FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Mable Huff York**

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Transcript

GOODSILL: Thank you for coming in Mabel. Perhaps we can start with Needville and then go wherever this interview takes us!

YORK: My name is Mable Huff York. I was born in Harris County on September 10, 1943 to Clarence and Azalee Foston Huff. My mother brought me to live with my grandmother when I was two weeks old. I came from a blended family. My grandmother was Bettie Lewis Foston Robinson, grandfather Alex Foston and my step-grandfather was Willie Robinson. I grew up with my cousin, Wardell Thompson, Jr. and my uncle R. C. Robinson. My grandmother was a maid, a janitor and a farmer. She did all of those things in order for us to survive. She had some rules in the house — that each one of us had to get an education, exercise our civic duties, go to church and respect the rights of others. So the majority of her children are educated. The problem was, we all had to leave home to get jobs. My grandfather Willie Robinson worked in construction and farmed and was a janitor in Needville First State Bank until his health began to fail him.

I've been back home for the last ten years because my Aunt Jeanetta had Alzheimer's and I felt that the best thing for her was to bring her back home.

GOODSILL: Where do you call home?

YORK: Home is Needville, but I lived in Houston. I'm a retired schoolteacher. After 35 ½ years at North Forest ISD, I returned home with my aunt, who was a retired counselor from Kilgore ISD, Kilgore High School. She worked for the state of Texas for 50 years. When Kathy Leissner's husband, Charles Whitman, was shooting people on the campus at the University of Texas, my aunt (Jeanetta) was on campus, in class, working on her counseling degree.

Charles Whitman killed Kathy and his mother, and then went to the Tower at UT and started shooting. He shot 15 people at random. My uncle. James Alexander Probasco. was on the campus at the time, waiting on my aunt to come out of class.

GOODSILL: Did he see this happening?

YORK: Yes, he did. And we knew the gentleman. We would see him in the bank. Kathy was from Needville. She was the only daughter and this really had an impact on her family. My grandmother used to work for them. She worked for Raymond Leissner, Dr. Joe Yelderman and Gus and Oliver Kunkle. Her husband, Charles Whitman, was a mild-mannered person, but he had a brain tumor. They found that when they did the autopsy.

In 1941 my aunt, Jeanette Foston Thompson Probasco, graduated from Prairie View A & M University. My mother graduated from high school in 1940 and my grandmother could not afford to send her to school the first semester. So my mother decided, since Aunt Jeanette was graduating, that she would go to Palacios to work. She met my father and had all her children and THEN graduated from college — at the same time I graduated from high school! To me that's a story! Documentation can be found in the Forward Time Newspaper.

Most of the people in my family were military people. Some were in the Army, some in the Coast Guard, the Navy. R. C. Robinson was in the Korean War. He went in as a 1st Lieutenant and ended up being a flight instructor. He flew planes. He worked for Rockwell International and Hughes Tool. This was in the early 1960s. Arthur Lee Foston went to the Army before he went to college, because my grandmother couldn't afford to send him then. But she had planted that seed in his mind so he went to the Army and then went to college. When he was a youngster, my grandmother was told that he could not learn and that when he graduated from elementary school, he needed to be sent off to work. But, he was an over-achiever. He has two B S degrees, one in engineering and one in industrial education and mathematics. He has a Masters in math and one in physics. That was because he was told he couldn't learn, so instead of making that a negative thing, he made it a positive thing. He decided he'd show them what he could do! So he did.

Aunt Charity Foston Barnes was the oldest child, and she wanted to be a cosmetologist so she went to Franklin Beauty School. Uncle Alexander Foston wanted to be a minister so he went to seminary in California. He organized a church in Baytown and it's still in existence. Uncle A. C. Foston decided he wanted to go against the grain, so when he graduated from elementary school, he did not go to school. He worked for Hagen Reinagin with the Needville Hatchery and Feed. It's called Simon's Corner now. Then he went to construction work. But guess what? With the construction job, he was making more money than his sister, the one with 50 years of service who was as a teacher and counselor. That's really sad. Its still is true today

My Aunt Jeanette sent my uncle, R. C. Robinson, to Prairie View. He was the baby so she helped him go to Prairie View. He graduated in 1952 with degrees in mathematics and physics. I'm the last of the last. I was raised by my grandmother. I went to Prairie View and I graduated in 1967 in Home Economics Education. They did NOT want me to major in home economics because my uncles, Arthur Lee and R. C., said I would never get a job.

