

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees: **Lawrence Vaccaro**

Interview Date: 05/08/2010

Interviewer: Jane Goodsill

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

Project / Group: Stafford, Texas History

24 Pages



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Transcript

GOODSILL: Our focus today is Stafford history. Let's start with a little bit of biographical information on you. Your name is Lawrence Vaccaro. When and where were you born?

VACCARO: I was born in a hospital in Houston and we lived out in Stafford since I was born in 1942.

GOODSILL: Tell me how your family came to live in Stafford?

VACCARO: They had migrated to the Bryan/College Station area, to a little community called 'Mudville', right on the Brazos River. They were raising cotton in that area. There were two floods, one in 1914, the other, I think, 1916-1917. After the second flood they picked up and came to Stafford.

GOODSILL: And my notes say your grandparents emigrated from from Sicily in 1905.

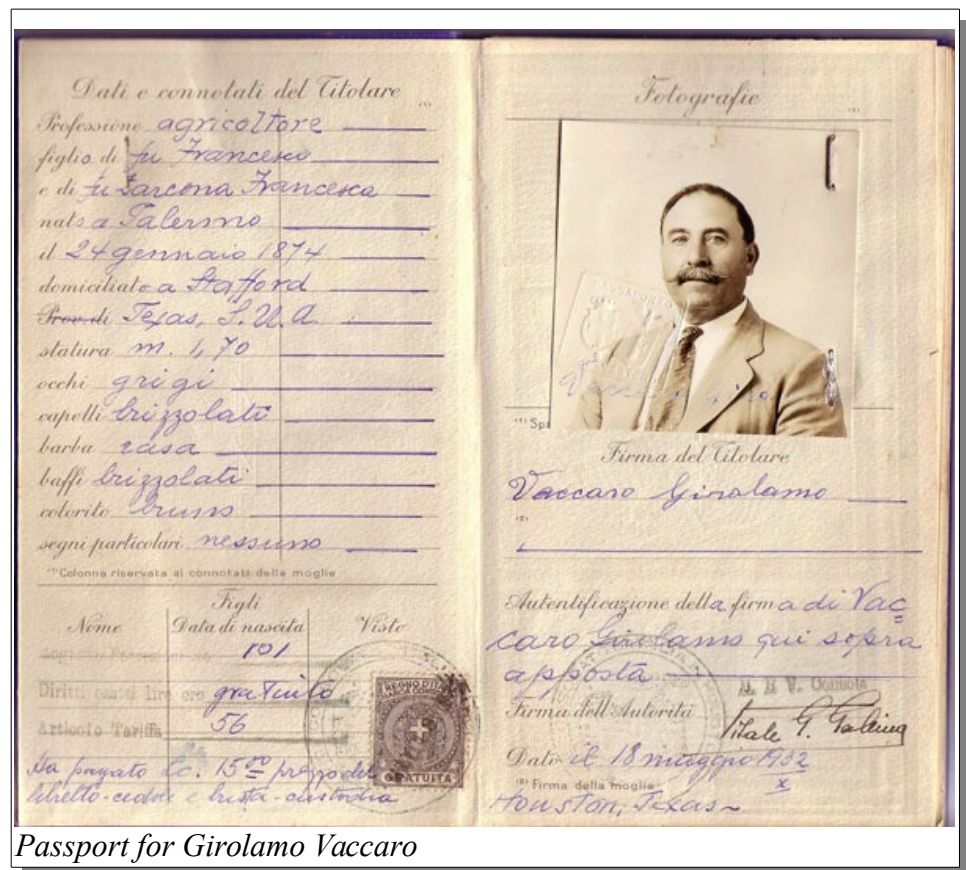
VACCARO: Yes, they did come here in 1905. I had one uncle that was born at that time. His name was Frank. Frank was born in Italy in 1905. He was six months old when they came here.

GOODSILL: Was he the child of Girolamo (Jim) and Catherina.

VACCARO: Yes.

GOODSILL: So, your grandfather's name was Girolamo, he went by Jim Vaccaro?

VACCARO: Jim Vaccaro, yes.



GOODSILL: And then, when they got here they had other children?

VACCARO: They had a total of six children. There were four girls and two boys.

GOODSILL: And your father—where was he in the birth order?

VACCARO: I think he was third. He was born in 1910. His name was Lawrence also. He was born in College Station [Texas].

GOODSILL: It doesn't sound very romantic to move from Sicily, Italy to MUDVILLE, Texas!

VACCARO: Well, that's correct. My

grandfather was on his way to California. In Sicily, Italy he raised oranges in orchards—he had an orchard there. And they were on the way to California. And they made a detour in Texas because of funding, I guess, and they never were able to get out of there.

GOODSILL: They got as far as they could, and then they had to stay there and make a living.

VACCARO: Right.

GOODSILL: So they switched from oranges to cotton. And they had six children all together. What do you think life was like for your parents, when they came to Stafford in about 1917.



