

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Joseph Renwick Randon**

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Interviewers: Jane Goodsill & Jesse Matthews

Transcriber: Jane Goodsill

Location: Related to the Big Prayer area of Fort Bend County 10 Pages



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Transcript

GOODSILL: Will you start by telling us where the land we are on is located?

RANDON: We are in Fort Bend County, north of downtown Fulshear. We are outside of the ETJ (Extra-Territorial Jurisdiction) of Fulshear. This is the area I grew up. My grandmother along with my mother raised me. I called my grandmother MomMo, which meant 'Mom more', but her name was Ellen Cockrell Adams. Relatives called her "cuten babe" which meant cousin. My grandfather, Cornelius Randon, was born in 1893. As a child I recall going down to the area where my grandfather lived. It was referred to as "Little Prayer". The area where my grandmother lived was called "Big Prayer".

GOODSILL: How did your family get to this area?

RANDON: My grandmother's grandfather, Grandpa Hackney, is as far back as we can trace our history. I recalled some stories where she referred to him as pure African. She told us that when the slaves were freed they were told that they could keep all the land they could clear. So he and other relatives cleared land from Simonton to Fulshear area. It was a lot of land and different black families lived on it and in the surrounding area.

The native people were being push off the area and Stephen F. Austin had given certain white people leagues of land to organize land structure. One of the names that comes to mind is the Randon league. My grandmother said that some of the land that blacks cleared was taken back by white folk, however, I recall as a kid that blacks owned about 85% of the land in this area. Grandpa Hackney was the key figurehead in the transition from slavery.

MATTHEWS: What year was this? 1865?

RANDON: I'm not certain. As you know, the emancipation proclamation was not broadcast as such so many blacks remained slaves. Some sources say that it was two and a half years until slaves in Texas heard the emancipation proclamation on June 19, 1865, known as Juneteenth. He was born a slave but was freed. A lot of slaves became sharecroppers, as did he.

GOODSILL: Know anything about his personality?

RANDON: As I recall, the story was that he was a very strong physical specimen. He could throw a bale of hay very far. Grandma Rose, his wife, was also an amazing woman. Grandma Rose used to gather her enormous family and tell stories about slavery.

GOODSILL: Your great grandmother's maiden name was Gordon?

RANDON: Yes. Her father's name was George Gordon. Her father, James Cockrell, and his twin brother, Robert, married two sisters of the Gordon family. At one point our land connected with our relatives from George Gordon Road to Pool Hill Road and much more. My grandmother's mother's name was Rose Gordon. She grew up in the "Big Prayer" near Fulshear. I am not sure where the boundaries of "Big Prayer" and "Little Prayer" met. In the 1990's, I took the initiative to change some road names. Considering my ancestors gave the land easement, I named the road that turns off of Rogers Road to 'George Gordon Road' and this road leading to the museum is 'Gordon Side Road'. The road in the back of the property I named "Big Prayer".

My last name is Randon, from my mother's father, Cornelius Randon. The Randon League was given to a white man but I am not sure if there is any connection. All I know is one of my grandfather's sister's was born a slave. He grew up in Little Prayer. My grandmother grew up in Big Prayer, which was more conservative, more religious with a lot of church going. Little prayer was much more liberal, "Let's say a little moonshine!" (laughs)

MATTHEWS: How many homes in Big Prayer?

RANDON: That is one of the things we want to figure out. I hope to collect all the family names that made up Big Prayer. I want to hear their stories and record the history before is all lost; document their journey in their words. I am not certain how many homes are in our Big Prayer Region. It is my vision to try to incorporate Big Prayer as a city. I have initiated these efforts and currently am looking into the feasibility. As in anything else, it takes money. My meeting with Mr. Robert Kness is on hold until I come up with more funds.

GOODSILL: How did it get the name Big Prayer?

RANDON: I am not totally sure. I have asked my mother and she say she doesn't know. Some names come about in reference to a personal thought or conversation and they stick. Geographically this land is higher than the surrounding area.



Supposedly in the 1900 flood this area did not flood. So it was preferred land and was used for growing crops. Our family has maintained this area since the time of freedom. People talk about 40 acres and a mule. That was not true in our case. Native people lived here originally and were run off. African people sharecropped and worked the land. If they stayed on the land and worked it they got to live on the land. But there were no legal signatures that I know of, as time passed the process became more organized. I am not certain if we were included in the political conversation that involved land division. We were kept in the blind, not included in conversations. We were not supposed to know too many details about how things worked. This type of thing came down from slavery. It is very deep rooted, not to know or to talk about important things openly.

GOODSILL: What is your goal?

