

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Leonard Leon Scarcella**

Interview Date: 03/07/2014

Interviewer: Jane Goodsill

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

Location: Stafford City Hall, Stafford, Texas

24 Pages



This oral history is copyrighted 2017, by the Fort Bend County Historical Commission. All Rights Reserved. For information contact: Fort Bend County Historical Commission, Attn: Chairman-Oral History Committee, 301 Jackson St., Richmond, TX, 77469.

Terms and Conditions

This file may not be modified or changed in any way without the express written permission of the Fort Bend County Historical Commission.

This file may not be redistributed for profit.

Please do not 'hot link' to this file.

Please do not repost this file.



Transcript

GOODSILL: Will you start by telling us how your family got to this part of the country?

SCARCELLA: Well, my family basically is composed of the father and the mother. Let's start with my father's family. I know very little about it for the reasons that I will address. He grew up in Temple, Texas. His parents came from Italy. In fact, all of my grandparents came from Italy, but three of the four came from Sicily. One, from whom I supposedly got the blue eyes, came from northern Italy. I don't know the town. My grandparents settled in Temple and were merchants. My father, Leon Scarcella, was a very gifted athlete as well as a very talented musician. In fact he ran on the winning 440-relay team for Temple and got beat in a photo finish for the championship of Texas in the 100-yard dash. He also got, but did not accept, an offer to play baseball for the San Antonio Padres. They were part of the Texas League and the Houston Buffs and all that. Then he went to A & M but did NOT like the hazing and left A & M. He got his college education and then went to Chicago. From there he went to Houston. He knew there were a lot of Italians in Stafford, so he came to Stafford. That was in the mid-1930s.

I know a lot more about my mother's family because my father died when I was ten years old. He died at the age of 46.

GOODSILL: Could you give us your birth date?

SCARCELLA: My birth date is July 19, 1940.

GOODSILL: So he died in 1950?

SCARCELLA: He died on May 25, 1951. I will remember that date all of my life. Anyhow, my mother's family farmed. All the Italian immigrants who ended up here came through New Orleans. They were going to Ellis Island and obviously things in Italy were not that wonderful.

GOODSILL: Remind us what was happening in Italy at that time.

SCARCELLA: It was between 1888 and 1895. There were circumstances according to my maternal grandfather, Ross Bonano and his wife Mary Court. She was the sister to all the Courts. Mary and Ross Bonano lived in Steele's Store.

GOODSILL: Where did they live in Italy?

SCARCELLA: Their parents lived in Sicily. My grandfather got here when he was just a couple of years old. My grandmother, Mary Bonano, was born here, two years after her parents arrived in the United States.

GOODSILL: From Sicily as well?

SCARCELLA: Yes. So I have an awful lot of Sicilian blood in my veins and sometimes it comes through, very vividly! My mother's name was Margaret Court Bonano. She was reared in Steele's Store, which is literally a stop in the road. And it's about twelve miles from Bryan on the way to Caldwell. They had a farm there. My grandfather was only allowed to go to school one year and after one year, his father said, "Ross, you're a smart young boy, but we got to take care of the field and the crops." It's kind of sad, but as he used to tell me, he worked every day of his life from the time he was seven years old until he was seventy-five. When he retired, I guess he was so thrilled to do that, he just sat in front of the television and watched old cowboy movies. Sadly his system sort of collapsed because he wasn't doing anything and he'd been doing physical work every day.

He was a very smart man. He once told me something and I think of it so often. I've told it many times. We were sitting out on the front porch. My grandparents being good Catholics said the rosary every night. I was asking him about why they would not teach me to speak Italian. He said, "Well, one reason, that way Mary and I can talk and you don't know what we're talking about. But the other reason, the main reason," and he was kind of joking about that, "You need to understand my family loved Italy but we came to America because we knew there was a better opportunity here." The other thing is (as far as Italians and so many people were saying you have to keep up your culture) "we came to America to be Americans. The only way that you're ever going to be successful in America is to learn to speak English good." I don't know if he said good or well, I don't remember that! (Goodsill laughing) If he said well, then I'm REALLY impressed! He said, "I just want you to always keep in mind that Italian is a beautiful language and if you want to learn it, I encourage you to. But remember (this was about 1957 or 1958) one thing, Italian will NEVER help you in America unless you become an opera singer." He said, "You've GOT to speak English, you've got to speak it well. You have to become very fluent and very capable in the use of English." And he said, "You hear people talk about these other things, but you don't see any documents in Italian. You see nothing." Now, that was obviously fifty-five years ago, but he was VERY perceptive in terms of the benefits of being an American.

He was so proud to be an American, because he started with a little farm, and during the Depression, they literally had to live off the land and the cows and the chickens. That's how they made it. That's what my mother grew up in and that's why she was so fiscally conservative. Literally every penny, every nickel, meant something.

GOODSILL: When we get to talking about your tenure as mayor, I wonder if you'll tell me something about whether you're fiscally conservative?

SCARCELLA: I'm EXTREMELY fiscally conservative! I told one guy, "I'm to the right of the Tea Party when it comes to fiscal conservatism. But I'm a Democrat." (chuckles)

GOODSILL: So we know about how your family got here and a little bit about your relatives. Tell me the history of Stafford.