So I stayed in school longer than I should have because I changed my major from Home Economics to Industrial Education to Dry Cleaning to Sociology to History and back to Home Economics. I decided one day, "Wait a minute now! WHO'S career is this? Is it theirs or is it mine?" So I had to take back my authority and decide what I wanted to do. Because they were much older and they were wiser, they thought their advice was good for me, but it wasn't. I worked 35 ½ years as a teacher, in Home Economics, CVAE/VEH Food Production Management and Service and Consumer Education.

GOODSILL: This career path grew as the world grew.

YORK: Right. And I ended up teaching special needs children and that was the most rewarding time of my life because they cared. Special needs children put their heart and soul in trying to learn what ever they could learn. They showed their appreciation by saying a kind word, hugging you or trying to help with what ever they could help with.

You never knew how much they were going to learn, so you created many levels of lesson plans to expose them to the essential elements planned by the State. When you created a lesson that they could achieve, you could just see them blossom. Other teachers would come in and say, "Well, I didn't know that they could do that!" My philosophy was to give them the opportunity to see whether or not they could master a task. Most of the time they could.

But this story has a twist. In Needville, the only education black children could get was to the 8th grade. There was no high school for black students. So you either stayed with a relative or went to work. There was Powell Point High School in Kendleton and they had a dormitory. The students from here would live in the dormitory to go to school. The twist is they were paying taxes for the high school here and had to pay room and board at Powell Point High School. My grandmother used to go to the school board meetings all the time and tell them that was unfair. She had property and was paying school taxes here but we had to go to another school. It didn't change until September 1, 1966.

YORK: In later years, my Aunt Jeanette, R. C., and my mother, Azalee, stayed in the boarding school in Kendleton to get a high school education. My uncle, Arthur Lee, was sent to Houston, so he graduated from Booker T. Washington High School in Houston. My aunt, Charity, was sent to Houston, to live with Uncle Joe Perry, to finish her education and then go to Franklin Beauty School. My uncle, A. C. just went to 8th grade. Uncle Alex went to A. W. Jackson High School for one year and then he went to California to Seminary School to become a Minister.

My mother, Azalee, taught at Manvel, Dora Miller and Peck Elementary schools. She also had a BS, Masters Degree and Principal Certificate from Texas Southern University. They accomplished all of these things in spite of having limited resources and having many obstacles in their way. My grandmother became a divorcee and had to raise her children alone. She was able to remarry with a houseful of children. Her new husband had one child with her. Times were not good and it was not easy.

Her father, James Lewis, and mother were from Halifax County, North Carolina. Her father was a slave; as the story goes he was a slave master's child. After slavery was abolished, the slave master (also named James Lewis) wanted to give him some land, but he refused to take the land. He said, "I would still feel enslaved." So he came to Texas. But it wasn't his idea to come to Texas. It was my great grandmother's idea.

GOODSILL: The slave master was a white man?

YORK: Yes, or possibly an Indian. We're not really sure. We're still trying to research that.

GOODSILL: Were there very many Indian slave masters?

YORK: Yes. Blacks, too. See, people are not telling the true story. All kinds of people were slave masters — blacks, Indians, whites. The story goes that James Lewis's wife, Georgiana, was never a slave. I heard two tales. One was that money grew on trees in Texas. That was one of the stories that brought the family here. And the other one was that her mother and father did not want her to marry James Lewis because he was a widower with a child and about 15 years older than she was. So she persuaded him, along with Mr. Andrew Smith's family, and the Jordans and the Lees, and the Whiteheads all to come to Texas together. I'm still trying to find out how they traveled. It could have been by wagon train or by water, because Halifax County was not too far from water. They could have come into Galveston and then traveled inland by walking or wagons. When they came to Fort Bend County and stopped off in Richmond, they started sharecropping. They would never get out of debt.

