FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees: **Maurice Berkman**

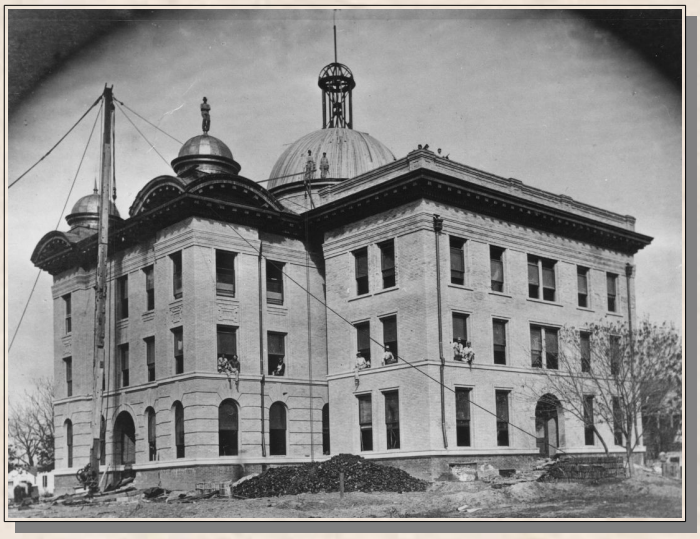
Interview Date: 10/07/2010

Interviewer: Jane Goodsill, Bruce Kelly

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

Location: Post Oak Blvd, Houston, Texas 27 Pages

Comments: Also participating in the interview is Mrs. Florence Feit Berkman.



Transcript

GOODSILL: Let's start with your dad. What was his name and where did he grow up?

BERKMAN: Harry Berkman. He grew up in a comparatively small town in Vishneva, Poland. I think it's still a town by that name.

GOODSILL: Tell me what you know about that town.

BERKMAN: Actually I know very little about his younger years, growing up that he did in Russia. Other than that it was a very hard life. My dad had very thick fingernails. Where did they come from, we would ask him. That's from frozen hands, he said, being out in all kinds of weather. They raised horses and he said we'd have to be out in all kinds of weather and our fingers would get VERY cold and probably frozen, or early stages of frostbite. And as a result, his fingernails were--we used to get it sometimes. At tap on the head with those hard fingernails was a warning.

Anyway, when he came to this country, you had to have someone vouch for you; that you would not become a ward of the state. Someone had to say that you had a job waiting for you or that they would be responsible for you. In this case he had a brother that had emigrated previous to him and he vouched for him.

GOODSILL: Do you know the brother's name?

BERKMAN: His name was Isadore Berkman. He was a tailor. My father arrived at the Port of Galveston in August 1911. His first job was driving a car for a Doctor Daily here in Houston. On questioning my father, 'Where did you learn to drive a car? You only had horses. There weren't cars in the old country.' He said, and this was his attitude with everything, 'What is it to drive a car? You get in it and you go!' (admiring laugh)

So anyway, he became a chauffeur because doctors in those days only made house calls. They didn't have offices very much. They only made house calls. And so he used to drive him around Houston. This Doctor Daily had several other brothers. The brothers had stores in Simonton, Eagle Lake, Rosenberg. They were in different communities. And so they persuaded my dad to come work in the store in Simonton. And that would have been shortly after he came here--1911, 1912--something like that. And he worked in that store until he was called into the military service.

GOODSILL: The papers you looked at said he started in 1917 and served until 1919.

BERKMAN: Okay. So between his Houston experience and Simonton, he left from Simonton to go into the service. And he returned to Simonton after serving overseas.

GOODSILL: Tell us about the letter of intention and what it means.

BERKMAN: In order to get his citizenship, he had to sign a Declaration of Intention. At that time Vishneva was part of Russia, and he had to say --'It is my intention to renounce forever all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentates, states, sovereignty and particularly to Nicholas II, Emperor of all Russia, of whom I am now a subject'.

GOODSILL: Why you think he came to Galveston as his port of entry.

BERKMAN: Prior to his arrival, a lot of immigrants were coming in to the state of New York through Ellis Island. They became concerned in that part of the country that there were too many immigrants coming in. So they started diverting the ships that were coming in--or the immigrants that were coming in-- to other ports along the east coast, further south, and eventually some groups came in through Galveston. Galveston was a major port of entry for a period of time. Of course, my father's eventual destination was Houston, so it was convenient to come in through Galveston, as my father's brother had vouched for him.

GOODSILL: What made your father decide to come to America?

BERKMAN: I never heard him say. But I am sure that living the life they had over there was a hardscrabble life. And in addition to that, being a minority [Jewish) in Russia in those days was very hard. It was hard on all minorities. Even today in some parts of the country minorities are subject to a lot of abuse and life is cheap. That was the incentive, I think, to come to this great country that they heard about; the land of milk and honey. And of course it was a hard fight over here, but you didn't have to be concerned about the government jailing you or killing you, as they did over there. As a minority they were just trying to stay alive.

GOODSILL: Did he tell you anything about the boat trip? The conditions, the cost?

BERKMAN: No.

GOODSILL: No details like that. But you do have some papers about his arrival.

BERKMAN: Yes. When he arrived--let's see--these papers were actually (looking at papers) dated--this was when he was born, 1893 in Vishneva, Russia.

GOODSILL: How do you spell it?

BERKMAN: W-I-S-N-A-R-Y

GOODSILL: And tell me what you think about that spelling?

BERKMAN: Well, I think that the spelling is wrong. In fact, I KNOW it's wrong. It should be Vishneva but it was extremely hard for him to pronounce his W's--or his V's rather. And they came out as 'W'. Particularly when you were giving information to a clerk [at an immigration port]. Often they gave you a name because it sounded like it. And many people that are in this country, of foreign extraction, you'll see a lot of Bakers--surname Baker. When they interviewed them as to what their profession had been, they were a baker, so they GAVE them a name. His name was Baker.

GOODSILL: But your father kept his name, it was Harry in Russia and it was Harry when he got here.