SCARCELLA: The history of Stafford is a very fascinating history. William Stafford came with Travis's Three Hundred and he settled here. At that time it was called Stafford's Point. William Stafford was a very, very ingenious man and an excellent entrepreneur. That was 1821. He saw the opportunity so he started a cotton plantation here and had a cotton gin. It was one of the most productive facilities and farms and plantations. Nobody talks about the slaves very much. I don't know anything about that, other than to know that he ran it in the same way that a lot of other people did, back then. It did extremely well until 1836. Then Santa Ana came through on their way from the Alamo to San Jacinto. They stopped here, spent the night and then burned the town.

From 1836 to about 1838 it was just picking up the charred remains and trying to put this little town back together. William Stafford died in 1845, I think. He was somewhat of a renegade and he got into a shooting incident, killed a man and had to go to Mexico. He had a lot of political connections. Somebody finally got him a pardon and he came back here and then he rebuilt the town. In 1853 there was enough commerce here, through his efforts and his family's, that the first railroad in Texas actually stopped right out there. It was built from Harrisburg in Houston, twenty miles, to here. We celebrated the 150th anniversary, the Sesquicentennial, in 2003. So the city of Stafford was recognized for its commerce, most of which was agriculture. It did quite well until the Civil War. The Civil War was apparently pretty disruptive to Stafford. After 1865 there were sharecroppers and the federal government got involved. And there's a large gap in activity after the Civil War. You can go to the courthouse and look. Basically between about 1870 and about 1911, very little happened here. There had been some sharecroppers, some African-American families such as the Tucker family and the Bates and two or three others.

Many of the streets and little allies around here are named after black families. Then, in about 1911, the Italians came to Stafford. That was about the same time as my grandfather went to Steele's Store. The thing that happened was that there were lots of Italians that were not farmers. They had other skills. You couldn't make it in Steele's Store or Mudville unless you were a farmer. So they migrated down until they got to Stafford. One bought some property and another one, and the next thing you know, virtually the whole town was Italian immigrants. In fact, the Holy Family Catholic Church in Missouri City just had its one hundred year anniversary. I get a little bit frustrated with them because they want to skip to 1974. I say, "Wait a minute. This church wouldn't even have started had it not been for the Italian immigrants in Stafford who started the church before it was moved to Missouri City."

These people were shopkeepers or like Court's Hardware, they had grocery stores, there was at one time a little Western Auto store. Even something resembling a car dealership. And this area, this island in the middle of Stafford, is where they all settled.

GOODSILL: You are referring to the island between 90 and Main Street? Where City Hall and the Fire Station are now?

SCARCELLA: Yes, between the two Main Streets. My uncle was Frank Cangelosi. He married my grandmother's sister, Katy Cangelosi (her name was originally Katy Court). He was the one who put all of this together. It's so funny. The house I grew up in is still there, on the corner of North Main and Avenue D. When my mother and father got married in 1942 and decided they wanted a piece of land. They went to Frank Cangelosi and said, "We need a tract of land. We want a place to build our house." He said, "Fine. I'll give you what the rest of them have." He literally took twenty steps and that was sixty feet. Then he walked to the back and that took another sixty-six steps or something, and that was two hundred feet. That was the lot; sixty by two hundred. That's how so much of this land in here was developed.

Now, when the surveyors got in and tried to survey it and do something with it for documentation, there was a lady named Mrs. Blix, probably on the corner right around Avenue E and South Main where that old Viking Den was. She had a fence post that was right at the corner. So many starting points for the survey of all this property around here began at Mrs. Blix's fence post. All these surveyors have nightmares when they have to come in here and try to figure out where Mrs. Blix's fence post is and then tie everything in to how long my uncle's steps were.

Going back to about 1911-1914. The Italians all started coming in. Most were farming cotton and okra. But some had little stores, the epitome of the Mom and Pop stores. That's how Stafford grew up.

GOODSILL: When you say right here, do you mean the island area?

SCARCELLA: I'm talking about the island. They called it the Golden Strip and it used to irritate the heck out of them because they had all the businesses in here. There wasn't anything we'd think of today as being great, but back then they were. When they would start the valuation for property taxes, for the school mainly, because the city didn't have any at that time, the County did, and that's where the taxes were. Every three to five years they would start the cycle in Stafford in the island and raise those values first. Well, everybody really got irritated and when we were creating the school district that was one of the things. We've got the Golden Strip, we have to pay more taxes. There was nothing in Sugar Land of any substance except Imperial Sugar. And nothing in Missouri City except close to the school. You'd walk down the street and you went to the post office that had some candy bars and a few other things in it. That was the commerce in Missouri City through the early 1960s.

These Italian immigrants came here and as a result, it got to be a place that the Italians felt very comfortable. When the city was incorporated in 1956, kind of an interesting story there. Houston was expanding and they were concerned about Houston annexing everything out here. Stafford and Missouri City both got concerned about it. There were about three hundred families in Stafford at that time and there were seventy-seven people in Missouri City. They thought about incorporating it as one town. But they had one of their little meetings and when you look at the boundaries of Stafford and Missouri City, especially on the east side, you wonder how in the heck this ever happened.

It is a most interesting story. They got together and decided, "No, Stafford, you want commerce. We want only homes in our city." So Missouri City had only homes and Stafford had commerce. You go down FM 2234, which is the Texas Parkway now, and there's an area that looks like it ought to be in Missouri City but it's in Stafford. Well, the people in Missouri City were basically all Anglican from England and Scotland and wherever. People in Stafford were all Italians. The guy that owned the property over there was a Jew named A. K. Jacobs. He was approached by both cities. After they did a little horse-trading, literally, Mr. Jacobs decided he wanted his property in Stafford. Not only that, they offered him a seat on City Council. (laughing)

So that's why you see all that weaving in and out, and it really irritates the heck out of Missouri City because Stafford goes almost up to the Missouri City City Hall, because of Mr. Jacobs.

