

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Larry Callies**

Interview Date: 07/17/2017

Interviewers: Jesse Matthews and Jane Goodsill

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

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16 Pages



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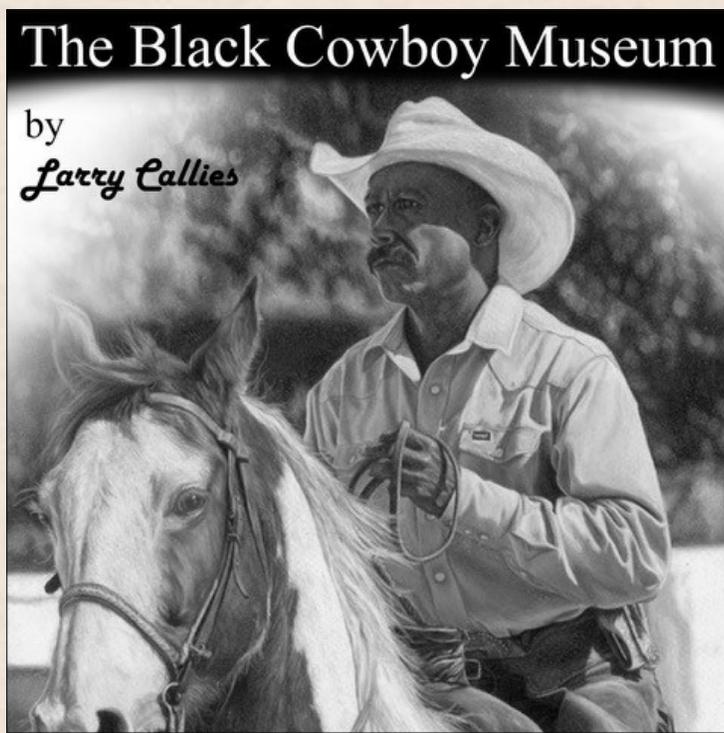
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Transcript

MATTHEWS: How far does your family go back in Fort Bend County?

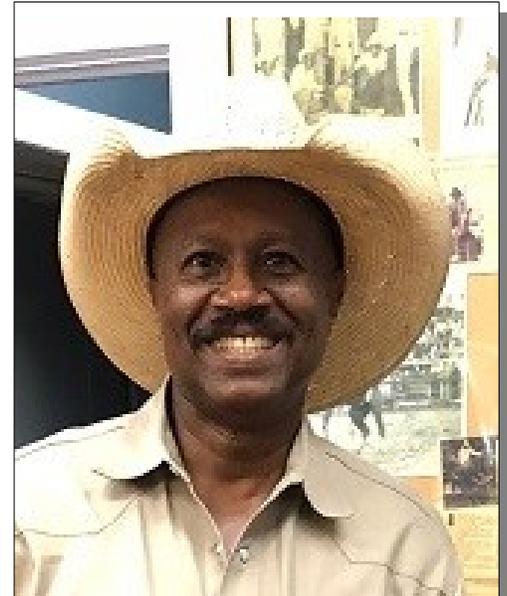
CALLIES: They go back to the 1700's.

MATTHEWS: Do you know who the first Callies was that got here?

CALLIES: No, I don't. My mom wouldn't tell me the real story of the Callies family. My dad always told me to go to Edna, Texas.

I worked for the U. S. Post Office for 34 years in Fort Bend County. I also worked at the George Ranch for some time. When I retired from the Post Office I moved to the Rosenberg area and I opened up a saddle shop. I had been collecting black cowboy historical material, photos and artifacts.

Then Channel 26 did a story on me. I said I wanted to open up a black cowboy museum. Naomi Mitchell Carrier, a historian from Houston who has written a book, called me and asked if I was going to open a museum. I said, "Yes, I'm trying to." She said she had a slave house she wanted to give me. I asked her what year and she said it was 1850. She said it belonged to her parents and it was in West Columbia. "It's in pieces. Do you want to have it for your museum?" I said, "Okay. I notice your middle name is Mitchell." She said, "Yes, I'm a Mitchell. Why do you ask?" I said, "Because my mom was a Mitchell. Where were you from?" She said, "Hallettsville." I said, "My mom was from Hallettsville." She said, "Well, you know, we're kin."