BERKMAN: Yes. Berkman also was his name. There was no question about that being changed.

GOODSILL: So, tell me, what stories did he tell you about what his life was like when he arrived in Houston.

BERKMAN: This is when he arrived, 26th August 1911.

GOODSILL: And so I'm figuring he was about 18. Born in 1893.

BERKMAN: Correct.

GOODSILL: So he went to work as a chauffeur and then he went out to Simonton.

BERKMAN: Well, any of the stories that he told me were really mostly anecdotes of things that had happened. They were all good or amusing. You know, because to him, coming to America from over there, everything was fine. Great, here. (chuckles)

GOODSILL: He didn't experience any prejudice for being Jewish?

BERKMAN: He didn't go into it but there would be. You know, to be a Mason in Texas was--or anywhere in the United States--was quite an honor. And he tried several times to be a Mason but was rejected. First of all, he spoke with broken English and Ku Klux Klan was strong back then, especially in small towns.

And particularly where you had other minorities of color. He never was able to become a Mason. I became a Mason in my time and he was very--he took pride in the fact that I could do it. He couldn't. He tried. He knew the reason behind it. Anyway, he would tell stories sometimes, of course, of the snipe hunts. Have you ever heard of snipe hunting?

Well, there were a number of émigrés like my dad that the Daily's took in, that came from the old country. And they would come and work in the store. They have a large family in Fort Bend County, but they had stores, like I told you, in Richmond, Rosenberg.

GOODSILL: So they would take young immigrants--

BERKMAN: Yes! Some of these were kin or grew up in the same village. There's a Dr. Robbins, who was originally Robinowitz, who lives in this apartment (where I live) now. He did a family tree and found where we are third cousins, he and I.

GOODSILL: You were talking about the Daily brothers, taking in immigrants.

BERKMAN: The Dailey's would take them in and they would work there until they got on their feet and went in some other direction. Try to open up a business of their own or had other family members that came over and they would go in partners and open up in Houston, which was a growing village too, at that time.

GOODSILL: So, your father had lived here for several years and then he signed this declaration of intention (of loyalty) and then he was put into the military.

BERKMAN: Yes.

GOODSILL: And the dates we have on that were 1917. Did he tell you anything about his war experience?

BERKMAN: Yes, he would talk and tell us occasionally about his experiences in the trenches. Always on the light side, never any of the hard part of it, and we know that there was some. Had to be. Had to be. One amusing incident--Southern Pacific Railroad ran right in front of our store, and when I came back from the service, I went to work with my father. We became partners in the store. And a man came in the store one day and, I don't know if you ever lived near a railroad or not--you did? Remember the old one-lung [engine] where two to four men could ride on them? Those putt-putts, you know, with the gasoline engine?

Well, usually if there was any official that came through, they were on one that sides on it, isinglass sides. Are you familiar with isinglass? Plastic, today. There would be four of them, and they came in the store for a cold drink. And the man had seen Dad's name on the front. And he came in and he said 'Harry Berkman. Were you in France in the World War?' Dad said, 'Yes'. He said, 'I'm so-and-so' and he and Dad were in the same outfit! And this was--well, let's see--I would have been eighteen years old, I guess, by that time, so you know how long that's been! And Dad told me later, he said, 'When he [that man on the train] was in the trenches, he wouldn't get out to go get his meals'. You know, to where they were serving mess. He was frightened, he said. So Dad said, 'I used to bring him back his meals.' When he left, when they were still in France, he said, 'If you ever need anything and you're in Texas, look me up.' Dad forgot about it. So anyway, he came in the store. 'Are you Harry Berkman? You were in France?' And they found out who they each were. And he said, 'Harry, if you ever need anything'--he was a [big] wheel with Southern Pacific--'if you ever need anything, please call on me.'

So one day, this was before I was married, I was going to Denver, or to the East Coast. I was going to take a trip. Dad said, 'Go by Southern Pacific headquarters', which was on Main and Franklin, and he said, 'Go up there and see Mr. Jones (or whatever his name was), and maybe he'll give you a pass.' So I went up to him and introduced myself. He said, 'Oh yeah, you're Harry Berkman's son. What can I do for you?' I said, 'Well, you told Dad that if we ever needed anything to come up and see you' and I said, 'I want to make a trip to so-and-so'. 'Why sure', he said. And he called one of his young men in--at that time it was all men secretaries at the railroad company--no offense (chuckles). And he said, 'Take Mr. Berkman down and get him a ticket.' So he took me to the Rice Hotel, that was the ticket office at that time--the downtown ticket office. He took me down to the Rice Hotel and told the clerk behind the counter, he said, 'Mr. Berkman wants a ticket to Denver'. He said, 'Sure'. (laughs) When he got through he said, that'll be $19.00 or whatever. So that was the extent of the favor - he took me down--I didn't have to stand in line--no line! (laughing) Dad and I laughed about it. I was looking for a free pass - OH YES, let me help you out!

GOODSILL: (laughing) That'll cost $19.00!!

BERKMAN: Of course, that was big bucks back then.

GOODSILL: Absolutely. Oh, that's a good story.

BERKMAN: We'd anticipated a free pass. Anyway, the stories that he told about the war were just amusing instances--incidents like that. Nothing of the violence or anything that was going on. I guess that generation, probably more than any other always tried to shield children from the life as it was in the tough times. They didn't talk about that very much.

GOODSILL: Well, we know it had to be tough. World War I was not an easy battle. So he came back, returned to Simonton?

BERKMAN: Yes. And got married in 1919. (sounds of document being unfolded)

BERKMAN: Oddly enough--I don't know whether you saw in the paper or if it was even news--we saw it, the old synagogue, the Jewish synagogue in Wharton, burned the other day. It had been sold to the Head Start program. It was no longer a synagogue. But Mother and Dad were one of the first members to get married there. The rabbi was Jacob Keilin, he married them.

GOODSILL: And so that gets us to your mother. Her name was Dora Glick. G-L-I-C-K

BERKMAN: Right.

GOODSILL: She was married was September 9, 1919. How did her family get to America?