Lawrence Vaccaro Sr. (top right)

VACCARO: Well, the roads were still mud and still mostly traveled with horses and mules and wagons. And I guess we could pick up HOW they got to Stafford and why. After they got flooded out, they pretty much lost everything that they had. And they had some friends named Jebbia. They had some property and a house here in Stafford that they were not using and they invited my grandfather and his family to come here to Stafford and they could live in that house until they got settled. I think they probably lived in that house a couple of years. Then they bought some property, around 1919-1920, and at that time they built what we call a single wall house. I think it had maybe four rooms in it. No sheetrock, not anything. Just boards on the outside walls. A single wall.

GOODSILL: Outside----inside. Single board in between (chuckles). That had to be tough in this climate.

VACCARO: Right. And they lived there and then they built a newer house that was a fairly good house, and they lived in it until 1960.

GOODSILL: Do any of those three houses, your friends' house, the single wall construction or the next house, still exist?

VACCARO: In fact, the house my grandfather built, was moved to Missouri City Estates. And it's still there. And when my Daddy got married, I think he got married in '33 or '35, he built the house and it was moved off when we developed the property. He moved it on a single lot and sold it.

GOODSILL: What was the name of his wife?

VACCARO: His wife was named Josephine Abbate.

GOODSILL: And that was your mother?

VACCARO: That was my mother, yes. She died in 1950.

GOODSILL: How many children did they have?

VACCARO: They had four.

GOODSILL: Can you name them, from the oldest to the youngest?

VACCARO: James, Lawrence, Kathryn--

GOODSILL: After Grandmother.

VACCARO: Yes. --and Josephine.

GOODSILL: After Mother.

VACCARO: Yes.

GOODSILL: And Lawrence, do you have children?

VACCARO: Yes.

GOODSILL: Why don't you tell me their names while we're at it, and your wife's name.

VACCARO: My wife's name is Betty Ann Hammond.

GOODSILL: And your children?

VACCARO: There's Lacy, Lori, and Lisa.



Lawrence Vaccaro Family

GOODSILL: Do you have grandchildren?

VACCARO: Not yet.

GOODSILL: Not yet! But they're working on it, maybe? (laughs)

VACCARO: They're working on it.

GOODSILL: However, none of their last names are Vaccaro, are they?

VACCARO: The youngest one's still not married.

GOODSILL: But when they have children, the children won't be named Vaccaro.

VACCARO: No, they won't.

GOODSILL: Did any of the other brothers—did James have any children?

VACCARO: He had three girls.

GOODSILL: Oh for heaven's sake! The family name isn't being carried on.

VACCARO: That's right.

GOODSILL: Awww. That's kind of sad, isn't it?

VACCARO: Yes. And my uncle, Frank, he never got married and never had any children. So we're the end of the Vaccaro.

GOODSILL: The end of the line---

VACCARO: At least THIS part of the Vaccaros.

GOODSILL: Yeah. I'm sure there are others.

VACCARO: There are others, like Brenda Vaccaro, the movie star.

GOODSILL: Is she related to you?

VACCARO: No.

GOODSILL: Oh! (giggles) You fooled me! Well, tell me a little bit about Jim and Kathryn? Did you know what their personalities were like or what was their life like?

VACCARO: Well, my grandmother died when I was kind of young. In fact, she died right before my mother did, in 1949 or '50. But my grandfather was a farmer and he was a pretty big man.

GOODSILL: Do you mean physically? Or important in the community?

VACCARO: Well, as far as stature-wise. He was about 6'2" or 6'3".

GOODSILL: Do you remember him?

VACCARO: Oh yes. But, what I remember about him, he had arthritis, or in them days they used to call it rheumatism. You don't hear that any more. Rheumatoid arthritis so he couldn't get around very well. So my dad pretty much ran the farm since he was probably ten years old.

GOODSILL: Wow. Life was different then, wasn't it?

VACCARO: Oh yes. Yes.

GOODSILL: So your dad starting running things on the farm to help his father?

VACCARO: Right. In fact, he got through the third grade and pretty much after that he had to quit school so he could work fulltime. My grandfather wasn't able.

GOODSILL: Wow. Tell me what a typical day in the life of your father might have been when he was a young man.

VACCARO: Well, my understanding is they would get up before sunrise. At that time they were still farming with mules. And he would get the mules and get them ready and be out in the field by daybreak. My aunts would bring him breakfast out in the field.

GOODSILL: And it was cotton that they were growing?

VACCARO: Yes. Mainly it was cotton.

GOODSILL: Did your parents own the land that they farmed?

VACCARO: They did own the land. They bought the land— they finally ended up with about 160 acres, which is now Vaccaro Manor.



Vaccaro Farm

GOODSILL: That's nice. The name DOES live on.

VACCARO: Right. (smiles)

VACCARO: That was our farm. And they farmed it 'til about the middle '50s and then they let somebody else farm the property until it was developed.

GOODSILL: What was Frank doing? Was Frank involved?

VACCARO: My uncle Frank worked right alongside my dad. He was a short man. He was about 4'6". And that was as tall as he got. He was a really good person. He never went to school—never was able to go to school. But he worked right alongside my dad.