Larry Callies, owner, founder, and curator of The Black Cowboy Museum in Rosenberg, Texas.

She said, "There was a slave owner in Hallettsville, named Isaac Newton Mitchell. He had a bunch of kids by slaves. The slaves would name their kids after him if they turned out to be light-complected. I bet your mom is light-complected."

When I asked how did she know that, she said because she came from that area." I said, "Mexican guys used to come up on the street when I was five years old, and speak Spanish to her, because she looked so light-complected and her hair was straight."

She said, "There is a book called *A Texas Family* by James Kerr Crain and there is information on the internet about Isaac Newton Mitchell." I went to the website and looked it up. Isaac Newton Mitchell was my great-great-grandfather. One day I was at my shop and my cousin, Dwight Callies, from Edna walked in. He said, "What are you reading, Cuz?" I said, "I'm reading about my great-great-grandfather." He said, "Read about the first one. This one on the first page. That's your great-great-grandfather, too." I asked how he knew that and he said, "I'm from Edna. We all know where the Callies came from."

GOODSILL: That's what your dad told you from the beginning!

CALLIES: Yes, that's what my dad told me, that we were from Edna. But my mom said we were from Hallettsville on the Mitchell side. She didn't want to tell me anymore because she was embarrassed about the mixed race part. So I didn't learn that until a couple of years ago.

I had an uncle from El Campo named Willie, who was born June 19, 1919. I called Uncle Willie - he was 94 years old. I said, "Uncle Willie, how far can you go back?" He whispered, "We had a white grandma." I said, "Do you remember her name?" He said her name was Sally, but that was the name she named herself. Her real name was Annis. Dwight told me to look on a certain page, almost the last page of the interview in *A Texas Family*. He had kids by slaves and he wrote it down in his Bible. He was a Baptist minister, a minister of the Gospel, and he wrote down in his bible the names of all the slaves he had and the year they were born. I looked it up and there is Annis, right there. I asked Uncle Willie what year was she born and he said, "About 1838." So he was right. That's how I know that's my great-great-grandmother. I asked him if he had ever seen her. He said, "Yes, one time." In 1926 when he was about five years old he went in a covered wagon to a little town called Danevang, which is about 20 miles from El Campo. He went to this house in Danevang and saw a white lady out on the porch. He didn't think anything of it. He went in and played with his relatives, but when he left, he said, "Dad, who was that white lady sitting on the porch?" He said, "That's your grandma, boy." (laughter) So that's how I got to know about my great-great-grandmother.

GOODSILL: (reading from Callies' book) "Major James Kerr had a daughter, Mary Margaret, and Captain Isaac Newton Mitchell married her."

CALLIES: I think this is a picture of the grandma of the kid who wrote this. I would like to give him a high-five for writing the truth. A lot of people would like to bury this history. This is a picture of the Callies family in Edna, Texas.

GOODSILL: That's a great picture. You told me some of the people were light skinned but they look mainly dark skinned to me.

CALLIES: That's because for so many years, they had children with other blacks so the skin color of the descendants got darker.

MATTHEWS: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

CALLIES: I have three brothers and one sister. The eldest is Marvin Callies; then me, Larry; then Andrew; and then Leon, who was named after my dad. My sister is Valerie Callies, the youngest. My sister is on the board of the Black Cowboy Museum. They all came to my opening on June 19th. As did Naomi Mitchell Carrier.

MATTHEWS: What were your mom and dad's names?

CALLIES: My dad was Leon Callies. Nathan Callies was my grandpa, my father's father. Matthew was my great-great-grandfather, Nathan's dad

GOODSILL: And your mom's name?

CALLIES: My mom was Inell Mitchell Callies. She wanted to say her father was from Louisiana to not to get it all mixed up with what happened in Hallettsville, but she first told me she was from Hallettsville.

GOODSILL: Is your mom still alive?

CALLIES: No, she passed away 10-15 years ago.

GOODSILL: It was a big embarrassment to her?

