

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees: **Lonnie Esker Meadows**

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Transcript

GOODSILL: Why don't we start with your saying how your family got to Fort Bend County?

MEADOWS: Well, my dad was a soon-to-be graduating dental student at the University of Texas in Houston. My mother was in Bay City, and they met on a blind date in Houston, that a mutual friend of theirs had set up, in 1946. I had a brother that came along in 1948 and I was born in 1951. They felt like Rosenberg was a great place to start a practice. It was far enough away from my grandmother for my mother--but just an hour away--and dad grew up in the Valley, so it didn't really matter to him (laughing). He was a long way from anywhere! He grew up in Harlingen--actually in Combs, outside of Harlingen.

GOODSILL: How did his family get down there?

MEADOWS: My grandfather, years and years ago, was involved with the Nehi Bottling Company during the Depression. He and a partner owned it, and the partner committed suicide because of the Depression. It had such an effect on my grandfather that he said, 'You know what? This isn't worth it.' So he sold his interest, moved to South Texas and bought a cotton farm, and he sold life insurance for Jefferson Standard or Jefferson Pilot, I'm not sure which one it was then.

GOODSILL: Down in Harlingen?

MEADOWS: Yes, ma'am.

GOODSILL: Is that where he had the Nehi Bottling?

MEADOWS: No, that was in South Carolina or Georgia or somewhere like that. I don't really remember.

GOODSILL: But moved down into the Valley! That must have been an interesting place to live.

MEADOWS: Yeah, I think it was. I really do. It was just my opportunity and I'm not sure if my grandmother had a tie down there or not. We don't really know that.

GOODSILL: Why don't you tell me some names. What's your grandfather's name?

MEADOWS: My grandfather's name was Pierce Benjamin Meadows.

GOODSILL: And your grandmother's name?

MEADOWS: My grandmother's maiden name was Pierce. We called her Grandmother and that's all we knew her by. (laughs)

GOODSILL: And so they had your father.

MEADOWS: They had my father and Dad had six brothers! My grandmother had been married before because my Dad's two oldest brothers were twenty years older than he was. And they were both killed in World War II. Then there was Dad and the other four that he kind of grew up with.

GOODSILL: What was your father's name?

MEADOWS: Pearce Lamar Meadows, DDS. That's the way he ALWAYS said it. (chuckles) Dad was a dentist.

GOODSILL: And your mother's name?

MEADOWS: Mary Margaret McDonald Meadows. Her maiden name was McDonald.

GOODSILL: And your brothers' names?

MEADOWS: I have a half-brother, Dewey F. Meadows. Dewey's dad was married to my mother and he was killed in World War II. Dewey never met him. So Dewey was six when Mom and Dad met and got married. My grandmother raised him in Bay City, with my mother, until mom married.

GOODSILL: Then Mary met Pearce and they married.

MEADOWS: That was Dewey Fugler Meadows. My next brother is Pearce Lamar Meadows, Jr., and I'm Lonnie E. Meadows.

GOODSILL: Where does the name Lonnie come from?

MEADOWS: Lonnie was my mother's father's name. My grandmother's name was Eula Simms McDonald. My grandmother was one of the first white children born in Bay City Hospital, Bay City, Texas.

GOODSILL: Was Bay City mostly minorities?

MEADOWS: Primarily black. The sugar cane was in that area, rice farming, and ranching. There's a Matagorda County history book that alludes to that, because we've seen it before.

GOODSILL: So tell me a little bit about your life story.

MEADOWS: Born in 1951 in Hermann Hospital. Dad was already practicing dentistry in Rosenberg at his office. At that time he was in the Turicchi Building which is now owned by Billy Dostal and Dostal's Jewelry. Billy's dad was also a renter of that building as well, but they were on the ground floor, towards the alley. I remember growing up and going in there. As a kid I would watch parades out of that window. When I was older I would go to that same corner, 3rd and Avenue H, to sell newspapers. Now it's the Herald-Coaster - it wasn't called that then.

GOODSILL: Made a lot of money?

MEADOWS: It was a DIME! I got a nickel and they got a nickel. It was great! (laughs)
That was on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

GOODSILL: What did you do with all your money?

MEADOWS: We'd go to the movie, of course!

GOODSILL: Oooh, you'd use it for entertainment?

MEADOWS: (laughs)

GOODSILL: How old were you when you started selling the newspapers?

MEADOWS: My first job was as a basket boy at the Rosenberg pool when I was six-and-a-half.

GOODSILL: What did a basket boy do?

MEADOWS: In the old days, you'd go to the swimming pool and you'd get a ticket. They'd hand you a basket to put your clothes in and we'd go put the basket on the wall and you'd keep your little ticket with a pin on the front of your bathing suit. Come to find out later, my dad was paying the coach that ran the pool, just so I'd have a job at that time. But it was a great experience for me.

GOODSILL: Six years old! You were a very responsible basket boy?

MEADOWS: Well, I was lucky. I had two older brothers and that made a BIG difference in my life. Dewey was ten years older and Lamar's two-and-a-half years older. So I always had good people to follow. They never led me astray! (laughing) My oldest brother's an attorney and Lamar's a dentist.

GOODSILL: And your career?

MEADOWS: I'm in the insurance business. For the last thirty-three years I've been in the insurance business. Got my license the day my daughter was born - thirty-three years ago.

GOODSILL: Okay. So, you're six and you've started your career as a basket boy.

MEADOWS: I did that for two summers if I remember correctly. And then I started selling newspapers on Wednesdays and Saturdays for the local paper.

GOODSILL: Do you remember the name of the paper?

MEADOWS: I can't remember the name! Dick Barton was the editor at that time, because he would check our papers out to us, and we'd sell them around town.

GOODSILL: Where did you go to sell them?

MEADOWS: I usually worked the corner of Third Street and Avenue H, right in front of Billy Dostal's office now, because it was a GREAT place. (laughs) And it happened to be a barber shop and a lady's beauty shop there.