The first mayor was Billy Wright. He was in office from 1956 to 1964. Then A. J. Tony Jebbia was the mayor from April of 1964 to July of 1969. Then some people got very upset over what had transpired with some property on the north side of the freeway, which ultimately became The Meadows. They gave Jebbia a very hard time and he got mad one night on July 10th. I was at the meeting, and he wrote a note and passed it to me. "I hereby resign immediately." He got up and walked out the door. Well, they didn't know what to do. They called an election and I signed up. There were a couple of people that wanted to run but didn't when I signed up. Anyhow, I won on August 30, 1969.

GOODSILL: What were you doing up until that time? Did you have a career?

SCARCELLA: Well, it was kind of interesting. I got out of Texas A & M in May of 1962, with a degree in accounting. Then I was thinking about going to law school or getting my CPA certification. But, at that time, the draft was in effect, so everybody had to factor that into their plans. I began working with a very small CPA firm in the area, but I knew I had to do something. Right after the Cuban missile crises, the 147th Air National Guard Unit opened up at Ellington Field, and I joined that in May of 1963. The reason that's so significant is that that was the unit that George W. Bush ultimately wound up in. It was the unit that the Gordons (of the Gordon Jewelry Stores), and R. E. 'Bob' Smith's son-in-law was in. Smith owned property all over Harris county and Fort Bend County. The Gordons are the ones that developed The Fountains.

Everybody said, "How'd you get in there?" I said, "Well, when the Cuban missile crisis was over, they had everybody frozen." You couldn't get out of the service. It didn't matter whether your enlistment was up. They were worried about war with Cuba and war with the USSR. When the Cuban missile crisis was finally over with, they dropped the freeze and then it opened up. All of a sudden they had 900 positions open, so I literally walked through the door. No big deal.

The only problem was, in about two years, Vietnam started and all these people were trying to figure out how not to go to Vietnam. There were some people from River Oaks that were very prominent in the life of Colonel Stout, who was the commander over there. A man I knew well, Sid Adger, was the one that basically directed all these River Oaks youngsters into that unit. It was kind of interesting.

One night, and I've seen a replay of this, way back in 2000 or something, they were arguing over how George W. Bush got in this Air National Guard unit. And McLaughlin, who used to have the McLaughlin Report on PBS, said, "Well, it's simple. Sid Adger got him in there." I've been real close friends, in fact, just the other day Sid Adger the II was in my law office. I do his tax work and have for over forty years, maybe closer to fifty now. There was so much attention in hindsight paid to that particular guard unit because of who was on that list.

Well, going back to Stafford, in the mid-60s, Joe and Regina Agnello had some property right out on where they were building the Southwest Freeway. They sold the 192 acre property which is now somewhat fabled, to Texas Instruments. Nobody even dreamed that some big business would want to come out here. When Texas Instruments bought that property and announced that they were going to build their facility here in 1967, that started the commercial migration from Harris County into Fort Bend County. That was what sparked the entire explosion of Fort Bend County. It started at that property which we are now working on, ironically, to revamp or transform.

GOODSILL: Because that is a part of Stafford?

SCARCELLA: That is part of Stafford, and a critical part of Stafford because it's right on the freeway. I just got a call this morning from Dallas from the people who are supposed to be buying it from T. I. They've jumped through all kinds of hoops and are coming in Monday to meet and talk about it some more. They've been here a dozen times to talk but they're coming back.

They're getting pretty close and they've asked me what should we be doing here? I

said you need a full rollout, a complete rollout. But don't let it be like the Obama-care rollout. If you do that, you're dead in the water.



Stafford Mayor Leonard Scarcella advocated a mixed-use development being built at Texas Instruments' former campus as be a major step in transforming the city into an urban center.

So they've been trying to come up with something to be a little bit more efficient than that. That was the perfect way to say, "Don't throw something out there because you could get blown out of the water before you ever really ever put a stake in the ground." Anyhow, that started it in 1967.

GOODSILL: You were National Guard and you were working in a CPA office at the time?

SCARCELLA: Yes. And I also did something else that was quite fascinating. Mayor Jebbia decided we needed a city property tax and he convinced council. They hired me to set up the first property tax rolls. It is ironic that I did that in 1965 and then in 1997 we abolished property taxes. Talk about a full cycle! I went from doing all the work to institute taxes to doing all the work to abolish them.

I literally wrote in longhand the first property tax roll of the City of Stafford. I worked with the CPA who did the first audit of the City of Stafford in 1963. This has been my home and my life and the whole bit.

GOODSILL: So when the Mayor resigned, you got elected?

SCARCELLA: Yeah. They said, "He's a kid." Well, it would be wonderful to be called a kid again. (laughs) I haven't been called that in a long time. At that time, they said, "You don't want this guy. He's a kid. He doesn't know anything. He's twenty-nine years old!"

GOODSILL: What were the responsibilities of the mayor at that time?



Leonard Scarcella, the "Kid" who was elected Mayor of Stafford City for 46+ years.

