

# FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

## *ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE*

Interviewees: **Kenneth Bryce Otto**

Interview Date: 03/19/2014

Interviewer: Jane Goodsill, Bradley Stavinoha

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

Location/Comments: Needville, Texas. Kenneth's wife, Linda, also participated in the interview. 36 Pages



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*Transcript*

GOODSILL: Mr. Otto, we are hoping you'll tell us some of the history of Needville. Begin by telling us when and where you were born.

OTTO: December 11, 1932 in Rosenberg, Texas. Dr. Weeks was the doctor that delivered me. He had a clinic. The old hospital, as you are going into Rosenberg, the first right, you turn there and it would be on the right, down about a block. It's that big building with those pillars in front of it. That was the original hospital and that's where I was born

GOODSILL: Tell me how your family got to Needville.

OTTO: On the Schendel side, they came over here from Germany and they landed at New Orleans. From New Orleans, I think they came to Galveston and came inland from there. They went up to Brenham and settled at Brenham. August, my grandpa, was three years old when they came over.

GOODSILL: What year was it?

OTTO: I'll have to dig in here. (a big box of resource material)

GOODSILL: When you review the transcript you can fill in the dates. About what time?

OTTO: My wife, Linda, says it's before 1864. I know August was three years old and I've got the list of the people that came over and it gives all their ages and their names.

GOODSILL: I'll leave a blank and you can fill that in. Your grandfather is August. Do you know your great-grandfather's name?

OTTO: Yes. Christoph Schendel. They went up to Brenham and settled up there and from all I've read about Christoph, he was a bricklayer by trade. August married Maria (Louise) Kohn on October 22, 1885 while they lived in Brenham, it's in the church records. August and his wife came here and established this town, and I have the deed where they gave the town 30 acres for the school and Immanuel Church of Christ which used to be a Lutheran Church. He gave some other stuff. The first telephone that came to Needville, it was in the old Schendel house and my mother was the operator. They probably didn't have but a couple of parties (families) on it! Mr. Waddell who owned Fort Bend Telephone bought a lot next to my father's house and they moved the office over there. Miss Belle Kuykendall was the phone operator for several years. She'd get up at all hours of the night. If somebody rang in, she'd go in there and take care of it. She was very good. That was right next door to where I was raised.

GOODSILL: August and his wife whose name was Louise – why did they come to Needville?



*Louise Schendel, August Schendel*

OTTO: To establish a town and build a store. We didn't have a railroad here then. To get freight, we had to go to Rosenberg because they had a rail line. We'd go there with mules and wagons and whatever it took to bring the goods back to Needville. So we had a general store. Mom told me that when Grandpa Schendel built his first store, it had a dirt floor in it. Later on, he built several more buildings, but his original store was just a dirt floor building. They had a case of goods that they would keep bringing onto the front so people could see what was stacked on the shelves. And if somebody came in and they were sick, they would talk to Grandpa Schendel. They would look at the medicine and talk about what might be good for what they had. So he would prescribe something for them and hopefully they'd get well! (laughing) He had a gin, also.

GOODSILL: Did he set up the gin or was it already here?

OTTO: He set it up.

GOODSILL: So he was an organizer type of guy. He knew how to put things together.

OTTO: Yeah. He certainly did. There was a lot of stuff in that old safe that came from Germany. He had a lot of interesting papers in there.

I think there were six different businesses, in line, and they were situated right at the corner of School and Main Street and went west. They were made out of tile and brick. The guy that built some of them was Oscar Holcombe who was the mayor of Houston when he built some of Grandpa Schendel's buildings. The building on the corner was Rabinowitz Stein. Rabinowitz is an old Fort Bend County name. They had a lot of country stores and they had people to run them. The way I understood it, Rabinowitz would have 51% of the stock but they had good people running them. At one time, right next to it, was Valka's Meat Market, the first one in Needville.

We have some old pictures of Mr. Valka's first meat market so he came very near the same time my Grandpa came down here or he might have already been here. I don't know. Then there was a café and we had general store. We sold everything that a farmer would need in the way of hardware, clothing, any kind of kerosene oil, or salt. We had it there for them but we had to bring it from Rosenberg by a team of mules and wagon until we got the railroad in here. That was a BIG event. I think the railroad came in around 1928 along Highway 36.

GOODSILL: Did your family have anything to do with getting the railroad to come here?

OTTO: They did originally with that old deed.

GOODSILL: Tell me about the deed.

OTTO: One deed is the land that he got from the state. This other deed is from the state and it encouraged people to settle, and the railroad in and establish a town.

GOODSILL: I'd like to read this into your oral history. It says:

General Land Office, Austin, Texas, January 12, 1892

August Schendel, Richmond, Texas

Dear Sir:

This is to notify you that the following described land has been awarded to you, per your application, to purchase under act approved April 1, 1887. An act, amendatory, thereof, approved April 8, 1889 and April 28, 1891. This sale to you, dated October 7, 1892.

Notice: Interest on your note will be due on the first of next August and must be sent direct to State Treasurer.



V71-211  
U80-40

GENERAL LAND OFFICE,  
Austin, Texas, *July 12* 1892.

Mr. *August Scheudt*  
*Richardson Texas*

DEAR SIR;—This is to notify you that the following described land has been awarded to you as per your application to purchase under act approved April 1, 1887, and act amendatory thereof, approved April 8, 1889, and April 28, 1891.

This sale to you dates *Oct 7* 18*92*.

Section	Block	Certf	Tp.	Grantee	Acres	County
<i>8/4</i> <i>26</i>		<i>93</i>		<i>H &amp; T C Ry Co</i>	<i>160</i>	<i>Fort Bend</i>

NOTICE: Interest on your note will be due on the first of next August and on the first of August each year thereafter, and must be sent DIRECT TO STATE TREASURER. Interest payments must reach the Treasurer not later than November first, otherwise an additional 20 per cent. will be added to the interest, which if not paid by April first, the land will be forfeited.

PRESERVE THIS CARD.

*M. L. McGeough*  
Commissioner.

OTTO: We have some of those old receipts.

GOODSILL: So this paperwork allowed what?

OTTO: The state awarded him the deed to the City of Needville— 30 acres originally.

GOODSILL: That's how big Needville was, 30 acres?

OTTO: Yes. That's it. There's a survey attached and field notes. And I think the date on this is 1899 (or 1897). That's how the town got started.

GOODSILL: Then the railroad came in 1928.

OTTO: I think so, approximately. And also Highway 36 was built. We only had a dirt road between here and Rosenberg. Then Highway 36 came in and that opened up things quite a bit too.

GOODSILL: So it changed the town quite a bit when the highway and the railroad came through. Please tell me about that.

OTTO: We had a lot of other businesses come in, such as Southern Flour and Feed. There was Carew's Photo Shop. And Mr. Nowatny's business. He may have come from New Braunfels. I know he had kinfolks in New Braunfels.

That railroad had a spur that came off the main line and came back over to his warehouse. You could get boxcar loads of feed. He had a mill. When the railroad put the spur in off the main line, it went back behind Mr. Nowatny's. Then there was a fertilizer plant and a grain dryer and storage along that spur at a later date. Everything connected with agriculture is what this town was - a center for agriculture.

GOODSILL: What was the main crop in Needville?

OTTO: Corn, cotton and milo, which is grain sorghum. Soybeans is an alternate crop but I don't think we were planting soy beans back then. We planted soybeans later but we didn't have storage for soy beans so we had to take them somewhere else and sell them.

People would put their grain sorghum in that one big building. It would hold about 300 carloads of grain. The farmers would come in and either sell their grain or put it in open storage. They had an account there for so much grain and they would come in during the winter or whenever they needed it and take out so much grain out of their account and take it to the mill and make feed for their livestock. It got to where the farmers weren't doing that so much.

The grain was mostly going to the port in Houston, to be sent to other countries for them to make feed for their livestock. So we sold the grain dryer and now that strip center where the drug store is and the liquor store, that's where the old grain storage building used to be. They completely demolished it. It was a solid little building and there were a LOT of electric motors in there. I hope they salvaged them because there was a lot of copper in those motors.