GOODSILL: How did you get that spot? How come some other little boy didn't want that spot? (chuckling)

MEADOWS: Well, I was always FIRST! (laughing)

GOODSILL: (laughing) You were early?

MEADOWS: I was early, yes. They would release our papers around 1:30 in the afternoon and I'd beat a line to that spot. And there were only three or four of us that were doing this.

GOODSILL: Did you have to hawk them? 'Paper, sir, paper, sir'?

MEADOWS: No ma'am, I just said local paper (whatever it was at that time). [Editor's note: Two newspapers were merged to form a semiweekly in 1958, called The Herald Coaster.]

GOODSILL: And how many did you sell?

MEADOWS: We'd probably sell ten or fifteen each. There were three or four of us who did it in various areas of town. I always made enough money to go to the movie--I remember that. And buy a Coke and a Slo-Poke and a bag of popcorn.

GOODSILL: And you had the pride of being an income-earner!

MEADOWS: Yes, ma'am. And I also knew that if it was a slow day, my mother was usually in the office and I could palm them off on her, if the movie was going to start soon. I was spoiled, obviously! But I always appreciated it. So I try to do the same thing for our kids. After that, we did a LOT of things in the neighborhood with the kids, as far as volunteering for different things that we would do, out of school.

GOODSILL: I want to tell you, that it may seem insignificant to talk about having this paper route or being a basket boy, but these are not jobs that exist anymore. So in some year to come, these are going to be quite interesting historical notes! (chuckles)

MEADOWS: (laughing)

GOODSILL: So feel free to tell me your memories of your younger days. Your audience needs to know when you were born so they can place you in time.

MEADOWS: March 16, 1951. One of the other things I remember-- besides getting involved in Little League baseball and stuff like that--my parents moved to Richmond when I was in the 7th grade.

GOODSILL: So, was that a BIG thing, moving from Rosenberg to Richmond?

MEADOWS: Not really, because we were all in school with the same people. And I say that, but we actually blended in Junior High. Rosenberg & Richmond had separate elementary schools. If you lived in Richmond, you went to Jane Long, and if you lived in Rosenberg, you went to Robert E. Lee or Travis. I was in the first group of kids when they started to move me around from one school to another. But we were STILL either in Richmond or Rosenberg. We moved in '63, because Mom and Dad built the house across the street from where I am now.

GOODSILL: Why did they pick that neighborhood?

MEADOWS: They were going to build in Rosenberg on a street calls Mons Avenue. A gentleman (I can't remember his name) had a lot and he heard Mom and Dad were looking, and he said, 'You know what? Why don't you buy my lot from me? I've already put some beautiful trees on it.' And it IS a beautiful lot, and it sloped well. Mom and Dad went over to look at it and fell in love with it. So they sold the lot they had on Mons and bought this one.

At that point, I'd already become involved with horses and there was room for a stable. I was very fortunate. I wasn't scared of horses and I was already around them. I had my first horse when I was six years old. I kept it at Bailey's Feed Store in Rosenberg, and that property was purchased by the Leaman when they were expanding their lumber sales. But for years and years I kept a horse in a couple of stalls there.

GOODSILL: Were you the only one?

MEADOWS: No, ma'am. A lady named Sandra Schumaker--my dad had an agreement with her father. Dad bought the trailer and Mr. Schumaker would trailer us around to various rodeos that we did junior rodeo stuff.

GOODSILL: What were the events that you would ride in?

MEADOWS: As a kid you all start off on barrel racing because it teaches you balance and everything else. And then I got into roping. And on Saturday night when we were younger, we would do the 'jackpot'. The gentlemen would rope the steers, which were small calves, and we were small enough that they could put us on them. And we'd ride them after that. Also as a kid, I broke Shetland ponies for my cousin from Bay City. My cousins were into Shetlands as well, and we just LOVED to do that.

GOODSILL: What was involved in breaking a Shetland pony?

MEADOWS: Hang on as long as you can until they quit bucking. If you fall off, you get back up and get on it and just stay with it.

GOODSILL: Sheer perseverance on your part.

MEADOWS: Yes, ma'am. And they were usually wonderful but every once in a while you'd get one that was just sour. You left those alone. Eventually you got rid of those. (both laugh) My great-uncle would ship those.

GOODSILL: Ship them where?

MEADOWS: He'd sell them.

GOODSILL: Where were the rodeo grounds when you were a kid?

MEADOWS: Where Fiesta is now, in Rosenberg. Actually that's where the prisoners from WW II were kept, when they brought the German prisoners over. Consequently, many of those guys came back to the Rosenberg area. They would work on the farms.

My wife's granddaddy and grandmother would pick up prisoners and hire them because they LOVED the fields. And her grandmother would feed fried chicken to them, and everything else. You'd treat them like anybody else. They were human beings. They were great people. They were just on the wrong side of the fence, that's all. A lot of those gentlemen came back to Fort Bend County.

GOODSILL: I've never heard about that before. I've heard about the German prisoner wards, of course, but I never heard that they came back here.

MEADOWS: Yes, ma'am. We had a large one in Rosenberg where the Fairgrounds was. It wasn't very secure, obviously, but I don't think they had any issues. Those guys were happy to get three squares a day and a roof over their heads.

GOODSILL: I'm wondering where they came from?

MEADOWS: I don't know. Obviously they were captured somewhere and brought here, but who knows!

GOODSILL: You're taken prisoner in Europe somewhere and you end up in Texas?!

MEADOWS: (laughs) Yeah. I can't answer that. It makes you wonder. Gee, were there Germans who might have been in this area and the thought that they could hurt us-- maybe they rounded them up? I don't remember the history of that. You'd have to have somebody older than me.

GOODSILL: Well, they might have fit in anyway, because there was quite a large German population here, before then, right?

MEADOWS: I THINK there was. I know it really helped the German population after it was over, because they were very pleased with our ground. And the ??? migration went off to Schulenberg and San Marcos, and that area.