He was the oldest, but my dad pretty much ran things. In this area cotton was pretty much ALL that was farmed. Now, he also farmed okra or cantaloupe. And that was basically a cash crop that we farmed -- just before the cotton got ready to harvest. And so we farmed those two things and took those to market.

GOODSILL: So, tell me about your dad. You told me what he did when he was a young man. What was his personality like?

VACCARO: Oh, he was a well-liked person. He was a pretty strong person, pretty strong-willed. Pretty much self-educated. He actually he served on the school board from 1945, which was when Missouri City School District became an independent school district. Prior to that, it was a common school district, which was run at the county level.

GOODSILL: Did your dad have something to do with that transition?

VACCARO: Yes. He was on the first school board in 1945. And then in 196?. In 1959 he was part of the consolidation with Sugar Land. Missouri City and Sugar Land consolidated to form Fort Bend Independent School District. And in 1961 my stepmother had a chance to go to work for the school district in the tax office—and he resigned from the school board. And at the time, he told me that education was getting too complicated and it was getting beyond his level of education. And that he was willing to step down so somebody else —that was more educated—could come up and take the reins.

GOODSILL: Your father didn't have an education himself, but felt education was so important, he got involved with the school board. That's very admirable.

VACCARO: Yes. And like I said, he was well-liked with people in Missouri City and throughout the county, as far as I know.

GOODSILL: And going back just a minute. You mentioned Vaccaro Manor and I don't know where it is. What's it near?

VACCARO: Okay. If you go out Cash to Stafford Road take a left on Stafford Road and you go about a half a mile on the right. That's it.

GOODSILL: Okay. Is it a housing development?

VACCARO: Yes, yes—it's residential.

GOODSILL: So you—your family sold the land and it—

VACCARO: We developed some of it, my dad and I. I helped him and I built houses back in the '60s and '70s. We developed some of it and built a few houses, sold them; built some rent houses and kept them. We sold them back in the '80s.

GOODSILL: So you went from farming to using the land for building.

VACCARO: Yes. I guess the other thing -- back on those days there was a lot of discrimination in this area.

GOODSILL: That's one of my questions. Tell me about that.

VACCARO: Yeah. So I guess the Italians were kind of discriminated against, you know, especially during the war with Italy. And, to tell you the truth that was one of the reasons a lot of Italians emigrated out of Italy. Because of the government. They wanted to leave, not because they couldn't make a living, but because the government was a dictatorship.

GOODSILL: In 1905, when your grandparents came, it was a tumultuous time in Italy? So they moved here but there was discrimination against the Italians in America, including in Stafford.

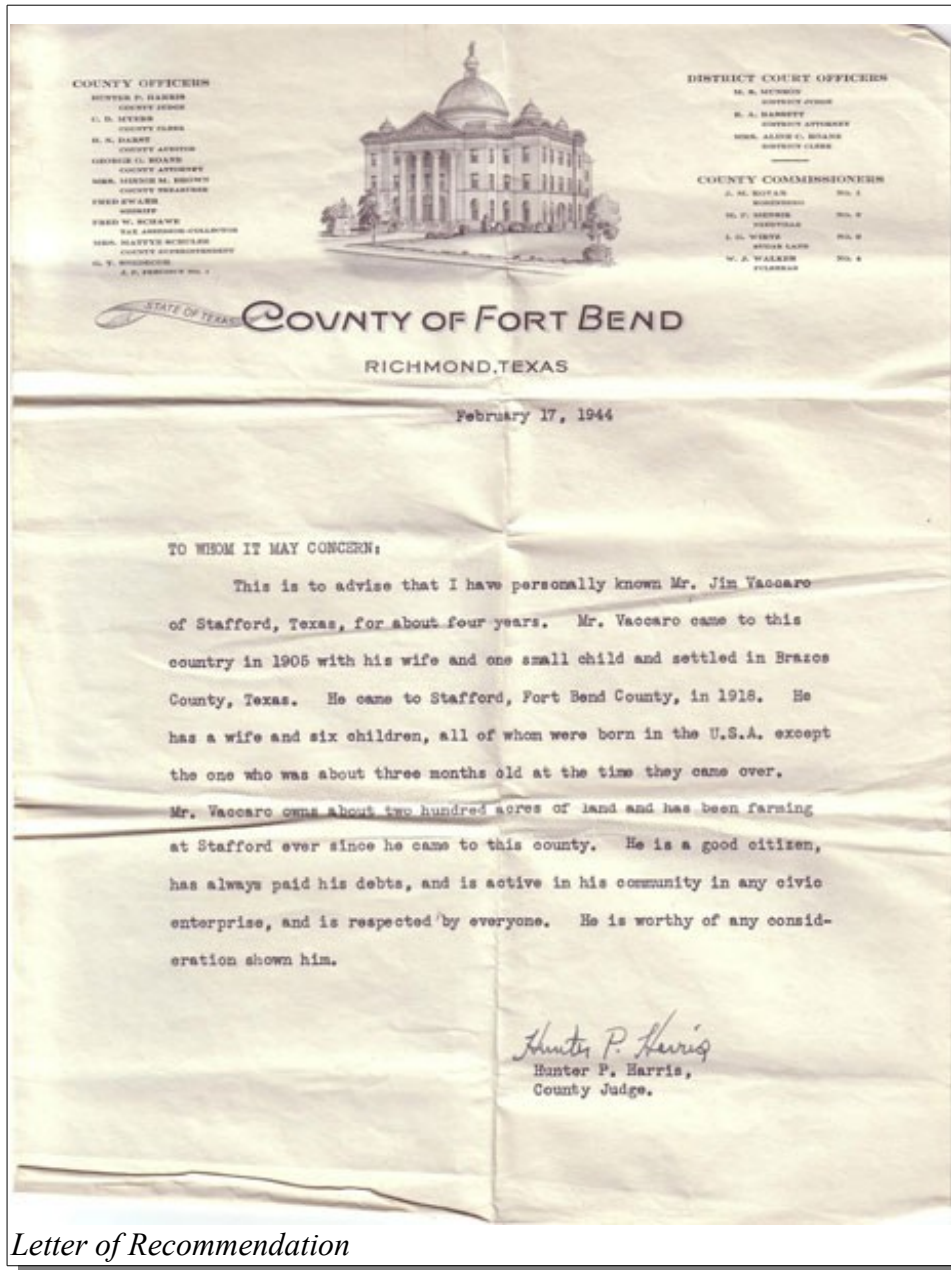
VACCARO: Right.