CALLIES: Yes, that the masters had kids by the slaves. She thought that was degrading. But it's history. It is something that happened. I like to say, "I'm a Christian first, and I'm a cowboy second."

The reason I'm a Christian is because of this man right here, my great-great-grandfather, James Kerr, the Baptist minister. He would teach the slaves about God and they would teach their kids about God. I used to wonder why I had so many preachers and reverends in my family.

MATTHEWS: Do you have any idea how many slaves he had?

CALLIES: No. Somebody can tell me, but I don't know. There is a Callies cemetery in Edna, too.

GOODSILL: So we have history going back to Major James Kerr.

CALLIES: He came here in 1749.

GOODSILL: It says here that, "The title of Major was derived from a commission he held in the Army of the Republic of Texas. He played a prominent part in the early days of Texas and of Missouri."

MATTHEWS: What did your mom and dad do for a living?

CALLIES: My dad was a cowboy all his life. And he farmed. My mom worked for people as a housekeeper in Wharton and El Campo. I went to school for three years in El Campo, and then we moved to Boling, Texas. That's where I graduated.

GOODSILL: Is there a story about how your mother and father met?

CALLIES: Yes, there was a story, but they didn't like to talk about it too much. It's because they weren't married when they had my oldest brother.

MATTHEWS: Did your dad work on some prominent ranches?

CALLIES: Yes, he worked on one of the biggest ranches in Texas. He worked for Sloan Williams, a rodeo stock producer for 25 years. I worked for him for about 15 years, ever since I was 12-13 years old. He came to the opening of The Black Cowboy Museum.

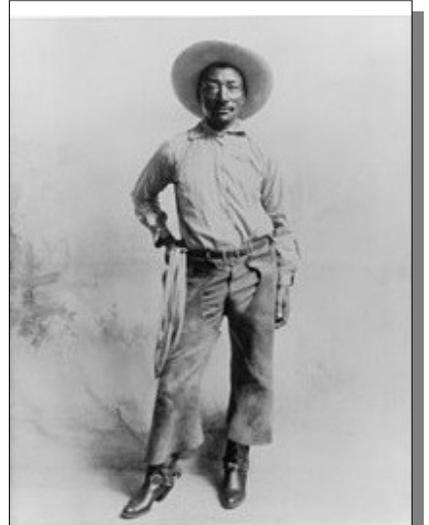
I worked my way out of the cotton fields! I knew if I worked hard on horses and learned how to ride, they would pay me more than I could make in the fields. (I found out in my reading that this was what the cowboys in the 1800s did. They knew that if they could ride a horse and work cows, they didn't have to pick cotton.) Sloan used to come by and shout, "Hey, Larry! Can you come help us with the horses?"

MATTHEWS: Who was the first steer dog?

CALLIES: That was Bill Pickett. I have a picture of him in the museum. And photos of all the black cowboys.

MATTHEWS: He kind of invented steer dogging. (laughing)

EDITOR'S NOTE: Steer dogging, also known as bull dogging or steer wrestling. Bill Pickett invented the technique of bulldogging, the skill of grabbing cattle by the horns and wrestling them to the ground. It was known among cattlemen that, with the help of a trained bulldog, a stray steer could be caught. Bill Pickett had seen this happen on many occasions. He also thought that if a bulldog could do this feat, so could he. Pickett practiced his stunt by riding hard, springing from his horse, and wrestling the steer to the ground. Pickett's method for bulldogging was biting a cow on the lip and then falling backwards. He also helped cowboys with bulldogging. This method eventually lost popularity as the sport morphed into the steer wrestling that is practiced in rodeos.



Willie M. "Bill" Pickett, 1870-1932. --Wikipedia

CALLIES: He did what he saw the dogs do.

MATTHEWS: Did your dad know him?

CALLIES: No, he didn't know Bill Pickett. My dad was a calf roper and he was pretty good, too. But my uncle, they say, has a picture with Bill Pickett in Fort Wort. He knew all the famous cowboys and he was one of the famous cowboys.

GOODSILL: So there was a way for the black men to rise up, by becoming good horsemen.