GOODSILL: So you were riding horses, college.

MEADOWS: I went to Lon Morris Junior College. I was a drama major for a while. It is now closed. It was a Methodist college in Jacksonville, Texas. It was the oldest junior college in the state of Texas. It closed a couple of years ago, after running into some financial issues.

GOODSILL: Good experience for you?

MEADOWS: It was wonderful. Met some great, life-long friends there. You had to be really creative in Jacksonville, Texas to have a good time. Transferred from Lon Morris to Sam Houston.

GOODSILL: (laughing)

MEADOWS: (chuckling) We were a small college with maybe 500 kids--350 to 500 kids.

GOODSILL: AND it was a junior college, so you HAD to get out after two years!

MEADOWS: Yes. Well, I lasted a year. I went straight through college. I never came home. I had so much fun. If I came home, I'd have to go to work! I didn't want to do THAT. So I usually had jobs at the colleges, where I was. I worked for a pallet company in Jacksonville, for a year. The pallets that grass is put on. We built thousands of those things with our hands. You have a hammer, and three nails per row. You'd have nail, nail, nail. But they paid us good money, as kids. It was fun. Always had beverage money, you might say. (laughs)

GOODSILL: And movie money! Don't forget that! (giggles)

MEADOWS: But being in Jacksonville, we'd line up a date from the junior college. Classes were small - you might have twenty-five or thirty people in a class. You knew everybody in two weeks. So we'd go to Tyler for a good time, because that's where the theater was and lots of restaurants, and the rose garden. Transferred from Lon Morris to Sam Houston State University. Got a degree in Sociology and Criminology. My first job out of college was with the Harris County Sheriff's Department. My goal was to get in the Secret Service. And in 1972, in December, it was tough because Vietnam was winding down. And if you weren't a veteran or weren't a minority, at that point you weren't going to get in the Secret Service. And I understood that. Those guys served their country and I was number 268 in the draft, so it was one of those things. Kathy & I got married in 1974.

GOODSILL: Tell us Kathy's name.

MEADOWS: Kathy Lou McColloch Meadows. Her family rice farmed here. Farmed right past the George Ranch. We got married January 26, 1974. Just celebrated forty years! At that time, she was an educator. She was a teacher and I was working for the Richmond State School, TDMHMR, and spent five years with them in various capacities.

GOODSILL: What was your job there?

MEADOWS: I started off as a case worker. You dealt with mom, dad and problems.

GOODSILL: Were you good at that?

MEADOWS: I was good at that.

GOODSILL: You were? (amusement in her voice)

MEADOWS: Yes, ma'am, I was! (laughs)

GOODSILL: Isn't that interesting! You probably NEVER knew you would be good at that.

MEADOWS: You just had to listen. And pay attention, and focus on them, at the time. And realize they don't think they got a fair shake in the world because they've got a retarded child, quite frankly. I had a cousin that was retarded, so I knew what his mom and dad went through. Saw a divorce, and I guess that's what really drove my heart to jump into it. I started off as a case worker. After I was there for two years, we had a special site called Commission for the Blind. We had a contract between the State Commission for the Blind and TMHMR--blind, multiple-handicapped kids. I was a project director for that for a year and a half, so I was back and forth between Austin and Richmond every other month.

GOODSILL: So, project director--that's quite different from being a case worker.

MEADOWS: It was. You have staff--I had a psychologist under me, I had a bunch of trainers.

GOODSILL: How did that work out?

MEADOWS: It was fine. It was a great experience. The training I went through for that was phenomenal. We spent probably a month in Austin and you'd have blinders on. You're experiencing everything a blind person experiences, usually from 8:00 to 5:00.

That was the training. And they would put you in every environment you could imagine. You HAD to be able to understand what they experienced. Now, compound that fact that they are retarded, in some capacity. It was a tough world for them. That was a great experience. After I had done that for a while, I could see the writing on the wall that funds were going to be getting tight for the State and the Commission for the Blind was thinking about trying to do some separation and I didn't want to move to Austin.

GOODSILL: Was there something going on, politically or financially in the State of Texas?

MEADOWS: Yes, ma'am. Financially. There is always competition for funds. Just like there is today. That's never going to change. About that time, the person who was in charge of what we called Quality Assurance/Quality of Standards for the State School, was taken out of the job and went to another school. So I was contacted to see if I might be interested in that, since I knew everybody and I was in my office, on campus, anyway. So I started that. Then I was Admissions Coordinator. That came under that group. We went out and beat on doors in the surrounding counties and set up group homes. I did a lot of that. All of that was part of what I did.

GOODSILL: Group homes for?

MEADOWS: Group homes for mentally retarded kids. The very first one we opened up that I worked with, was behind my uncle's house in Bay City, of all things! So I thought, I know the neighbors, because I grew up down here, going every other weekend, being with them. I walked around the neighborhood and introduced myself, 'I'm Eula McDonald's grandson and we'd like your permission to build a group home here'. We'd buy this house on the corner and it would be a group home. And not a one of them turned me down! We went to Galveston, we went to Wharton County, we went to Texas City. Thirteen surrounding counties deal with Richmond State School. It was a great experience.

GOODSILL: Are those houses still in existence?

MEADOWS: Yes, ma'am, they are.

GOODSILL: Really?!

MEADOWS: They are! I'm not sure in what capacity some of them are in now.

GOODSILL: They change as the times change.

MEADOWS: Oh, times change, sure. I finally left the State because we were in a situation where we'd have to move to Austin to move up, and we didn't want to leave here. We were starting to have kids, and we had baby-sitters built-in here with my parents and Kathy's parents. We thought, You know what? We have all the fishing and hunting we want here. Thank you --see ya. So I left that. Did a couple of other things, waiting to get my insurance license.

GOODSILL: Why did you choose insurance?

MEADOWS: Because I like the idea of selling. I figure if I'm selling papers when I'm a kid, I can sell pretty much anything!

GOODSILL: (laughs) That's cute!