GOODSILL: About what year is this?

YORK: That's where I'm having a problem. I would say my great-grandmother and great-grandfather married in 1886 in Halifax County, North Carolina. My uncle, Henry, was born in 1892 in Texas. So between 1886 and 1892 they came to Texas, but I can't pinpoint the exact time.

Since they couldn't get out of debt sharecropping, they decided to split up. The Andrew Smith family came to Needville, the Jordans came to Needville and the Lewis' (my people) all came to Needville. They are all black people. They all traveled together. They stayed on the Armstrong Bottom, over by the Boling Highway. They stayed over there and then finally my great-grandfather purchased land from the Bankers, which is down in that particular area. The land that he purchased was not good farmland so he sold it back to the Bankers and came to what we called 'The Colony'. He bought 52 and some acres of land.

GOODSILL: Where is The Colony?

YORK: It's down Highway 36 to Colony Road and make a right. When you get to the curve, you're in 'The Colony'.

GOODSILL: Why did they call it 'The Colony'?

YORK: You know what? I have NO idea. It's been that name ever since I was a child. They bought 52 acres of land in 'The Colony' and my uncle, Walter, who was James Lewis's son, who was not my great-grandmother's child, bought 50 acres of land, and they farmed. But my Uncle Walter wanted to go to Oklahoma with his father-in-law, so he sold his land to a Dillard lady. My great-grandfather bought his land from the Dillard lady. So that's the land we own today. My grandmother and her brother Henry inherited 52-some acres a piece and my Uncle Walter, because he had sold the land, directed them to give Uncle Walter $1,000 in my great-grandfather's will. So he got money but no land. So that land's been in our family over 100 years. We're trying to hold on to it. We have all but one acre.

My grandmother, Bettie Robinson, was an industrious person. She was a part of the Home Demonstration Club. The county agent taught them how to can food, how to sew, how to crochet, how to budget their money and home improvements. It was segregated, so we had white county agents and black county agents. When I was a child, the black county agent was Georgiana Thomas and the male was Mr. Hardison. There was an area for the youth and for the adults. I was part of the youth organization and I would enter projects in the Fort Bend County Fair, like sewing or canning or something of that nature. I'd win first prize, second prize, and third prize — whatever. It didn't matter. It was just fun to me. And I raised 300 turkeys. I bought my high school class ring with the money I made from the turkeys. The Home Demonstration Club would meet once a month at my grandmother's house. The ladies would quilt.

GOODSILL: Because your grandmother's house was the place to go?

YORK: It was, with all the kids. All the kids came too and played. Because our uncles and aunts and mothers were working, they would bring us the latest toys. My cousins and I did not pick cotton, we did not chop cotton. We were spoiled kids and just played. (laughter)

The county agent met at a house in each community. They would have different projects. For example, they might be sewing or quilting, or it might be canning season. I can remember when my grandmother used to put food in canning jars. Then they stopped canning and started putting everything in the freezer. I can remember when we had a smokehouse and they went from the smokehouse to sending ALL of the meat to the packinghouse. Ladd Stavinoha had a freezer in his place. He would slaughter the animals and package it up for you. Then he would freeze it and then when it was time for you to pick it up, he would call you and tell you to come pick it up and then you would put in your freezer.

They started doing that because my grandfather, Willie Robinson, starting having strokes. He was a farmer and he had several strokes and heart attacks so he stopped farming. He still raised animals but not like he did at first. We had a vegetable garden and a vine garden, which included watermelons and cucumbers and those kinds of things. He never mixed the two gardens. I can remember one time he experimented with sugar cane — not successful. He experimented with peanuts. One year they won a prize — first place for a particular type of cotton. That was a bumper crop year for them. It was in 1960, I think. They were really proud. They brought the bale to the house and it was in the front of the house! And my aunt had a miniature bale made from the sample of the cotton. That was a BIG thing for them! My grandfather's chest was standing out.

GOODSILL: Your grandfather's name was Willie Robinson?

YORK: That was my step-grandfather. My natural grandfather was Alex Foston. The other Alexander Foston is his son. We called him Alec. After he became ill, someone else farmed our land and I think my grandparents got one-fourth and the farmer got three-fourths, because my grandparents didn't have to spend any money. The land is still being farmed.

