

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Lee Elkins LeGrand**

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Interviewer: Jane Goodsell

Transcriber: Megan Moore

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Transcript

GOODSILL: Today is October 8, 2015. I'm interviewing Lee Elkins LeGrand. This is for the Fort Bend County Historical Commission Oral History Project. Lee, I'm so glad you could come in today. I've been looking forward to interviewing you.

LEGRAND: Thank you.

GOODSILL: I wanted to start our interview by asking a little bit about your ancestors, specifically where they came from and how they got to Fort Bend County.

LEGRAND: I believe I'll start with my grandfather, Lawrence E. Elkins Senior. My records from my aunt show that in 1921-1929 my grandfather was installing telephone systems in Franklin, Texas, and then moved further this way to Wallis, East Bernard and Stafford. It was the Austin County Telephone Company. His wife, my grandmother, was a switchboard operator. All calls had to go through her. They married in 1912.

GOODSILL: Switchboard operator where?

LEGRAND: In the house in Missouri City where FM 2234 (which I will refer to often as Blue Ridge Road) and Highway 90 intersect. Highway 90 was just two lanes and there was no traffic because there was no Houston out there. My grandmother would take the calls. I believe they had four prefixes at this company. She would patch them through. And my father said he often got in trouble for trying to listen in. That was not allowed. My grandfather had strung the telephone wires and got to Stafford, Missouri City, in 1929. They actually purchased the property in 1933 where my dad lived and where I grew up.

GOODSILL: What was the address to that property?

LEGRAND: I don't know. It fronts what is now Orchard Street. There's some county facility there now, paved over that particular area of land. There was Orchard Street, then 2234 Blue Ridge Road, then Louisiana Street, then Missouri City High School. So it was in that little quadrant. There was a post office, very small, a little center of the community. There was a whole group of wonderful individuals a couple of streets away; The Roanes, the Bordens, people like that. I don't know how or why my grandfather got on the school board, but the picture from a 1937 year book indicates he was President of the Missouri City school board. That was interesting, because this is a man who I'm not sure graduated from high school. He was born in 1895, married in 1912. But he must have been very community oriented, as was my father. I am too.

As the switchboard telephone person, my grandparents took in boarders. I found out last week through records, they took in Jim and Doris Jones. Mr. Jones, later became a principal at Missouri City schools, and was a personal friend of my father. E. A. Jones Elementary School is named after him. They took in various school teachers (laughs softly), maybe that's why they talked him into running for school board. I don't know. But Stafford and Missouri City were all connected.

GOODSILL: You didn't tell us your grandmother's name.

LEGRAND: Oh, my grandmother was Corine Hebert Elkins, from Louisiana. My grandparents were married in Orange, Texas, which basically is an annex of Louisiana. (laughs) My grandfather Elkins was from Celeste, the very northeast part of Texas. So they met somewhere and brought the telephone to Missouri City.

GOODSILL: He was born in 1895 and he was in Missouri City by 1929?

LEGRAND: Yes. My grandfather was thirty-eight when my father was born. They were older parents.

GOODSILL: Did they have more than one child?

LEGRAND: Yes. My dad's the youngest. He had two older sisters, Maidie, who furnished me a lot of these records, and his older sister Irene. They predeceased him. My dad, at the age of ten was a full time resident of Missouri City.

GOODSILL: What's the birth date for your father?

LEGRAND: September 18, 1924.

GOODSILL: So your grandfather and grandmother were living in Missouri City by 1929?

LEGRAND: Yes. They were renting. They had 3 children.

GOODSILL: Well, that's why he got on the school board!

LEGRAND: Could have been. Irene might have already been out of the house. She's twelve years older than my dad. His sister Maidie graduated from the Missouri City schools. So Maidie and my dad, Lawrence, went through the schools there.

GOODSILL: Do you know how long grandfather Elkins was on the school board?

LEGRAND: I would say three to four years, because they moved back to Franklin, Texas when the children were grown. My grandfather died in 1951. After that my grandmother traveled among the relatives in Louisiana and Texas. What a joy! We looked forward to grandma coming.

GOODSILL: What was she like?

LEGRAND: Oh, wonderful [whispered, like a secret]. Ask most people in Missouri City and they will remember her, warm, friendly, loving, easy going.