MEADOWS: I always had a theory on that. I just kept it clean.

GOODSILL: Also, selling insurance is a product you probably thought was useful to people.

MEADOWS: Yes, ma'am. It was. You know, you have to have insurance on a house if you have a mortgage. If you're going to lease a car, or buy a car you going to go through the bank and get insurance. So it just kind of fell into place. I was contacted by an agent who was a friend of mine and he said they were getting ready to expand the company that he was with, State Farm. Dwain Barnes, a dear friend of mine, was an agent. I don't know if you know Dwain and Lynn. Dwain contacted me and introduced me to the manager, and I took all the tests, and poof! The next you know, I'm an agent.

It took a year to get all that to fall in place. While this was occurring--they told me how long it would take--I had a dear friend who was part-owner of J & S Beer Company, which was Schlitz Beer. Vic Zdunkewicz was one of the major owners of that. We ran into him at Christmas--we were on a trip, skiing. We were just chit chatting, and he said, 'What are you doing?' I said, 'Well, I'm getting ready to change careers. I'm going into the insurance business.' He asked how long that was going to take? I said, 'Vic, it's going to take a while to get licenses and contracts and all that kind of good stuff.' He said, 'Well, I just lost my area sales supervisor for Schlitz so come do it as long as you want to.' So I DID!

I made 362 calls a month and beat on doors, went into bars, drug stores, grocery stores-- anybody that sold beer. And I would go in and talk to the owners and negotiate space for my drivers. I had six drivers. It was a great life. It was fun! I'd pull their route or go along with some of those drivers. Two things occur when you do that. One, you get the respect of the driver, because you're busting your tail, lifting I can't tell you how many cases of beer! It's HUGE. And then you're going in to that store owner and he SEES you pushing that dolly. My competition usually had their suits on and they were coming out. I worked hard. 'You see what we're doing, you know what my drivers are experiencing, please allow us to have this many faces.' You call it a face when you have spaces in a refrigerator. 'I want eighteen faces, if that works for you. My competition has most of those right now and it would be nice for my driver, because you know, they work on commission.' And we usually worked a deal.

There was ONE gentleman that I could NEVER capture control of, and that was Herb Appel, whom I love dearly. I think the world of Herb, and that's how far we go back. That was in 1979-1980. I knew Herb before then because of his involvement with the State School. I thought he'd be a good one to mimic. He and Cliff Terrell were my heroes at the State School. I've told Cliff's wife, Roberta, that a couple of times. We're in church together and I've known her a long time. I saw what Cliff did. And I knew him as a child. I knew his first wife. She was an elementary teacher. He was here with the Chamber when I was a kid. I remember seeing the things that he would do and it made an impression. He and my dad were always buddies.

GOODSILL: What is it about Cliff that you admired?

MEADOWS: His 'can-do' attitude. Making things work and his communication skills were phenomenal. I could watch him defuse a situation where someone would be mad about something the Chamber had done, or not done, and Cliff would say, 'Let's just talk about it. What can we do to make this right?' And I used to always admire that. People shape and mold us as we're kids and young adults, and hopefully we still are being that way. I'm 63 years old and I'm thinking, 'Man, this is really cool.' Sometimes you watch somebody do things, and you think, 'I'm going to try that'. Anyway, that helped.

After that, I got into the insurance business and I was at State Farm for three years. Joe Clyde Wessendorff approached me and said, 'I'd like you to come be my partner.' And I never looked back. State Farm was a wonderful company but I had blinders on, because there were SO many things I wanted to do at that time, and they didn't want to focus on that. And having grown up down the street from Joe [Robinson], knowing Joe D, I thought, 'This is a GREAT opportunity'. That was June 1, 1984.

GOODSILL: So, what exactly did you do when you started working there?

MEADOWS: I managed the agency. Continued selling.

GOODSILL: Oh, you didn't come in just as sales, you were doing management, too.

MEADOWS: That was our deal. He said I'd be the general manager and keep doing what you're doing, so I did! I was lucky. (laughs) You know your product, you know your client, create the sale and if you feel uncomfortable, get out of the environment. That's all.

GOODSILL: Was that a satisfying company for you to work for?

MEADOWS: Yes, ma'am, it was. He and Loise -- I had a special relationship because I had known them. I knew who I was working with, who I was negotiating with in certain situations, and he was very fair and very honest. I knew I could push him when I was kidding about something. And he had a certain little phrase he'd always tell me when I'd gone too far. It was loud and clear! And we'd talk about something else. But I KNEW what I could do. I'd hear things that happened to him, and make a little fun of it, sometimes. I'd be sitting in my office doing something, or he'd be in his, and he'd come back and say, 'Let's go for a drive'. That usually meant he wanted to talk about something. He had an idea. Or I had an idea. But it was a great way for us to get away from staff and people. He was a marvelous mentor. He just taught me to look at things differently, whether it be hospital or banking or whatever. And I was fortunate enough to serve on the First National Bank of Bay City--I was a director for five years, when my uncle died.

We represented a family block of stock. I would come have discussions with Joe after some of our meetings, and I learned SO much from him about that. So occasionally he would have a meeting with Poly Ryon Hospital folks, and he'd say, 'I want you to just come sit and listen. Don't say anything'.

To this day, I'd hug him right now, if I could, because I've served as a Trustee for Methodist of Sugar Land for the last four years, and I can look at things and understand conflicts and the stuff that staff goes through. I can look at budgets and understand those. And it's because of Joe Clyde Wessendorff.

GOODSILL: Because he included you in meetings so that you could learn.

MEADOWS: Yes, ma'am. Exactly. At that time I didn't know why he was doing it, to be honest with you.

GOODSILL: Do you think he did?