SCARCELLA: You have to understand it and if you can't convince council members; you have a hard time convincing citizens. The main thing was just to keep the city running and make sure you had a little bit of property tax, it wasn't that much. You had a budget, which was just over \$100,000. The only full-time employees were the City Secretary, the Police Chief and a very old street maintainer. We had a guy that used to work on the maintainer. He would sleep on it as much as he'd work on it. So we had three employees.

So now you get in and you start expanding the police department and putting in all these volunteer firemen. Just like Court Hardware, if there was fire, they ran out the door, closed and locked it and went to the fire. Then when the fire was over, they came back and ran the hardware store again. And a service station owner was a volunteer too. Those were the people who were the Stafford volunteer fire department in 1969. The great majority of the area was agricultural at that time and some of those little business I alluded to, and Texas Instruments. Texas Instruments was starting to attract other businesses around it like a magnet. In view of that the city started to grow and take on a commercial basis.

Now the one decision we made very consciously was to have enough commerce to support the city. We didn't want it to be all homes where you just had a property tax and you didn't have any resources coming in. At that time, this was a VERY frowned on view.

GOODSILL: I got that impression from what you said about Missouri City. They wanted all residential.

SCARCELLA: Sugar Land wanted it. Of course, the Kempner's owned Sugar Land so they owned all the property. You didn't own a home in Sugar Land; you rented a home in Sugar Land.

GOODSILL: But practically speaking, it's hard to run a city if you haven't got a tax base from both industry and residence, right?

SCARCELLA: That was always my theory. And it's been proven to be right. And in fact, most people frowned on it until 1986 when oil prices dropped down to below \$10 a barrel. That's when people realized everybody had been depending on the oil industry so much. I just saw where Finger's has declared bankruptcy. I will always remember Jerry Finger. I was watching television and they were taking an interview of him. They had all these plush leather, maroon, gorgeous couches with these big buttons and everything. The main reason he stocked all of them was to sell them to these oil companies, and the people that work with these oil companies. Well, when they went under, nobody was buying any of that furniture. And they sold it at fire-sale prices.

GOODSILL: That was the same with automobiles, clothing?

SCARCELLA: Everything! And they asked him, "What's your summation of this whole thing?" "Simple," he said, "Everybody in Houston, Texas is in the oil business whether they want to acknowledge it or not."

Well, in 1987, the Greater Fort Bend Economic Development Council was formed because they said, "We've got to do something to prop up the economy of Fort Bend County." Then everybody started talking about economic development. Up until the mid-1980s, economic development or commercial was almost a bad word. Now you listen to the Greater Fort Bend EDC led by Herb Appel and now Jeff Wiley and you realize what a strong economy we have! But it really was not even an acceptable approach. Mayor Hilmar Moore and I had some very interesting discussions. He was very upset with me and he said, "I don't want any commercial development in Richmond. We don't want to be like Stafford."

One night at a party, I reminded him of that and I'm not sure he took it very favorably. I said, "Well, Richmond would be a ghost town if it weren't the county seat and all of the tax money being spent to build everything there. What does Richmond have outside of that and a few real nice homes?" Of course Mayor Moore didn't particularly appreciate that either (laughs). He had some choice words for Stafford, which some of them were appropriate, I guess. But the thing of it is, it was just a different dynamic. Texas Instruments started the migration into Fort Bend County literally, not only in commercial but residential to complement it. That was 1967. Oddly enough, almost twenty years to the day later, is when...do you remember the old Ford ads where they had a little light bulb went on? Well, the light bulb went on and everybody said, "Wait a minute. If this place is going to be anything, we've got to have commerce here!"

GOODSILL: So explain something to me. When you abolish the tax rolls, what exactly does that mean?

SCARCELLA: There are no property taxes that the City of Stafford charges, period.

GOODSILL: For business or for residential?

SCARCELLA: Everything.

GOODSILL: How does the city get its money?

SCARCELLA: From sales tax. And we generate it through having strong business. I've had people come here, I'm talking to people from the Woodlands right now, I don't know how he did and of course I don't know when their primary is, but I'm talking with a gubernatorial candidate in Georgia who wants to try to emulate what we did here and abolish property taxes for every city in the state of Georgia. You're talking about Atlanta and a few others.

GOODSILL: Have there been any other successful cities in Texas that have done this?

SCARCELLA: Oh, yeah. Well, we're the largest city in Texas without a property tax. There are some others. You've got Weston Lakes.

GOODSILL: You've just told me that the light went on and everybody got the idea that you needed to have both commercial and residential. And your city decides that you'll live on sales tax only.

SCARCELLA: Right. But see, the thing of it is, we were getting enough sales tax to really function without a property tax. The state legislature passed a law that said you could impose a half-cent sales tax to lower property taxes. The emphasis is on lower. Well, when we passed that within two years we saw that it was far exceeding what we were getting out of the property tax.

GOODSILL: What is the sales tax in Stafford?

SCARCELLA: This past year it was \$16,000,000.00

GOODSILL: What is the sales tax rate?

SCARCELLA: The same as everybody else. It's two percent. Sugar Land, Houston, Missouri City, and Rosenberg have two. I mean everybody in this part of the state has a two percent sales tax. But a half-percent goes to eliminating the property tax and a half-percent goes for the Stafford Economic Development Corporation, which built the Stafford Centre.

GOODSILL: Tell us a little bit about the Stafford Centre.

SCARCELLA: It in itself is a fascinating story. In fact, this week we are celebrating the 10th anniversary.