BERKMAN: She and her father came to America and they landed at Ellis Island. And she had several cousins along the East Coast, I think in the Carolinas and in Boston. Anyway they wound up coming to Wharton, Texas. It was their eventual destination anyway.

GOODSILL: Why?

BERKMAN: Because this cousin of Mother's had come previously, and she wound up with a number of children. And needed help with those children. Now that isn't the reason Mother came to this country, primarily. They wanted to come to America.

GOODSILL: Where did they come from?

BERKMAN: They came from Poland. They were--where did Mother emigrate from Poland? What was the town that Mother came from in Poland?

MRS. B: Lwow - L-w-o-w.

GOODSILL: Were there any other children besides Dora?

BERKMAN: Yes! But they didn't come. Just my mother and her father came over. They didn't have enough money to bring the rest. So Mother came to New York. She went to work in a factory that made overalls and she made pockets. Pockets for overalls (chuckling). She was a specialist! And she saved part of her money, kept saving part of her money, until she had accumulated enough to send for the rest of the family. And she brought them all over later on. Yes, she did. That was something we were always proud of.

GOODSILL: Do you know who her brothers and sisters were?

BERKMAN: Yes. She had two brothers and two sisters. My mother was the oldest. Rebecca, Jake, Leah, and Irving. His name was Isaac. Of course, once they came here, then they became Americanized. They changed Isaac to Irving (chuckles). That was 'a thing'.

GOODSILL: So she lived in New York for a while and then she moved out to Wharton. What was her life like in Wharton? Did she ever tell you stories about that?

BERKMAN: Well, they didn't stay in Wharton too long. She worked for the people that had asked her to come over. Their name was Oshman. And they had a dry-goods store. Are you familiar with that term? They had a dry-goods store in Wharton. And she helped them in the store and helped them with their children. And then her father didn't like it in Wharton and so he wanted to go back to New York. And they went back on like a coastal steamer, or a coastal small ship. On the way back, he contracted scarlet fever and passed away. I believe that Mother came back to Wharton because she did have a job and family there. So she came back to Wharton by herself, then.

GOODSILL: And how did she meet your father?

BERKMAN: Well, I guess it was through other relations--distant kin that lived in this country, Dad was working in Simonton at that time and then she moved to Simonton after they were married. Of course I came along.

GOODSILL: Are you the oldest?

BERKMAN: I'm the oldest. I was their first-born.

GOODSILL: And what year were you born?

BERKMAN: June 27, 1920.

GOODSILL: And did you have brothers or sisters?

BERKMAN: Yes. My brother next to me was Arthur Berkman, and Arthur was killed in Italy in World War II. And, in fact, I just finished reading a book called The Day of the Battle. It tells about the war from North Africa, Sicily and the taking of Rome. That's where it ended. This guy that wrote this book is fantastic. He did so much legwork, looking in diaries and letters from generals to their wives. You can tell I'm doing a book review here! But it was interesting to me. I was trying to find a time and period when my brother was killed. It was just a small portion in there about where his unit was. It was immediately prior to the infamous battle of the Rapido River crossing and the bombing of Monte Cassino. That's very well known. He was killed right previous to that, to those battles. But in taking those mountains where the Germans had the high lie shooting down into the valleys, that's when he lost his life. But I had another brother, Ralph and then Betty.

GOODSILL: Okay, so, now we're down to your generation. But I want to go back for one minute because our mutual friend, Tim Cumings, told me that there was some anecdote about your mother's family, in Poland, supposedly there was something about a soldier with a bayonet and a little boy.

BERKMAN: I don't know that story.

GOODSILL: This is what Tim said, supposedly a soldier with a bayonet demands food from a little boy, your uncle--your mother's brother. And the older sister throws herself between the bayonet and her little brother in defiance, saying the little boy will not give up his food.

MRS. B: I never heard that story.

BERKMAN: Mother may have told Tim, because Tim would come in the store, I'm sure. He was always interested in things and she may have told him a story that we never heard. You'll have to ask Tim where he got that.

GOODSILL: Back to our story, you've been born and you have brothers and a sister. Tell me what it was like growing up in Simonton.

BERKMAN: Well, as well as I can remember, we were only in Simonton until about 1926. Let's see, I would have been about six years old--'26 or '27, about that time. We moved to

San Antonio. Dad had a brother-in-law, one of mother's sister's husband, that persuaded Dad to come to San Antonio and they were going to open a grocery store. Times were pretty good about then. Dad knew the meat business and the grocery business. He knew produce--his father was in the produce business. They opened up this store. Of course this was RIGHT before the Depression hit. And so within about a year, year and a half, they went under. So Dad came back to work for the Dailys once again, and they put him in Fulshear. They had a store that they were operating in conjunction--the Dailys had a store they were operating in partnership with a man by the name of Mayes. You will come across this. Mitch Mayes was well-known, big landowner. He had--have you seen pictures of downtown Fulshear?

GOODSILL: (nods) Describe it to us though.

BERKMAN: There was big red brick building, L-shaped, right in Fulshear, right on the corner where the big drive-in grocery is now. On the very corner was a saloon. Of course, saloons had been closed up in my time. It was the Prohibition Era and there was lots of bootlegging going on, of course. (papers shuffling)

[looking at a photo] This is what we had. They had a Simonton Elementary School, class of '41--'45. This is what our old school looked like. Have you noticed coming in they painted this thing red, solid red? They call it the old red schoolhouse. Well it was always white. The building is still--looks exactly like this. This is the first school I went to, in first grade. And I was like 6 years old right there. Biggest building I ever saw in my life. Had three classes downstairs, a big auditorium upstairs. Every morning we would go up and pledge allegiance to the flag, sing American AND Dixie. Yes! I remember singing Dixie! But anyway, the--these are some pictures of the early school as it really looked. And it's there now. I think a photography studio has taken it over. And they painted it.