CALLIES: They could ride in rodeos, but it took years before they could ride against the whites. In the 1940s, 50s and 60s, they couldn't compete with white cowboys, until Willie Thomas came along from Fort Bend County. He was the first black to ride in professional rodeos. I think he did it in the 1940s, in San Antonio. But the way he had to do it, was he had to ride after the rodeo. One time he rode a bull that was unriden and he rode him the full 8 seconds.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Please read the Johnnie Mae Thomas Greenwood interview on this website at <https://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/home/showdocument?id=41391>

The talk around town was "Willie Thomas rode such-and-such bull". But people who were at the rodeo said, "We didn't see that!" They said, "Well, he rode him AFTER the rodeo." Eventually the professional rodeos had to change the way they did things. They said, "For every black man that rode after the rodeo, they'll have to have two whites to ride after the rodeo." So they started letting blacks ride in the rodeos. Tex Williams, my cousin from El Campo, was the first black to make the state finals in high school rodeos.

GOODSILL: Black riders weren't even allowed to compete in high school rodeos?

CALLIES: No. In 1967 he wasn't allowed to participate. They let him in it because they didn't know he was black. He signed his name and had the nerve to enter the white rodeo. When he got there they had to let him ride. He had won the whole thing in 1967.

In 1971, I started riding. There were certain rodeos I couldn't get in. If I had to send a picture, I couldn't get in that rodeo. I asked my mom, "Why do they want a picture of me?" She said, "They want to know if you are black or white because of your cousin, Tex Williams." I made the state finals in high school rodeos in 1971. I told that story in the television interview and some girl was checking it out to see if I was at the finals.

It doesn't show 1971 on here, but this is an old poster of the Brazoria County state finals. She sent me this: Larry Callies, Hungerford, Texas. I didn't win it like Tex did, but I made the state finals.



Larry Callies, successful rodeo rider, cowboy, and entertainer at the George Ranch. Larry founded the Black Cowboy Museum in Rosenberg, Texas

--<https://activerain.com/>

When did you ride? (asking MATTHEWS)

MATTHEWS: From 1965 to 1969, in high school. I went to college in '69 on a football scholarship. The coach said, "I heard you rodeo." I said, "Sometimes." He said, "Well, if you get hurt rodeoing, we're not going to pay for anything. If you get hurt playing football, we'll cover you." I was wise enough to make the choice! But I bet we rode in some of the same places.

CALLIES: I used to ride in Simonton. I rode in Simonton in 1968 when I was 15. I used to play music out there too. I started playing country music in the 1980s.

MATTHEWS: I remember going to see Charley Pride just to make sure he was black.

CALLIES: I saw Charley Pride in 1968, with Sloan Williams, in Johnson City. He was playing for President Johnson. I was working the chutes and I could see the President right above me. I could have touched his boots! When Charley Pride first came out, all my white friends asked me if I wanted to see Charley Pride. I said no because I knew he was a country western singer and, being black, I wasn't supposed to like country music. When he was in Johnson City I didn't want to go see him because I was scared somebody might try to beat me up or something. But I DID like Charley Pride. I didn't know he was black! I thought he was a white guy. Everybody was in the front looking for Charley Pride, and they brought him in through the back where I was. I thought, "Oh-oh, that black guy's in trouble!" (laughter) There were policemen surrounding him. I thought, "Man, what has he done?!"

He was the entertainment, but I didn't know it. The place wasn't air conditioned. They had windows that raised up. My buddy said, "Hey, do you want to go see Charley Pride?" I said, "Yes." I'm looking in the windows and said, "Where is he?" He said, "He's right there. He's the man with the microphone." I said, "I see a black guy holding a microphone for somebody." "THAT'S HIM!" (laughter)

Ever since then, I've wanted to sing like Charley Pride. I knew I could sing like him. I started in the 1960s, and sang kind of like Charley Pride, but I didn't go to any clubs, because they wouldn't let me in. I went to see Charley Pride in East Bernard at Riverside Hall and they wouldn't let me in. They said they didn't want to have any race problems.

GOODSILL: They thought they'd have a race problem, not if a black man was singing, but if black people attended?