GOODSILL: I can hardly believe it!

SCARCELLA: You've talked to the Cashes [Stafford citizens who have been interviewed] but they had a field out there and they sold part of that field to Houston Community College and then we got ready to go. We decided we were going to build something very special there. It was interesting that at that time, we're talking about the late 1990s, Houston was trying to position themselves to get the 2012 Olympics. They came to us and they knew we had a little money, and this guy, Jordy Tollett, who was quite a character, was sort of the economic guru and worked with the City of Houston.

He was the one that was leading this effort. He said, "Look, we can't just build everything within our city limits. We've got to get some of these outer cities, Stafford or Sugar Land or Pasadena or Galena Park, Galveston maybe in some instances, to build facilities. You look at what the Russians just did in Sochi for the Winter Olympics." Anyhow, he wanted us to build the natatorium. We had conversations. I said, "That's all wonderful, Jordy, but what in the world do we do once the 2012 Olympics are over, assuming we get 'em. Who in the heck is going to come to Stafford to swim?" "Well, there will be people."

We had a study done and we concluded we wanted a convention center. We had the civic center, which is really nice, but it doesn't provide for conventions and theatrical productions. You don't have the dressing rooms and the stuff you need. So when we got through talking about it, and I'll always remember the lady, her name was Patsy Sabrsula.



She lived in Richmond and Rosenberg and worked at the banks there. She also ran the Fort Bend Country Club for many years. I said, "Patsy, what we need is a convention center and a performing arts theater." So we had a feasibility study done, and they said, "Yeah, you can do the theater with about 1,100 seats in it and you can do the convention center with about 20,000 square feet, and we believe it will work well in this Houston market."

So we went to the people and we passed a \$28 million bond issue that the SCDC did, for two purposes. \$8 million was to build these underpasses on 90A, which would change the dynamics of Stafford traffic, and \$20 million was to build the Stafford Centre. The Stafford Center has ultimately cost about \$30 million, but we had a lot of other money from what we called excess sales tax. And that's how we built the Stafford Centre. I had so many people wonder, "Who in the world is going to come there? You're going to put this thing in the middle of a cow pasture? Nobody is going to show up." We've now had over 3 million people come through the Stafford Centre in ten years. We started with the Moscow Ballet, which was kind of the feature thing, coming in. John Cornyn had just been re-nominated for the Senate but it was his staff that worked to get the Moscow Ballet visas to come here and perform in 2004.

Because that wasn't that far removed, two and a half years, from 9/11. There were all kinds of restrictions and his staff literally worked for weeks on it, almost without stopping for sixteen days. The Moscow Ballet landed at Bush Airport on Thursday and performed on Saturday night. We thought this thing would work, and sure enough it has. And it's exceeded all of our expectations. I go back full circle; my father was a great believer in music and the arts.

GOODSILL: And he was a musician and a performer?

SCARCELLA: Oh yes. And he had this dance band and they used to play everything Glenn Miller played.

GOODSILL: Tell me where they used to play.

SCARCELLA: The Rice Hotel and The Emerald Room and it's still there. In fact, I went there and it brought back so many memories. Went back there after they refurbished it and I've been there a couple of times. He said, "Look, a community is nothing without culture." He had this strong feeling of that, and like a lot of Italians, he loved the opera.

They used to have a grand saying that today would be sexist, but he would say, "She's as high-strung as an operatic soprano." Apparently he had some dealings with some of them that had driven him up the wall! We really wanted to emphasize the performing arts, but we have a lot of conventions too. We have weddings; we have all kinds of activities.

GOODSILL: And do you get sales tax receipts from that facility?

SCARCELLA: There are some sales tax receipts.

GOODSILL: The City of Stafford owns part of that facility?

SCARCELLA: We own the whole thing. The SEDC (Stafford Economic Development Corporation) built it but then under this law (Sugar Land has one, Missouri City has one, everybody has one) they basically deeded it to the City. The City has the property but the SEDC still has the debt. I'd like that for myself! (Both laugh) I get a beautiful home but somebody else has to pay the mortgage!

GOODSILL: Yeah, I want one of those too. Now, there was a time in Stafford's history that is sort of legendary, that people like to talk about.

SCARCELLA: Stafford was wide open. Having the Italian influence probably didn't help or however you want to perceive it. There was gambling, especially during Prohibition, mainly during Prohibition.

GOODSILL: Remind me of the years of Prohibition.

SCARCELLA: We're talking about the late 1920s and early 1930s. That mentality carried into the 50s. Even though prohibition went away, in fact, we were recently digging for the underpasses, we ran into something. They acted quickly which irritated me because they didn't give me a chance to get out there with a camera! They ran into one of these big vats that had been built underground. It was enormous. It's where they made and kept the bootleg liquor so that the Feds couldn't figure out where it was. It was literally under a house! So people lived on top of the liquor. I don't know what aromas you'd get at different times of the year. I used to play golf; I don't play anymore, but I used to play at the River Oaks Country Club as a member's guest. I had some of these friends in River Oaks through the Air National Guard.

Two really interesting stories on that; a gentleman was up in years, but he came up to me and said, "You're Scarcella?" I said, "Yes, sir." "And you live in Stafford?" and I said, "Yes." He said, "Oh man, I used to go to Stafford every Saturday night and get my bootleg liquor." We were renowned in the Houston area for supplying everybody with bootleg liquor. Even after Prohibition went out, there was still gambling here. A couple of stories right out of some movie where two guys had been out gambling. There was this place in a loft and a guy lost and then the two guys walked out. Then a guy steps out, shoots and kills both of them. They tumble down the stairs. A lot of people say, "Oh, you shouldn't say that!" I said, "That's HISTORY!" You talk about where Wyatt Earp was and you're not going to talk about what happened when he was there? You're only going to talk about what's going on today?