The first black teacher in Needville was Reverend Cassius Herman Brown, Senior. I found a newspaper article where they were naming the white school with the students, and they said there was a black school with 32 students or something like that. So I was curious and found out who the first teacher was, but I still have not found the list of the students. I know my grandmother was his student because I remember her saying that he taught her. And he lived in The Colony. The Colony is a unique structure. I define it as a 'U' and inside of that 'U' would be black people. On the outer perimeters of the 'U' are white people, except in the curve where one black family, the Smiths, lived. They came with my family from Halifax County, North Carolina. They are diagonally across the street from us. On MY side at the end of Hurta Road was a white family. The street is named after the Hurta's and their family lived on the farm across the street from our farm. The Leissners had the property directly across the street from us. The next property was the Laymans , Hurtas and then it was the Patuseks. I never knew who was on the end.

On MY side, in my part of the curve, it was the Lewis' (which was my family) and beyond that was Ed Woods, and I didn't know the people on the end. Going back toward Colony Road, was the Heards, and adjoining the Heards property was property of Reverend C. H. Brown, Senior. The Brown family still owns their land. The Woods land is now owned by his forefathers, who are the Watsons, and my cousin, Oscar Woods. It was divided up between Oscar Woods and Melinda Watson. My grandmother divided up her land among all of her children and me. She gave me an acre because she raised me. Part of the Heard land has been sold but the family still has some of it.

Some people think Hurta Road and Hubenak Road are the same thing, and at one time they were. When you turn right on Hubenak Road, to the right was a trash pile. That's where all the neighborhood trash was dumped. I don't know who owned that land next to the trash pile but I do know that James Cantrel owned the land to the right on Huberneck road. The land to the left was the Heards' land. And that was it for families in The Colony, blacks who were early owners of land. Then I think you had the Petruseks, were coming toward Needville.

Schools for Blacks were Bassett School, Routts Point, Marlowe Point, William Routt — that's where I graduated from — and the last school was N. A. Allen Elementary School. The schools are named after the area in which they were located. Routts Point was named after the area known as Routt Point. This area is named after the Routt family who were a black family that came to that area in the early 1880's.

GOODSILL: There are quite a few schools. How big was the black community in Needville?

YORK: Well, it was maybe 300 people, but what happened was they didn't have each one of these schools at the same time. From what I'm looking at, they might have been going by population because they would have school in Routts Point, and the next year they might have it at Marlow Point School and when I came along, there was ONLY William Routt School. Right before integration, it was N. A. Allen School. N. A. Allen replaced William Routt School. So they were not in existence at the same time.

GOODSILL: Where were you when integration came along?

YORK: I was teaching! (laughing)

GOODSILL: Did it make any difference in your teaching career?

YORK: When I started teaching, I was actually hired by a white administration. There was a hold up because they wanted to make sure that I had a vocational home economics degree not just straight home economics. That made a difference. The principal interviewed me and then he called Central Office and said that he wanted me. I never really applied for a job. I was fortunate — I had a guardian angel for jobs.

GOODSILL: Would you tell us where you taught?

YORK: Forest Brook High School in Houston, B. C. Elmore High School, Smiley High School — they are all in the same district and I'm moving up the ladder. W. G. Smiley Career Technology Campus was the last campus I was on. These were all in North Forest ISD, which is in northeast Houston. My home is in northeast Houston. I didn't know anything about integration because I went to Prairie View for my B. S. and my Masters.

GOODSILL: So your own education didn't take place in an integrated environment?

YORK: Never. I have two teaching certificates. In order to teach special children, you have to go back to school. So I went back to school and that was at Texas Southern University.

The churches — when I was a young kid, there were only two black churches in Needville. There was Greater New Prospect Baptist Church and Saint Mark's AME (African Methodist Episcopal) Church. That's where Pete U. L. Davis went, to Saint Mark's AME Church. The cemeteries are owned by those churches but now you have four churches, I

think.