CALLIES: Yes, lot of people didn't want us in the club. They'd be throwing ice at me. Calling me the N word. I thought they would let me go in because Charley Pride was there, but they wouldn't let me in. I sat out in my car and listened to him, because they had the windows open. Man, he was good!

MATTHEWS: Where were some of the places that you played?

CALLIES: I played at Riverside Hall in the 1980s. I played at the Simonton Rodeo. I played everywhere in Houston. I played at Gilleys. I opened for Travis Tritt. I opened for Collin Raye a couple of times. I opened for Selena. I opened for Emilio, twice. George Strait's manager was my manager. Clint Black's band used to be my band, The Bronco Band, until I lost my voice.

I played six nights a week. I was making money and having a good time. I think I was off on Mondays. I worked at the post office during the day starting at 5:00 AM. I think that's what really hurt my voice. I was overusing my voice and not getting enough rest.

GOODSILL: Tell us about your voice.

CALLIES: I have something called vocal dysfunction. It's a nerve that attacked my vocal cords. I asked God, "God, just get me where I can talk to my kids." That's when I started taking Botox shots. I took them for 24 years. After the last time I took a Botox shot, I could talk. I didn't like taking the shots twice a year.

GOODSILL: Did you finish telling us about your singing career?

CALLIES: People couldn't tell the difference between me and Charlie Pride when I was singing.

GOODSILL: Did losing your voice happen overnight or slowly?

CALLIES: It happened pretty quickly. George Strait's manager called me and about two weeks later I started noticing I was losing my voice. I told my drummer, "Man, I'm losing my voice!" He said, "You're just getting nervous because a big-time person wants you to sing." I said, "No, it's something else. I can't control it." He said it would be fine.

That's what Erv Woolsey, George Strait's manager, said too when I called him. I said, "Man, I think I'm going to lose my voice." He said, "We're going to get you down here in a couple of months." But by that time I had lost my voice.

GOODSILL: Because you kept performing every night?

CALLIES: Yes. I performed even more, to get ready. When I got there, my voice was gone.

GOODSILL: Was that pretty much a heartache for you?

CALLIES: Yes, but I think it was a godsend. God didn't want me to do that. He wanted me to do something different.

MATTHEWS: What year was that?

CALLIES: 1989-1990.

MATTHEWS: You started singing in the mid-1980s.

CALLIES: Actually I tried to sing in the 1960s and '70s but I didn't know how to play guitar until the '80s.

GOODSILL: You mentioned something earlier about it not being cool for you to like country music?

CALLIES: That's right. It was considered white man's music. They used to call me Uncle Tom in school, a black guy who wanted to be white. That was hurtful.

MATTHEWS: The black rodeos that I went to in the 1960s, you didn't hear country western music. You heard soul music.

CALLIES: Yes, and it was good, too! But back then you didn't cross the line or you'd be called an Uncle Tom.

GOODSILL: How about now?

CALLIES: Crossing the line is still a little taboo, but they don't care anymore. People are people. There are more blacks listening to country music than ever before. There are more white people who listen to soul.

GOODSILL: Tell us about your museum.

CALLIES: I named it the Black Cowboy Museum because blacks didn't get any kind of recognition in the '40s, '50s, '60s, and '70s. The second person who wanted to give me a saddle was a white guy, Grady Allen. He said, "Larry, can I be in your museum?" It almost made me cry. I said, "YES!"

He was one of the best calf ropers I'd ever seen. I wanted to be left-handed because he was so good. I used to watch him when I was three years old. My dad would say, "You know, I can beat just about anybody in the state of Texas. But I cannot beat that left-handed son-of-a-gun right there." He lived right down the street from us.

MATTHEWS: Who is the other big black calf roper who came out of here? The white one is Cody Ohl?

CALLIES: No, Fred Whitfield. But, before Fred Whitfield, it was my cousin, Calvin Greely. He could have been the world champion, and everybody knows it. Fred Whitfield knows it. But he couldn't prove it because back then, they had a time clock. Calvin roped the calf right out of the box and tied him real quick. It was an 8 second run but the man with the hand timer called it ten seconds. Then a white guy would rope ten feet away from where he was in slower time, and they called him an eight. Everybody knew it he was cheated.