Oh there was another bunch of pictures that I wanted to show you (sounds of paper shuffling). AH! Here we are. Now these aren't too good. Simonton was a BIG potato producing area back in its day. We produced more potatoes, I think, than any place else in the state of Texas. The early-on settlers that came here--I'm digressing--

GOODSILL: That's okay. This is good.

BERKMAN: Okay. The early settlers of Simonton came from Kansas. And they raised potatoes. The Mullins--you need to interview some of the Mullins. I don't know if there are very many left. One of them is younger than I but lives in Simonton now. His name is David Mullins. Tim knows him, probably a contemporary of Tim's. They came from Kansas to raise potatoes because we had the soil. Our soil--along the Brazos River, flooded quite often back in the early days. In fact, when my dad came there, there was water up to town, into town, from the river, which is a mile and a half. The town was under water. In fact, they always knew how high the water was--have you ever seen platforms alongside of the railroad track where they used to--the platform is at the height of the railroad cars, so you can trundle cotton in. That's what the platforms were for, to put the cotton in --to load it into boxcars. So people came out of the bottoms with their horses and mules primarily. And one man had put a dozen mules on top of the platform because the water was THAT high. And they always knew how high the water was because on the fetlocks of the horses and mules, the water came up about six inches above the hoof. And when it eventually went down, like a week later, the hair all came off of their legs. And so that's how they always knew how high the water was! It was six inches above the cotton platform, in downtown Simonton.

GOODSILL: That's a GOOD story.

BERKMAN: This is something [photo] showing some water standing.

KELLY: There was a major flood in 1913.

BERKMAN: That's it! See because Dad came there in '11 and the flood in '13, right.

BERKMAN: These are pictures of David Mullins I was telling you about--his mother had these pictures and gave them. You see, they're planting potatoes here, they're on a planter. And, you know how they plant potatoes? Have you ever had a garden? When you take a potato, spring of the year--we're talking about the red potato--that was the only thing that was grown. They hadn't even developed the Burbank, yet, the white potato. That's what eventually killed the potato business in our area, was the white Burbank, long California potato.

You take the red potatoes and you cut them in about quarters, so that they're about 'this' big and just cut them in quarters. And you know how you've seen 'em if you've had them too long--they start sprouting. Well, you'll usually have a couple of eyes on each one of those quarters and you just drop them in the ground about a foot apart. And so these planters did it mechanically so-to-speak. You cut them by hand but you dropped them in--there's a hopper on there that you drop them in--hopper was 'yea-big'. And every twelve inches it would throw down a piece of potato.

GOODSILL: Mechanized!

BERKMAN: Yes. Yes, it was! It only took one mule. A mule and a man. They grew potatoes until two things happened. First of all, Florida came in with their red potatoes before we did. Then we got a disease in the soil. It made a little--they called it a scab, because it looks like a human scab--on the potato. It was a soil-borne disease that ruined the looks of the potatoes. It didn't HURT them but people wouldn't buy them. You couldn't blame them. And then the Florida potato came in, just a few weeks before ours did, so they beat us to the market. So, all-in-all, it just put an end to the potato business. Of course we were raising potatoes and corn and cotton as always.

GOODSILL: Your family was?

BERKMAN: No.

GOODSILL: But people in the community were.

BERKMAN: Right.

GOODSILL: Your family were shopkeepers.

BERKMAN: Right.

GOODSILL: And did you work in the shop at all?

BERKMAN: No, because, you see, Dad came back from the war in 1918 ad went to San Antonio, and then from San Antonio, we moved backed to Fulshear. I lived there with my parents until I was eleven years old. At eleven, I moved to Houston to live with a grandmother, because it's every Jewish family's desire that their children be confirmed.

And they wanted me to be Bar Mitzvah'd and to be confirmed. And you have to be taught how to do this in the original Hebrew. So they sent me to Houston to live with grandmother. So I came in 19--I mean, when I was eleven years old--and I stayed here, actually, until I graduated high school. 1937.

KELLY: What is this? Is this a picture of Simonton? What is the big building?

BERKMAN: The Mullins had a store in downtown Simonton. And they invited--they invited the Dailys, who had experience in operating grocery stores, to come in and operate this store for them. Because stores in the early days, in this era that we're talking about in the picture we're looking at, these were just laborers here. They were planting potatoes and gathering it, planting cotton and gathering cotton. Sharecroppers is what they were.

KELLY: It says something up here, Allied upstairs--something Allied upstairs. It must be a company or something up there.

BERKMAN: No, I don't think it was a company. That's probably the cotton gin because that's where it sat. I think that's the cotton gin.

KELLY: There are two smokestacks on it.

BERKMAN: Yeah, because back then, they were steam fired back in that era. In the country there were commissaries. They had what we used to call the three M's: Meat, Meal and Molasses. It's the only thing they carried in those stores. You know, they had salt and sugar, but it was just basics.

KELLY: Is that the commissary where you dad come to work first?

BERKMAN: Yes. Yes. But of course it had changed over from a commissary to a grocery store, you know, general store, right.

KELLY: But the newer version--this a new--

BERKMAN: Well, now, this store sat where that white building was. In 1951,1093, which is Westheimer, [was built] and took that building. We built the other store behind there, and once we built it, we trundled everything--all of the groceries--into that building, and then tore this one down.

The store, a building now, sits right here. That was the old Daily store, and what they did is they tore this down. But a remnant of this building stayed behind the Dailys new store. Up until I came back from the service, it was still there. They used it for a gristmill. They ground corn. They used that building there. They left it there. But it made it into a one-story building. Mother and Dad lived up here. When I was born, that's where we were--that's where I was born. I was born in Houston in a hospital.

GOODSILL: They lived in a building in the picture that Maurice is showing.

BERKMAN: Yes. That building had a post office, which wasn't part of the store and next to that was Burwell's meat market. At that time, we had three stores in Simonton. It was a growing metropolis! (chuckles)

GOODSILL: (chuckling as well!)

BERKMAN: Yeah, we had three stores and just one meat market. It was understood that Mr. Burwell would have the meat market and the grocery store would not compete with him. Of course, there was more than that involved. In order to have a meat market, you had to have refrigeration, and refrigeration wasn't as it is today. It was a complex thing to have refrigeration.