We had a split in our church, because on Hubenak Road there was a church and a cemetery. The church went defunct. The church owned two acres of land but for some reason or another, when the people sold the land around it, the people that bought it let their cows run over the graves. And I can NOT find the documentation — I've been looking and looking! I can find documentation for every cemetery but that one. So because we had family members who belonged to the old church, which was Greater New Prospect Baptist Church, when they built the church in town, some decided they weren't going to leave. They thought maybe Armstrong would take the land back, but they didn't look at the deeds, because they bought the land from him. They bought it for $1 but there were some stipulations that said it was for a church AND a cemetery. So he couldn't have taken it back from them, but they were scared, so they stayed.

So now we have two Baptist churches — New Prospect and Greater New Prospect. The church and the cemetery are still there and Reverend Phillips is the pastor there. That's like home to me because I was baptized there. Oh, WAIT — we were baptized in the San Bernard River! But now they are modernized. They have the baptismal pool inside of the church.

Let me tell you about the N. A. Allen addition. Blacks were not allowed to live in Needville — were not allowed to buy property in this area. The Barker brothers decided that since the blacks couldn't buy in Needville, they would start selling their land to blacks. They gave each church an acre of land, which would be New Prospect Baptist Church and Saint Mark's Methodist Church. If they would relocate, their people would follow them. That was their theory. And this is what started the addition close to downtown but not in downtown, for blacks. So we started building the church. Everybody was for building the church and relocating the church because the area where the church is located is a dead area. Not too many people live in that area. It's growing now, but at that time it was really a dead area.

There's another area where blacks stayed when they came to town. We had another name for the area but I don't want to say it because it's offensive now. But during that time, that's what they said. That was a place that all blacks would go, to live because the Armstrongs had houses/huts and jobs for them. The funny thing about it is nobody lives there now because those people worked there, saved their money and bought land in Routts Point, The Colony, and the N.A. Allen Subdivision.

We used to laugh at the last man who stayed there — the last man standing! He still was staying over there when he was building houses over in N. A. Allen Community. He had his own house and several rent houses and enough property to give each one of his grandchildren property. He had one daughter and her husband died. SMART man! His name was George Heard. He probably had just an 8th grade education, saved his money and amassed a fortune before he left this earth. It's not the degrees you have but what you do with the money that you have. I had an uncle that always said you pay yourself first. Then you do all these other things.

But now they can buy anywhere. Well, I don't know about that because my cousin just tried to buy some land out here and the deal was going through until they found out he was black. So I don't know about that! He wanted 5 or 10 acres of land and when they found out he was black that deal collapsed.

We have three active black cemeteries in Needville; the one at New Prospect Baptist Church right next to the church; Peaceful Rest, which is owned by Greater New Prospect Baptist Church, and Saint Mark's has its cemetery which is called Routt Point Cemetery. Routt Point is an area that was predominantly black. One time there was a man named Tobe Rivers who had a gristmill — his grinder is installed in front of the police department. He had a gin and sugar cane mill. He made syrup and all that, too, down in the Point. He owned something like 300-400 acres of land. I think he bought that in 1880. So from what I'm seeing, he was probably the first black to own land in this area. He's one of the ones buried in the cemetery where the cows were grazing.

GOODSILL: Are the graves still marked in that cemetery?

YORK: I have no idea. The cows have been running over them for so long, they are probably gone. Miss Monette, who was Reverend Brown's daughter, first told me about the cemetery when I was a kid. So when I started doing research, I tried to find it. It's on the map but I can't find any paperwork. If you can't find paperwork, you can't prove anything. That's the only paperwork for a cemetery that I cannot find. I looked for Morningstar Baptist Church, but that was the name of the church. And I looked for who I thought were the ministers but I couldn't find them. Then I looked for who might have been the deacons, but I never did find it.

GOODSILL: Did you ever work with the Fort Bend County Historic Commission on the cemeteries?