RANDON: Many of the elders are gone but those that are left I want to document what they know and pass it down to future generations. I want to bring all people together. Our area is getting more and more international. It is important for me to capture the footprint. Many blacks have not progressed due to ignorance and fear left over from slavery and the system of white control. It should not be a black and white thing; it's about educating everyone and bringing the community together – our human family.

My goal is to leave a legacy, a remembrance of those that came before us. My museum project, the Native African-American Information Museum, is a work in progress. The name Native came from my native blood. African American is from our black ancestry. I want to build our museum not only to be interactive but also to inspire artists to show up and create ideas.

I remember the first white person who came to this area. They bought property next to us. I remember, looking out the window and I remember feeling fear and caution. I'll never forget one incident. We had hogs because we are in the country. They were from the city. Their dog came over here and bit our hog! OOOOH! My brother came out with the shotgun and shot that pretty white dog. It was devastating! The hog was important to us and dogs that trespassed were shot, which I guess they did not know. I was young. It was in the 1970s. I'd never seen a white person on our property. I was peaking out the window. That was the first time I saw cultures for the first time interacting. My grandmother sat us down at the table to eat our meals. I'd sit at the table to wait for my grandmother to prepare lunch. She did not agree with the microwave in fact I remember her statement, "take the devil out" – referring to the microwave. She was earth conscious.

She was born in 1898 and died in 1988. Her older brother was William; they called him Bill. He died in his mid 50's. William used to travel up to the Dallas area. My grandmother was the cornerstone of the community, doing Missionary work. She was well respected by everyone she met. She was an inspiration to all persons especially within the church in Big and Little Prayer. She was eager to stand up for what was right, a very strong person. She was warm but she got her respect. She got her respect!

She was a woman of great integrity and wisdom. As a woman she held her own, but I think the men sometimes took advantage of her because they knew how to sharecrop and sell at the market etc. We had a huge a garden and were self sufficient in nearly every way. MomMo was a great cook, soul food to the bone. I am more health-conscious now, in what I eat. I try not to eat pork but I still enjoy the taste of soul food. I was a child in the 70's and things were changing. I was different in many ways from any of the rest of my family! Grandmother had three children: Kathereen, Jerlene and Rozina, my mother, who was born in 1936.



*Gravesite of Joseph's grandmother
Ellen C. Adams*

GOODSILL: Will you speculate on how your mother, Rosina's, life was different from her mother's?

RANDON: (Pauses and sighs) PHEW, gosh, day and night! She was the youngest. She was a little spoiled. She was light skinned. My middle aunt was dark skinned. Always light skinned people got better treatment. So their environment grew them up opposing each other.

GOODSILL: Did your grandmother have any schooling?

RANDON: Yes, I think she went to the sixth grade. Minimal education. And my mother went a little further than my grandmother did. A. W. Jackson was the all-black school. My mother had her first child when she was 18. So that changed things for her.

GOODSILL: What were her children's names?

RANDON: Charles, Carmelita, Thomas, twins Donald and Ronald, and two years later another set of twins, Floyd and Lloyd, then Ellen and me. I was born in December 1969 the youngest of 9.

GOODSILL: Can you compare your life to the life of your mother?

RANDON: I was born in 1969 and she was born in 1936 so it was a totally different time. Because I have older brothers and sisters, I was more open-minded. Everyone in my family picked cotton except me. Cotton fizzled out in the 1970's when new machinery came in. So I never really picked it. Also the crop changed, watermelon became the cash crop. I worked hard in the fields just not cotton.

I attend Bowie Elementary in Rosenberg. I had to walk up Rogers Road where it meets George Gordon Road to catch the bus. Then I went to Jane Long Elementary. They built Huggins in 1978 and I was the first class there and I attended B. F. Terry High School.

My grandmother, my mother and the community raised me so what happened to me was a fantastic journey – I want to, and will, give it all back. We all lived in that little house right there. Since my brother and sister were older than me, I recall there was nobody for me to play with. I was raised in a formal way, “May I go play?” At night I recall my routine prayer beside my grandmother. I was beside her praying every night. My mother was a maid and made a career at Richmond State School as a Professional Cook. She is well respected among people of all ages for her work ethic and love for community. She is a humble person, hard working. When I went with her to work, I had some exposure to seeing nice things in white peoples houses.

The game changer for me was when I was in 7th grade. I was a pretty good basketball player. As a high school freshman I got some preferential treatment because I could dunk the basketball to make the people feel good. My surrogate mother, Doris Hatton, was a fabulous person. She and her husband, Coach Hatton, taught me respect and gave me exposure to the middle class lifestyle. My sister also provided unprecedented commitment to make sure I had all I needed. All my brother and sisters contributed to my up bringing and I am so thankful for the love of family; the Gordon's the Taylor's, Parker's and all our community. When I grew up community was our foundation.