GOODSILL: Were you sorry to see that building go?

OTTO: I was. I worked there for several year. When we first built that building, we went out to farmers and they bought stock in it. We sold enough stock to build the first building. We saw it wasn't going to be quite big enough so we added on right away. We were storing commodity credit grain at that time - government grain. And some of that grain was coming to Needville from up in the Panhandle, from the Plains. They would ship it in here in boxcars. We'd put those boxcars, one at a time, where we could open the door; the grain would go in the auger and into our pit. The pit wasn't far but it was about twenty feet. So we'd empty the loose grain out of the boxcars into the pit and from there it went on an elevator into the building.

We had a four-man operation to empty those boxcars. We had a grain drag with two handles on it. One guy would get in there and we had a little Ford tractor that we'd hook up to it and drag the grain to the door, to empty the boxcars. Kind of a poor boy operation but that was the best we could do at the time!

We stored a lot of grain and bought a lot of grain. We shipped some out in hopper-bottom cars. We could put about 200,000 pounds in one of those.

GOODSILL: What year are we talking about?

OTTO: Probably about 10 years ago.

GOODSILL: What was your job?

OTTO: I was President of the Board and General Manager of Needville Warehouse, Incorporated.

GOODSILL: Was it part of Needville Warehouse's job to store this grain?

OTTO: Right! We were in grain merchandising and storage.

GOODSILL: What decade are we talking about?

OTTO: The '50s. The way it came about, there was an Incorporating Board of Directors. Mr. Melvin Reeh was the first president. ET: 00:19:57 There were about five or six of us on the board, to get the thing built. And then as some of them got older, I stepped in as General Manager and President for a few years.

GOODSILL: Tell us something about commodity credit grain.

OTTO: That's what the government takes over from the farmer. They would export it. Like a government loan. If a farmer wanted to sell his crop to the government because the price fell below the support price, the government would take over the surplus grain. (Commodity Credit Corporation or CCC)

[Editor's note: The CCC administers commodity loan programs, which were part of the "price support" system that has dominated U.S. agriculture since the 1930s. Farmers who agree to limit their production of specially designated crops can sell them to the CCC or borrow money at support prices.]

The surplus grain that the price was cheaper to the farmer than what the government would pay for it. And that's how it ended up in the government's hands. That's how we built that building. Every quarter we'd go to the post office and get a check for about \$10,000 so it didn't take too long. I think it cost about \$50,000-\$60,000 to build the building. So in a period of two to three years, it was paid for.

GOODSILL: You got paid money for storing the grain? And then when the government needed it, you would ship it to them?

OTTO: Yeah. It would usually go to the port and go overseas.

GOODSILL: Now if the farmer could get a better price selling it in the market, he would, but if he couldn't, he would sell it to the government for a slightly lesser price.

OTTO: That's how it worked. It worked the same way with all commodities, such as cotton and corn.

GOODSILL: So after these crops have been grown, they need to be processed before they can be stored. They need to be dried for example?

OTTO: That's correct. We had a dryer at the grain storage. If the grain came in with too much moisture, we couldn't put it in the building because it would sour. We'd run it through the dryer.

GOODSILL: What did that look like?

OTTO: It had shelves in it. It was tall. You'd start at the top and we had a big gas blower to put heat through it. As the grain came down it would go thru the shelves, like a Z, and we would check the moisture to be sure we were getting enough heat on it. When it was dry it would go into the building, using elevators. It would go from the dryer into the elevator and then into the building. And we had a certain gate that we would use for green milo. If we couldn't dry it right away we put it in this green bin until we could dry it. It won't sour as long as you put air through it. We had blowers where we could force air through that green grain. By the same token, that's how we used to fumigate the grain, too, to keep the insects such as weevils out of it. Chemical companies would come out with canisters that looked like oxygen tanks--methyl bromide I think it was.



We would take the end of the fan and bring it around into our aeration system and they would meter the gas into the aeration system. It would blow all that gas through that big pile of maize (milo is another name) and it would do a real good job. They had another one called Phostoxin that was a pellet. That came along after methyl bromide. We would probe that into the grain pile and then we would put some of the pellets on top. It was pretty deadly. You had to be really careful with it. (laughing)

I'll tell you a little secret about that. It's nothing to do with killing insects but the Germans used it in some of their extermination camps. Same kind of chemical, methyl bromide. Poor people got in the place to get a shower and they shot the gas to them.

GOODSILL: This was quite an operation. Did many small towns have this kind of storage and drying capacity?

OTTO: Yeah, there are some around now. Fairchild has got some tanks over there and I'm sure East Bernard does. Wherever there's a feed mill in operation they usually have a grain storage place.

GOODSILL: So these crops that were grown were being used for feeding animals. This must have been during the '50s and a prosperous time for Needville.

OTTO: Yeah. It was before herbicides and picking machines came on the scene. On Saturday night, we wouldn't get a chance to close our store until 8:00 or 9:00 o'clock. There were people walking up and down the sidewalks. There was mostly migrant laborers coming here, to pick cotton and chop cotton. That was all handwork. We didn't have the herbicides we've got now and we don't use hand labor. You spray the herbicide and you have the picking machines to pick the cotton. Back then you had to do it all by hand.

GOODSILL: Nobody has described to me yet, the actual process of picking cotton. Or the chopping of it. Can you describe those to me?

OTTO: Chopping cotton – the main thing is to get the grass out of the cotton. Herbicides will kill the grass for you. Picking machines are like a drum but they have bars in them, up and down and there are spindles on this bar. As it rotates, the spindles are turning and it goes through the stalk of cotton. When it comes out, it has what you call a doffer that knocks the cotton off the spindles. From there it goes to a blower up into the hopper. Now they have a picking machine that sell for over \$600,000 but they do SO much more. (laughs) They can pick eight rows at a time.

GOODSILL: What was it like when people had to pick it by hand?

OTTO: It was pretty hard! I tried it one time and I think I would have starved to death if I had to make a living picking cotton! My fingers were too short and weren't good for picking cotton.

The machines we're talking about now - they have strippers or spindle machines. A stripper goes along and gets everything off the stalk. The spindle machine just gets the open cotton. The machines we're talking about, they make modules, which look a lot like these big round hay bales you see, but they're cotton. They have a plastic wrapper around them. When the hopper gets to the right weight (I suppose), that's when it's dumped out. Then another tractor comes along and picks up that round bale of seed cotton and puts it on the trailer and goes to the gin.

Me and my brother were in partnership and it was Otto Brothers back then. We were farming and ranching together. We bought two one-row machines and boy, we thought we were in heaven! With a one-row picker you could pick five or six acres a day. We had a Case (brand). I've got a picture of it. When we got the International, it was SO much smoother, easier to grease and everything. And that's what we used. John Deere came out with a picker similar to the International. Now your two main picking machines are John Deere and International.

GOODSILL: Is this area still used for agriculture? A lot of growing still goes on out here?

OTTO: Yes.

GOODSILL: But no more drying plant, no more storage plants.

OTTO: There is still a rice dryer in operation here. I didn't mention rice, but that was another crop. It's dwindled down to where it's not nearly as many acres as it used to be. And you run into a problem now with water.

GOODSILL: Tell us about that.

OTTO: We're not troubled here so much but where the Colorado River is, the county over there had to drill wells because they were cut short on the river water. The river was about to go dry. So they had to cut way back on farming rice over there. The water wells were operated by diesel and electric power. Most of them ended up being electric. At the start, probably most of them were diesel engines.

Those big old wells they put out 3,000 gallons a minute or something like that. (The regulator agency was the Lower Colorado River Authority.)

GOODSILL: How many cotton gins were here back in the '40s and 50s?

OTTO: There was a cotton gin over where City Club used to be, near where Charro's is. That's where Warney had a gin. First it was Hooper, but Warney was married to a Hooper so Warney ended up with the gin, some way. Then go down to where the concrete works is, there were two gins there. They were close together. Both were Farmers' Gins. There was Horak's gin that was in operation as long as I can remember. That's one of the oldest gins around here. Those boys keep everything up to snuff. They are some of the biggest farmers around here and they keep that gin in operation.