MEADOWS: Yeah, I figure he had a vision. He was amazing! He had great vision. He was usually SO far ahead of people. I used to LOVE to watch the developers come out and think they were dealing with some country bumpkin who owns this property. They'd come in with this wild idea and he was very polite, and very direct. 'And there's the door', after he got through. And he'd say, 'I skinned them, didn't I?' And I said, 'Yes sir, you did. They are just NOT going to run over you.' (laughs) So that was always fun to watch. He was always the ultimate gentleman, though. He tipped his hat to the ladies if he had a hat on. He'd take it off--you still see some of that in Richmond and Rosenberg, today. And in Houston, off and on.

He had one saying that I just LOVED. He'd come in and say, 'I'm going to back you if you're half-right, son.' That was just kind of our relationship. And I'm sure he did that with others and told them the same thing. But it always made you feel good. One occasion, he made a comment to somebody over our front counter, 'Oh, we can take care of this or that', and I just kind of shook my head. The gentleman left and I said, 'Joe C., we can't do that. Rules have changed!' He said, 'Son, you take care of it and I'll never mention it again.' And that's the way he dealt with us. Then younger partners came along, and he was fair with them as well. Life was good. We had a good time. I was with Joe for twenty-two or twenty-three years.

GOODSILL: As we've done these Wessendorff interviews, I have been impressed with what a wide variety of business ventures he was involved with.

MEADOWS: Yes, ma'am. He came by that naturally.\

GOODSILL: Can you tell us something about that?

MEADOWS: You know, he was always in development. He LOVED land. He LOVED building.

GOODSILL: What developments in this area was he responsible for?

MEADOWS: A lot of the area north of Richmond. There's a series of roads that are all named after different towns, states, stuff like that. He and James Prowell, who had retired as a Colonel from the Marines were always great buddies. The Prowells moved here when I was in high school; one of his daughters was in my class. They were buying property. They would design their own houses and build them. And built a LOT Of houses. They'd make the loans, so it was a great deal.

GOODSILL: So he owned the lumberyard and did the loans and sometimes bought the property. And he was in the insurance business so that tied in because you would buy a home and then get insurance to go with it.

MEADOWS: Then the property that was out on Ransom Road--had cotton fields out there for a long time and other row crops. He decided cattle were easier and less work, instead of worrying about the weather and hoping you'd get rain. I can remember when I was in high school, those roads were there. He knocked all that down and got in the cattle business, in its entirety. Got out of the crop business and into the cattle business. That was before I joined him. But I remember it occurring.

I had a motorcycle and the one place I could ride was out Ransom Road which was gravel at that time. Crabb River Road was gravel. It was the only place I was allowed to go by parents. At that time it went all the way around to 762, which was quite a ride. The freeway wasn't there and it was all gravel, winding road. It was great. It was a LOT of fun.

GOODSILL: Well, that was quite courageous, to completely stop one entity of his business, the farming, and move it into ranching.

MEADOWS: He knew what he was doing. He always had a good plan. He was involved in banks, so Joe had his act together. He knew exactly what he was doing. And then, the day he came to see me was just one of the highlights of my professional life. Now I loved the State School and I'm still a member of the Volunteer Council. I'll never get away from that. It's funny--I drive in that front gate and I get that little warm feeling.

GOODSILL: Before we get away from Joe, let me look at this. You had made some notes and I'm referring to these notes.

MEADOWS: One of them was hunting.

GOODSILL: And the other one is patriotic.

MEADOWS: Yes ma'am. Let's talk about patriotic. I always remember people would come in, complaining about taxes. Joe had a good CPA but Joe always thought it was a pleasure and an honor to pay taxes. He fought for the country and he said, 'You know, taxes support our county.' And he NEVER complained about it. So I thought that was really unique. Everybody needs to step up and pay their share.

One thing that I remember Joe would say about being fair, because we were both Rotarians--still am, in Richmond Rotary. And one of our deals was 'is it fair to all concerned?' And that was the one thing when we would always consider about a deal, he'd say, 'Is it fair to all concerned?' Not everybody is always HAPPY but is it fair. That was the one question he always posed to me. I remember one day, when they were developing out Ransom Road way, we knew the school needed some acreage for Jane Johnson Elementary. I wasn't in the development company. I'm not a real estate person, but he would say, 'Go talk to so-and-so' and let's go from there. So he said, 'You need to call Dan Ives', who was Superintendent at that time, and say 'Dan, we need to go for a ride'. And Dan usually knew what that meant - there was property available.

So I picked up Dan and we drove out there. I can't remember if it is twelve acres or fourteen, or whatever it is. And I said, 'Joe C. wants to make you a deal on that but we need to do it before the end of December', and this was like, December 1st. It was done. And that was just how things happened. I always admired him for that. The things he did for the district. They made a special sweetheart deal for Wessendorff Middle School, catty-corner from Lamar Junior High. That warmed your heart, you might say.

But if we were hunting together, which he loved to do, I'll never forget the first time we were sitting in a duck blind, he and I and Colonel Prowell and Mr. Hoot, who managed the ranch that Joe Clyde had bought. It was an old hunting lease and Joe bought it years ago. Marvelous duck hunting near Brazos Bend State Park, we shot a lot of birds. And we were sitting in a blind, and I was a little bit timid with them at first, and he said, 'Son, if you want to knock a bird down, you'd better shoot before I do, because I don't miss!' He DIDN'T miss. So I learned to shoot quickly. Shoot and be direct.

GOODSILL: (laughing)

MEADOWS: We never argued over birds because everybody knew that we were on point! It was fun. And one time, we were sitting in a blind, and a dadgum alligator was under us. And you'd shoot, and that alligator would go 'SSSS'. We were disrupting him, that's all. And if you were walking through to pick up a bird, you knew that if you walked up on a mound, you backed up. You just back-stepped, because you'd walked up on a den, probably an alligator under the water. You just had a lot of respect for them, that's all.

GOODSILL: He paid attention to his environment.

MEADOWS: And I had that conversation numerous times with Orin Covell, because Orin used to love to hunt out there as well. I don't know if you know the history, but Orin and Jeff were with Joe Clyde when they left to go with their own agency, that's why Joe approached me. Orin and I hunted together for years and years and years, with Jack Moore, on Hilmar's property. We had many a funny story about alligator mounds. We always made sure we didn't fall through of them! (laughs)

GOODSILL: Smart! What's the story of this fishing picture?