GOODSILL: So he would put all his resources in that and the others wouldn't?

BERKMAN: Correct. Because he knew how to butcher. Have you ever seen an abstract? Title? I'll explain it to you in a little while.

GOODSILL: Great! Well, we're back in Houston. You were living in Houston with your grandmother. Did you go back to Simonton very often to see your family?

BERKMAN: Well, weather permitting--all the roads were dirt--well, some of them were gravel. Have you ever lived on a gravel road? Seriously. It gets like a washboard after it's been traveled a while. And they call it corrugated. The only way you could drive over it is drive fast. So how fast could you go? Fifty miles an hour, you were speeding! Especially on a dirt road. Yes, it was gravel.

GOODSILL: So would you drive? When you went back to Simonton you would drive back?

BERKMAN: Oh yes. But you watched to see if it was going to rain. If it looked like--got cloudy--you hit it--because--to get back.

GOODSILL: Because when it rains, what happens on the gravel road?

BERKMAN: Impassable. Well, gravel you could handle, but not all the roads were gravel. Lot of it was dirt. Just the well-traveled roads were gravel.

GOODSILL: The wheels would get stuck in the mud is what you are saying.

BERKMAN: Right, right! Or you'd slip off in the ditch. I remember when Dad would come in to visit--they'd come in to visit, Dad and Mother and the kids. Dad would go out about every fifteen minutes--go out and look in the west to see how it looked the way home. And if clouds started to build, he'd get nervous and say, 'Okay, let's start packing'. Because it took an hour and a half to go that thirty miles, in those days, even in good weather.

GOODSILL: What part of Houston did your grandmother live in?

BERKMAN: Do you know where San Jacinto High School is? On San Jacinto and McGowan? Chenevert and Elgin? Or Main and Elgin?

KELLY: It's now Houston Community College.

BERKMAN: Yes. Right. Do you know we still get, four times a year, a newspaper that's put out in the same format; " The Campus Cub". We were the Bears, the Golden Bears. And our newspaper in high school was "The Campus Cub". The alumni association is still active. We had a number of well-known people who went to San Jacinto. Dr.--he has a ranch out at Orchard--heart surgeon--

GOODSILL: Cooley?

BERKMAN: Cooley. Denton Cooley. He was a graduate of San Jacinto. And a well-known, nationally, internationally well-known radio announcer.

KELLY: Walter Cronkite?

BERKMAN: Walter Cronkite. He was a graduate of San Jacinto.

BERKMAN: I remember, I lived with my grandmother, and my grandmother lived with my aunt, so we all lived one big family--extended family. Lived across the street from Elizabeth Baldwin Park.

And the city had programs once a week in the summer months. They would put on movies in the parks. That was during the Depression era, post-Depression era. Nobody had the ten cents it took to go to the movies. And if you did, you went once a month or so.

I worked after school. I worked at a grocery store. (chuckles) Stayed in the family. I worked at Weingartens. Weingartens was a big chain in Houston at one time. It was the largest. And I worked after school. And then when I graduated high school, I went to work for Weingartens full time. In fact, you heard me mention a man by the name of Robbins, a Dr. Robbins that lived here? I worked for his father. He was in charge of the poultry and seafood processing division. And we processed all of the live poultry that came in. Yes, I was the one who couldn't stand the sight of blood. (laughs)

GOODSILL: Cruel twist of fate!

BERKMAN: Yeah, that's the way to get over it! Throw you into the middle of it. I worked there until I was drafted into the service. Which was 1941, prior to the war. September I think it was, of '41.

GOODSILL: What was your war experience like?

BERKMAN: Well, I was fortunate. I was sent to California for training. While in California and getting training, of course, December of '41 came along, and they shipped us out. We hadn't completed our training. I was fortunate enough to get sent to Alaska. So we were out of the combat zone. They had already bombed Dutch Harbor. And the Japanese had retreated to Attu and Kiska, the far end of the Aleutian Islands. We stayed out there, just to upset their balance. They just kept a small contingent out there, because they didn't do any harm and they couldn't do any good. But it kept us occupied, keeping them contained. I stayed in Alaska for two years and then I was fortunate enough to be one year in the southern part of Alaska, off the coast of Sitka. The second year I was at the headquarters command in Anchorage. Then after two years I was sent to Virginia and was there for the rest of the war, for two more years. So, like I say, I was extremely fortunate, not having to participate in any combat.

GOODSILL: After the war was over you came back to Houston?

BERKMAN: I came back to help my dad, temporarily, because he and Mother had been tied down in the store with the other children. My brother had been killed in the meantime, and two younger siblings had all been tied down operating the store and not able to get out. So I came back to help them out so they could get away and go take a little vacation. I was just going to do that for a couple of

months. And I left forty-five years later!

GOODSILL: (laughing)

BERKMAN: Yeah, just a temporary thing. But it was really a happy time, that whole forty-five years. In the meantime I'd gotten married.

GOODSILL: How did you meet Florence?

BERKMAN: A blind date in Houston. Some of her friends were mutual friends with my brother, and they lined us up. We just went out a short period of time--

GOODSILL: And got married?

BERKMAN: And got married, yes. I was thirty-five and Flo was twenty-eight. So we weren't spring chickens.

GOODSILL: So that was 1955? I took your birth, 20 and added 35 and that got me to '55, 1955.

BERKMAN: That sounds about right. '53 comes to mind, but anyway.

GOODSILL: Did you have children?

BERKMAN: Yes. We have a son and a daughter, Stephen with a ph, and Deborah.

GOODSILL: And do they live nearby?

BERKMAN: Stephen is a Houstonian and my daughter lives in Tyler, Texas. And we have three grandchildren. One in Houston and two in Tyler. Well, one's still in high school, the one here. He has a couple more years. And the other two are in college, yes. Great family. That's pictures of them over there, in back of you.

KELLY: Tell us about when Leon Hale interviewed you.

