FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees:	**Martha Virginia Ansel Payton**
Interview Date:	08/18/2012
Interviewer:	Jane Goodsill
Transcriber:	Olga Barr
Project / Group	Oral History Mini-Fair held at the Fort Bend County Museum in Richmond, Texas

13 Pages

Transcript

GOODSILL: Will you tell us your name and then your date of birth?
PAYTON: Martha Virginia Ansel Payton, born March 15, 1928.

GOODSILL: Were you born in a hospital or in a home?

PAYTON: I was born in a hospital. The hospital was in Sugar Land. I've always said I was born in Richmond but actually our doctor who was Doctor Nichols delivered me. That was the only hospital we had anywhere around. The Rosenberg hospital wasn't there at the time. Everything took place in Sugar Land at that hospital.

GOODSILL: But your parents were living out here in Richmond?

PAYTON: Yes. My father came here in 1924 to work on the bridge.

GOODSILL: Tell us about the bridge.

PAYTON: He worked on the bridge in Wharton—somewhere over in that area, but then he came back here in Richmond and worked on this bridge.

GOODSILL: The bridge over the Brazos? What did he do?

PAYTON: I think daddy was a timekeeper. I remember him saying that.

GOODSILL: What do you think a timekeeper does?

PAYTON: I have no idea. (laughs) He came from Kansas. He was working for the company in Kansas and was transferred here work on this bridge.

GOODSILL: Was he proud of that bridge?

PAYTON: Oh very.

GOODSILL: What did he used to say about it?

PAYTON: Well, I have a big picture of it as a matter of fact. All my siblings have a picture of it too, hanging in the house—a color picture of it.

GOODSILL: What do you think he was proud of about it?

PAYTON: For one thing a man fell from the bridge one day. The man fell and was drowning and daddy jumped in and broke both ankles because the water was not that deep. It was deep enough that the man was drowning. Daddy jumped in and saved him. It laid daddy up for six weeks.

GOODSILL: That's quite a story.

PAYTON: I know. He was in it.

GOODSILL: He was a hero. What did your father look like?

PAYTON: He wasn't tall. He was about five nine, dark hair, dark eyes, nice looking young man. He later became mayor of Richmond. He was mayor of Richmond until he gave it up in the middle of a term for health problems and Hilmar Moore took over. That's how long Hilmar's been mayor—ever since then.

GOODSILL: Tell us your dad's full name.

PAYTON: Wilbert Lee Ansel.

GOODSILL: That's a great story. So he came from Kansas to work on the bridges.

PAYTON: Came from Lawrence, Kansas.

GOODSILL: And what else did he like about the bridge? Did he talk about the construction or how hard it was to build?

PAYTON: No, not really, not much, but he was proud of the fact that brought him down here because he met mother who lived right here.

GOODSILL: What was her name.

PAYTON: Her name was Martha Virginia Hinson.

GOODSILL: Tell us about her family.

PAYTON: Mother's side of the family had been in Richmond for five generations. When daddy broke his ankles jumping off the bridge my grandmother took him into her house. She lived on the corner where the district clerk's office is now.

GOODSILL: Do you know the streets?

PAYTON: Third and Jackson. That's where her house was.

GOODSILL: Why did she take him in?

PAYTON: At the time my mother and father were going together. Daddy had no relatives down here at all. They were all back in Kansas. It was either staying by himself in some rooming house with both ankles broken and laid up in bed or bringing him over and kind of helping him out—tending to him. That happened in-- I guess—I really don't know when that happened because mother and daddy married in 1926. I think maybe he came down in '24 and that happened some time in between.

GOODSILL: That gives us a good timeframe. That gives us a timeframe of when the bridge was built as well.

PAYTON: Yes, yes.

GOODSILL: Well, let's go back to your mother's side of the family for a moment. They were here for five generations. What did they do?

PAYTON: My mother's father was nephew of J. H. P. Davis. So actually Virginia Scarborough and I are related. Distantly, but we are. That was my grandfather's side. We go back that far on his side mother's father rather than my grandmother. My grandmother came from Columbus.

GOODSILL: What line of work were they in?

PAYTON: My grandfather was postmaster for a long time. My grandmother ran a boarding house. She was a very good cook and everybody in town knew it.

GOODSILL: Where was her boarding house?

PAYTON: On the corner of Third and Jackson.

GOODSILL: Any stories you have of your grandfather being the postmaster?

PAYTON: Well, not really. I can just remember going down with him on Sunday afternoon. The post office was where Sandy McGee's tearoom is right now—the restaurant. I'd go down with him on Sunday afternoons to sort the mail.

GOODSILL: What was it like? Describe it to us.