GOODSILL: So your grandparents had to deal with it, and your parents.

VACCARO: I saw a letter written from the County Judge back in 1932. It was a letter of recommendation for my grandfather, saying that he was a good person and that he was a property owner and a good American, and paid his bills. Basically that is what the letter said. And it was written by the County Judge. [This letter could have been a recommendation for citizenship.]

GOODSILL: You don't happen to have a copy of that, do you?

VACCARO: I have it on the computer.



GOODSILL: That would be an interesting thing for the historical commission to have. When we do interviews like this, we like to back them up with data that substantiates what we've talked about.

VACCARO: Yes. I have it. In fact, one of my cousins created a web page of a great Italian family, We got All of the historical stuff that we had and put it on this web page. I'll see what's on there. I know there's a picture of the old homestead around there. [<http://www.mybigfatitalianreunion.com/gallery/view.php?gid=3&page=5>]

GOODSILL: Oh good. Old homestead – that would be good.

VACCARO: Back in—I can't remember when it was—in the '40s or something, some guy flew around the area and took a picture of all the farm houses, and then went around and sold them I think.

GOODSILL: Aerial photos, neat. So, you were telling me there was discrimination and your grandfather had to have the Judge write him a letter of reference.

VACCARO: And I guess that was the one reason-- I asked my dad one time, why I never learned how to speak Italian, because he spoke it, my grandfather didn't speak any English. And he said they didn't want us to grow up learning Italian because they didn't want us to go to school with an accent.

GOODSILL: I think it's a common story of immigrants throughout the world. I think each one has had to struggle with this kind of issue.

VACCARO: Right.

GOODSILL: Until they finally 'belong'.

VACCARO: Except now they got more rights than we got.

GOODSILL: (giggling) Okay. So—

VACCARO: And, you know, he was also the type of person, my dad was, that he got to be real good friends with the Robinsons in Missouri City. And—you know Dr. Robinson?

GOODSILL: Well, I wouldn't say I know the whole history but I'm familiar a little bit. Tell me about it.

VACCARO: Dr. Robinson became a great doctor and married and became real wealthy. My Dad said that Dr. Robinson was one of his friends at school and they used to eat lunch together, and my dad would usually have some kind of a homemade sandwich of whatever it was. Dr. Robinson would have ham and cheese and stuff, and a lot of times they would just swap sandwiches at lunch. So this showed me that my dad was well liked in school.

GOODSILL: He knew how to make friends.

VACCARO: Yes, yes.

GOODSILL: It must have been a difficult time, especially since he didn't get to stay in school very long and had to start working.

VACCARO: Right. You know, even across the river in Rosenberg, he was friends with the Wessendorffs [Joe Clyde] and that bunch.

GOODSILL: Do you think he got to know them through business?

VACCARO: Through business and insurance. YES. I think it was mainly through business that he got to know them.

GOODSILL: I think in my notes it said he might have been on the City Council, too?

VACCARO: He WAS on the Stafford City Council.

GOODSILL: What kinds of issues do you think he was involved with on the Council? Do you know?

VACCARO: He was on it for a short—I think a couple of years, and then he got beat in election by one vote.

GOODSILL: Is that right?

VACCARO: Yes! But anyway, he also was in the grocery business. He ran a grocery store.

GOODSILL: What was the name of the store?

VACCARO: At the time it was C and V Food Market.

GOODSILL: Oh. Where is it located, Lawrence?

VACCARO: He was in with one of my cousins, Cangelosi. Not the Cangelosis in Stafford but the other Cangelosis in Houston. And they were in together. The grocery store—

GOODSILL: OH, is that what it stands for. Cangelosi and Vaccaro.

VACCARO: Yes. C and V Food Market.

GOODSILL: And where was it located?

VACCARO: Okay, it started out in the building there called Rudy Building.