When Fred Whitfield came up, they started using an electric timer and they couldn't cheat Fred. When he called "TIME" that timer better stop. But when Calvin was roping, they would cheat him EVERY time. I would go to the rodeo and would see it happen.

GOODSILL: This is the same story as Willie Thomas and bull-riding?

CALLIES: Yes. He would ride good and they would score him real low.

GOODSILL: He would stay on for 12 seconds and they would say he hadn't stayed on for 8 seconds.

CALLIES: He would jump off and they would blow the whistle. I've seen that too. In Crosby, Clint Worth rode a bull so good and everybody would know the 8 seconds was up but they wouldn't blow the whistle. He would jump off and then they would blow the whistle.

Tex Williams would ride so good – he was light complected – so when he pulled his hat down, he looked like a white guy or a Hispanic. He'd come out just kicking the horse, riding so good, and people stood up, clapping for him. But then his hat blew off and they started booing because he had nappy hair! (laughing)

GOODSILL: Did Hispanic cowboys get a better deal than the black cowboys?

CALLIES: They got a better deal than the black guys. There was a guy named Richard Gonzalez. He was pretty good. He and Tex were about the same. He would come out to Simonton all the time.

MATTHEWS: When did you start the museum?

CALLIES: I began it about five years ago. I was working at the George Ranch. They were cleaning out some stuff and they were going to throw away photos and material about Willie and James Thomas. They said I could have it. So I started collecting.

I have lots of historic photos of black cowboys. I have saddles, trophies and lots of things highlighting black cowboy history. I have a black walnut bust of an African woman, which is most probably a slave wood carving. One of my resources said, "These carvings would have been fairly common after the 1830s, when forests of that tree were extensive along the Colorado and Brazos Rivers." Several plantation homes had black walnut stairways and cabinets, possibly carved by slaves. The slaves' African ancestry of wood carvings was probably from the Ashanti and Akuaba (Ghana) tribes.



Historic early photo taken on the Jones Ranch, which became the George Ranch in the 1880's. Names of the black cowboys are unknown but the man in the foreground is Thomas W. Jones, son of owner Henry Jones.

MATTHEWS: What was your job at the George Ranch?

CALLIES: CALLIES: I was the lead cowboy at one time. I was over the other cowboys. I would tell stories about black cowboys and there were some white cowboys who didn't want me to tell those stories. They would tell the boss that I was talking about black cowboys instead of the ranch cowboys. I told them "The ranch cowboys WERE black. This ranch didn't hire white cowboys." They said, "How do you know that, Larry?" I said, "My dad told me." Back in the late 1800s they wouldn't hire white cowboys on a big ranch.

GOODSILL: Why?

CALLIES: Because a white cowboy could ride in and they don't know where he's from or anything about him. In two months he could steal 200-300 head of their cattle. He could take them to Louisiana or Oklahoma and sell them. He could tell the buyers, "I'm Mr. George's son." He would get paid in cash for stolen cattle.

But a black cowboy couldn't take a herd and sell them. A white cowboy wouldn't even have to go as far as Oklahoma or Louisiana. He could go to another county and sell them. There was no paperwork – just take them and sell them. They could even do that in the 1950s and '60s. They wouldn't hire white cowboys for that reason.

My last day of taking Botox shots, this magazine was sitting on the floor. It was *Houston History Magazine*. I started reading "*The Spanish Mustang and The Long Way Home*". I thought, "This is what I've been looking for."

I asked the people at the place if I could have the article, and they gave it to me. There is more history about horses than anybody would ever know. The Spanish mustang was thought to have come from Spain. But it didn't. It came from here. A paleontologist named O. C. Marsh found some bones in 1870 in Nebraska. He started digging and found out they were from 35 million years ago. He couldn't prove it was a horse. In 2009, they ran DNA testing on those bones and found out it was a horse. O. C. Marsh was long dead by then. So the horse was brought back over here from Spain and that's why it is "the long way home."

In this book, they say the first people who rode horses were Moorish tribes from North Africa. They rode horses for years. Then they got the idea that they would attack Spain. Spain didn't know what hit them. They went in there and robbed and plundered. The Spanish said, "Who were those guys?"