PAYTON: The post office? It was right there on that corner. You entered it off of Morton Street. There were many, many, many mailboxes—little mailboxes on the wall, and posters on the other wall of criminals. I wasn't but about six years old at the time, but I can still see it [laughs]. Things like that stick in your mind.

GOODSILL: That's a cute memory of a little girl. How about the other generations of your mother's family? Anything else that comes to your mind that they did or what were their names?

PAYTON: I don't remember very much about them except that they all traveled by horse and buggy. They would go out to see Aunt Mamie George and Uncle Albert when they were all real young and have to spend the night—travelling by horse and buggy out there. It was too far to come back. They would have dinner parties there and her father, who was J. H. P. Davis.

GOODSILL: Mamie's father?

PAYTON: Yes, prominent man here in Richmond. She told the story. They were all sitting around the dinner table one night, and they had a cousin. I don't know what her name was. All I know is that they called her Dinks. She was always predicting things. They'd all say, "Oh, Dinks shut up, you don't know what you are talking about." But they were sitting around the dinner table one night and all of the sudden Dinks caught her breath—just went "Ah". Everybody said, "Alright what?" She said, "I just saw" —I don't know who she said—somebody who had already passed away standing behind Uncle Judge who was Aunt Mamie's father. And she said, "I'll be back for you in May." They just all laughed it off and paid no attention to her. But sure enough, he died in May. So that story was passed on down in the family. It makes a good story.

GOODSILL: Do you remember your mother or your father telling you anything else about the George Ranch?

PAYTON: It was just a working ranch. The big old house was there. I think in a different place. Well, maybe not, no. No, they didn't talk much about it—not really.

GOODSILL: Did you go out there very much when you were a little girl?

PAYTON: Not very much, but I was out there a number of times.

GOODSILL: Good memories?

PAYTON: Yes. When we graduated from high school, Frank Davis and I finished high school at the same time and several other people here in town that were close to Aunt Mamie's family. Frank and I are both related. Dorothy Myers who was Dorothy Harrison was related to us and Roy Woodmansee. She had a big party for us for graduation. We had the entire graduating class there. That's just how she was. She couldn't do enough for anybody.

GOODSILL: What year was your graduation?

PAYTON: 1945.

GOODSILL: What do you remember about those years in Richmond?

PAYTON: They were much slower, easier; you could walk every place you wanted to go. I don't remember that the Thompson cutoff had been built. Life was slow and easy.

GOODSILL: Do you remember World War II affecting the town or your family?

PAYTON: It didn't really affect my family because both my brothers were too young to go. That was my senior year in high school. My four years of high school were World War II. There were a lot of things we couldn't do because of the gasoline shortage and tire shortage—that sort of thing. We still had a good time and made the best of it.

GOODSILL: Did it affect your father in any way?

PAYTON: Not really. Daddy had a Western Auto store down where the District Clerk's office is. It was my grandmother's—he had her house moved for her and she rented it out and came to live with us. He built a Western Auto store on that corner.

GOODSILL: Where your grandmother's boarding house used to be?

PAYTON: Yes.

GOODSILL: So that was his business during those years.

PAYTON: He had the John Deere business in the back end of it. That's what he did.

GOODSILL: How do you think the War affected his business?

PAYTON: I don't know, but Daddy was fairly prosperous. He made a go of it and had a good business. After the war, he started farming rice, so he had both of those for a long time until he retired.

GOODSILL: Did he lease the land to grow his rice on?

PAYTON: Yes, he did.

GOODSILL: Where was it?

PAYTON: It was on the other side of Rosenberg on the Orchard highway.

GOODSILL: Do you remember going out there?

PAYTON: Oh, yes.

GOODSILL: What do you want to tell me about growing rice?

PAYTON: I don't know much about growing rice. The rice fields were under water a whole lot of time. We had horses out there, and we'd go out and ride horseback around the place. It was not too far from the Brazos River. Occasionally we'd go down on the river and even swim some. It was a great place to go.

GOODSILL: When the rice needed harvesting, who did the harvesting?

PAYTON: During the war—of course they didn't have those big machines that they do now-- Daddy and some of the other rice farmers would get the high school boys off for an afternoon and they would shock the rice. They'd bundle it in the fields for him. I don't know where it went from there. They didn't have help because of the War, and they didn't have the machinery. What machinery they had if it broke down it was awfully hard to get it fixed or get parts. I remember them talking about that.

GOODSILL: When you were growing up, when did your family first have an automobile?

PAYTON: I think they always had an automobile, but they were from the old, old looking things to the new modern.

GOODSILL: What kind of a car was your dad driving in 1945?

PAYTON: A DeSoto. We had a blue four-door DeSoto. There was a DeSoto dealership in Rosenberg and he and daddy were good friends. We had several DeSotos during those years.

GOODSILL: Did you daddy have the Western Auto by that time? The Western Auto was selling parts, not vehicles?