GOODSILL: Here in Stafford?

VACCARO: Here in Stafford, yes. My dad owned that building in 1945. He bought that property and some other property and some rent houses in 1945 from a man named Rudy. And he wanted to rent the building and start the store. And Mr. Rudy said, 'Well, why don't I just sell it to you?' And he said, 'Well, I don't know that I can afford to.' And Mr. Rudy said, 'Yes you can'. So I guess he knew my dad.

And so he had two buildings, the store—where the Fort Bend Theater is now—that building. And then this side of the tracks, he had about 2 acres that had some houses on it. And he bought that property in 1945. And it was all income property. So my dad and Mr. Rudy sat down and they made a deal, and my dad bought it. So then he opened the grocery store—I'm not sure when he opened it—I think probably around '48 or '49.

GOODSILL: And do you remember that? You were a little boy then. You were six.

VACCARO: Yes, yes, yes. Well, I remember right after that. At the time when my mother was sick, I lived for a year and a half with my grandparents. Well, I lived six months with my aunt, who lived over there off of Washington Avenue, by Houston Avenue. And they had a little grocery store and they lived next to it. So I lived with them, and then my mother died and I lived with my grandparents for a year. My grandfather was farming. He was living at Westheimer and Voss Road. He was farming that land.

GOODSILL: Wow. So you went from family to family.

VACCARO: Yes. For a year and a half, yes. And then my dad remarried.

GOODSILL: What was her name?

VACCARO: Betty, like my wife. He remarried in 1953—I think it was. I came back here in the fifth grade. I think I was eleven years old. My birthday is in June, so, I was young when I started school. We lived out on the farm, in the house. My dad built a new house when he got married.

GOODSILL: And that, was at Vaccaro Manor, in that area out there?

VACCARO: Yes. It was next door to my grandfather. When he started the grocery, then he was doing both farming and grocery store. That's when my uncle Frank really started doing more of the farming. When I was twelve years old, I can remember driving a tractor in Stafford, pretty much by myself.

GOODSILL: Of course. (giggles)

VACCARO: And when I was thirteen, I was driving. Got my license when I was early fourteen.

GOODSILL: Were you working in the farm at that time?

VACCARO: Was working in the farm, working in the grocery store. We was working some, but actually, it was just about cutting down on the farm and letting somebody else do it. And so we was working more in the grocery store.

GOODSILL: All the kids worked in the grocery?

VACCARO: Well, my brother and I.

GOODSILL: Not the girls.

VACCARO: Not the girls.

GOODSILL: That wasn't work for the girls.

VACCARO: We used to have to go there every morning an hour before school, put up all the produce, and then after school, when we didn't have football practice—they never stopped us from doing any kind of school activity. But any other time, we was working.

GOODSILL: That's just the way it was, right? You had to help.

VACCARO: Well, that's right! And we benefitted from it. I mean, I worked and Dad treated us like grown-ups. I mean, I had a car when I was fourteen. Not that many people in those days had a car when they was fourteen.

GOODSILL: And you needed a car because?

VACCARO: To go—to get back and forth to work and school.

GOODSILL: From home to the work to school.

VACCARO: And before then, a lot of times I had to walk to work. Of course it's not all that far, about a mile. A lot of times people would give me a ride to football practice during the summer time and stuff like that. Especially when I was in junior high, you know, I had to get there the best way I can. My dad had rent houses back in those days and so we was always building something or working on something or repairing something.

GOODSILL: You learned how things work, how to fix things, how to manage ‘things’?

VACCARO: Right. How to develop property and stuff like that.

GOODSILL: What community activities have you been involved with? I know your father was on the Council and the school board. Did you follow in his footsteps at all?

VACCARO: Well, no. I never did. I ran one time but got beat and I decided I didn’t— In the early ‘60s and middle 70’s, I was building houses and then when that market went bad, I had gotten married and I decided if I’m going to raise a family, I need something more stable. So I got a job and I worked for another contractor for a couple of years. He pretty much shut down. So I decided to get out of the construction business. Then at that time I got a job at Katy Independent School District, back in ‘74. And I worked there three years in the tax office, doing appraisal work. They were JUST starting to grow at that time. So I worked there for three years. Then I went to work for Fort Bend County and worked there for two years. From ‘77 to ‘79. And then I came to work for the city of Stafford in September, 1979.

GOODSILL: And what’s your job now?

VACCARO: I’m Director of Public Works.

GOODSILL: Oh, is that right! Would your father be proud of you?

VACCARO: I think so, of what we’ve done and what we’ve accomplished. We’ve been with the City through the early days when there wasn’t much population. The growth was just starting. We’ve accomplished a lot, through those times and we’ve had a couple of hard times, but we worked through them and, I think, came out stronger.

GOODSILL: I think your grandfather would be surprised at the changes that have happened in Stafford.

VACCARO: Oh yeah. Oh, oh yeah. They never would believe it! I mean—a lot of things he didn’t believe back in those days. I think the first nice car my uncle bought cost him about \$3,000 and he just was AMAZED at that. (laughs)

GOODSILL: Grandfather would also be very pleased at how a young Italian boy has done well for himself.