GOODSILL: Tell about how long the lines were to get the trailers into the gin.

OTTO: We had seven or eight big trailers that we would dump the seed cotton in and we'd have to tromp it down so we could get enough cotton in there. Some of those trailers were 8 or 10 bales of cotton if you tromped down on it good. There would be lines of those trailers. One time we got so hard-pressed for trailers, a gin in Lane City was about caught up so we got one-shot trailers and went to gin cotton in Lane City, to get the trailers emptied so we could keep going.

GOODSILL: Did you run the gin day and night?

OTTO: Oh, yeah.

GOODSILL: And that was all Mexican labor?

OTTO: No. The main ginner was Benton Schmidt and his brother, Anton. They were all white folks. In later years you would see Latinos ginning quite a bit.

GOODSILL: When picking the cotton back then, did you hire migrant labor most of the time?

OTTO: Oh, yeah.

GOODSILL: Once those long lines of trucks come and they unload them, then what happened?

OTTO: They got in line until they could get under the sucker where the gin sucks the cotton up, using air. It comes off the trailer, goes in through the dryers and from there it goes to the gin stands. Inside the gin stands are a bunch of saws and those saw teeth pick the lint off the seed. The seed comes out down at the bottom and goes to the scales so they can weigh it. Everybody sells their cotton seed now. They take the money from the sale of the seed and apply it to the farmer's ginning charge. We used to get little gin checks. In fact we used to hunt a little bit on our gin checks! After the cotton goes through the gin stands, it goes through the press and that makes a bale. Then they roll the bale out.

GOODSILL: The seed would go to the Richmond seed house? (Southern Cottonseed Oil) They would make meal out of it?

OTTO: That's where they crushed the cottonseed, in Richmond. They made cottonseed meal and cottonseed oil. I know you probably smelled it if you drove down that road.

GOODSILL: How many acres did the average farmer farm back then?

OTTO: A lot of these farm families had 80 acres.. They could make a living off it and raise their family. They raised their own food and they raised goods that they could sell to buy other stuff. We used to sell laying mash. We had a tin warehouse back of our store and we'd use that same spur (rail line). They had printed sacks for laying mash for the hens. The farmers would come in and they wanted at least three sacks so they'd have enough to make a dress or something. (laughs) This would happen nine times out of ten. There would be two sacks that would be easy to get to but the third sack was WAY on the bottom. You had to move ALL the whole stack to get that third one! But that's what we did.

GOODSILL: You were laughing, Mr. Stavinoha, about 80 acres - making a living on that. How many would it take now?

STAVINOHA: They're farming 4,000 to 10,000 acres now.

OTTO: The Horaks down here at the Horak gin, I don't know how many acres they have. They are some of the biggest farmers that I know of in this country and they have some of the best equipment. And they have their own gin.

STAVINOHA: Albert Urbanek, Junior, is the biggest. They've got land all over the place.

OTTO: You don't see any little farms any more. They are all getting bigger. We own a farm in Wharton County and it's 300 acres. We have a Latin American guy who's lived there and raised his family right there. He's lived on that farm for 65 years. He came when he was 16 years old and we kept him there.

GOODSILL: What's his name?

OTTO: Reynaldo Lucio. He raised his whole family there, educated them – some of them went to college, and made it all off of that farm.

GOODSILL: His children are as American as we are, now. (both laugh)

OTTO: He's a good fellow. I think a whole lot of Reynaldo. He's like one of my family, he's been there SO long. 65 years – that's a long time.

STAVINOHA: Do you ever see any of that sea island cotton?

OTTO: We tried it one time. It's what they call Pima cotton now. It's an extra-long staple cotton.

GOODSILL: I would LOVE for you to explain what that means!

OTTO: You don't see any of it around here. But if you get out in West Texas and Arizona, New Mexico – up in that part of the country – they plant it and they have a special gin to gin it. They gin it on a roller gin. A roller gin is not a saw gin like we have here. It's rollers and the cotton goes through these rollers and the rollers "pinch" the lint off the seed. When Daddy saw some it, he said it looks like angel hair. It's such a long staple.

GOODSILL: How does it make a different product?

OTTO: It's a longer staple and it makes material similar to silk.

GOODSILL: That's why the sheets are so soft and why the weave is so tight.

OTTO: And why they are expensive.

STAVINOHA: It's worth three times the money, too, than regular cotton.

OTTO: Mr. Kruger and Mr. Kunkel were going to build a gin down there, and I think they ginned a little bit. They had one stand.



STAVINOHA: Wagon and a mule. And you'd feed the stand (dump the cotton) with a washtub. They'd fill the washtub with cotton and carry it to the stand.

OTTO: I remember that.

GOODSILL: So different kinds of cotton could make you different kinds of money.

OTTO: Oh, yes. This Pima cotton, it sells for more than a dollar a pound or more than that.

STAVINOHA: Like 60 or 70 cents and the other was 40 is what I remember.

OTTO: I remember seeing the field where they grow that stuff. There was a big tall stalk and the bolls were 3 locks.

GOODSILL: What does that mean?

STAVINOHA: Instead of 4 or 5 locks like most cotton, this only had 3. And they were long and pointy. And they were hard to pick because they had such a short burr.

OTTO: Yeah, you could tear your fingers up on them. A boll, when it opens up like that, you've usually got 4 or 5 locks. But Pima cotton only has 3 locks. It's harder and more dangerous to pick. (chuckles)

GOODSILL: But with machines it can be done.

STAVINOHA: We didn't have machines in those days.

OTTO: Now they do. There are all kinds of different cottons. They even had some they were growing that was a certain color- Brown.

GOODSILL: What would be the advantage of brown cotton?

OTTO: They wouldn't have to dye it brown, I reckon! (laughs)

STAVINOHA: That was grown up around Van Dyke. The cotton was brown when you get it off the stalk. It didn't have any lint on it it was slick.

OTTO: Let me tell you about the railroad. It came through Needville and then it went through Guy, the next little town below us here. And they had a station in Guy and a switch there. From Guy it went to Damon. My brother, was about 12 years older than me, would get on a passenger train here in Needville and ride it to Damon to visit his Uncle Will, who was August's oldest boy. Needville had a fair here at one time, before the County Fair. They brought people out here on the train. And there was an airplane out here, giving rides. There was a guy who walked into the propeller was killed. My brother, John Wesley Otto, Junior, knew all about that. I wish he was here. He could really elaborate on that.

I was really closer to one of my cousins than I was to my brother. My cousin's name was R. J. Otto. We went all through school together, worked cattle and hunted together. He got killed. He roped a bull and the horse fell with him and the saddle crushed his head and killed him. He wasn't riding his horse. He was riding somebody else's horse. The horse got caught in one of those ruts in the rice fields. His little boy was one year old when that happened. He had three kids - two girls and the little boy. So that little boy never knew his daddy.

I was closer to R. J. than I was my brother because my brother was either in college or in the service when I was growing up. I must have been about 11 or 12 years old when the Japs bombed Pearl Harbor. My brother was going to A & M and was getting close to finishing so they gave him a deferment so he could get through with college. As soon as he got out of college he went into the infantry at Camp Howze at Gainesville, Texas. All they had was tarpaper shacks up there for barracks. They had just thrown up it - a hurry-up deal. I remember going up there and visiting him.

When he got out of the service, my dad and my uncle started me in the cow business. When I had a birthday or something, Dad would give me a heifer. And that heifer would have a calf and I'd have another one. Mr. Slim Barta, he was sheriff of Fort Bend County at one time, had 22 head of cattle between here and Guy. I love Brahman cattle and they were white Brahman cattle. I wanted those cows SO bad. So he said, 'All right. We'll go to the bank.' So we went to the bank and I paid him \$100 a head. I signed a note for \$2200 and the bank let me have the money. Of course Daddy co-signed it! (laughing) He never was going to get the money.