YORK: I did work with them. I gave them all the Negro cemeteries and they throwed it in the drawer and gave somebody else credit for my work. When they came to validate my work, they went to my cousin — they didn't know he was my cousin — Henry Lewis, who was a bus driver. Oh, that's an interesting story. Henry Lewis's wife was a teacher. They had a school transportation problem. The students were missing too many days of school. So he took his car, would pick up the kids and bring them to school. So he got a bright idea. Somebody gave him an OLD raggedy bus that did not work or was barely working. He decided that he'd fix that bus up. He was the first black bus driver to drive the kids to and from school. It was Needville-Fairchild Road, going to your left, and there was the school. The kids talk about it now. They said if it hadn't been for him, they probably couldn't have gotten an education because they didn't have cars.

When my mother and her sisters went to school, they had to walk from where we lived, all the way down to the Boling Highway, because the school was across the street from the church. So their granddaddy would carry them by wagon, to school. Or they had a horse they called Old Minnie and they would ride her to school, especially when there were just one or two of them. There were no cars, just wagons. So that was interesting. They said when they walked to school the kids across the street would throw rocks at them. Those were the white kids. But they kept on going. It didn't make any difference to them because they knew that the way out of poverty was to get an education. My grandmother always said to them, "You NEED to get an education" and she would always asked them, "What do you want to do?" Each one of them would set their goals, except my uncle who didn't get his education. He said he wanted to be an ass cutter and shit wiper (laughter). That's what he said and that's exactly what he did. Once Henry Lewis had that bus, Needville ISD hired him as bus driver, and a janitor. He had a café here, too. So he was an entrepreneur!

GOODSILL: You had a lot of ambitious people in your family.

YORK: Oh, yes, because they knew the way out. Henry Lewis's father was my grandmother's brother, and he realized that he wasn't making enough money farming. So he went to Houston and had a store next door to his house. AND he worked for the City of Houston in the Public Works Department. He knew he had to leave home. All of us knew we had to leave home because if we stayed home, we couldn't get a job.

Mr. Gus Kunkle wanted to hire me in the bank, but my grandmother told me that all they wanted me to do is bring water and soda. She said, "NO. Don't do that." My grandmother worked for him. Well, she really worked for Oliver Kunkle, who was his son. They owned the bank that was downtown. It's a city building now. My grandmother used to clean up that bank. I remember when they built that bank. The first building is where they had the bank at first, that building right on the corner, across the street from Western Power. Mr. Kunkle came here with $3 or $4 and amassed a fortune.

Someone was talking about the movie house. We had to go upstairs because it was segregated, so our parents stopped us from going to the movie house. They were being ugly to us, so our parents told us you don't have to put up with that. It was just one of those things. We had our little world and they had theirs. When we traveled, we could stop and get gas but you couldn't eat or use the restroom. So we always traveled with a picnic basket. My aunt made sure that we had a picnic basket so if we got hungry we could eat. If you wanted to use the restroom, you had to stop on the side of the road. So that's what we did. There were no hotels you could stay in.

GOODSILL: Unbelievable to think about!

YORK: There were black and white water fountains. Early on, in Needville, I heard that if a white woman was walking on the sidewalk, you'd have to get off the sidewalk to let her pass. But let me tell you, Mrs. Leissner's, Lee Leissner's mother, wanted to adopt my mother when my mother was a little girl. They would pick cotton for them. This lady would have a home-cooked meal for the cotton pickers at lunchtime. They would go to the house and sit at the picnic table under the trees, to eat their lunch. The Leissner's were like that. They owned land across the street from us. They were part of the pioneers of Needville. They would call my grandmother and ask her, "Do you have such-and-such a thing in your garden?" And if she didn't have it, they would say, "Come on over here, Bettie, and get some." My grandmother had flowers around the house. If she saw a flower bush or a tree that somebody had, she'd knock on the door and ask them if she could have a cutting. Because she was part of the Home Demonstration Club, she knew what to do with that tree.

During certain seasons, my grandfather kept a bucket in the trunk of the car, because if there were peaches on the side of the road, or pecans or berries or grapes, he would pull to the side of the road and pick some. My grandmother would make jelly out of the berries or grapes. So he had to stop and pick that for my grandmother.

My grandmother was something else! She taught us all. We didn't have time to know a lot of things in Needville, because I was busy sewing, canning, cooking, minding my own business.

GOODSILL: You didn't have time to go to those movies anyway!