VACCARO: Well, well, yes. Well, you know, he was always a strong person and—but, yes. I think that carried on in all of us.

GOODSILL: Yeah. That strength. So this kind of leads to my next question. How do you think Stafford was different or similar to other towns?

VACCARO: I think Stafford was a more close-knit type development. I remember growing up, when we had the grocery store, one of the things that always brings to my mind, on Good Friday, everybody in Stafford would close down, from, two to four, or one to three—I can't remember—in the afternoon to go to church. All the stores would just close. That's kind of unheard of these days.

GOODSILL: (chuckles) Kind of nice.

VACCARO: Stuff like that, you know. And everybody worked together. I mean, my grandfather moved here 'cause the Jebbia's told him come in, do this. They helped each other out.

GOODSILL: Yeah. Sense of community.

VACCARO: Yes, yes. Sense of community. And I think because the group that came here, Vaccaros, Jebbias, Cangelosis, Cash, Ruffinos—they ALL helped each other. Worked together, I mean. And so it was during the development that they worked together. In fact, my dad used to tell me the story about Stafford and Missouri City. At one time they had plans to incorporate together. And Missouri City went ahead and incorporated on their own, without telling the Stafford people. I think that was the best thing that probably ever happened to Stafford. But anyway, they worked together. And they were small. Stafford was small and so it kind of worked as a business community. A lot of these other cities were more bedroom communities and Stafford is a more business community.

And with the coming of companies like WKM and Texas Instruments, they brought people here and Stafford has a FEW developments, but nothing big you know. The people that moved to Stafford were hard working country people. And I don't know—just a different type of atmosphere than people in Missouri City, who moved to Quail Valley -- 'country club' type people.

GOODSILL: It's interesting, isn't it, to look at the different personalities that develop into a town.

VACCARO: Yes. And people moved to different towns because of that. I mean people moved to Stafford because that they WANT to be more independent and more involved.

GOODSILL: Well, this is a BIG question; how have you seen Stafford change, in your lifetime?

VACCARO: Well, I think the changes have been great! I mean, people ask me all the time, 'Would you like—don't you think—you know, wouldn't you wish it would be like it was?' Stay like it was. Well, no, because I think I'm a lot better off now than I was. I've got three girls that all graduated from college. One of them's got a master's degree. They are all making good.

GOODSILL: And that's hard to do when you're raising cotton.

VACCARO: That's right.

GOODSILL: So life has changed and their lives have changed.

VACCARO: And, you know, I've got a good job, with good amenities. So I felt like I'm a lot better off in this world than it would be if it had stayed like it was fifty years ago.

GOODSILL: The buildings that your family owned, right in downtown Stafford—does your family still own those buildings?

VACCARO: No, no. We sold those. In fact, my dad kind of divided some of the property up, back in the late 70s. So we got that property but that property was sold around 1980. In fact, the people that owned the property next door bought it, Louis Katz. And, because he had the adjoining property and some property all around it, and it was logical that he bought it, to join it. The property that we had didn't have enough land to go with it. He gave us what we wanted for it and we sold it, and never asked a question. I've never been sorry for it.

GOODSILL: Aren't those—those are THE buildings that have been preserved and are still standing and in use.

VACCARO: Yes, yes.

GOODSILL: Sort of gives a sense of history.

VACCARO: Yes. You know, owning family property doesn't work all that good. So we sold them a long time ago, my dad told me—and I've tried to do this—when you make a deal, you make the best deal you can and never think back.

GOODSILL: That's good advice.

VACCARO: You always hear people say, 'Man, if you'da kept that land, it—just think what it would have been worth today'. Well, they sold it back in those days because they HAD to sell it. They needed to sell it and they needed the money. If they wouldn't have sold it, they'da probably been worse off than they are today.

GOODSILL: That's a good philosophy.

VACCARO: You know, my grandpa on my other side—he owned land on Westheimer and Voss Road, and at one time, back in the early '20s, he owned from Westheimer Road almost to Buffalo Bayou. Which was, a hundred and thirty—forty or fifty acres, and he sold most of it during the Depression.

GOODSILL: OOOOOOOOH. But he did what he had to do?

VACCARO: He had a son in college. The son in college got a law degree. Well, if he wouldn't have sold that land, his son wouldn't have gone to law school. Yes, he did what he had to do. At that time. And they all tell me that. You do what you have to do at the time. To do what you can. So that's kind of the way that I've tried to live and I did what I could to put my three daughters through school. Like I said, they got a college degree. It was hard on us for a while.

GOODSILL: Your dad would be proud of that. That's what you do for the kids, right?

VACCARO: That's right.

GOODSILL: Well, one of my questions is: What did people in Stafford do for recreation when you were young?

VACCARO: Mostly we played outside.

GOODSILL: That's what someone else told me too! (laughing)

VACCARO: Yeah. I remember playing outside until we came in; until it got almost bedtime. So we would visit friends and our parents would go visit friends. They would have kids and we would play together outside. But once we got older, we went to movies. The only the movie we had was in Sugar Land.