GOODSILL: What did she look like?

LEGRAND: Large, I mean, she was tall. I think that's where my brother and I get height. She was one of twelve children. Probably was considered a spinster, because I don't think she married 'til her mid to late twenties but was able to roll with the punches. Able to accept a lot and so the traveling was not an issue for her. I found in one picture, she was part of the Fort Bend County Demonstration Club, the ladies. In 1933 or 34, my aunt recorded that they had a load of pineapple. (Reading from something) Home Demonstration Club in 1930s. They had a carload of pineapple (laughing) and so they were supposed to can it here. The Home Demonstration Club was like an agri-extension agent here. I guess it would have been in the county seat, probably Richmond. It was a woman's club for practical homemakers. You know, canning, putting up jams and jellies, gardening, that kind of thing.

GOODSILL: Tell us something about your father's life. He was named after his father, Lawrence E. Elkins.

LEGRAND: He's the junior, right. Lawrence Edward Elkins. Born in 1924. So as a young boy, he pretty much was totally known by all the residents of Missouri City. When I was a child the population was right at six hundred, certainly a lot less than in his childhood. He grew up knowing all of these people. My grandfather, also owned part of the mechanical garage that Mr. Dew had owned. So my dad literally, pumped gas, it was (with humor) before the electric pumps, and you had to physically...



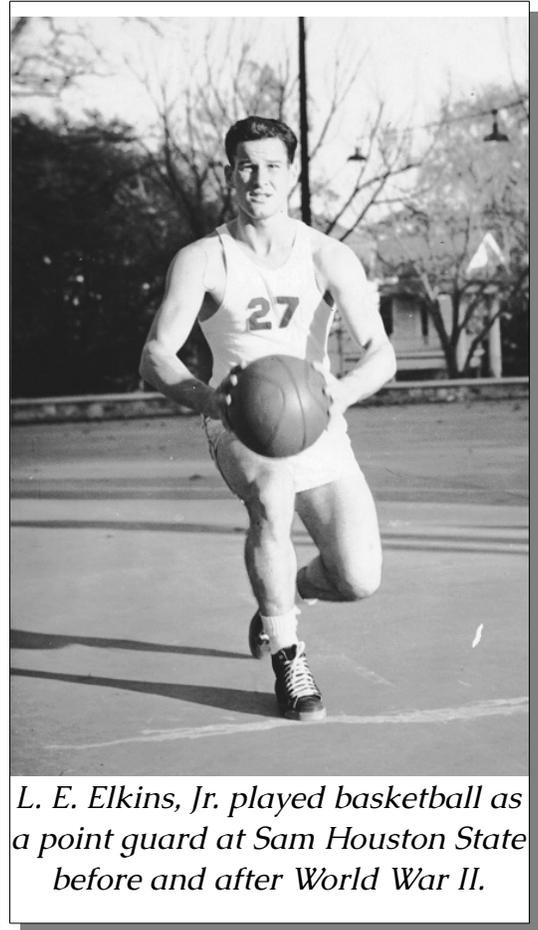
Lawrence Elkins, Jr., at the Missouri City Garage in 1941

GOODSILL: Really pump! (laughs)

LEGRAND: Really pump. Because my grandfather had to have several trades, my dad always had little jobs and purportedly there was unofficial dog racing somewhere on the edge of Fort Bend/Harris County. As a child, my dad said his job was to take the dogs and do the cool down for them. As a young child, he probably had no idea what he was doing. But he knew the people. They knew him. It's an amazing place, to where adults, through generations, cared about other adults. I think that he was a benefactor of that.

GOODSILL: What do you mean by that? In what way?