I had those 22 head of cattle and I had probably another 30-40 head scattered around in some other pastures here. To make a long story short, when my brother got discharged, we formed Otto Brothers and bought some more land and had a ranch. It was ranching and farming. We farmed milo and cotton, no rice, and cattle.

GOODSILL: Did you do that in addition to your job?

OTTO: Yeah. That's how Otto Brothers got started. We bought a ranch, 1386 acres down close to West Columbia, from Mr. C. F. Mann. He had bought 3000 acres from The Texas Company (Texaco), close to West Columbia. He got in a tight situation and needed some money; so he put this 1386 acres up for sale. I think we paid him \$30 an acre for it. That's when we got a little bit bigger in the cattle business. We pastured about 250 head of mama cows on there, not counting the calves.

And there was timber, except on both sides, there was an opening. There was about 200 acres on one sides and 200 acres on the other side. Through the center of the ranch was a drain from Eagle Nest Lake, which is a natural lake. It was pretty advantageous to a certain degree. While we were walking and looking at that place, Daddy told me, 'This place will flood.' I said, 'What are you talking about, Dad?' And he said, 'Look at those water marks on the trees.' He could tell just how high the water had gotten by the water marks on the trees. It was cheap enough and we needed it, so we bought it.

GOODSILL: Was flooding ever a problem?

OTTO: Oh yeah! There were a couple of times where it flooded the timber. But we had enough open country where we didn't lose any cattle. It would make us a little short of grass but we didn't ever lose any cattle. I remember being down there when that water was out in the woods, and a gar would be out there. I imagine they were spawning. I'd take a .22 and shoot them and then take a rope and get it around and drag them out to the bank. Those doggone things were about half as long as this table. We brought them to town and gave them away.

We had a 40-50 acre hay meadow on this ranch that we planted to make hay out of it. I had a flat bed truck and had three other hands with me. We had just left the ranch and we come up onto this drain from Eagle Nest that went through our place. I looked up ahead and I could see something in the road. I told the other guys that somebody has run over a man up there! There's a man laying in the road!! I got up there and it was an alligator. (laughing)

We had hay ropes that we tied hay with, so I built me a loop out of that hay rope and roped that 'gator. Got his front foot in there so he couldn't back out of it and tied him to the bridge. I went to my neighbor and borrowed a single shot .22 and came back and killed that alligator. It was 10-1/2 feet long. It was about all me and the other guys could do, to get him on the truck. We loaded that 'gator and brought him back to town. We drove down to the store where the lights would shine on him and when the word got out, here came all the folks to see that alligator. That old gator must have had a little kick left in him or somebody moved his foot or something. And boy, they scattered! (laughing) They weren't 100% sure that 'gator was dead! I've got his hide at the house. We used to buy quite a bit of tack from Tex Tan at Yoakum - saddles and bridles and stuff like that from them, to sell at the store. We called them up and asked if they could tan it for us. They said, 'Sure. Just salt it down, put it in a sack and put it on the train and ship it up here to us.' So I did and they tanned that hide for \$25. (laughs) And I've still got it. I need to get it down and put a little Neet's Foot Oil on it, I imagine.

GOODSILL: I want to ask Mr. Stavinoha, if there are there any other questions I should ask?

STAVINOKA: What do you remember about the worst floods or hurricanes? I know Carla was one. Where there any before then, that you can remember that really affected you?

OTTO: I know the old folks would talk about 1900. The one in 1932, when I was born, was a real BAD hurricane. And we've had some more come through here. Carla was the one that lasted the longest. It just kept pounding and pounding and pounding.

STAVINOKA: Where did y'all stay during the hurricanes?

OTTO: My folks vacated. They went down to the ranch we had in Atascosa County. And low and behold, the damn hurricane came right over where they were! (laughing) I stayed here in town. If Dad had some cotton bought up, he'd take those bales of cotton and put them in front of that entire glass front in the buildings downtown. Just stack the bales of cotton in front of it and then we'd open the doors so people were sheltered. They'd come stay in the buildings. That was a pretty good blow. We had about 3-4 tractors in a tin building and after the storm was over, I went up to that building. I didn't know what I was going to find. But the building just squatted right on top of those tractors. Didn't hardly scar the paint. Of course we had to tear the whole building apart to get our tractors out of there!

And after the storm, I stayed with Louis Fredrickson at his house. He was a rice farmer here. Then I went down to the ranch and there were limbs broken off everywhere. You had to take the limbs off the fence and put the fences back up. Something that I remember very vividly is those buildings burning down. In '51 we had an ice storm and everything stayed frozen for a solid week. HL&P had chains on their trucks so they could get around. I was out here feeding cattle and one of the places was 20 miles from here. I didn't have any chains on my tires so I couldn't go over 15 miles an hour. If I got up to 15 miles an hour, I'd slide off the road. The roads were just glazed. But I had to make that run every day. At 15 miles an hour, you can imagine how long it took to drive 20 miles from here. So we'd go down there and feed the cows hay. I had some cattle on the prairie, too. In the bottom they had good protection. By bottom, I mean in the timber. On the prairie, we had what you call a windbreak. It was an L shaped wall, so to speak. I had some cattle on the prairie and we'd go out there every day and feed them hay. I had a windmill not far from it, and that windmill had wind all the time so it was pumping warm water. The minute we got through feeding, those cows would make a break for it and run to drink some water. Then they run to get back behind that windbreak. But I didn't lose a one. They all made it.

STAVINOHA: Did the dust storms make it down this far? Do you remember any of those big dust storms in the '50s and '60s coming here?

OTTO: They didn't really make it here. Now in Atascosa County, I've seen them. That's south of San Antonio, about 30 miles.

STAVINOHA: What about when electricity first came to Needville?

OTTO: Mr. Banker was one of the early settlers here. I think he might have encouraged my grandpa to come in here and set up the town. He had some of the first electricity here. He had a dynamo. And there was another guy who would have electricity just at certain times, in the afternoon. They had that until HL&P came in. We had electricity as long as I can remember. I'm sure way back there they didn't have any.

STAVINOHA: What about the fire.



OTTO: It started in the old drug store. It was a wiring problem that started the fire. The drug store was right next to our store. There were 6 or 7 building in a row, separated with walls. They all burned. Back then they used a lot of tar on the roof and when that tar got to burning, it really got hot, then. And we didn't have any water to fight the fire with. Didn't have city water, and had one little old Model T tank truck.

GOODSILL: What kind of damage did this fire do?

OTTO: It wiped out 7 businesses. Then you start over.

GOODSILL: Did you have insurance?

OTTO: \$70,000, something like that. We were trying to salvage as much as we could before the store burned down. Right by the back door was our meat cooler and I was taking quarters of beef out and people took them over to the Schendel house and covered it up with a sheet. Rabinowitz-Buls at Damon bought our meat. So we salvaged that. The last thing I can remember was being at the back door, and the flames were just starting to come through the ceiling of the store. There was no stopping that fire.

GOODSILL: What year was that fire?

OTTO: 1946. We rebuilt those buildings in '48. We borrowed money from the SPJST Lodge to build those building. SPJST is a fraternal organization.

STAVINOHA: Fraternal life insurance company.

OTTO: I was old enough to drive at that time and I drove my Uncle Henry to Fayetteville where their headquarters were. We took our abstracts of the property, put the property up for collateral, and then we built the buildings.

GOODSILL: Are those buildings still standing now?

OTTO: They are. We sold them to a Mr. Rosa. I always kept them rented. You'd probably think I was a fool, but I rented them cheap. But at least I had some revenue. After he bought them, he hasn't done anything with them. I know his taxes and insurance and stuff like that is on-going. You could rent them cheaper rather than let them sit empty.