The Spanish went down to Africa and acquired those horses and started breeding them with their horses. They had the best breed ever in the world and it is STILL one of the best breeds. Christopher Columbus brought those horses over here. He didn't realize that they had originally come from here, millions of years ago.

So I started telling that story at the George Ranch. They said, "Larry, don't tell that story." And I told them how cowboys got their name. The cowboy got his name from slaves. They had a house boy, a yard boy and somebody who worked the cows was called a cow boy. They came from right here in Fort Bend County, because the cowboys in Fort Bend County were the first cowboys, from the George Ranch and the Moore ranch, all the big ranches.

The white guys didn't want to be called cowboy because they thought it was a slave thing. But when cowboys started showing up on television, then everybody wanted to be a cowboy! I asked my dad years ago how come there were no white cowboys and that's when he told me this story.

GOODSILL: Let's go back to your decision to form a museum. You got the idea five years ago.

CALLIES: I got the idea from the George Ranch. I knew all these cowboys and all this history. I started looking up the history of the cowboys and when I got this article about the mustangs, I really wanted to start a museum. The history of the horse is what it is all about, and the first people to ride them and where they came from. When the Moorish African horseback riders did what they did, it inspired others including even inspired Genghis Kahn and Alexander the Great. They were the best. The article also says that they brought slaves with them, some of whom could ride. They were riding horses in Africa before anyone else was.

GOODSILL: Tell us the address of your museum.

CALLIES: It's 1104 3rd Street Rosenberg, Texas. We have all kinds of visitors, kids, adults, church groups, whites, blacks, Hispanics. We charge a nominal admission and accept donations as well. We're a non-profit and are working on our 501(c)3 designation. In the back I do my saddle and leather work. This skill came about as a surprise to me. I was working at the George Ranch and there was one guy who could make knife sheaths. I had this pretty knife that a guy made for me when I was singing in the clubs. I asked the guy at the Ranch if he could make me a sheath for the knife, and he handed me the leather and said I could make it myself, "I'll teach you how to do it."

So he taught me how to make the saddle stitch. He said I did a real good job and that it looked better than his! He asked what I was going to make next, and I said, "I've always wanted a pair of chaps." He said, "Good luck. I've never made a pair of chaps."

There was a guy who had a nice pair of chaps so I asked him if I could use his chaps as a pattern, and he said yes. The Ranch had some leather and stuff and I asked if I could have it. They said yes. They had an old sewing machine that wouldn't work with the heavy material.

I started tinkering with it and discovered it would punch holes in the leather. After the holes were punched I sewed through them by hand. In two weeks I came back with these chaps on. They said, "Larry, where did you get those chaps?" I said, "These are the ones I made." For some reason, God showed me how to make these perfectly. These are the best ones I've ever made. Now my son wears them. You can't find this kind of leather anymore. Everyone at the Ranch wanted a pair! And I made them. They paid good money for them. Eventually I got the machine fixed so I could sew with it, because I couldn't hand stitch all the time.

GOODSILL: How did you learn to make saddles?



Larry models chaps he made by hand from another rider's chaps.



The Singer sewing machine Larry works with in his saddlery shop in Rosenberg to craft a variety of leather goods.

CALLIES: I went to a guy in West Columbia, named Carl Waldrep. He took me under his wing. There's a lot involved in making a saddle. I can take the leather off an old saddle and use it as a template. But I can't just make a saddle from nothing. Carl had all the templates. I just remake the saddle. I did that with my uncle's saddle right here. It is the oldest thing I have in the museum.

My cousin from California heard I was redoing saddles and asked if I wanted my uncle's old saddle. He came in carrying it. It was the 2nd time I'd seen him. It looked bad, and he didn't want it. I saw the brass on it and I wanted the brass. So I told him I'd take it. I started cleaning the brass and was able to use it.

MATTHEWS: How many kids do you have?

CALLIES: I have three. Khristi, she's 23. She has a job in Rosenberg. She has a twin brother, Dylan. He's in the Navy. And Whitney graduated this year. She's 17 and going to U of H.

Interview Ends