LEGRAND: It's almost a mentoring, without it being that way. It's not a self-serving mentoring. It's for the betterment of the people, because you want your community to be a good place. You develop leaders. Why else would my father, probably through Mr. Jones and Mr. Rogers, L. P. Pat Rogers, who was superintendent of the schools in Missouri City, who was the first superintendent when the consolidation with Sugar Land came, why would all those people have encouraged my dad to go to college? There was really no precedent for it. Here he was, a young kid, goes off to Sam Houston State on a basketball scholarship. He was an amazing basketball player – he was a Point Guard. He was fast! In fact, my aunt wrote that at some track meet in junior high, he wasn't even supposed to be running, but he won it with tennis shoes and overalls. The man could run! He was very physically fit. I think Mr. Rogers and Mr. Jones saw that and said, "Why don't you go to the teacher's college?" which at that time was Sam Houston State Teacher's College, and he did. He was there one semester on a basketball scholarship. Then he was drafted into the Army Air Force. He never would talk about his experience in World War II other than to say, he got very quiet, "Thirty three missions in Europe as a tail gunner." Not many of those guys had it easy, you know? He won three distinctive medals, including the Distinguished Flying Cross, He just wouldn't discuss it.



GOODSILL: Do you think he was flying over Germany?

LEGRAND: Oh, yeah. Germany, wherever the European theater was. When he got back, and this is what's so amazing, which I have to kind of credit Tom Brokaw with documenting the Greatest Generation, how do you come back and become the college basketball player again? Which he did.

He went straight back to Sam Houston, picked up where he'd left off. He waited tables for extra money. Graduated, had the GI Bill, then went to the University of Houston. Again, it's got to have been the influence of Mr. Jones, Mr. Rogers, a couple of other gentlemen who said, "Lawrence, you need to go. We need you here in the schools." So he got his Masters in Education. Although he was a coach at Missouri City High School for four, maybe five years, his longest stint was spent in administration. He became the principal of the elementary where I went to school. (laughs)

GOODSILL: Tell me something about his physique and tell me about his personality.

LEGRAND: He had the personality of my grandmother. I do believe my grandfather was probably feisty and a little bit edgy. I don't know, in the pictures he's always scowling. I've heard short-tempered, I've heard Scotch-Irish. My grandmother, the Hebert, (with humor) let the good times roll! It's all good!. My dad very much looks like the Hebert side – dark, olive skin, very dark hair, dark eyes. Especially when I was younger, my family would look at me and say, "Oh, she's an Hebert." (both laugh) Because of the darker coloring.

GOODSILL: Was he a big man, like your grandmother?

LEGRAND: Not really, no. He was five ten, five eleven. Extremely muscular. Even after he retired, with thirty-five years in the district, he still had some muscle groups! When he'd be out in the shorts, out in the yard, I'd think, yeah, he had a little spread across the belly, but, oh, my goodness, he still was in good shape. All the training, he was just truly a natural athlete.

GOODSILL: I wonder if that's why he was a tail gunner, because he was kind of a compact guy.

LEGRAND: Could have been. Yes, because he was not six feet tall.

GOODSILL: So he went to school. Then he became a principal?

LEGRAND: Principal of what was Missouri City Elementary. That was 1954 to 1965. I mentioned to you about Mr. Jones, a huge, huge influence, and a personal loss when Mr. Jones died very suddenly in a fishing accident on the coast. He was surf fishing. He either had a heart attack or something that took him down quickly and he drowned before anybody could get to him. That was 1962, I believe, so the school was renamed E. A. Jones at that point. From 1954-65 he was the building principal. We have pictures of him. Of course, no school was air conditioned in this area. But short sleeve dress shirt and a tie, ALWAYS a tie. A cigar (both laugh), which my mother did not allow in the house. Between the buildings at Missouri City Elementary, where the independent buildings, like the Lakeview semi-circle was set up, he would take his cigar, and you knew he was coming (both laugh). But early on, he told me, "When we're at school I'm the principal. I'm not your dad." That whole sense of entitlement, from early on, was his way of showing me, you get any merits or any credits or discredits on your own. You don't go on a family name.



Principal L. E. Elkins, Missouri City Elementary from 1954-1965.

GOODSILL: So you didn't have a sense of entitlement? You had to earn it?

LEGRAND: (Emphatically) YES! Even in my last year of high school at Dulles High School, when I was student body president, I made him promise that he would not come in for lunch when I was in that building. I didn't want anybody thinking I was getting any favors, because I wasn't!

GOODSILL: What was his position when you were in high school? What as his title?

LEGRAND: Assistant Superintendent.

GOODSILL: So you didn't want him to come in when you were there. And he honored that?