During my years at B. F. Terry High School I remember all the great people, teachers and coaches who made a positive impact on my life. After high school I went to the University of Miami to play basketball. I started with a business degree, but I changed my major to social science and communication.

I wanted to play a few years in the NBA and come back home and build a restaurant. Anyway, life happens and I changed my degree to social science, where my interest is yet today. My focal point is to make the world a better place. Having the opportunity to be on “The Young & Restless” and “Save The Earth” inspired me to invent Soundwater.com and travel the world with a mission. I used the basketball court as an analogy toward communicating the strategy. When I compare my life to my mother’s, I think about her being in a survival mode verses me having a chance to make choices. We came from totally opposite situations.

GOODSILL: Where did your life take you and what brought you back?

RANDON: I have an amazing story. One day it may catch the eye of an interesting book or film. When I graduated from college I was frustrated with the politics of my basketball experience. Miami, at that time, was changing. I had access to private membership at Club Vandome in South Beach. It was one the top clubs and I had access to people who were well connected. At one point I started modeling. After I graduated I stayed in Miami a bit and went to New York City and ended up moving to California for a while. I did quite a bit of traveling around the world.

In 2013 I came back and saw the unearthly plow out there was sinking deep into the ground. I wanted to get it out to honor my grandmother and our community. So I paid to get it out. I was inspired to do it to help build a legacy for my grandmother.

To I got a container home set up and started to collect artifacts and get the word out about my intention. We dredged up all these artifacts and started a museum. My goal is to make this something phenomenal and have an interactive museum that children and people can visit. I want kids to be able to experience the land. So they can know how hard it is to survive and live off the land. I want to tell stories about each of our artifacts into a QR code so they can listen to the stories on their phones!



Antique plow from grandparents' home.

Artifacts from the Native African-American Information Museum



Frontier-era cast-iron skillets



Antique cast-iron wood stove



Large, iron frontier cooking pot



Early electric sewing machine from the Singer Manufacturing Co.



Farm or homestead implement of unknown purpose

You will notice there is a sign over there. I put tape over one word. My mother insisted on it. Do you know what that word was? It read: “A transition from slavery to the present moment.” She demanded I cover 'slavery' up because it represents so much pain to her. I want to uncover that history. It should be liberating not painful. But for some it is not.

GOODSILL: So much shame and bad memories related to slavery?

RANDON: Yes. My mother is the president of the Simonton/Masonic Cemetery in Little Prayer. She still cuts the lawn with her helpers and does labor. She thinks that her work is in the laboring class. There is nothing wrong with working hard but it is really about educating yourself not just doing labor. At 80 she is out there mowing because of her passion to clean and have things orderly. I wish she'd share her knowledge instead. As a black man, many of my childhood friends and peers are in imprisoned or living below standard. Society has imprisoned so many people and they don't know how to come out of the box. It is important to be proud of your heritage. Lack of that knowledge is why I say we are not progressing the right way. Because of shame people hide things. And then your social interaction becomes more superficial.

GOODSILL: The shame and degradation of slavery is still acting itself out in your family and your community?

RANDON: YES! All over America. It's like Post Traumatic Stress from slavery. It needs to be treated with a social level of education. In a small community like this, there is a need for reeducation.

In reaction to my efforts I hear: “Take them signs down. I don't want this stuff here. You ain't got no business doing all that. Some people come here to steal this land. They going to come take everything!”

GOODSILL: When you come from a position where you have no power you possibly become fear-based? So inviting the world into your space is not safe? Worry about bringing attention to oneself?



Big Prayer Land Development sign

RANDON: Right. Even interviewing people might be different if you are black or white. Black people may not speak as openly. I see how we are distrustful of each other. That is why I want to make this an information center and a museum about our past and our future. Without the young people the community is devastated, all communities are.

It is difficult to step out and do something different. I get a lot of opposition as I try. The wounds of slavery are deep...after you are captured and a slave for 40 years and you get freed, you still don't know how long it will take for it to feel safe for you to come out of that cage.

We learn as a society not to "question the teacher". That needs to change. When I changed the road name to Gordon Side then others had ideas about how they wanted things to be.

You see that property across the street? A guy from India bought it. He put up warehouses and has a business renting them out. They are all full. Now he wants to put in an assisted living place. I'm impressed with how they stick together, financially backing of others to help him. They are not afraid to do something different. We did something beautiful last year. We put together a family tree. So we are making progress.

Interview Ends