MEADOWS: He was an avid fisherman and opportunities would come up every once in a while for him to catch a fish. As he would say, 'I got an invite to go fishing' and he DID. And that's a nice redfish there.

GOODSILL: Where were you? Were you with him when that was taken?

MEADOWS: No ma'am, I was not with him then. I'm going to guess that took place out of Matagorda. But I do know when a dear friend of his, Bob Moses, passed away, Joe and another fellow made a contribution to present Texas Parks and Wildlife a boat in honor of Bob. A nice big inboard/outboard or in-shore/offshore boat. He appreciated Texas Parks and Wildlife. It allowed us to go do the things we wanted to do.

GOODSILL: How nice! His bird dogs--

MEADOWS: Well, he had several of them. The bird dogs were special. They had really good treatment (laughing).

GOODSILL: You'd like to be one of HIS dogs?!

MEADOWS: Well, if I could come back as a dog, I would have, yes ma'am! They were well trained. He would take a dog out and use him in the morning as he was walking. Joe had a tendency to get up early every morning and go out and walk around the home place. Then he would come back in for breakfast, clean up and come in to the office. We'd see him about 8:30. And that was his routine.

GOODSILL: Tell me what he used to say about Joe D. (Robinson) and the family.

MEADOWS: Joe D. was referred to by Joe as 'my son'. He'd light up when he'd talk to him. Joe D. was living in Austin. If I may digress a minute, when I was at TDMHMR (Texas Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation), I was in Austin SO much. So I'd call Joe D. and we'd go eat supper. Or we'd go have a cold beer somewhere, or whatever. Then I went to work for Joe after that period of time and we would communicate with Joe D. quite a bit. He'd say, 'What's he up to?' so I'd call Joe D. and say, 'Hey, what's happening? When are you coming in?' and that kind of stuff. It wasn't any of my business but Joe D. knew the reason I was calling.

At one point, Joe Clyde and Loise were starting to have some health issues and he said, 'I need Joe D. here'. And I said, 'Yes, sir. I'll take care of it.' So I called Joe D. and said, 'Start thinking about this', and he knew. One of the gentlemen I had worked with at the State School had left the State School and gone to work with Texana, so I called (John Waddell was the guy's name) and said, 'Hey, I've got a good friend who's a registered therapist and we need to get him back to Richmond because he happens to be Joe Clyde Wessendorff's son. He said, 'I just happened to have an opening.' (laughs) So we set that up and Joe D. and Patty moved back here and that's how they got back to Richmond.

GOODSILL: So he was close enough to be near his parents and also have a job that was fulfilling for him.

MEADOWS: Joe D. wasn't interested in selling insurance. He didn't like it. He wanted to do something else. I FULLY understand that. He's just special, that's all. My wife and I knew Joe D.'s mother when she was alive. She was challenging. So when she passed away, we were in junior high, and Joe and Loise adopted Joe D.. And Joe Clyde felt like Joe D. needed to maintain his father's name and instead of being a Wessendorff, he wanted him to remain a Robinson, out of fairness to his father. Which I thought that was a cool thing. Very admirable.

GOODSILL: Loyal.

MEADOWS: Yes, ma'am. So that's how THAT evolved. So here we are.

GOODSILL: Joe Clyde was proud of him, Joe D.

MEADOWS: Oh, very! Yes ma'am. He would light up when he talked about him. He'd say, 'My son'. There were pictures in there, and I would walk in and say, 'Hey, who's that rascal on the wall over there?' and he'd say 'My son'. And Joe D. would call him. He'd say 'Father'. He just LOVED to hear that.

GOODSILL: You mentioned something about Joe Clyde's empathy for people who are less fortunate.

MEADOWS: Yes, ma'am. People will NEVER know how benevolent Joe Clyde and Loise Wessendorff were. The things they paid for, for MANY people. Grocery bills, if someone had a medical issue, Joe took care of it. And never wanted anybody to know about it. And to this day, folks will never know what was done for them. Or who even paid for it. I know the Texas Department of Transportation wanted to name Williams Way after Joe Clyde. It came right through the heart of his property. He said, 'I don't want my name on that.' And that's just the way he was. And they HOUNDED him to do that. (laughs) He said, 'NOPE, thank you very much. Don't want to do that.' He made contributions to every organization you could ever imagine. If someone would just go talk to him and tell him what they were doing.

And that's why I think he was SO wonderful for the George Foundation. The things he was involved in there and the things he helped kind of restructure the George Foundation. They were going a certain way and there were some issues there, and Joe said, 'You know, this isn't going to work'. I know he was instrumental in doing a LOT of that to get them on the straight and narrow.

GOODSILL: He was dedicated to pay-back to the community.

MEADOWS: Yes, ma'am. He would write one of the nicest business letters you could ever imagine. He would sit at his desk for an hour, and I would walk by and watch him. I knew the mode he was in, at times. He'd have a piece of paper in front of him and he'd write it out and Ms. Socorro would type it or it. He'd say, 'Listen to this a minute.' Little things like that. I always felt SO blessed to be around him. Loise would give you the shirt off her back as long as you didn't know who gave it to you.

GOODSILL: (laughs)

MEADOWS: Loise just didn't want ANY recognition at all. She was just apparently raised that way as well. Loise came from a very affluent family and she just believed in giving back. She loved the Lord and loved the churches. If you could get to her, to talk about something, a need or something, and she felt like it was justified, she helped you. It was fun to watch things that she did.

GOODSILL: It must have been a joy for her, to be able to have the resources to help people.