LEGRAND: Yes. Oh, he knew. He'd raised me. He knew. (laughs) He did things for me. Unusual for a girl, before Title Nine. One summer, in high school

GOODSILL: Tell people who don't know what Title Nine was.

LEGRAND: Oh, Title Nine was the representation, I guess, especially in sports, for girls and boys, athletics. Before the feminist movement was in vogue, one summer my dad told me that part of my summer job was to write the family bills. He said, "Here they are: electric, gas, whatever, whatever. I want you to write them out, I'll double check, I'll sign them. I want you to understand what it costs to live, to have a household." He did not do that with my brother.

GOODSILL: Oh, younger brother?

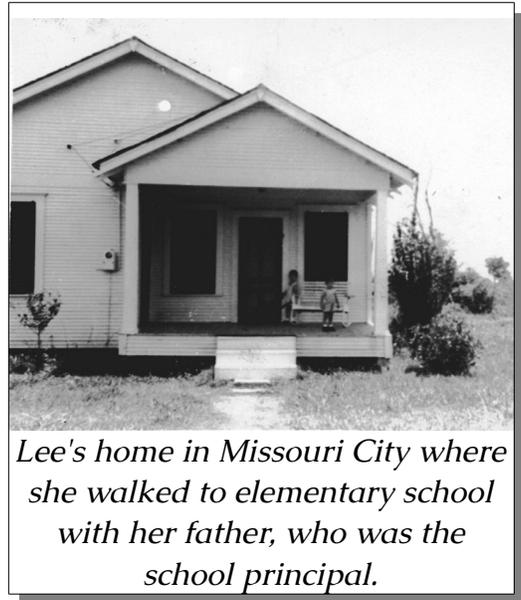
LEGRAND: We laugh, my brother and I. He turned out OK but took a different route. Being an only child for seven years, I probably thought I was an adult. Nobody really was concerned, they took it in stride. My dad, we would walk to school

together. We only had one car. We were three blocks from the campus, and my dad and I walked to school. I can tell you now, I can out walk anybody. My dad had the stride before "power walk" was a word. (both laugh) We walked. It was marvelous.

On the way, that leads me to think, some of the wonderful neighbors we would pass. Mr. and Mrs. O. F. Fuller Carroll, who owned the beautiful house that now is called Heaven on Earth. It's called the Douglas house. Well, back when it was a true house. It was all white, beautiful, antebellum architecture. Mr. Carroll was retired from the Humble Oil Refinery headquarters in Houston. He'd moved out to Missouri City. For extra money, my dad painted that house in the summer because, as it is now, school salaries were difficult. My parents didn't have the money.

My dad refereed football games, he painted houses, all while being an elementary school principal. My mother would pry him away so we could go to San Antonio for five days for a vacation. He loved his work. He loved it. (laughs) Ask any of his teachers.

GOODSILL: What is your mother's name?



LEGRAND: Sue Newton. They met at Sam Houston. She was from New Willard, a sawmill town that's now nonexistent. It was outside of Livingston, Texas.

She started college at sixteen because Texas only had eleven grades, she was a summer birthday and the war was coming on. Why not just go to school? She was the youngest of her siblings...but her mother, my grandmother, had had some college. In 1958-59 my grandparents moved to Sugar Land. My grandmother was a teacher at Lakeview Elementary.

GOODSILL: What was her name?

LEGRAND: Blanche Willis Newton. She taught with Maxene Gary, Rita Drabek, and Dot Hightower. As a

child, before I started school, I went on field trips because my grandmother's second grade got to go. I had flashcards. I had leftover teacher attendance rosters from my dad. I played school a whole lot. (both laugh) My grandmother made the angel food cake. Dot Hightower made the pound cake.