BERKMAN: Well, actually he didn't interview ME he interviewed Flo. I wasn't in town. I think he mentioned in here that I had gone into Houston. I used to go into Houston about twice a week, to pick up groceries. I even brought milk out from Borden's to Simonton. Everybody wanted to know, 'What are you doing, bringing milk? Everybody has a cow out there.' But they didn't. I used to go in twice a week to pick up fruit and vegetables. At one time we had to pick up our own groceries. They didn't deliver. And when I first got back from the service, we had to go in to pick up groceries. I would pick up some produce and then a couple of people would say, 'Look, when you're in there, how about getting me a quart of milk or a gallon of milk, however it came at that time. And so eventually I just picked up milk twice a week. If there was anything you needed, I'd get it. In fact, I always remember the first time I ever put capers in our store. Can you imagine capers in that store? Because it wasn't this store. It was in the new one.

Valley Lodge subdivision was the first subdivision out of the city of Houston within commuting distance. Started back in the '50s. And of course all of them--the Woodlands and everything took over later. But ours was the first one. We were, what, forty miles from downtown?

KELLY: Did your life change much after your Leon Hale article appeared in 1964?

BERKMAN: It didn't have any affect.

KELLY: Did people come out to see you because of the article?

BERKMAN: No. Not that many people read papers. You'd be surprised. We can't get along unless we read three papers, still today! We can't get along without periodicals, particularly daily newspapers. But, no. Now, see this fellow, Jay Pabst? He sent this to me. Of course we have copies of it. In fact, Leon Hale spoke to a group after we had retired and come to Houston.

Our synagogue still has once a month what they call the 'YES' group. Young, energetic seniors. Y-E-S. And they have a gathering, serve a meal. Of course that's how you get them out. And they always have some little program on. Well, one time they brought Leon Hale out to speak to us, and I took this article. And I don't know where the original is, but I got him to autograph it for me. Does it have a date on there?

GOODSILL: That's the one right there. You got him to sign that. He signed it at the top, right there.

BERKMAN: Yes, yes, sure did. Okay. But the original article was 1964 and this was--

GOODSILL: March, 2002.

BERKMAN: Do you read him in the paper? He's great with writing.

KELLY: During your time living in Simonton, where did you go to synagogue?

BERKMAN: Houston. We always belonged in Houston.

KELLY: You never went to the Wharton synagogue.

BERKMAN: No, we didn't go in that direction because our family was all this way.

GOODSILL: Well, I wanted to ask a little bit about the racehorse or trainer and the Simonton connection.

BERKMAN: Okay. Now he wasn't a racehorse trainer. He was a cutting horse.

GOODSILL: We are speaking to Mrs. Florence Berkman. Please tell us about Leon Hale coming to the store.

MRS. B: He just wandered in, you know.

BERKMAN: Well, the road goes somewhere.

MRS. B: Sit in country stores and watch people. Of course he says ours wasn't a REAL country store because we had two check-outs. (laughs) He's a real character.

BERKMAN: Yeah, we love his articles. We read him religiously today.

GOODSILL: Back to the cutting horse trainer.

BERKMAN: Yes. Jim Reno who became a well-known sculptor. He did this as an avocation, the sculpting. But one of his first loves was cutting horses. And he came to Simonton in the later years and he worked training horses. I'm trying to remember when he first came. I'm trying to remember when we met Jim.

MRS. B.: He was working for Mr. Harkins, training his horses. Mr. Harkins was an oilman from Houston and he bought a place out at Simonton. And Jim was his horse trainer. But Jim was also a sculptor. And he used to do sculpture work, you know. And he'd sculpt horses.

And anyway, we always used to laugh--he told us this story. He'd sculpted a head and one of the stable hands came in and said, 'Oh, Mr. Jim, that really looks nice.' He said, 'You could put a lamp up through there and have a lamp.' (laughs) We always used to laugh about that.

BERKMAN: Yeah, he had a great sense of humor.

MRS. B.: Here he was, a great sculptor and this guy wanted to make a table lamp out of it.

BERKMAN: He had a great sense of humor, Jim did.

MRS. B.: Jim was sculpting and then, let's see, he went into horse trainer. And he wasn't selling too much, you know, he didn't have much luck. Anyway, one of his customers that had a horse that he was training was Joe Jaworski. His father was Leon Jaworski. Anyway, this Joe told him, he said, 'You need to get a good art dealer to display your work.' So he found Meredith Long. You know who that is. And he started displaying Jim's work and it started taking off. So, anyway, he did that and we wanted to buy one. Of course they were quite expensive. Anyway, so we told Jim, said, 'We'd like to have that but we can't pay for it all at one time.' And he started laughing. He said, several years back when he was trying to sculpt, you know, he ran a grocery bill with us. And it went on for about two or three months. So one day, Maurice pulled him aside and said, 'Jim, you know, this bill's getting pretty high.' He says, 'It IS?' like he didn't know. So anyway, he made arrangements to pay for it. So when we wanted to buy that, he said, 'Now Jim, we're not going to be able to pay for it right away.' He says, 'So?' He says, 'I want to get you in a place where you owe ME money.' (laughs) Anyway, he was a fine fellow. Really a nice guy.

GOODSILL: Did you work in the store? I was teaching school in Houston when he married me. I worked Monday through Friday, had the weekends off, had the summers off, all the holidays. I married him, he put me to work six and a half days a week. We were open a half a day on Sunday. So I didn't improve myself THAT way! But I did otherwise! (laughs)

KELLY: When you own your own business, it really ties you to it, doesn't it?

BERKMAN: Oh yes, particularly if you have a grocery business.

MRS. B.: Do you remember when you told Jim we couldn't pay for it right away?

BERKMAN: Yes. I want to tell YOU, he said, 'I want to come up to you and say, 'Say, you're a little bit behind on your bill. Yeah, I'd love to do that.' Oh he had a great sense of humor.

KELLY: You were tied to your business all those years. Was it very hard for you to get away. Did you have someone who could take the store over while you went on a trip?