Anyhow, we were fabled, if you will, in terms of providing liquor and gambling and maybe a little bit of prostitution but not that much. That was Stafford's reputation, going into the time before it was incorporated in 1956.

GOODSILL: And so can you tell me how this small city overcame that reputation?

SCARCELLA: Well, Texas Instruments helped a lot. Changed what people focused on. The other thing was, most of the people who had been involved in that had died off. So there were only a few people out there telling tales.

You can go back and look at the census of 1940 through 1960. In the census of 1970, the population of Stafford, Missouri City and Sugar Land combined was less than 10,000 people. Now it's over 300,000. There were less than 10,000 people on this side of the river. That's another reason the people in Richmond and Rosenberg used to say, "Oh, there's nothing happening over there and they're just scattered around." That river was more than just a natural divide. There was a TREMENDOUS difference in attitudes between what went on on the west side of the river and what went on, on the east side of the river.

GOODSILL: Tell me something about that.

SCARCELLA: Well, Richmond and Rosenberg were mostly German, Anglican, and Czech.

GOODSILL: Oh, it was a cultural thing!

SCARCELLA: Oh, it was VERY cultural. But they had the land and the money. As one guy said, "What can a man ask for, more than to have land, cattle, oil, and a good looking wife?" What else is there in this world that a man would want? So many of those people over there had those four things. And oddly enough, the oil even stopped at the river! There are a lot of people over there getting royalty checks today but there's none from this side.

GOODSILL: That's interesting! So it's sociological, cultural AND geologic!

SCARCELLA: Yes! Richmond and Rosenberg did not look on us with very high esteem. Of course, the county seat was in Richmond. If you didn't live over there, you weren't part of the hierarchy of Fort Bend County. Stafford evolved through that and we've got such a strong commercial base, then The Fountains was built in 1995. That was before there was a Sugar Land First Colony Mall.

Stafford was the first place that you stopped coming out 59 from Houston. The Fountains helped us because it generated a lot of sales tax. But when we eliminated that city property tax, that got us a reputation all over the United States. I got calls from Martha's Vineyard, Washington, D.C. all these places, and they wanted to know if I'd come up there and run Washington.

GOODSILL: Oh,, you were brilliant! Everybody wanted you then. A light bulb was going off! (laughing)

SCARCELLA: (chuckles) I told them no, I didn't think I could help them. But it changed the whole dynamic that we've been able to do things so effectively. Another thing we were able to do has been to eliminate all our general obligation debt, the debt that you have to pay back, basically with property tax. We will have the bond burning ceremony on September 1st because that will be our LAST payment of any outstanding general obligation debt.

GOODSILL: From how long ago?

SCARCELLA: It actually goes back to the first bond debt in 1968. It took us about fifteen years to chip away all the way down to zero. We now have something like \$228,000 that we'll owe on September 1st. But to have a city that has no city property tax and no general obligation debt is truly a rarity, anywhere in the United States.

GOODSILL: Somebody I interviewed from Stafford said that, with the school and public works and City infrastructure that they had to build step-by-step, they never started to do a project that they couldn't fully pay for.

SCARCELLA: And we've always tried to maintain that mentality. And then, of course, something else that you just mentioned. The school. That's got us a tremendous amount of publicity, favorable and unfavorable. We created that Stafford Municipal School District by breaking away, not only from Fort Bend ISD but also from Houston Independent School District.

GOODSILL: That was QUITE controversial.

SCARCELLA: VERY controversial. We had the Governor against us. We had the Lieutenant Governor, the Attorney General, the Commissioner of Education, we had everybody, not to mention senators against us.

GOODSILL: Boil it down for us. Why were they so against it?

SCARCELLA: Because they thought this is just something you don't do. This is going against everything a community stands for. Fort Bend ISD was considered a good school district.

GOODSILL: Since Stafford is a part of Fort Bend, why not be part of their school district?

SCARCELLA: Yes. To give you a couple of numbers I remember all too well, at the time we started, Fort Bend ISD was 181 square miles. And Stafford was 7 square miles.

So we're saying, "Look, we're only taking 7 square miles. They're going to have 174 square miles left." Well, history has proven us right. I mean, they've got so many schools over there, there's nobody around that can tell you all the schools they have, let alone anything else.

GOODSILL: How many schools are there in Stafford?

SCARCELLA: At that time, oddly enough, the schools that were in Stafford were part of Dulles High School, the northerly half. We got into this for six years in the federal courts. Finally the Fifth Circuit, on the second hearing, approved us and ordered our implementation. But the City of Stafford line ran right through the middle of the basketball gym, so they're saying that Stafford gets the northerly goals and Fort Bend gets the southern half of the gym. How is THAT going to work? Then they had Dulles Middle School and Dulles Elementary. That ALL was in Stafford. Everything else was somewhere else. BUT, back when we started in 1976, that was basically Fort Bend ISD. And a lot of people don't realize that.

GOODSILL: Dulles Elementary and Dulles Middle School are in Stafford?

SCARCELLA: In the beginning and Dulles High School. All three had Stafford addresses.