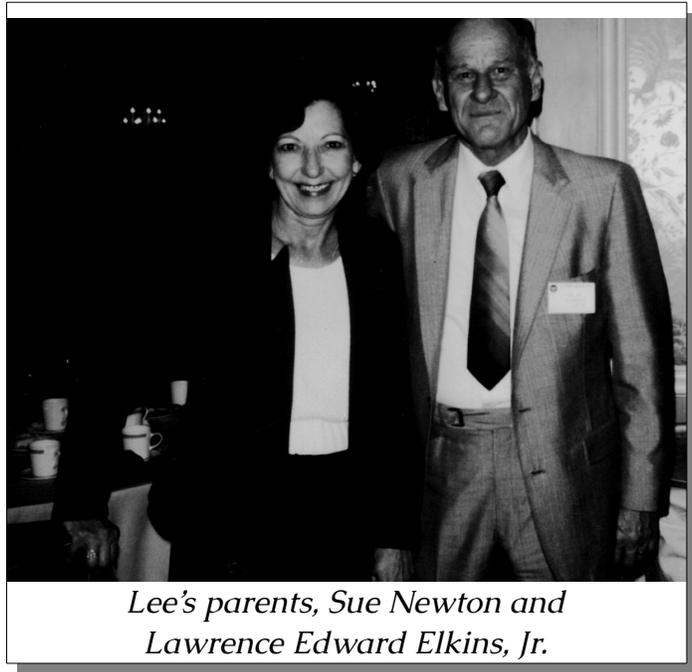
GOODSILL: What was your grandfather's name?

LEGRAND: Kellum Newton from Lovelady, Texas. My grandmother, Blanche, was from Timpson, Texas.

GOODSILL: I haven't got your brother's name.

LEGRAND: Officially, Lawrence Newton Elkins but my brother goes by Larry. My father never went by Larry. I guess even in high school they called him Lawrence.

GOODSILL: How did you get your name?



*Lee's parents, Sue Newton and
Lawrence Edward Elkins, Jr.*

LEGRAND: My dad's initials are L. E. E. My mother's first name is Emma but she didn't like going by that name. She thought if she did not give me a middle name, I wouldn't have to worry about all the rigmarole of changing names or going by first or middle. So I have no middle name. Because she was from East Texas and Emma becomes, let's see if I can do it, (with a strong East Texas drawl) Emma Sue.

GOODSILL: So it was fun growing up in your household?

LEGRAND: Oh, it was wonderful. My mother was a teacher, eventually.

GOODSILL: Where did she teach?

LEGRAND: She taught in HISD (Houston Independent School System). I believe in 1950 or 51, somewhere in there. At that time, women were forced to resign once their pregnancy showed even if they were married, which of course they were.

She did not teach from the time I was a child until my brother started kindergarten. When she returned to teaching she went to HISD, with a principal who was a friend of our family from church. Her thought was, that she and my dad should probably have separate locales. Only when HISD was assigning her across Houston and my brother was little, did she resign from HISD and come to Fort Bend. At that time she said, the furthest I can get away from the administration building...let's see, that would be Blue Ridge Elementary, there's where I'll be. Then Missouri City Junior High where she retired from.

GOODSILL: Did you grow up to be a teacher?

LEGRAND: I did. (laughs)

GOODSILL: Tell me about your career.

LEGRAND: I graduated from Dulles High School in 1971. I was a little bit of a rebel, because my whole family, grandmother, great aunt, mother, dad, everyone went to Sam Houston. I decided I would go to the University of Texas in Austin. So I did. In 1974 I came back and started teaching high school in the fall of 1974. Some of my students were only five or six years younger than I was. I was twenty one years old.

GOODSILL: Where were you teaching?

LEGRAND: Dulles. Then I opened Willowridge High School as a teacher. Remember, all during this time, my brother is in high school, my dad is the Superintendent, and my mother's still teaching. Here's the arrangement. I got married in August, 1974 and began teaching the next week. My brother was not about to claim me, nor I him, being in ninth grade. Again, I was using my married name so only the old teachers would know.

GOODSILL: So mom went as far away as she could get from administration, dad did his job, and you changed your name. (laughs)

LEGRAND: Right. BUT, on afternoons at my grandmother's in Sugar Land, of course, how do all these people NOT talk about school? Oh, my goodness, my dad got an earful all the time. But to protect us he held confidences with board members and developers. He said to my mom and I that there are people who will try to get you to talk, and to find out what's going on, and that's not fair. Hands off. My mother would get so angry. "Why didn't you tell me this was happening?" He said, "Because it would have been hard to not talk. It's enough to deal with when you have to deal with it internally. So now you know." (laughs)

GOODSILL: You found out when you needed to know?