BERKMAN: Didn't take many trips. Didn't take many trips. If it was, it was ONE of us. I mean, she usually would take the kids and go up to see the grandparents up in east Texas, where her people lived, in Marshall. Yeah. So I missed out on a lot of things like that. But life was great.

KELLY: It didn't bother you that you were that tied to it?

BERKMAN: No, no. No.

KELLY: I want to ask you a question about the Simonton depot and the trains that came through there. You told us the story of the friend of your father's that stopped there. Did you ever hear stories about Mr. Eldridge of Sugar Land shooting a Mr. Dunovant of Eagle Lake at the Simonton depot. Do you know anything about that?

BERKMAN: No.

KELLY: Okay. That's all. That's good.

KELLY: Any other things about being in a small town with the train station that you could tell us about?

BERKMAN: Oh my. I just know that it used to be a big event. We got one of the first diesel engines for a passenger train that came through Simonton. It ran from Yoakum to Houston. And it would come through in the morning, about 7:00, and come back in the evening about 6:00. It would hit Simonton at those hours. It was a diesel engine and the engine had the baggage car in one car. And then they had one car for passengers. Thanksgiving to Christmas they had TWO cars. Double the capacity. (chuckles)

KELLY: That was an Inter-urban.

BERKMAN: Practically. Practically. Because it ran like, like I say, from Yoakum to Houston. Go in in the morning and come back in the evening. It was perfect, because Mother used to shop for the store. She ran the dry goods department. You know, piece goods and ladies dresses and shirts. In fact, I found an old price list--1957.

We used to buy khakis and overalls from a manufacturing facility in Tyler, Texas, Sledge. Their price list -- the khaki pants that--the good ones--the chinos--today $29.00 I supposed you'd buy them for-cost, wholesale, then, a little over $3.00. $3.23. I guess we sold them for $5.00 back then. It's just hard to comprehend or to remember how things were back then.

KELLY: As a storeowner, did you mark up a certain amount?

BERKMAN: You mean, was there a set mark-up? No, because people would come into your store and they'd want to know how much is Crisco. Crisco, sugar and coffee. Those are the three items that people would want to come in to your store--that was the first thing they wanted to know. If they were a little not sure whether they wanted to shop with you or not, 'How much is your Crisco?' And then, 'How much is your coffee?'' And sugar.

KELLY: Did you have any issues with theft?

BERKMAN: Not much. Not much. People came up to a counter and asked for what you wanted. Half of this store was devoted to dry goods. We sold more dry goods than we did groceries. And of course we had hardware too. We sold barbed wire, nails, rope--everything that you would need.

KELLY: Is there any story that, when you tell your children or grandchildren, they just roll their eyes? Are there any stories like that, because those are generally good stories. (chuckles)

BERKMAN: Yeah, we had an interesting story. We had a man killed on the front porch of our store. Our new store. Mr. Burwell had the meat market. Well, when Mr. Burwell passed away, all three stores put in meat. But, none of the stores sold beer. Even after it became legal. We had a beer joint in town. We called it the beer joint. It was a separate building and the ladies didn't go over there. If the ladies wanted to buy beer, they drove up out front and honked, and somebody came out and they told them they wanted two or three to take home. Not to drink. The man that owned the beer joint was an old settler there his name was Senior. Family name was Senior. They were old settlers. Let's see, what's the name of the little town that adjoins Sugar Land? Missouri City?

KELLY: Dewalt?

BERKMAN: Dewalt. Seniors came from Dewalt. Anybody in Dewalt will know of the Seniors. There's two or three of those old homes that sit up on the highway, and one of those was a Senior home. Anyway, Mr. Senior lived in Simonton and he was a deputy. He had been deputized by the sheriff and he always wore a gun. Now we're talking about post-War. And he owned the beer joint. He had the beer joint prior to-- pre-War he had owned that beer joint. And the majority of his customers there were black. And he had a BIG strapping strong black man that worked for him on his ranch where he had cattle and all, and he acted as kind of his bouncer at the beer joint. If any of them got to rowdy, he took them outside, quieted them down. He was okay. Anyway, the deputy carried a gun too. He wasn't authorized to but the boss said he could, so he did. Well, during the cotton picking season is when they did most of the business, because there was some cash then. And one of the black deputy's kinfolks--

MRS. B.: Sold bar-be-cue, didn't he?

BERKMAN: No. Will Dean sold bar-be-cue. But one of Buddy Oliver's no-good in-laws told him he wanted some bar-be-cue but he didn't have any money and he'd pay him next week. He said, 'No, I don't think we'll do that.' So he got put out about it and then he told Buddy-- the deputy's deputy--and they had a confrontation in front of our store. And he said the man was selling bar-be-cue says, "You're talking big because you've got a gun on. And I don't have one." He said, 'Well, I tell you what, I'll meet you out here next Sunday. You have your gun on.' He said, 'All right.' So they were both in agreement.

On Sunday I used to let my butcher off and I'd run the meat market. And she'd (Mrs. Berkman) work up the front. And so I was waiting on the deputy's wife and while I was waiting on her, we heard POW--POW. And she started screaming. Because she knew what it was. Will was standing on the front porch and her husband pulled up in a car and he jumped out of the car and started shooting, right away. Well, as he shot this man-- after he shot him, he didn't go down. After he shot him, he ran around the corner of the store, heading back toward where he lived, behind the store, in that direction. He ran around the corner and the man that died was chasing him, and shot a couple of times at him, and fell over dead. And Mother was walking from the house, coming to the store when these two men came running around. She didn't know what was happening. Bullets were--anyway, he got killed right there. Nothing ever happened because they both had guns, first of all. Second of all, the deputy was a deputy to the deputy, you see, to Mr. Senior, so it was his word.