MEADOWS: It was. She had a child she kind of helped. Sent some funds for her to the State School. Before I joined them, I was working at the State School, and she knew that. She did it for a lot of people. It was a right place/right time kind of thing. It just put joy in her heart, for lack of a better word. You'd see her smile when you'd talk about certain things. She'd lay down from 4:00 to 5:00, or somewhere around there. And I knew that was a good time for me to go talk to her. And we talked about everything in the world. She'd call sometimes and say, 'Come by this afternoon.' 'Yes, ma'am'. Or I'd call her and say, 'I need to visit about something.' Particularly after we lost Joe, I'd say, 'I'd like you to be aware of what's going on in the agency.' 'Hey, what's new?' or 'We've hired somebody.' And it was always a joy for me to go spend ten or fifteen minutes with her. Of course she'd be surrounded by cats. I love cats and dogs. I'll cherish those minutes with both of them, but I had my separate time with each of them and realized how fortunate I was.

There were a lot of folks who were SO intimidated by the Wessendorffs, but the first thing Joe told me when I joined him- He said, 'Remember one thing, we all put our pants on the same way. You go toe-to-toe with everybody and you never back down.' My dad kind of had that same expression. Dad would say, 'If you're right, son, stand up. Someone will be behind you.'

GOODSILL: And you weren't intimidated by Loise, either?

MEADOWS: No, ma'am. I just knew her too well! (laughs) I knew if she were on a tirade, I could change the subject. 'Look at that cat! Isn't he gorgeous?'

GOODSILL: (laughing)

MEADOWS: 'How are the dogs?' 'How's this' or 'how's that.' Or we would say, 'How's Joe D.?' So I was her sounding board for a lot of different things. Joe and I've had this conversation a LOT. He'd say, 'Bless you!'. 'Yeah, some of this stuff I shouldn't know about, Joe.' He said, 'That's all right, she trusted you.' And it made my heart feel good. She loved my wife too, so I was very lucky.

GOODSILL: And I'm sure it was important for her to have somebody that she could just talk to and trust. Share and rant or whatever she needed to do (laughs).

MEADOWS: Kathy knew Joe D, as a child, because she grew up with Joe D. So my wife had a special relationship with them as well. They started at Calvary Episcopal kindergarten together. They were the first class. And they lived in the same neighborhood, too.

GOODSILL: Did you say you have a picture of that?

MEADOWS: We DO have a picture of that.

GOODSILL: You don't suppose you could scan me a copy?

MEADOWS: I sure will.

GOODSILL: That would be adorable to put with your interview (laughs).

MEADOWS: That would have been 1956 or 1957.

GOODSILL: Loise had a great love of the Hill Country and she also had deep spiritual beliefs. And she mingled those two things. Tell us about that.

MEADOWS: She did. And when they bought the property in Blanco, she developed a religious center there.

GOODSILL: Did you ever go up there?

MEADOWS: Yes, ma'am, I did.

GOODSILL: What was that like?

MEADOWS: It was gorgeous. It's Hill Country property. It's rugged and at the time she had a couple of cabins there. And then as things progressed, she built a little dormitory-type thing. In fact, we had a couple of meetings there. Usually it was pretty much reserved for the Episcopal church members. And she had a secretary who managed and scheduled that. And I'm not sure how it's evolved now because I've not been in quite a while. Her dad bought a place right across the street from Camp Mystic, which you are probably aware of. It's three or four acres, and it's gorgeous.

GOODSILL: What was that used for?

MEADOWS: For when Loise was at Camp Mystic, her mother wanted to be closer to her. So her parents bought this property and built the house. I've been very fortunate to get to go up there. In fact, Kathy and I will be there at the end of April, for a long weekend. It's just special.

GOODSILL: That's a beautiful time of year to be there!

MEADOWS: It is. It truly is. The camps haven't started yet, so it's not crowded but the trees are still turning. There's water running behind it. We'll canoe and just have a lot of fun. I just realized how fortunate we are to be able to do that. It's a great time. But it's hard, once you pull in the gate, all these things start going through your mind about Joe and Loise, and all the experiences we have had, both Kathy and I. So I'm glad that she has that ability to share and remember things as I do. And she had different things, being around them, before we ever got together. With her dad and grandfather being rice farmers and Joe was a row cropper as well. They always had a special kindred with each other. That was nice.

GOODSILL: Nice story, of your connection with these people. Joe never talked to you about his military experience did he?

MEADOWS: Not a whole lot. He didn't like to talk about that. He didn't flaunt it. I knew he was in Africa for a while and some other places. The summer before Kathy and I got married--in fact, that was when I was working at the Harris County Sheriff's Department and realized I was going NOWHERE.

I left the group and a dear friend of ours who was a Baptist missionary and lived in Nakuru, Kenya, which is 80 miles from Nairobi, had come back to bury his sister. His relationship with our family was, my dad's youngest brother was a Baptist minister, and they went to seminary together.

So they kept strong ties and when Bill and the family were back in the United States, they would usually stay at our house. So Bill came through, this was a Thursday night and we were eating supper with Mom and Dad--I think we were at the Warwick Club if I remember. One of those places my folks liked to go. And he said, 'What are you doing?' And I said, 'I'm in the Sheriff's Department and so forth and so on. I've got a real respect for them but I'm at a dead end. I'm not going to do what I want to do.' So he said, 'Well, come WITH me.' That was Thursday night, and Monday we were on Air France, headed east.

GOODSILL: REALLY! What was that like?

MEADOWS: It was great! As a missionary, he would go in and do mission work in the mornings and we would go fishing in the afternoon. We'd go shoot animals for food for the mission. We shot the things they could eat. We never shot stuff to waste. We weren't shooting for heads. I spent six weeks with him doing that specifically, and I was there a little bit longer. And I was able to do a LOT of touring. I was at a function one time with Idi Amin and Jomo Kenyatta, the president of Kenya. Idi Amin was Uganda. And we were in Nairobi, and the thing I remember, Idi Amin would have six or eight HUGE men around him. And they had clubs, like Fred Flintstone. He didn't trust them with guns at that point. This is 1973. If you've seen films where he'd sit there and go 'HA HA' and beat a stick on the ground--I can hear that echoing through the village we were in. It was a great experience and I was in the right place at the right time to see it.