LEGRAND: That's right. It's an amazing ability, to keep a confidence. I'm not as good at that. My brother is.

GOODSILL: What career did he choose?

LEGRAND: Adult Probation for Fort Bend County. He just retired in December after 32 or 33 years. I joke with my brother and tell him he dealt with those students that I had a little trouble with.

GOODSILL: (laughs)

LEGRAND: Not really.

GOODSILL: And did you have children?

LEGRAND: Yes. My husband and I have one daughter. She graduated from Elkins High School, I'm proud to say.

GOODSILL: Aww, what's her name?

LEGRAND: Erin. LeGrand is her maiden name, of course our name. She's married. Her last name is Stauffer. She has a son, Grayson. That's my grandson. He is seven!

GOODSILL: Where does he live?

LEGRAND: They live with my son in law, in Lawrence, Kansas. The Stauffer family is very much established in Kansas. They have several family businesses there, so that's the reason they're there.

GOODSILL: Wow. This has been a great family history. Why don't you look at your notes or pictures and see if there's anything else you wanted to talk about?

LEGRAND: My dad was Fort Bend County Fair Chairman for one year after his retirement from Fort Bend Independent School District (FBISD). He said one year was enough, the politics and the fair were just beyond what he wanted to deal with in retirement (with humor). He was a charter member and past president of Missouri City Lion's Club. He was a charter member and past president of the East Fort Bend Chamber of Commerce. He was on the Boy Scout board at the Karankawa District; he was chairman. He was with the Association for Retarded Citizens, as that started out as that.

FFA, he was Texans War on Drugs, one of the first schools participating. My parents had the drug dog. It was too funny. The drug dogs had been brought into Fort Bend. This was, I guess 1975, and the dogs were pure German Shepherds. They were only using German Shepherds. So they gave my dad a dog. Oh, that was the most loyal dog. We loved her.

My dad was still Superintendent when they named Clements High School and Elkins Road. He fought those, both the names. He pointed out that you don't assign names to streets or buildings to people who have not yet progressed out of that position because their record is not finished. He was outvoted.

GOODSILL: Tell us about Clements.

LEGRAND: In 1980 Governor Clements was the first Republican Governor since Reconstruction.

GOODSILL: But he wasn't out of office yet, so your father opposed it.

LEGRAND: That's right. He was a one term Governor. A lot of the state funding on education was adversely affected by Governor Clements. I don't know the particulars. It's just that we saw things changing. In the 1980s, public education became very different than it had been. There were a lot of factors. I just saw different things from the classroom, and of course as a citizen too, bond issues. When the Stafford district broke away from FBISD it affected my father because so many of the personnel from FBISD had been friends and children of friends from the Stafford/Missouri City ages.

It was a federal court. I had taken a break from teaching. I was a paralegal with the firm that was representing FBISD. This was federal court testimony because the issue was whether a district, part of an entity, could pull out of another district. And if so, what is your bonded indebtedness? How would the funds that you've already voted from the public, be amortized over these districts? That was difficult. Then my dad retired.

GOODSILL: Wait a second. You said that affected your dad personally. It was a split among people as well as among school districts?

LEGRAND: Yes. That's correct. By that time, administrators had been on multiple year contracts. I remember the first time my dad was offered a contract from FBISD, as superintendent, for more than one year. Administrators were one-year contracts, just like the teachers. There was some point of discussion, I remember, in the late seventies, and my dad said to the school board, "Either you let me run the schools and you handle the finances, or fire me."

GOODSILL: Go back to the Stafford thing. Was your father opposed to that?

LEGRAND: Yes. Yes. He did not want to see the break away.

GOODSILL: Wasn't there an issue about transportation for the children, across the highways?

LEGRAND: It involved transportation. Anyway life went on. He retired in 1984. He also was a manager for TEA (Texas Education Association) over the Kendleton school district. Because of mismanagement of funds, I believe Kendleton has finally been disbanded. I forgot his position, but they were taking retired Superintendents and placing them as the CEO, CFO, because of the graft and suspected graft that went on. So he would have to go to Kendleton, sign off on all the paychecks, that kind of thing. He did that for about eighteen months. Then he became ill. He died at the age of sixty four.