But anyway, one of the sidelines of that was immediately behind our store was a little frame home. And we'd rented it after Dad built his home. He built a home next to it. They moved in there. Dad rented out this to an elderly couple--this little house behind the store. And it had a tin building next to it that was used, in its day, to house the school bus, which was a pretty small bus. But it was just big enough for the couple that had lived in this house had an old trunk. And Mrs.--

MRS. B.: Johnson

BERKMAN: --Mrs. Johnson had her good winter black suit folded up with moth balls in the bottom of that trunk, out in the back, in that--in that garage. And months later, she went out to get that suit--winter was approaching--and she came in and she was telling us about it. 'You know, I found that suit out there and it had a hole ALL the way through it'. And she said, 'It couldn't have been moths because the holes were too big and they were even, and it went through every place that was folded'. So about five or six holes--you know it was folded up. (chuckles) And we finally figured out what it was. We went out there and saw a hole in the side of the building where the trunk sat (laughing). That was the only amusing thing about that. Mrs. Johnson's suit got the tale end--

GOODSILL: (giggling) Got the brunt!

KELLY: I have another question. The time that your father was running the store and even the time that you ran the store, the Jaybird Association of Fort Bend County ran the county politics.

BERKMAN: Right!

KELLY: Did that have any effect in your family in any way?

BERKMAN: No. No. It didn't. They hadn't gotten around to us. (chuckles) No they were VERY strong, very strong.

KELLY: One more thing I want to ask you, real quick. [picking up paper] I was looking through all the owners of the seventy-five acres that it talks about.

GOODSILL: Start out by saying what it is.

BERKMAN: I don't know where this is.

GOODSILL: Read the front and tell us what we're talking about.

BERKMAN: We're looking at an abstract of title. Now whenever you buy a piece of property, you get a policy, today. When you bought your home, you got title policy. This was an old one here. But the title company means that they went down to the courthouse and they looked back and there're no outstanding mortgages, debts, or liens filed against your property. That it is free and clear. And you pay for that, of course. Well, the way it is actually done, and it used to be done, they sent a man down to the courthouse and he started back with the Spanish land grant. The first known article on here is a--this is dated 1857 and it's signed--the abstractor says, 'This instrument is in Spanish and I am unable to translate same.' Now this is on file in the courthouse, if you ever need it and want to go back that far. But it is signed by Estavan F. Austin--Stephen F. Austin. In Spanish, Estavan. He is petitioning the Mexican government on behalf of Thomas Westall--the Westall League--and he is petitioning him to give him a league and a labor of land. A league of land is--I don't know what--675 acres?

KELLY: 4,428 acres. And a labor is 170 acres.

BERKMAN: Really! Yeah. And that is--the labor is in--in this case, was in Richmond. And that's where he went and stayed during the early days when Indians were around, and you were in a safe spot in the fort. And you stayed there during the winter months, and in the spring and summer, well, you worked. You went to your league of land and worked it, out in the hinterlands. But it tells you everything that happened; if you borrowed money to build a house, if you just borrowed money, if your land was repossessed.

KELLY: How did you come into possession of it?

BERKMAN: A man by the name of Spencer--they were one of the big landowners--one of the big potato producers--in our area. You didn't happen to know or don't happen to know--What is Spencer's daughter, the one that married--

MRS. B.: Dean Lehmann?

BERKMAN: Do you know the Lehmanns?

KELLY: I know the Lehmanns, in Rosenberg. Lehmann Lumber Company.

BERKMAN: Yes! Right. Did you know Dean, by any chance? Or any of the sons?

KELLY: I know the sons.

BERKMAN: Okay, his mother. Do you happen to know his mother? I think she's still living. Jackie. Jackie Spencer was our neighbor. Jackie Spencer's parents sold us our property for our house we build on there. In fact, they owned the property where our store was. They had owned that property and we bought it from them. The--yeah, Jackie and Dean. So this is quite interesting. This [paper] didn't pertain to any property we had, but he had it, and he said 'You may like to have this. I'm going to throw it away.' I said, 'You BET I want it'. (laughs)

KELLY: It refers to 75 acres somewhere near Simonton. That's what it says on the front.

BERKMAN: Yeah. Well, you see, one of the owners in here is Theopolis Simonton, who the town was named after. Yep. Theopolis. All named them after Greek--

Does anybody need to use the restroom or anything?

MRS. B.: You know there's a big oil field in east Texas--there used to be one--I guess it's still operating--the east Texas oil field--Kilgore and Longview-- Well, our home is Harrison County which adjoined it. There never was any oil there or any explanation. And my dad figured out the black people in that area lived with one woman and had children, and they'd live with another woman and have children. Anyway, it was hard to get a clear title to the land. If they bought a piece of property, the children from another arrangement would show up and want their part, and so they never messed with it. Never was an oil well in our area. (laughs)

BERKMAN: That was his theory.

MRS. B: Probably held some truth.

KELLY: In the following clip, Mr. Berkman tells us about the pool hall in Simonton.

BERKMAN: Well, it had a big long bar. About the size of this room, I guess. The whole beer joint was a little bigger than this. Not much. And they had a long bar, of course. And, of course, whites and blacks didn't mingle. They'd get drunk together but they didn't. And, so what they did, is they had a--they took a two-by--a one-by-four, nailed it to a two-by-four in the shape of an "L" and on one side it said "White" and on the other side it said "Black". This thing slid. If they had a lot of whites, they slid it over. If there were more blacks, they slid it (laughing). So that way we had separate but equal.

KELLY: Yeah. And adaptable. (laughing)

[About Mrs. Berkman: Mrs. Berkman is a native of Marshall, Texas, attended East Texas Baptist University and graduated from the University of Texas. She was the first female reporter ever hired by the venerable Victoria Advocate to cover other than "ladies news". In the early 1960's Ms. Berkman received an appointment to serve on the County Community Action Council and in 1972 she was appointed to the CPS Board and eventually became Chairman. She worked with a group of ladies in her community of Simonton to organize the first project to purchase Christmas gifts for the children under CPS supervision. This program is now called "The Christmas Project" and currently serves over 600 Fort Bend children and seniors annually. Mrs. Berkman served on the Fort Bend County Mental Health Association Board and was a founding member of the Fort Bend County Child Advocates (CASA) Advisory Board.]

GOODSILL: Florence's maiden name is?

BERKMAN: Feit