GOODSILL: Did you go to Sugar Land very often for other recreational things, or mainly just movies?

VACCARO: Not too much.

GOODSILL: You pretty much stayed in your OWN town.

VACCARO: We went into Houston but most of the time when we were in high school. We went in more towards Houston. But I remember going to the movie every Sunday afternoon in Sugar Land.

GOODSILL: We sort of talked about already but since it is on my list of questions, 'What do you remember about racial segregation in Stafford'.

VACCARO: Well, we've always had blacks on the farm, we've had Spanish on the farm. And from day one, my dad taught me to respect them just like anybody else. So I didn't really know that much. I mean, when I was a little kid, growing up on the farm, we had black families that came in and had kids. And I'd play with those kids just like I played with my brother. So I didn't really know that much different. And it didn't bother me when they integrated the schools, which was after I got out of high school.

GOODSILL: But had it happened when you were in high school, it wouldn't have rocked your world that much?

VACCARO: Probably wouldn't have affected me because that much, because it was not ingrained in me, like some other people that I know, that got that hatred, and they KNOW it but they can't help it. It's just the way it was ingrained in them. And so, I didn't really feel that much because I wasn't around it that much.

Back in those days, there were very few blacks in Stafford. But the few families that were there, were respected just like anybody else. And we respected them. We had people that worked for us. We had some nice black families that were living here. Wasn't all that many of them. But those that lived here were, I thought, were respected. So, like I said, we had—always had a maid and that was one of my jobs, to go get 'em every morning. Before school, I'd go pick 'em up [in the car]. I had to mind them, just like anybody else. And if I didn't, then I would catch it from my daddy. So, they was well respected. My dad respected them also.

GOODSILL: (laughs) Learn about respect.

VACCARO: And helped them all he could. When we was in the grocery store, and he used to give credit, a lot of credit. Which is unheard of today. People come and buy groceries during the week, and they would pay their bill at the end of the week when they got their check, or every two weeks, you know.

GOODSILL: Why was it unheard of?

VACCARO: Well, it's kind of unheard of today, to have that type of open credit, especially in grocery stores. But a lot of these people that needed stuff during the week. I guess that's how it got started—come in and 'we need this, and we need that' so he would give them credit and then they'd pay. I mean, it didn't amount to that much, but yet, he would—my dad would always help people out when they needed help. And that goes again, you know, people helping people.

GOODSILL: Good point. So where did people in Stafford go for medical care?

VACCARO: Mainly to Sugar Land, during that time. They had two doctors there, Dr. Slaughter and Dr. Kuykendall, and Dr. Wheeler, the dentist. And that pretty much—when we was born, though, we went in to Houston, to Saint Joseph's Hospital.

GOODSILL: Is that where you were born?

VACCARO: Yes. That's where I guess all of us was born. And so, that's where MY mother went for medical stuff because she had a relative that was a doctor that she went to.

GOODSILL: So, is there anything that I SHOULD have asked you—something interesting or some story that's particularly an important part of Stafford's history, anything I should have asked that I haven't?

VACCARO: Well, back in those days Stafford was pretty wide open. Back in the '30s. That's how people remember Stafford, with the gambling halls and the bootlegging. So—I guess that's part of Stafford's history.

GOODSILL: It IS part of the history!

VACCARO: Back in those days, people did what they could. I mean some bootlegged, and I think my dad did a little bit of it towards the end, so he could feed his family.

GOODSILL: Help me put this in perspective. In the 1930s, during the Depression, people were looking for ways to make money and make ends meet.

VACCARO: Make money any way they could.

GOODSILL: Because the value of everything had gone way down. So the cotton they grew didn't bring in as much as they needed to—

VACCARO: Right. So—but—you know, they all survived and as far as I know, every one of my family all had a good life and did well.

GOODSILL: So it turned out to be a good thing to leave Italy and to come over to America, even though it was hard.

VACCARO: Right.

GOODSILL: Turned out to be an okay thing. That's a good story.

VACCARO: At least, you know, until the end of World War II, but 'til then it was—Italy was a dictator with Mussolini and so—

GOODSILL: Who knows WHAT would have happened to the family over there.

VACCARO: Yeah, you don't know.

GOODSILL: You know, something occurs to me. You may be in a unique position to educate us a little bit. The topic of public works is interesting to me.

VACCARO: Really? [sounding amazed]

GOODSILL: Oh yes! To know what goes on behind the scenes with the infrastructure of the City—how it's set up, how irrigation is managed, how water flows, how electricity is available to all, how the perimeter of the city is established. Is there anything you can tell us about Stafford that would be of interest to people who are listening to this, twenty--thirty years from now?

VACCARO: Well, you know, Stafford came up with simple principles. You know it was built on a foundation. We started the drainage system back in the early '60s-- 70s. One of the first things that Stafford did was to put in place an overall drainage system. Without drainage you can't do anything.

GOODSILL: And how did they do that? Did they build levees?

VACCARO: No, we built larger ditches and we built infrastructure to get the water out of town. Let's put it thataway. We built several ditches up there in the Meadows, and then the ones here on Mula Road. Willow Water Hole which is behind Vaccaro Manor.