GOODSILL: Oh! (surprised) I'm sorry.

LEGRAND: Yes. He went very quickly. My mother died two and a half months later at the age of sixty. That was 1989. Both of them died that year.

GOODSILL: Oh that must have been a tough year.

LEGRAND: It was. I had gone back part time, to teaching at Houston Community College. It was rough.

GOODSILL: He got a lot done in a short period of time on Earth.

LEGRAND: He did. And just the joy of the stories. As a child, I would come home to a household full of teachers, family friends, having coffee with my mom. Then my dad would come in and it would just continue. (both laugh)

I learned how to make coffee! My dad loved the community. He loved the people. It was amazing. We always knew we'd be the last ones to leave anywhere because dad would talk. Of course, my mother did, too.

GOODSILL: What's your speculation on what your father's war experience was?

LEGRAND: I think he saw things and felt things he never wanted to, but like many men from that era, he came back, picked up his life, and decided not to look back. From what I can see, I found pictures of the aircraft with a big bubble in the back, where he was the tail gunner. He did tell me one time there was an instance where they came back from a mission and his co-friend or whatever, in the pit, had a streak of gray in his hair that happened almost instantaneously. Dad said the bullets would fly.

My dad did go to two or three Eighth Air Force reunions but he would never go back to Europe. He was stationed part of the time in England. I guess that was the base from which they sent them out. He had no desire to go back. He did keep up with some of the people, I mean, when they had their reunions. But not much to say about it. No, no. Came back and everything was school.



Lawrence Elkins, Sr., Eighth Air Force, US Army Air Corps

He was a referee. The best story – I still see him in what I call the zebra suit, the ref suit, Friday night lights. He was refereeing a game in Hitchcock, Texas. There was a call that he made that the local supporters didn't like and the police had to take him out of town to get him home after the game. (laughs softly). I just remember him saying, "No, you never boo a referee." To this day, I can't boo. I can't! Because he said they're doing the best they can.

GOODSILL: That's not an easy job.

LEGRAND: He was friends with Guy Lewis, who coached at the University of Houston and Olajuwon who was on the dream team. My dad is in the Bearkat Hall of Fame at Sam Houston State as a basketball player. Bobbie was very pleased about that. Oh, he coached Bobby Williams, who lived in Missouri City, I believe. He became the athletic director at Rice University. He also coached Marshall Whichard.

GOODSILL: I'll read the names of the team: Pete Cangelosi, Gordon Brubaker, Anton Jensen, Robert Hearen, J. L. Segers, and then Lawrence Elkins, Alan Robinson, Ken Hearen, Ervin Reese, and Boyd Flinn. The coach was E. A. Jones.

LEGRAND: He went by Jim, but E. A. were his initials. Jerry L. Segars was the captain. He married Proova, short for Providence. They lived in Stafford.

(sounds of photographs being moved around)

LEGRAND: There's a beautiful picture of the school. You can see the brick, the integrity of the brick. I remember going to a junior, senior prom. I didn't go as a student. My first cousin, my dad's sister's son, they had a grand promenade march. So you'd sit in the bleachers, as if you were at a basketball game, with crepe paper in front of you, to be invisible. My mother would take me because she'd say, "Let's go look at the pretty dresses." So all, I guess, the people she knew whose daughters were at prom. Then you had to leave after that (whispered). But you got to see the grand march.

I would just say that the nucleus of Missouri City, where my dad grew up, was basically at the blinking caution light on Highway 90. As a child, I watched it just blink for about an hour or two before a car would come by. FM 2234, which is Blue Ridge Road, was the only paved road when I was a child in the fifties and early sixties. My knees tell the story; I've fallen on all the gravel in Missouri City!

I rode my bicycle through cotton fields so I got to see migrant workers. I helped them pick peas. My mother finally just said that that was probably not good. Let THEM get the wages. Bull Lane, was where most of the people that lived in town were. Marshall Whichard will tell you, his wife's home was at Fifth street at 2234 (Mary True Myatt). A lot of wonderful people.

GOODSILL: Excellent.

LEGRAND: Thank you for taking the information.

GOODSILL: That was a great interview. Thank you so much.