PAYTON: Yes, an auto parts store. Yes, that's what it was. High school was fun.

GOODSILL: Tell me what school you went to.

PAYTON: Richmond High School.

GOODSILL: What was it like?

PAYTON: It was a two-story building. There were about seventy-eight students in my senior class. I would say not any more than that in the rest of the classes. It started with the eighth grade—eight through eleven. The building stood where Jane Long Elementary is now only closer to the highway. It was just fun. You knew everybody in school. We made our own fun—dances on weekend. We had a football team. It was just an easy life growing up in Richmond because Richmond was small--much smaller than it is now.

GOODSILL: Well let's go back a little bit further. Tell me which homes you lived in—when you were born and as you grew which homes did you live in in town?

PAYTON: The first one that I remember was on Morton Street. It was a little house next door to what is now the grocery store. It used to be Love's. I don't know what the name of the store is now—little brick grocery store. It was a little white frame house. That is the first house I remember. Then the next house—well, I was born during the Depression. Times got really hard and so mother and daddy and I moved in with my grandmother there on the corner of Third and Jackson. I lived there when I started school. But by that time, I had two brothers and a sister, and we were all there. Got along fine.

GOODSILL: Tell me your brothers' and sister's names from oldest to youngest. You were the oldest.

PAYTON: I'm the oldest. The next one is my brother, Bert Ansel, Junior, and Carolyn. She lives in Huntsville now. Walter, but we call him—he was Diz. Diz died several years ago.

GOODSILL: So you were living in your grandmother's house. Then what happened—four children?

PAYTON: That's right. In 1936 is when we bought the house on Liberty and Ninth and moved. That was the same summer that my grandfather died. He was living when we were in the house with him. We moved that summer. I had scarlet fever and was quarantined. That's about all I remember. They had to have someone come stay with me during his funeral. I couldn't leave one room. Of course now they don't do that anymore, but they did then.

GOODSILL: What do you remember about the house?

PAYTON: It was a single story house and had a sleeping porch where the four children slept and two bedrooms downstairs. In 1943, daddy added a second story to the house, which was wonderful. We could all spread out a little. By that time, I was about a sophomore in high school. We stayed right there until the fifties when everybody—all four of us—were married. Mother and daddy stayed a few years longer and then decided to sell the house and move. They built a house out in our subdivision--close to the library.

GOODSILL: Where did you get married?

PAYTON: There at the big house at our home in the yard. We had a garden wedding in 1950.

GOODSILL: And the name of your husband.

PAYTON: Lou Payton. Louis Payton.

GOODSILL: When you were living in the house on Liberty and Ninth. Which families lived near you?

PAYTON: We lived right across the street from the big Pearson home. Judge Pearson and Miss Molly were still alive. Right next door to us on the north side was a big old two-story house that Miss Janie Darst owned, and she lived there--rented out a few room when she could. On the northwest corner of that same block, we had a half block for our house and a big yard. Miss Janie had part of the block. The Shufords had the other part of the block. They built a little brick home on the northwest corner of that block, and they lived there.

GOODSILL: Everybody got along pretty well?

PAYTON: Oh sure. Oh gosh yeah.

GOODSILL: Did you say something earlier about the courthouse?

PAYTON: I remembered when the old courthouse burned. I was real small and we were living over where I told you in that little frame house by what's now the grocery store over on Morton Street. Mother and daddy—apparently I was the only one they had at the time. I was just about that small.

They got me up and we went because the old courthouse was on the same block as city hall. The new one had been built, and it was empty except for bales of hay. Somebody set the hay on fire one night. They assumed it was a tramp, but never really knew or I didn't know. Set it on fire and it was a terrific fire. We stood over there on the corner and watched it for a long time.

GOODSILL: That must have been scary.

PAYTON: It was. I can still see it.

GOODSILL: And smell it probably. That cinder smell! Tell me where your family shopped.

PAYTON: Right here in Richmond we had a dress shop called Edelsteins. I don't know how many grocery stores—plenty—two drugstores, cleaners--just stayed right here. Especially during the war when gasoline was so short. Nobody ran into Houston when they felt like it. That kind of kept them right at home. Everybody prospered.

GOODSILL: Where did you go to church?

PAYTON: Calvary Episcopal Church. At the time, the little church was located on the corner behind the Moore home. Right over behind the museum.

GOODSILL: Near where the Fort Bend County Museum is today?

PAYTON: Um hum. Then they moved it after they built the new Episcopal Church out on the Thompson Highway. They moved the little church to the hospital grounds. Lo and behold, we had a tornado one day and it just blew it to smithereens.

GOODSILL: Do you remember any other damage done by that?

PAYTON: No, because for a short time my husband and I lived in Bay City. That's when that took place, but then we came back to Richmond as soon as we could.