YORK: Sure didn't! But on Saturdays, all the blacks would congregate in town. Ladd would sell sausage sandwiches. What is now the Super S was Ladd's store. Charlie (Cat) Castelow barbecued. Then there was a barber shop that was run by Miss Rena Johnson and Mr. Thurman Tolbert. They were the black barbers. Cat would sell barbecue and sausage sandwiches. I would always buy a sausage sandwich. My grandmother did NOT cook on Saturdays because she was cooking for Sunday on Saturday. The minister ate with us most of the time on Sunday so she was getting ready for Sunday. I think I paid 25 cents for a sausage sandwich at Ladd's.

There was another unique thing about my grandmother. She raised two grandkids — my cousin Wardell and myself. She gave him $10 a week for an allowance and she gave me $5 a week for an allowance. So, you know I HAD to ask why I was getting $5 and he's getting $10. And her response to me was, "He's a boy. He might have to take a girl to the movie or what have you." And I bought it. It wasn't any big thing to me. She would give us our allowance on a Saturday, and there were some rules. You had to pay your church dues and the rest of it was yours. But you cannot come and ask her for any more money until next Saturday. That taught me managing skills. You'd be surprised at the little things that parents teach you. Some parents just dish out money every time a child asks them for money. She might have done that with her kids, but she raised her grandkids differently from her children.

With that money I would buy fabric. At that time fabric was 25 cents a yard. $1 would buy 4 yards of fabric. I would buy the fabric one week, then I'd buy the thread another week, the pins, the pattern and I'd make me an outfit. Every Sunday I had on a new outfit. I was making my clothes at a young age. Because of the Home Demonstration work, my grandmother was sewing, my aunt was sewing — everybody around me was sewing. There is a newspaper article about the Home Demonstration Club, where they were asking her how they did things, and she said that I would help sew the clothes. We were always having home improvements. We started out with a basic house, because the 1932 storm flattened the area where I lived. The houses on Boling Highway coming back this way were all destroyed. But I forgot one thing. I forgot to ask them where they stayed! (laughter)

I found some paperwork where the lumberyard built the houses back then for them, and financed it. That was the same house that they had when I came along. One of the things with the Home Demonstration Club was home improvements so they kept adding to the house. So Reverend C. H. Brown one time added a porch and a room. And then Mr. Henderson in Kendleton added another room. At first, when I was a child, there was an outhouse. And I can remember, I was seven years old when they put a bathroom in the house and running water. I don't remember not having electric lights. But from what I understand, the first lights were just in downtown Needville. And a black guy named Mr. Shepherd had to do some kind of cycling of the thing to make the lights work.

I also remember we had no telephones. The Otto's had a building, a little white building, that was the first telephone company. What they would do, if somebody lived in Houston or somewhere else, and sent you a message, they would call them and give them the message. Then they would come to your house and deliver that message. That's how you got your messages.

GOODSILL: How far is Kendleton from Needville?

YORK: 18 miles. Oh, I didn't tell you! I was bused. I graduated from high school in Kendleton but I was bused every day for four years, to Kendleton. There's a school about five miles from my house and my grandmother was paying taxes. But I had to go 18 miles one way to school. And many days we would slip off in the ditch because the roads were not that good. And then we'd be late getting to class.

GOODSILL: You were bused because this was a black/white issue?

YORK: We were bused because it was the time of segregation.

GOODSILL: Five miles from your house was a white school, but you had to go eighteen miles to go to school?

YORK: Or not go to school at all.

GOODSILL: And now you are doing some work in Kendleton?

YORK: Yes, I am. We are in partnership with the Fort Bend County Commissioners and we are trying to write the history of blacks in Fort Bend County, from 1870 to 1965.

GOODSILL: How are you doing on that?

YORK: Well, I'm supposed to be focusing in on the family but I ended up finding information on Fort Bend County schools. Believe it or not, the county records are very good for the schools, except I cannot find the earlier books. I found Reverend Brown where they had hired him and he was the first teacher, but I cannot find his list of students. I have a list of students from 1907 to 1961-62 for all of the Needville black schools and for Simonton/Kendleton. The George Library has a list of the students, their parents and the school board members for the first black school which was in 1870-something, and a letter where they had asked the county to organize a black school. So I have that. But the county is unique because within the county you have various independent school districts, such as Needville, Kendleton, Fort Bend County and Lamar Consolidated. All of these are different school districts within the same county.