I remember standing out in the middle of a field and you could turn around, in a total circle, not see a soul. And about three seconds later, a Masai warrior or cattleman would tap you on the shoulder. You'd SWEAR he came out of the ground! Or he just materialized there. Nobody ever had an answer for that! If they were downwind, you'd smell them because the dung they had on them, for their dress, was nasty smelling. That's the only way you knew someone was there. (laughs) It was a GREAT experience. It was just fun. Watching these guys do the mission work and some of the things I was able to experience there, was cool. I think it helped mold and shape me.

GOODSILL: Have you followed events in that part of the world much more actively as a consequence of being there?

MEADOWS: I have. And it gave me a difference of opinion on donations that are sent over there.

GOODSILL: What opinion does it give you?

MEADOWS: I have mixed emotions about that, because I saw SO much graft. And I don't think that's changed. I don't care what people say. They haven't been there. If it weren't for the Europeans, the African wouldn't know what the wheel was. And bless their hearts; you'd see all this equipment that the United States and other countries would send over there--if something breaks, it just rots in the field. Well, having grown up, working for my father-in-law, driving tractors and stuff--FIX IT! That made an impression on me, too. It was tough. It's a horrible world over there

GOODSILL: Behind the façade.

MEADOWS: The poverty is HORRIBLE! If you come up on a wreck, they aren't there to help them. They are there to rob everything they can from them. It was a great experience for me, I knew I was fortunate I was to be able to do that. And at that time, just before Kathy and I started to date, we'd run into each other at a wedding for Bob and TomiGay Dawson (Ann Davis's daughter). Ran into Kathy at their wedding and we started to date a little bit, and then I went on this trip, and we were corresponding, and that's the reason I came home. (laughs)

GOODSILL: Absence makes the heart grow fonder! You had a deep experience over there.

MEADOWS: I've often wondered, if we had not started dating before then, would I have stayed over there? Who knows what I would have done!

GOODSILL: What could you have done over there?

MEADOWS: I don't know. I wasn't focused on that, at that point. I was thinking about getting home! (chuckles) On the way over we stopped in France for four days and I had a built-in tour guide. Bill had been back and forth SO many times. We were in France and Copenhagen for a couple of days. It was a different world! We were in Frankfort and then we flew from Frankfort to Nairobi, and while we were hurrying to do this, I forgot to get a visa for Nairobi. I had everything ELSE that I needed--I had to get shots and all that, in that short period of time. Back then you'd just go grab a visa. There was nothing to it.

We're getting off the plane and I'm trying to get into the country, and Bill notices that I'm hung up, because we got separated. So he got me in. Then, when I was about to leave, we went to his buddy who was the Air France director, and said, 'We've got a problem. Lonnie's Visa doesn't show he's here.' So they stamped my visa and they gave me a stamp of approval to leave. Otherwise he said, 'You're not going to get out of this country! So that was a strange experience.

GOODSILL: That was a GOOD example of graft and corruption! (giggles)

MEADOWS: Yes, ma'am, it was! It really was. I hadn't thought about it THAT way! But yes, it was!! So I'm coming back, by myself, and one really cool thing is I stopped in Greece and toured that a little bit. I was in Italy for 3 nights. I got off one tour bus onto another. I wanted to see everything I could see. Being single, twenty-two years old, I was having a blast! Then I stopped in London for three nights. It was nice. I ended up in a hotel right across the street from Howard Hughes. He was supposedly in because his men were there. I'm sitting in the bar, I think at the Hilton, and Chris Schenkel from ABC, Roone Arledge and another young guy were all there. They walked up to me and said, 'You're obviously an American', and I said, 'Yes sir, I am'.

I sat two evenings around the bar and had supper with those guys. I was touring during the day and they were doing their work, whatever ABC was doing over there. That was the COOLEST experience. To experience that as a twenty-two year old kid - what are the chances of that happening? So I always was very loyal to them after that, watching, making sure I was seeing what their careers were doing. Never talked to them again, it was something I just kind of got dropped into and I was always appreciative of that. I toured England and had a blast for three days and got on a plane and came home.

GOODSILL: WOW. What a trip!

MEADOWS: It was a great trip. I knew how fortunate I was. Then you come home, go back to work, and get married.

GOODSILL: Yeah! Well, seeing the rest of the world makes your life richer?

MEADOWS: Well, it makes it a small world. While I'm in Nairobi, I get a message that Hilmar Moore and Eddie Prowell, Colonel Jim Prowell's brother, were going to be in Africa. They were going to Nairobi on Hilmar's first hunt. So I rode into Nairobi, which was about eighty miles away, and had supper with them one night.

GOODSILL: YOU DID NOT!

MEADOWS: It's a small world! And of course, my first deer I killed was with Hilmar's gun on the Keller's place in El Campo.

GOODSILL: That's great! Who would think??

MEADOWS: I was one of the lucky kids. Jack had several of us that Hilmar would take to the football games in Austin. We were in Junior High, and very impressionable, and going into the locker room. Mr." Dog" Dawson, Bobby Dawson's daddy was an Aggie, so if we weren't in Austin, we were with the Dawsons in College Station. But when I heard Hilmar was coming, I thought, 'Okay, I'm going.' It worked out. We had a good supper and caught up. It made it a small world. I think we were 10,000 miles away from home.

GOODSILL: You HAD to see each other - you were only eighty miles apart!

MEADOWS: And I lived a half mile from him, down the street!

GOODSILL: Great. Well, that feels like a good place to stop. Thank you so much.

MEADOWS: Thank you. I've enjoyed and appreciated the opportunity to share a few special memories of the Wessendorff family. I did forget to mention one thing which was their positive support and optimistic outlook for me when I lost a kidney to cancer back in 1987. Their well wishes and prayer support along with family and many others helped a speedy recovery.

Thank you again. I appreciate the opportunity.

Interview ends