We put together a good drainage system and then we started building good roads. We worked on it as we could afford it. We built them and the maintained them until we could afford something better. But we didn't build something we couldn't afford.

GOODSILL: GOOD! (laughs)

VACCARO: And you know, the mayor'll tell you right now, the City is pretty much debt free and we are on a cash basis. Everything we build is being built with cash dollars. Say you do a thirty million dollar bond issue. Over a period of twenty years, it's going to cost you almost fifty million. So, if instead of going out and getting a bond issue for twenty million to do some projects, if you do three million a year, for the next ten years, that's thirty million. Okay. If you did them all today, then you would've spent over fifteen million for those same projects.

GOODSILL: That's a good description. Good explanation of how that works.

So let's go back a second to the drainage issues. Sugar Land was very swampy, and easily flooded because of the Brazos. Was it the same, here in Stafford?

VACCARO: No, Stafford was fortunate in that. One of the reasons that probably most of us are here today is because of the black land; the rich farm land that is here. But mainly, we are on the head-end of all the drainage systems. In other words, where the railroad track runs through, that's pretty much the high point. Everything south of South Main or the railroad tracks drains south. Everything north, drains north.

GOODSILL: Just naturally? That wasn't built like that?

VACCARO: Yes, yes. Just naturally. We had to build ditches to carry the water out faster but it drained naturally. We're at the high point. So you don't get low-end flooding.

GOODSILL: So you don't remember your grandfather or your father telling you about big floods that happened here when they were cotton farming?

VACCARO: No.

GOODSILL: So the City of Stafford has had to improve their drainage system, but they had a good geological set-up to begin with.

VACCARO: That's correct.

GOODSILL: Interesting. I tell you, it's interesting! (giggles) Anything else about the public works, or the infrastructure that might be interesting to people to know about?

VACCARO: Like I say, we started improving. We just got another big project that's going to be started here within this next month that's Stafford and Staffordshire Road—a road that we've been working on for probably the last fifteen years, trying to get it in various stages. Finally we're coming under construction this next month. We started, I think, in 1995, sometime in the early 90s with the original reports and environmental studies. Anyway, we've worked that long trying to get this road funded. And it's finally going to be under construction. So it's a project we've been working on for like twenty years.

GOODSILL: It's amazing how much time and foresight it takes in order to keep a city up to date and in good shape.

VACCARO: Right. We're working on Dulles to get it rebuilt. Brand Lane. We're trying to get all our major thoroughfares maintained and up to the quality of service that the people want to see mobility-wise. People don't like—I remember when I was young and I started driving, they'd have holes around here. I knew everybody—I went to talk to the mayor and I said, 'Mayor, we need to fix these holes around here! They're kind of rough'.

And he said, 'Son, (I don't know how old I was—fourteen or fifteen), he said, 'you know, we do what we can when we can afford it. Your dad drove over them holes. They was okay for him, they're gonna be okay for you too!'

GOODSILL: Isn't it funny that now you're in a position to be taking care of the roads yourself?! (laughing) Oh that makes me laugh!

VACCARO: Yes! But I remember that! That's what he told me! 'You know, them holes was good enough for your dad to drive over, you can drive over them too, a little bit, until we can afford to get them fixed right'. That was the first mayor of Stafford.

GOODSILL: What was his name?

VACCARO: Wright. Chester Wright, the first mayor, and fire chief. He had a garage that was in where that building was that the theater's in now. We've matured. But I think the philosophy is there, like when Stafford was started.

GOODSILL: Fiscally conservative?

VACCARO: Right. A lot of people come in and the first thing they do is start complaining about stuff. You know, the guy moves next to the railroad track and then starts complaining about the rail horns—the train horns. You know.

GOODSILL: (laughing) It's been there for a hundred years!

VACCARO: A hundred and fifty years! And you know it gets me whenever it happens. I mean, people start complaining like that, you know. They move here and I guess they don't realize it. They move next door to it and then they start to complain about it. But, you know, we ARE eventually fixing those things. Doing them. Bringing the quality of life up. I think people back in the earlier times were more patient and were used to a little bit of inconvenience. Nowadays the kids being raised—they are not used to ANY inconveniences. They want it to happen.

It's our fault that we made it happen for them. We worked our tails off to make it happen for them -- so they didn't have to go through the hard times. My dad worked his tail off so I didn't have to go through the hard times. I'm working almost, not quite as hard, so MY kids didn't have to go through any hard times. Or do without anything.

GOODSILL: And then they expect it to be good times all the time. (laughs)

VACCARO: Right. And so they don't know how to... Like I told them when they asked me—they said, 'Are we poor?' And I said, 'I'm poor – you're rich'. (both laugh)

VACCARO: I'm poor, they don't know what being poor is. (laughs)

GOODSILL: Well, I think we got all our questions answered.

VACCARO: Think we got everything?

GOODSILL: I do! If we should need to call you for some reason, ask more questions, do we have permission to do that?

VACCARO: Sure.

GOODSILL: I really appreciate your time and effort. It was very interesting hearing your perspective. Thank you again, Lawrence.

VACCARO: Okay.