When we built those buildings, I think it was the first air conditioned building in town. It had a big old wooden tower. Now they just have a little box! (laughing)

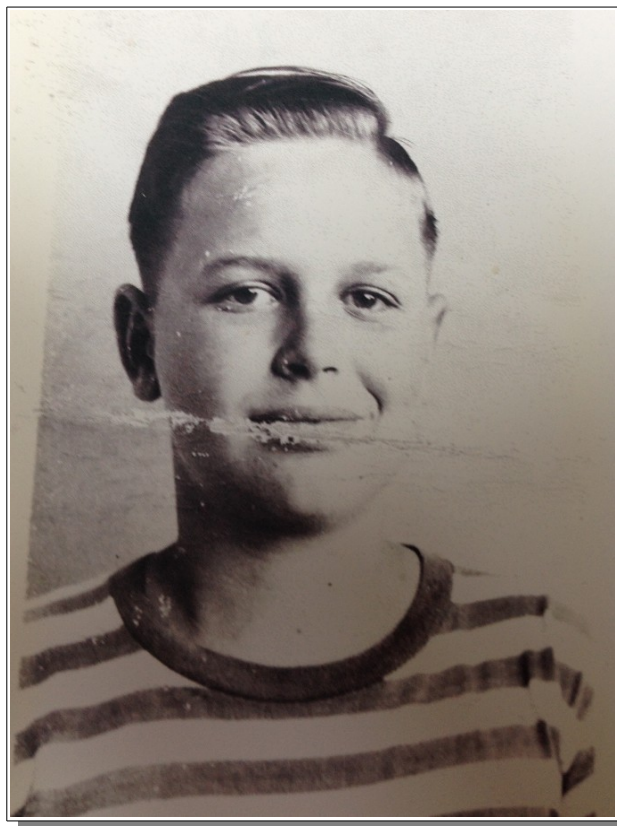
GOODSILL: Is there anything I should have asked that I've forgotten to ask?

STAVINOHA: How about the movie theater in Needville?

OTTO: Yeah, Cole had a theater here. It was right where Western Auto is now. When I was in the 6th or 7th grade, I had to make a speech and I was pretty nervous. (laughter) But that theater had a stage. I think I was Salutatorian. I wasn't Valedictorian, but I had to make a speech. That's been a LONG time ago.

STAVINOHA: How much was a ticket?

OTTO: Fifteen or twenty cents.



*Kenneth Otto*

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First interview session ends..

Second interview session date: 01/07/2016

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GOODSILL: Kenneth, you had some things to add to your original interview.

OTTO: I was going to tell you some of my experiences in the farming and cattle business.

GOODSILL: Was Needville High School opened in 1948?

OTTO: The first graduating class was in 1949. Before that, they would bus the students to either Rosenberg or Richmond for the last 2 grades. Needville stopped after the 10th grade. 1949 was also the last year that I drove cattle down Highway 36.

I graduated from high school when I was sixteen, in 1949. I had leased a pasture on FM 442 and was going to lose it at the end of the year because someone else came in and offered a higher price for the grass.

GOODSILL: How does a sixteen-year-old have a pasture?

OTTO: (laughter) Well, part of it was land that my folks owned. That's where I started out, on the August Schendel estate. I got my first two head of cattle because my Dad would give me a heifer on my birthday. Over a period of time I accumulated a few head of cattle. Then I leased the August Schendel property for grazing. And that's where the rest of my cattle came from at this time.

The pasture I was going to lose was leased from the Golston Oil Company. So I got a couple of hands and we drove the cattle down FM 442 to Highway 36 and took a right on Highway 36 to go to Guy. My dad had bought a little pasture down there so we could put the cattle there during the weather. It was about 80 acres, I think. It had a good stand of wild roses on the fence line, which made a good windbreak, so that's where we put the cattle. And we fed them behind this windbreak. This is where it gets a little complicated.

We had a general store here in Needville. My brother, John, was in the back candling some eggs. Candling is where you put an egg in front of a light bulb and turn it. If there's any kind of blood ring, the egg was discarded. [Editor's note: back in those days, eggs were usually fertilized so you had to check for embryos] Mr. Bill Allison, who had a market in Rosenberg and bought eggs from us, came in and asked my brother if we wanted to buy any pasture land. My brother said, 'We certainly do! We're about out.' He said, 'Well, Mr. Beard, who has that floor company in Rosenberg, one of his relatives, C. F. Mann, has 1386 acres that he wants to sell.' He asked if we were interested and John said sure.

So me and my dad got the horses, met Mr. Mann down there and rode over to the place. As we rode over where the creek was, my dad said, 'This country goes under water.' I said, 'What are you talking about, Dad?' He said, 'Look at those trees. There's a watermark on them. And if you look, you can see just how high the water had come up on the trees and stayed for a while.' So we looked at the place and it had high ground on both sides. One side was like a prairie and the other side was like bottomland. You had Bermuda grass and clover on one side and prairie grass on the other. The good thing about it was we never had any cattle drown. They had high ground to get on when the water came up.

We wanted to buy the property. We didn't have enough cash to buy it. We went to Equitable Life Insurance and borrowed the money to buy the land. I think Mr. Mann paid \$15 an acre for it, for 3000 acres that he bought from the Texas Company (Texaco). Mr. Mann got in a tight for money so he put 1386 acres up for sale and that's what we bought.

We gave him \$30 an acre. That was in 1948, that's what land was selling for back then. My friend, Dr. Joe Yelderman, bought some for \$15 an acre on the other side of the Brazos River from us. My dad and I looked at another place on the Bernard River at West Columbia and I think it was \$35 an acre. We didn't have enough money to buy it but Mr. Willie Gaubatz bought it. There were 600 acres on one side and 300-400 acres on the other side. Phillips wanted the 600 acres for a reservoir and that's what it is right now. So they traded him 600 acres of good farm land up around Bryan for that bottom land. He made a good swap there. Mr. Gaubatz still owns the 300-400 acres on the Bernard River. But that's how cheap land was then.

GOODSILL: Do you have a comparison on how much it sells for now?

OTTO: It depends on where it is located. Some of this land around here is \$10,000 an acre, smaller tracts where people come in and make little ranchettes.

We kept the land for 12-13 years and we sold it for \$275 an acre. That's how we got started - that's where we got our cash. Of course if we'd held it we would have gotten even more for it. And we bought some more land after that. We own a place down at Guy, at the intersection of Highway 36 and Vrla Road its pasture land. It takes about 4-5 acres per cow on the prairie land. Bottom land, along the river, you could run a cow on about 2 acres. The grass is better. You have to have rain.

That's how rice got started in this country. It takes a lot of water. With rice you have to have levees to hold the water in the fields. They used to take the water out of the river and then they drilled wells. But water is getting pretty tight around here now, with all these developments going in.

GOODSILL: I was wondering about rice being a popular crop down here.

OTTO: It was at one time. There was a lot of rice farmed around here.

GOODSILL: Not because there was a lot of rainfall, but because they could irrigate from the river?

OTTO: And the wells. But they monitor that a little bit closer now. There's a rice dryer still here that you probably saw when you came into town. There's one big rice farmer outside of Needville and that's the only one I know of left around here. There used to be several. That rice dryer in Needville takes rice from around Bay City. Somebody there made arrangements to either buy or lease the storage.

GOODSILL: When you harvest rice, is it wet or dry?

OTTO: It's dry.

GOODSILL: Why do you put it in a dryer?

OTTO: You can't store rice or Milo (grain sorghum) with a high moisture content. You've got to have the moisture down to around 12-14%. You put it in storage, and if it's green you force air through it. Then you take it from there and go up the elevator to the dryer. The dryer is real tall and it's a series of shelves. The grain comes down through that dryer, there's a big gas blower at the bottom of it. Every so often you take a sample of your grain to see what the moisture is in it. When it gets dry enough, then you go into storage with it. Too much moisture will make it cake up and sour, and it's ruined.

GOODSILL: Good explanation. Did you have anything more to say about your young years as a rancher?

OTTO: I started farming when I was 16. I bought a two-row, Farmall H tractor from Mr. Monroe Eversole out here. He had about 40 acres. I put in my first cotton crop. I came back to the house and my dad asked me, 'How many bags of seed did you use?' I said, 'Three'. He said, 'Oh, boy, you're not going to get a stand with just three sacks on 40 acres!' I said, 'Well, we'll just have to wait and see.' Anyhow, it was beginner's luck because it came up about 6-8 inches apart. At harvest I had some hands come in and pick it. We made right at a bale to the acre. I paid for my tractor the first year.