GOODSILL: Tell me about a typical day in your childhood.

PAYTON: Mother didn't worry. There was a whistle that blew at 6:00 every evening here in Richmond. For years—the 6:00 whistle. The stores stayed open from eight to six. Mother would let us—we could do anything we wanted to—get on our bicycles and ride any place we wanted to. Mother never worried about us and there was no reason.

All she would say when we'd leave the house a was come home when the whistle blows. Life was so easy and simple. I look back and think, my goodness, even my children missed that.

GOODSILL: What did your family do for entertainment?

PAYTON: We had a movie, a picture show. That's what we'd call it, here in town. We'd go to the picture show fairly regularly.

GOODSILL: What was the name of the theatre

PAYTON: Well, I guess it was the picture show. The Coles eventually bought it. They owned the one in Rosenberg. At that time it was owned by someone else. I don't think it really had a name.

GOODSILL: Let's go forward in time to 1950 when you got married. What was your life like then?

PAYTON: We married and lived in a little apartment on Winston Drive. It was brand new at the time. We lived there. It is still there too. We lived there for two years, and then we moved to 1200 Winston Drive—a little white frame home. Our only daughter was born while we were living in the apartment. Four years later we had a son. We lived right there until—well let's see—both of them were in school here. They both went to Jane Long here in Richmond just like I did. Then we bought a house across the river in Riveredge subdivision, and lived there for several years. Then Lou's business took him to Bay City, so we moved to Bay City, and lived in Bay City about eight years. Then it took him to Houston where we lived for two years and then back to Richmond, and have been here ever since. We moved back to Richmond in 1976.

GOODSILL: What are some of the major changes that you've seen in this area in your lifetime.

PAYTON: Oh, gracious.

GOODSILL: I know it's a hard question.

PAYTON: The major changes are the big department stores that have come in and put all the little mom-and-pop stores, as they called them, out of business. Which was such a shame, I thought. I still think it's a shame because there was so much more closeness of community with the little stores. Everybody knew everybody and the families. It just kind of grew too big. It got to where you couldn't walk where you wanted to. The highways came through whereas all we had was 90A growing up. The traffic wasn't anything really. The outlying areas begin to expand and the subdivisions. After the war all that started. It just grew.

GOODSILL: You have really picked out the significant things when you talk about urban development. Going from a little hometown to less personal because shops are not owned by people you know—they are owned by unknown entities.

PAYTON: Yes, yes.

GOODSILL: And the spread of urban sprawl after the war when people came home. And non-walkable, that's the other thing. A town is really contained when it is walkable.

PAYTON: The black community—everybody knew everybody.

GOODSILL: Was the black community separated from the white community?

PAYTON: Yes.

GOODSILL: Tell me about that.

PAYTON: Yes, it was. It was mostly on the other side of Thompson Highway like it is now. That's where it was then. We knew all the families. We had a cook who cooked for my grandmother's family. Her mother cooked in my grandmother's family, and then she took over when her mother could no longer do that. When my grandmother gave up housekeeping she came and cooked for our family. So she was in our family for forty years. It was just things like that. You were safe. You felt safe everywhere, everybody did. That's why I say you could walk anywhere you wanted to walk, at night or whenever. But it was smaller—much smaller.

GOODSILL: There was a separation of the black and white community. But people seemed to be able to get along and in your experience everybody felt like they were part of the community.

PAYTON: Yes, because they worked for the white families, nearly all of them did. You developed closeness with them. And that's when we didn't have babysitters. They didn't call them babysitters as such, but they stayed with the children. You felt like they helped raise your children, and they did too. There was a real closeness and a love for those that worked in the families for so long.

GOODSILL: What organizations have you been a member of?

PAYTON: The PTA here at one time. But then I also taught school. I belonged to the Garden Club. At that time there weren't many organizations.

GOODSILL: Is there a lot of pride in your family because your father was the mayor?

PAYTON: Oh yes, but he gave it up in 1949, and that's when Hilmar took over, so it was that long go. His picture hangs in the city hall.

GOODSILL: Just too finish something I've been thinking about. Did his ankles recover fully, or did he have problems with that as he grew older?

PAYTON: He had problems with them from then on. He really did—especially in the wintertime. They were just aching a little bit.

GOODSILL: It's not easy to be the mayor. Did he ever tell you stores about what things he did?

PAYTON: No, not really. But I do remember people calling the house and wanting to speak to the Mayor, Please. One of them would be the dog was barking next door and would he please do something about it. (both chuckle)

GOODSILL: Is there anything else that I should have asked?

PAYTON: I don't know offhand. I can't think of anything. We could probably talk a long time you know.

GOODSILL: It's been an interesting story you've told, particularly about how things have changed and why. I think you've really put your finger on that.