GOODSILL: You've also been doing some census research?

YORK: Oh, yes. The census research was from 1870 to 1930 and I started doing that by doing the entire census for 1870, pulling all the black residents out of the main census. If you are going to write a story about blacks in Fort Bend County, you have to know who they are. So my goal was to pull out who they were for 1870, 1880 and all the census years and then see if I could find some families where I could get a good story. 1870 was a LOT of work. But I was able to do it because my aunt had Alzheimer's and I was sort of locked in at home taking care of her.

GOODSILL: What did you learn? Did you come to any conclusions?

YORK: I've identified the surnames of the people. I've been able to connect families and some families didn't even know they were related. I've learned that you had pockets of blacks all over Fort Bend County. I've also learned that a lot of them were landowners. Kendleton is known for being a black community, so you know that they bought land. But blacks bought land in ALL of these communities. Around the Richmond courthouse complex is, there was a man named Peter Martin, who owned land around that complex. And he was a free person. His slave master had only one slave. His slave master was Wiley Martin, and he freed Peter Martin. But Peter Martin was also the first person to get a peddler's license (you can document this), he was a rancher, a farmer, but yet, in the history books, when they talk about Peter Martin, they say he died a pauper. I've been trying to figure out how you die as a pauper and you have land. He died before freedom but he was already free. But he had to have a sponsor.

You could be free and live in Texas, but you had to have a white sponsor to represent you to say you were an all right person. Not only was it a white sponsor, there was legislation to go with it. You had to go to the State and get permission to stay in Texas. There are legislative documents that you can find where they granted this person and that person the right to stay in Texas as a free black person.

Before Peter Martin died, which was before freedom, he was allowed to marry. He married Judith Jones. These Jones' are part of the Jones family over by George Ranch. This sponsor took all of his possessions and sold them and got Confederate money for it. The Jones helped Judy get a lawyer and she ended up getting everything back. This is documented. They were trying to say that she couldn't own property and she couldn't legally be married to Peter Martin because slaves were not allowed to marry. There is a problem with this story. They mention that she had children but it's hard for me to identify her children. But she had four children according to the court proceedings. But you can't find them. I'm trying to link some Martins, trying to link the past with the present.

GOODSILL: You are really enjoying doing this.

YORK: Oh yes!

GOODSILL: So, you've done the census, you've done the schools. What are you working on now?

YORK: I've collected cemetery information, legislative information about the politicians. Actually I've gone to the state legislature level with the first black politicians, to see who they were. Now I need to find some pictures. This will be exhibited in the Kendleton Museum. Some of it is already there. I have the entire census and I have found out that all blacks were NOT slaves. I have some in my family who were never slaves.

GOODSILL: If they weren't slaves, what did they do?

YORK: They were blacksmiths, land owners, farmers — just what everyone else was doing. Then what happened, depending on where they were, some of the whites would drive them out of those areas because they were jealous of them. Like I keep telling people, yes, there was segregation but in order for us to get free, a white person had to be involved in it too. There are a lot of decorated Negro soldiers, too.

GOODSILL: Are you doing some research on that?

YORK: Yes. We have a veteran's room with the veteran's pictures on the wall at the FBC Heritage Unlimited Museum. We also have a church room, school room and family research room. I go out there every Wednesday and every Saturday. It's in the Bates Allen Park, Kendleton, Texas.

I'm trying to get back to my family research and put it all together. I can look at it and say, Pete U.L. Davis went to this school. And then I can say these were Pete's classmates. He and my mother went to school together.

GOODSILL: I'm impressed with your research!

YORK: I'm doing it because we have been left out of the history books. You would be surprised at what we have actually done. I have two pilots in my family; we have doctors and lawyers — just like everybody else. And it all started with a lady who was a maid. (laughs)

GOODSILL: And she said you need to get an education!

YORK: My grandmother was not the only black person who taught their children that they had to get an education. Many of the earlier black students from Needville got an education or were able to get a good job.