GOODSILL: But not anymore?

SCARCELLA: No, because we unannexed them and they are now in Sugar Land. We told them we'd do that and they said, "No it's going to cost you \$40,000,000" and they made all kinds of allegations. But, fortunately and ironically, we had judges on the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeal in New Orleans that were around when Brown versus the Board of Education came through in 1954. And when they saw the number of minorities that we had in comparison to Fort Bend, they said you can't keep these people from doing it. Everybody else at that time was trying to create what they called 'the white flight' school district. They wanted to break off and basically have all white children, or 88%.

Westheimer ISD tried to do that with HISD. And in fact, that's one of the reasons that HISD didn't give us too hard a time, because they wanted us to win in order to defeat Westheimer ISD. Which is exactly what happened. But Westheimer ISD was about 88% white whereas HISD was about 75% minority back in the mid 1970s when we started (1976).

GOODSILL: So the fact that you had a larger minority population was in your favor?

SCARCELLA: Without it we'd have never gotten our school district.

GOODSILL: Because it was a civil rights issue?

SCARCELLA: Back then it was ALL civil rights. The thing that is so important to remember, and a lot of people can't even fathom it, is that across the United States, there were 300 break-away school district attempts that went to the federal courts.

GOODSILL: That's what Stafford was called, a break-away school district?

SCARCELLA: Break-away school district. And it's in the records of the Fifth Circuit. We were the ONLY one out of 300 hundred that succeeded. No one else succeeded, and it was for the very reason you're talking about, the racial make-up.

GOODSILL: What is the racial make-up of Stafford now?

SCARCELLA: It's about 5% Anglo, 12% Asian, 38% African-American and 43% Hispanic. Now, at that time, we had about 50% Anglos and we had a much larger Hispanic population percentage-wise and then some African-Americans. But at that time there were virtually no Asians anywhere around here. Not in the 1970s.

GOODSILL: They're the next wave of immigrants?

SCARCELLA: Yeah, that's right. We always said we wanted to give our children the best opportunity to get a good education. And the city wanted to assist because it was the city that funded that whole effort. There was no money from anywhere else. We funded it and we still provide them with over six or seven hundred thousand dollars a year, plus all kinds of benefits. We've got police officers in their schools. It's not just the campus cops. We have real police officers.

GOODSILL: How many schools are there in the Stafford School District?

SCARCELLA: There are now six, but they are all on one campus. You go from pre-K through twelfth grade all on that one campus. And that's what we presented to the federal court. And we said, "Judge, one of the great things, and y'all have all had these zoning issues. Oh, I don't want my kids moved from here to there. When the kids are four years old, they show up at that campus and when they're eighteen years old, they walk away from that campus. And that entire fourteen years in between, they're there every school day."

GOODSILL: That was a point in your favor.

SCARCELLA: That was a BIG point.

GOODSILL: Okay, I'm going to switch the topic for a second. You said at one point in your life you might have wanted to go to law school.

SCARCELLA: I DID go to law school. I got out of law school in 1967, got admitted to the bar, and I've been practicing law for forty-six years. There was no way I was going to pay my bills with what the city paid! As I've often told people when we were talking about the firemen taking 24-hour shifts. I said, "There were many, many, many days of my life that I got up at seven o'clock in the morning, worked 'til three in the morning and then went back to sleep for four hours, and got back up at seven. And I'd do that literally every day, which didn't do a lot for my health but it was the only way I could do what I needed to do and pay the bills." I practice law and I practice just about every kind of law, except criminal law.

Shortly after I became Mayor, in 1973, the U. S. Supreme Court ruled that a lawyer who was mayor could not handle a criminal case because he had an inherent conflict of interest. On the one hand you're supposed to be supporting the police. On the other hand, you've got to do everything you can to advocate your client's position, which is against the police. It was probably a great thing for me, because before they came down with that ruling, I had three or four very interesting criminal cases. In one of the more interesting ones the guy was charged with stealing a truck and he said, "No, I didn't do it." They went out to his house and found the truck dismantled on his porch, but he wouldn't talk to me. I told him, "That's all right. You don't have to talk to me. You're going to jail, I'm not, so if you don't want to talk..."

In the other case, the funniest one of all, I represented this African-American guy who partook in too many different things. His name was Willie. I got this call and I went up to 61 Riesner Street on Saturday night. It looked like something out of a movie, guys wearing big hats with plumes and all this stuff. I was able to get him out of jail and I said, "Willie, what in the world is this? They've accused you and charged you with attempted murder!" He said, "Attorney Scarcella, there's nothing to that." I said, "Well, there IS something to it, Willie. But you tell me why there's nothing to it." He said, "Well, just think of what they're saying. They said that I had the gun and I SAT on this guy and I SHOT this guy and I attempted to kill him." He said, "Now, Leonard, if that was the situation and I shot this guy, he'd be dead. There wouldn't be any ATTEMPT to it!" (both laugh)

GOODSILL: I think the Court saved you from some cases! The reason that I asked the question about your being a lawyer is that it's probably pretty important in running a city to be abreast of the laws and paying attention to the legislature.

SCARCELLA: Oh yeah. It's been exceedingly beneficial. It's been invaluable, truly.

GOODSILL: Have you written any laws?