GOODSILL: A bale to the acre - is that the ratio you are trying to get?

OTTO: A bale to the acre is a good crop. Well, it used to be. Now we've made as much as 3 bales to the acre on some of that good black land over at Wharton. So I leased some more land and eventually bought another tractor. But my brother, John W. Otto, Junior, came into partnership with me. When he came out of the service, I'd already had a herd put together so he came in and we formed Otto Brothers.



We farmed and ranched together, for several years. I had a cousin, R. J. Otto, who was more like a brother to me because he was my same age. We went through school together. My brother was hardly ever home when I was growing up. He was either in college or in the service. I only farmed cotton back then. A little bit later I started farming some Milo. You've heard about the long lines at the gin or at the grain storage? That's true. There used to be long lines of people. Everybody had a trailer and a cover and they'd get in line at the gin to get the cotton ginned.

GOODSILL: Explain the ginning process.

OTTO: In ginning, you separate the lint from the seed. When you pick it, you pick the seed cotton out of the burr. Then it goes through the gin. From the sucker that sucks the cotton off the trailers, it goes through a cleaner and a dryer. Then it goes to the gin stands. A gin stand is a series of saw teeth that pulls the lint off the seed. Another apparatus brushes the lint off of the saw teeth and from there it goes to the press to make the bale. We tried to make a 500 pound bale, more or less. Now they make standard density bales which are similar to a compressed bale that they put on ships for export. It makes a smaller bale. We would make those bigger bales and you could handle them pretty well by hand. But when they went to a standard density like a compress, when those things fell, it was dead weight. It took a machine and a couple of strong men to set them up.

GOODSILL: Once you get it into a bale, and export it, how is it used?

OTTO: They comb it and clean it and make cloth out of it. First, you get the lint off the seed. The lint goes into a condenser and is baled. Then it goes to the cotton mills where they process it into cloth. They weave it into cloth.

I want to tell you a story while I'm thinking about it. My grandfather, August Schendel, lost his arm in the gin. I think it was his left arm that got tangled up in some of the machinery and sucked in. This happened in the daytime. He had to lie there until the next morning until the doctor could come out of Richmond to take his arm off. They had to sterilize the instruments in a cast iron wash pot on the outside. Now how he laid there that long, I don't know. I don't know if they had some kind of painkiller or what, but they had to keep him sedated. Some of those old timers went through hell. It was a hard life. We talk about the good old days. We've got a lot better times now, with more conveniences than they had back then. They had to pump all their water by hand. You had to grow your own food.

OTTO, LINDA: This was prior to 1932 that he lost his arm.

OTTO: So we're back to the lines at the cotton gin. And it's the same thing with grain. This was the old days we're talking about. Now it's an all-together different story. You don't see lines any more. The cotton that's ginned comes out of the press in the bale and goes right on a truck and they haul it down to the port or wherever it's destined for. At one time we had two cotton warehouses here that received all the baled cotton. Now it's put directly on a truck. One of the gins bought one of the warehouses and the other warehouse the city bought. And that's where they drilled their last water well, and they use it for storage. It's not enclosed anymore; it's just a big slab out there. So we had the grain dryer, the rice dryer (which we still have) and the gins and that's about it.

GOODSILL: The reason the lines were so long was that it took so much time to gin the cotton?

OTTO: That's right. And the gins now are a whole lot faster. They've been improved. One gin used to gin 5,000 bales; now one gin will gin 50,000 bales. Everything's been speeded up.

GOODSILL: When does the cotton farmer get paid?

OTTO: There are several ways you can do it. We're in a marketing pool with our cotton with the co-op in El Campo. So they sell to the mills. I never worried about grading. Back when I was a kid, we pretty well knew how to grade cotton. You could look at the color and tell whether it was strict low middling or middling. My dad showed us how to pull the staple. That was very important. You had to have a good staple to get a good price. The things that entered into the grade of the cotton was the staple, the color and the amount of trash that was in it. When cotton picking machines first came on the scene, there were some terrible looking samples until the gins got modern and put in more cleaning to get the trash out of the lint so you would get a better grade.

On Milo, you had a scale that we would check the cup weight or bushel weight. You would fill a cup, level it off and weight it and you were shooting for 57 pounds to the bushel. After the cup weight, you were concerned about the moisture in the grain. You would weigh out some grain and put it in the moisture tester, press the button, and it would give you the moisture content of the grain. Rice was graded the same way.

GOODSILL: Those guys who are waiting in the long line at the gin are just praying it doesn't start raining.

OTTO: Yeah. Back then you had a tarp that you covered the trailer with. When it rained, everything shut down until it got dry again.

GOODSILL: So when does the cotton farmer get paid?

OTTO: If you're in the co-op, it takes about a week to get your check. My dad was a cotton buyer. The farmer would take the samples in, he would look at the cotton, grade it, and make an offer. If it was satisfactory, they'd have a deal. One thing I didn't mention, it takes a lot of money when you are buying grain or cotton. We borrowed the money to buy it, and then when we sold it, we paid them back. We did business with First Capital Bank in West Columbia on the grain. We'd issue what's called a warehouse receipt. There would be about 100,000 pounds on a warehouse receipt. We'd take it down to the bank and borrow whatever was needed. They would keep the warehouse receipts there until we sold the grain and collected the money. Then we'd go buy the warehouse receipt back. By the same token, Dad would issue a draft on the First State Bank and they would honor it. That's how the bank made their money and how we made our money.

GOODSILL: That's all well and good if you have a good crop. But if you don't have a good crop, it must be very anxiety producing!

OTTO: If you have a lot of rain on cotton when it's open, it lowers the grade. By the same token, that burr will get rotten and you've got to pull it if you pick by hand. Or you take a stripper and go through there and get it. It lowers the grade and it lowers your seed price. I've seen seed start to grow in the boll when it got real wet.

GOODSILL: Are you trying to harvest the seed as well?

OTTO: Yes. Seed can be used for next year's crop. But we used to take the seed and feed some to our milk cows. I have fed steers with it. When cottonseed got cheap, we'd buy several loads of seed and store it in bulk and in the winter, I used a hammer mill, a grinder that I got secondhand from Mr. Nowatny. He had a feed mill. We had a pretty good crop of Hegari hay that we planted and the cottonseed. In winter I would take a tractor with a flat belt pulley on the side to pull the hammer mill and we'd feed that hay and cottonseed through the hammer mill and grind it up and bag it. We would take some out every day to feed the steers. They loved that stuff. We'd have to take the steers out of the pen, fill up the troughs, and then open the gate. Here they'd come - don't get in their way! They did real well on that cheap feed.

We had hay, cottonseed and some extra cottonseed meal. Mr. Charlie Bailey had a feed mill in Rosenberg and we'd go up there and buy blackstrap molasses and we'd mix all that in the feed trough by hand. The steers loved that!

Cottonseed meal is a by-product from the production of cottonseed oil. It's a real strong, high protein feed. I think it's about 30-40% protein. When the oil is processed from the seed, you end up with the outside hull and the meal. We used to go up to the mill in Richmond and buy what they called 80-20, which was 80% cottonseed hulls and 20% cotton seed meal and it made a good winter feed for cattle. We bought quite a bit of that.

GOODSILL: How do you get oil from the seed? Do you compress it, smash it?

OTTO: That's right. There were some big ranchers around here. Mr. Banker was one of the bigger ranchers; he was one of the old timers. Mr. Armstrong off of FM 442 had a pretty big ranch. And the Moores still have a lot of land in cattle and rice. That's where most of the rice comes from, off the Moore land. And I think Jack Wendt's family is still farming the Moore land, west of town, close to Kendleton.

GOODSILL: Jack Wendt didn't want to be a rice farmer because it was so itchy. And then they come up with a variety that wasn't so 'itchy' so he could be a rice farmer.

OTTO: And not only that, the Milo is itchy, too. Very itchy. Some of the guys would take cornstarch and water, make a paste and put it around their necks and faces so it would itch so bad. Some of that rice was worse than other grains.

GOODSILL: Is there anything in the previous interview you want to go over or fill in?