SCARCELLA: Well, yes I have. We've gotten a few laws passed through the state legislature and I was very much involved in writing one. We built the first building that Houston Community College ever had that they didn't rent. It's a science and technology building in Stafford. They rented everything. We annexed ourselves INTO the Houston Community College to expand their boundaries. HISD and HCC used to have exactly the same boundaries. Since then, there have been several annexations; Missouri City, Alief, but we were the first ones. As a result of that, we had to go to the legislature.

The Chancellor came to me and said, "Mayor, I've got a problem and I need some help. We need to start building buildings and we don't know how to do it. But we think you can make this thing happen." I said, "Well, Chancellor, that's pretty flattering, but... He said, "No, we've got to." So we agreed to go to the legislature.

The law in Texas in 1995 was that a city could NOT build a facility for a college. That was the law and it had been on the books. I don't know who got mad at whom, when, but that was the law. So we had to rewrite the law to say that we could. We got quite a bit of opposition but fortunately, God rest his soul; Bob Bullock was the Lieutenant Governor. We went up there and literally the last day the legislature was in session, and the bill was in limbo, our lobbyist got him to take it. He said, "Oh, I like Leonard, I'll get this through."

At 5:00 or whatever it was, he slammed his gavel three times, read off about three senators' names, and bang, bang, bang, we got the law through. And that allowed us to build that science and technology building and for Houston Community College to have their first building. We built it for them, we paid all of the debt for them, and then they leased it back and when they had paid us back for everything we had spent on it, then we deeded it to them.

GOODSILL: That's a good deal, too.

SCARCELLA: Oh, it's a GREAT deal. Now they have over a billion dollars in buildings. But in 1995, they had none, and the reason was because of some of these laws. We changed the laws.

GOODSILL: Okay. So we talked about your mom being frugal, or as you said, fiscally conservative. Is there anything about that which relates to being the mayor of Stafford?

SCARCELLA: Well, my father did some band directing but the salary for a teacher in those days was \$300 a month. My father played with the orchestra and taught music. We had this little frame house, and on cold nights we tried to sleep through it and during the summertime we'd try to stay in that house but there was no air conditioning in those days. That's what I grew up with. I don't forget those things. I feel so fervently about the people's money. So many politicians think, "Well, we've got that money in the bank. We'll do this with it." It's the citizen's money. It should never be spent without great consideration, in my view. We get criticized for a long meeting.

GOODSILL: Is Stafford known for its long meetings? (laughing)

SCARCELLA: Yes! In fact, Wednesday night I left here at 1:00 AM in the morning Thursday. It started at 7:00 PM and got out at 1:00 AM.

GOODSILL: But that was a short day for you! (laughing) You got more than four hours of sleep!

SCARCELLA: Yeah, right! I think you have a responsibility to do that. That's why I get all these calls about 'how can you eliminate property tax', 'how can you be fiscally responsible', 'how can you do whatever'. There are some things that really grate on people and I will tell you one of them; policemen and fireman. Everybody thinks that whatever they want they ought to get and you shouldn't challenge them in any way.

Let's put it in the best analogy I know. We all know about the 'too big to fail' with the banks and everything that just occurred. Sadly, in my opinion, police and fire departments are too sacred to question. What they do is indispensable, is laudatory, any adjective you want to use. By the same token, that doesn't mean they're perfect and that doesn't mean they need everything they want.

GOODSILL: They have to work within a budget.

SCARCELLA: That's right. And somebody has to ask the tough questions and most politicians don't want to ask those tough questions.

GOODSILL: Well said. This has been a very complete interview. Think back in your mind and see if there's anything else you want to add, anything we left out.

SCARCELLA: No, I'm just extremely proud of where this city was in 1969 and where it is today. I'm proud of the way we've grown and the achievements we've made, I mean, creating the Stafford Municipal School District, abolishing property tax, eliminating debt, building the Stafford Centre, expanding and becoming a prominent player in Houston Community College. We've got all these businesses coming to Stafford because of the low property taxes or no city property taxes, what we call the 'freeport tax exemption'. They are literally coming here from places like Japan and Germany and Italy and Finland because the structure that we have here saves them money.

GOODSILL: What do you mean by the 'Freeport Tax Exemption'?

SCARCELLA: It's a law that allows a manufacturing concern to bring in an unfinished product, finish it and ship it out in 175 days, and they don't have to pay any property tax on it. It's one thing not to pay the city property taxes. The big one is they don't pay any school property tax, if they complete the process within the 175 days.

GOODSILL: What kind of industry can do a turnover in 175 days?

SCARCELLA: The oil and gas industry is a classic example. Texas Instruments was one. In some years we've had well in excess of \$200,000,000 in exemptions that have qualified for this. As one businessman told me, "Mayor, with this type of thing, it can enhance my bottom line \$300,000 a year."

GOODSILL: So I see how it helps the company. How does it help the city?

SCARCELLA: These businesses come here and their employees eat at our restaurants. We're one of the few cities in the Houston area that have more people working in the city than living in the city. It brings a dynamic aspect to it.

GOODSILL: You guys are kind of renegades!

SCARCELLA: Yes, we are. We get a big smile on our faces when people recognize that. American government is the best there is, but we can see what's coming out of Washington. It has a lot of flaws. And in a small incubator like Stafford, you can look at these things very clearly and you can dissect them and explain why it may be the norm, it may be what's acceptable, but it's not the best. And we can do it better. And that's what we've tried to show.

GOODSILL: Well, I think we should quit right there. You can't get any better than that!

SCARCELLA: Agreed (both laughing)

Interview ends