OTTO: The part about paying for the dryer is wrong. It took 2-3 years to pay for it. That's a pretty fast payout. And it always paid a good dividend.

Let me tell you about the market. When I was a young kid, I used to ride with my daddy to Houston. Port City Stockyards was the only place we could go to sell our cattle. At that time it was located on Calhoun, where the University of Houston started out. It had several different commission houses that would market your cattle. You dealt with one of them and then unloaded your cattle from the trailer. They had a straight chute with little pens on each side. You'd separate your cattle into the little pens. They were sold like a private treaty. The commission man would act as an agent between the seller and the buyer.

Some of those buyers were close enough to the processing plants where they could go right from the commission company to the slaughterhouse. They didn't have to truck them anywhere. I'd be unloading live cattle and look over and see them loading processed cattle by the quarter. They cut the cattle into quarters, loaded them into trucks and took them to the stores in Houston. After a while, auction took over. Houston got so big they had to move the Port City Stockyards to Sealy. I think they bought the Sealy Auction place. It has since closed.

GOODSILL: Was it better for the rancher to do it through the commission house or by auction?

OTTO: I liked auction a bit better because you had more competition. The biggest auctions around here were at Sealy. They used to run maybe 5,000 head when they had a big run. There was also a sale at Brenham. We used to go to El Campo, too. They had a good sale there. There was a little sale over at Hockley. I liked to go to Hockley because they had cheaper cattle. Sometimes you'd find some the dairymen had brought in, where they were half-breed milk stock, Jersey or Holstein. I bought some of those heifers and they made real good mama cows.

Down here most of what we ran were crossbred cattle, Brahman cross. You could put an English bull (Hereford or Angus) on them and cross them with a Brahman-type cow. These hybrid cattle are bigger and do better; they grow faster and put on more weight. A lot of these guys now are running Charolais bulls on their cattle, the solid white ones. You can put them on a crossbred cow and that's what my son-in-law has done. They like that crossbreed pretty well.

Brahmans can stand a lot more heat and insects don't bother them as much. Their skin is thinner and they don't have a lot of hair. I went up to Montana and they would have Black Angus or Galloway. Those cattle have lots of hair and it goes cold in Montana. You won't see any Brahms up there because it's too cold for them. I had a black bull with some Brahman cows in the pasture one time, and I couldn't find my bull. I thought he might have gotten out. I kept driving and came along a little creek. I looked down there and there was that bull. He looked like a buffalo, laying in that water, with just his head sticking out. The heat put him there!

There are a lot of diseases in livestock. One of the best things was the screwworm program. Screwworm isn't a disease but a parasite. They used to take a big toll on the cattle. We had about seven horses and we rode every day, doctoring calves. When the baby calf was born and his navel was raw, the screwworm flies would lay eggs in there and then there would be maggots in there. If you didn't get to the calf and doctor him, the screwworms would eventually take a toll on him. When I doctored them, I had a medicine or chemical called Peerless Borax Chloroform. I'd have some sample cotton in a bag and my Peerless worm killer. I'd put the medicine on the cotton and daub it in that wound. That would kill the maggots. Then I had another medicine called Smear 62 and you could put that one there and it made a fast scab. Usually the one doctoring was enough.

A lot of times you didn't have to worry about the Brahman calves because the cow would actually like the larva out of there. If you were out there in a pickup truck and wanted to doctor the calf, you got to the side of it, put a rope on it and pull it inside that bed of the truck. That cow would have her head right in there where you were, blowing her nose on you and shaking her head. You had to be careful she didn't climb in there with you! The Screwworm program did away with that. And it helped deer. If the buck ran through the woods before he shed his velvet, his rubbing his antlers against the trees would make a bloody spot on his antlers. Eventually maggots would get in there and it would kill him.

We had cattle that had worms in their ears from ear ticks. We even had white-faced cows that had worms on the edge of their eye. We had baby calves that would have worms right at the top of their back, where the hair makes a little swirl. It was work taking care of all those cattle!

In the 1940s, during the war when I was a kid, we had an outbreak of anthrax here. The cattle were dying and Daddy even lost some mules. We didn't have anything to fight it with. There was an old veterinarian from Orange, Texas, named Dr. Miers. He came down here and said, 'You people gather your cattle up and I'll come and vaccinate them. In two weeks they'll be immune to this anthrax.' So that's what we did. And it worked. As a result of that, every spring we'd get our cattle up and vaccinate them. It was a 2 cc dose. While we had them there, we'd work the calves too. They usually had an earmark, registering where we had marked the ears on the calves so we'd know which ones had been castrated and other things. We'd give them a shot too for a disease in baby calves called black leg.

GOODSILL: How long did it take between when the calf was born and when you sold it?

OTTO: It depended. Mostly six to eight months. We would wean the calves from the cows and either sell them, or brand the heifers we were going to keep.

GOODSILL: Since the weather is relatively mild down here, it wasn't too hard to keep the animals cared for during the winter?

OTTO: Most of our winters are not too bad. Heat is more of a problem here. Dad and I used to figure if we could go to the first of the year without having to feed, we were over the hump.

When we worked the calves, we had a brand that Dad registered for me. We called it a VTJ. We connected and it looked like a backward J. My Dad used the brand, 66. We were registered in Fort Bend, Brazoria, Atascosa and Wharton counties.

GOODSILL: Once a brand is registered, can it be used again?

OTTO: Yes. You have to re-register ever so often. If you have cattle, it's a good idea to have it registered. The Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association, which I was a member of, had some real good inspectors. One of them was Leonard Stiles. Leonard located some of our cattle. One of his men was really good at finding cattle thieves. His name was Graves Peeler.

GOODSILL: Were there a lot of cattle thieves?

OTTO: They would go out and steal a cow and butcher it. I'm sure there were some larger operations, but most of them were small operators.

Leonard Stiles was a good friend of ours. When we had the General Store he would come by and visit us ever so often. He told us one day, 'Well, I'm going to be taking a different job.' I asked him what the matter was. He said, 'I got a job offered to me at the King Ranch. I'm tired of catching these crooks and taking them to court and the court turns them loose. I want to get me a steady job.' So he left the Cattlemen's Association and went to Kingsville. He stayed there until he passed away. He was a real good fellow.

GOODSILL: So the punishment for stealing cattle was not very strict at that time.

OTTO: No, they didn't hang them then! (laughter) Not like Gus in Lonesome Dove. But that was their job, to catch criminals and watch the markets. They would have an inspector at the market. When the cattle came in, they would check them for earmarks and brands as to whose it was. The whole purpose was to catch rustlers.

GOODSILL: So let me put this story together. You did farming and ranching, and then there came a point when you began to run the store.

OTTO: No, I never ran the store. My brother ran the store. He was the inside man and I was the outside man. And I worked at the grain dryer. We had stock in the grain dryer and I worked there as the manager, and also as president of the board at one time.

GOODSILL: So which did you prefer?

OTTO: I always liked ranching. It was more fun, being outside all the time. That's what really bothers me now. Since I was in that car wreck, I can't get around and be outside very much. I was on Colony Road where it goes into Pier 36, I had the green light and a guy came from the other way and he never stopped. It was a head-on collision. I have two holes in my head, here, and here's what's left of my leg over here. This was in 2011. Before that I was very active. I was on my way to check on a field of cotton we had over at Long Point, where Jefferson Lake is situated.

That was another thing. We had that railroad through here and before Jefferson Lake Sulphur Company discontinued the railroad, they used to ship a lot of sulphur out of here. When the sulphur is molten, its reddish colored. When it got hard, they would break it up and use a dragline to load it into open rail cars. Then they went to liquid tank cars. They could keep the temperature in the tank cars such that it wouldn't solidify. When they closed that rail line, they killed us too. Needville had a change of fortune then, during the 1980s.

We used to get feed in here, in box cars, for the store. We'd take it out with the pickup and take it to the store warehouse. The spur came in here and went all the way to School Street. [Editor's note on railroad history: In 1918, the GH&SA (Galveston, Harrisburg, and San Antonio RR) built a branch line from Rosenberg through Needville and Guy to Damon. It was abandoned in sections beginning in the 1950s through the 1980s] We had a lot of frontage where we could park cars. When we had that liquid fertilizer plant, we had liquid fertilizer coming in here from Tennessee. We'd get our base solution from them and park that tank car back there. We'd pump it out of the tank car into our storage tanks. It was UAN-32, Urea Ammonium Nitrate solution, used for fertilizer for our crops. The applicators have like knives on the ends of them, and you'd knife it in to the beds. The applicators would meter it into the bed. Way back then we'd put about 250 pounds of liquid to the acre and now we put 500-550 pounds to the acre.



By the same token, you can mix sulphur with your fertilizer. In the past we'd have to use sulphur mostly for dusting. It was dry sulphur. Putting dry sulphur on to get rid of insects, it'll run the insects, because I think it stinks them out! But it won't kill them. And if you get a rain, you have to do it again. When it first came out, the airplanes wouldn't fly sulphur because it was too dangerous. It might explode.

One of the first applicators to come out here, was George Lane, at Lane Airpark. He got out of the service and bought two of the old Stearman biplanes, and that's what he started his business with. Lane Aviation is big now. They were not a spray plane; they used dry material, either fertilizer or insecticide. He rigged up some of the Piper Cubs and made spray planes out of them. They were small, but that's what he started with. He was a Piper dealer. My brother and I bought our first airplane from him. We bought an old Piper J-3 Cub and was more a less a glider with an engine in it. If you had a tail wind, you might get 70-80 miles per hour out of it. When you landed it, it landed at about 35 miles per hour - that's the speed it stalled out at!

GOODSILL: Why did you need an airplane?

OTTO: We were just playing! (laughing) Later on we bought another airplane we used to fly back and forth to the coast. We paid \$600 for the old Cub. I had never been up in one before, so George took me up. The pilot was in the front seat and I sat behind him. That thing rattled! We were flying along the freeway and he said, 'You can see the freeway. Just put the nose of the airplane on that freeway.' He looked back at me and said, 'You really don't have to grip that stick that hard.' My knuckles were WHITE! I was really uneasy in that old Cub. But we learned to fly in it. George taught us to fly and he had another guy, called Mel Chenoweth who was a good duster pilot.

I think the other plane we bought was new and we paid about \$5,800 for it. That was a four space plane and we could cruise at about 135 miles per hour. We'd fly down to Chinquapin on the coast, right on east bay, where we had a place. There's a little creek that joins Lake Austin to East Matagorda Bay. I could get in that thing and in less than an hour's time, I could be down there fishing. The guy that had the bait camp also had an airplane and he had a landing strip. So we'd fly in there and land on his strip, go to our house and fish. We had that house until Carla came by. I didn't go down there after Carla. My brother went down there and he said the only thing left was a couple of pilings. So that was the end of our fishing house.

We kept the plane and flew it a while, and then sold it a guy who was a pretty good poker player. He'd won a pretty good pot of money the night before and he was looking for a place to spend it. He wanted an airplane so we sold him the airplane. (laughs)

I want to tell you where the 1386 acres was located. Now we have 1030 acres at Dobrowolski, south of San Antonio, between Jourdanton and Charlotte, closer to Charlotte. We have it leased out for grazing.

GOODSILL: (talking about previous interview) Maria Kohn is Kristoff Schendel's wife.

OTTO: We have a question about how to spell Kristoff, with a K or with a C. Either way would be all right.

OTTO, LINDA: I have a rubbing of the headstone but I can't find it.

OTTO: This particular thing was made by Dorothy Leyendecker.

OTTO, LINDA: She was doing a thing for the German Society. They had their state meeting here in Needville and she had ties to Needville, so she came and talked to us.

OTTO: Neblin, Germany is where my kin came from. And Perlsberg, Germany as well. They came over on a ship called The Bavaria. The ship later sunk. August was three years old when they came over and his brother, Fritz, they called him one year, but he wasn't even born yet. Back then, if a woman was pregnant, that fetus was counted as 1.

GOODSILL: [reading] Mr. Schendel decided to move his young family to the U. S. because he didn't want his sons to serve in the German army. In 1867 the Schendel family departed from Hamburg, Germany, on the steamboat Bavaria, which carried 138 people to the U. S., looking for a new beginning. On October 25, 1867, the ship docked in New Orleans and the Schendel family boarded another boat headed to Galveston, Texas. They traveled to Wiedeville, a small community outside of Brenham. Christoph was a mason by trade.

OTTO: Those railroads got rich building those lines. Texas didn't have any money after the Civil War. When they joined the Union they had lots of land but no money. I think they traded land to England or someplace to finance the railroads.

GOODSILL: [reading] The Legislature of the State of Texas approved in 1854 an act to encourage the constitution of railroads in Texas by donations of land. For every mile of railroad built, the Houston and Texas Central Railroad Company--

So August headed to Fort Bend County to find the land he was looking for, and eventually settled in Needville.

OTTO: (looking at photos)

GOODSILL: [looking at notes] Alma Louise was August Schendler's daughter. Your grandfather and his family became the first settlers and merchants in the area. August established the first general store. He would travel by covered wagon to Rosenberg, Texas, to get supplies for his store. His wife, Louise, would put out a lantern on the fence post to light his way home at night. The town was called Schendelville but they always needed extra stuff, so as a joke, he named the town 'Needmore' but post office couldn't accept Needmore and renamed it Needville. August was the first Postmaster. Mr. Schendel platted a town and started selling lots and he donated land for the school.

OTTO: He tried to get people to come here and stay here. Sometimes they would have a bad crop and talk about leaving, and he would try to talk them into staying. There's one family who came down here from Oklahoma Territory. They left in covered wagons from Oklahoma to Needville. They didn't have any money, and they borrowed 50 silver dollars from my grandpa. His name was Freund. After they made the winter, he paid my grandpa back with those same 50 dollars. They stayed here and were a very good family of farmers. (looking at pictures) Do you see that meat market? That's Valka's Meat Market. And there's our store.

Let me show you this. This happened during the war (WW II). They wanted scrap iron for the war effort, so the school went out and gathered a bunch of scrap iron. There's a picture of me, with a pot on my head and something else I was using for a gun. They collected cars and tractor parts. Uncle Charlie and my dad helped me more than anybody in the cattle business. He was a good man.

GOODSILL: Do you remember your grandfather?

OTTO: No. When they found out I was big enough to throw calves, then I had to go work cattle with Uncle Charlie and Uncle Buck, who was the youngest. They never had any water and I'd get so doggone thirsty. Those old men were tough. They didn't need any water but I was pretty young and I'd get thirsty. I had my horse and there was a Senna bean bush that had a little shade. So I rode over there, eased in there and got in the shade. And Uncle Buck saw me and all he did was hooraw me about going to get in the shade.



*Needville, Texas. About 1925*

Here's a picture of Needville, 1925-1926 but we couldn't quite get it straight in our minds. They used to haul cottonseed with oxen. Mr. Banker had oxen and Mr. Will Lehmann had oxen.

GOODSILL: In that book you showed me, 'hauling bales of hay with oxen was not sufficient. They needed a railroad.'

OTTO: I don't want to stir anybody up but he wasn't a Baptist. He gave land to the Baptist church, but if they ever changed the use of the land, he was to get the land back. And he did. August had passed away, so they came to Uncle Henry and said, 'Mr. Henry, could we have that land back?' He said, 'No, I don't think so. I'm just not for making new Baptists.'

We've had some terrible fires here in Needville, back in 1946. We rebuilt the buildings in 1948, borrowing the money from the SPJST Lodge.

GOODSILL: That probably was just awful but it probably made the town better.

OTTO: Oh, it did. It took about seven building in a row, and they were all my grandpa's.

GOODSILL: How did the SPJST Lodge have so much money?

OTTO: They are a Czech fraternal organization. Sons of Hermann was German. They are a pretty good sized organization. I think we borrowed \$60,000 to rebuild those buildings. Their office then was in Fayetteville, Texas. They are a very conservative people and saved their money.

Interview ends