# FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

## *ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE*

Interviewees: **Roland Conrad Adamson**

Interview Date: 04/27/2013

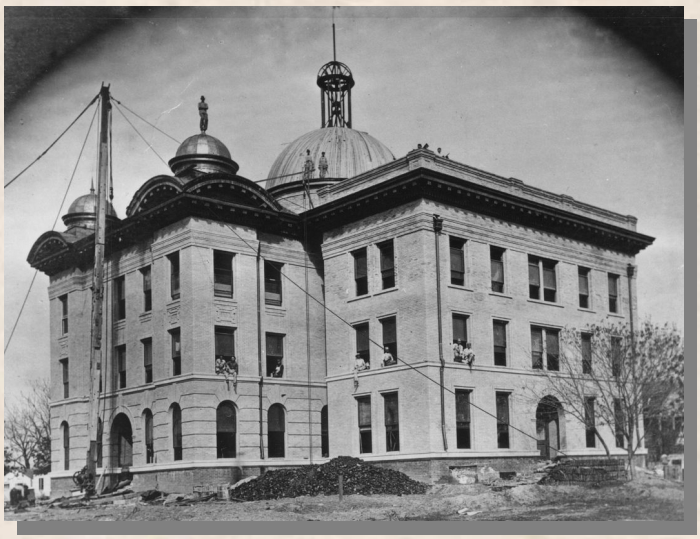
Interviewer: Jane Goodsill

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

Project / Group: Henderson-Wessendorff Foundation 19 Pages







*Transcript*

GOODSILL: Would you start by giving us your full name and date of birth.

ADAMSON: Roland Conrad Adamson. Today's my 68th birthday, April 27, 1945.

GOODSILL: That's great! Happy birthday!

Let's start by hearing a little bit about you, where you came from, your career, and your involvement in Fort Bend County.

ADAMSON: I grew up in a little town in extreme west Fort Bend County, named Beasley. Beasley was a German-Czech farming community, and my father was the principal, the janitor, the bus driver, and taught the fifth and sixth grade of the elementary school. And we lived in a schoolhouse, right next to the school.

GOODSILL: Tell me your father's full name.

ADAMSON: Roger Mac Adamson.

GOODSILL: And your mother's name.

ADAMSON: Billie Shelton Adamson.

GOODSILL: How did he and his family happen to get to Beasley.

ADAMSON: Beasley was going through a transition, going from its own school district to combining with Lamar Consolidated. And my father had gone to school at Sam Houston, and got a degree there, and saw the position in Beasley. He didn't come as the principal, but the superintendent of the Beasley school district, Mr. Boone, went to Needville, and my dad stepped in right after he left. It was changed from a one through twelfth grade to a one through sixth grade. My father taught the fifth and sixth grade and was the principal.

GOODSILL: He sort of ran the whole thing!

ADAMSON: Yes, he and three other teachers taught six classes.

GOODSILL: Beasley is a very small community?

ADAMSON: A small community, maybe 150 people at most in the city limits, but most of the people lived out on farms. It had two cotton gins and two grocery stores and one honky-tonk and a couple of filling stations. It was a great way to grow up. Life revolved around the volunteer fire department, the school and the churches. That was what we did.

It was a great but at the time I didn't realize it. But looking back, it was a great life experience. A lot of people involved with my life made it nurturing, caring, and safe.

GOODSILL: Was your father's family from Texas?

ADAMSON: Yes, they were from up in Central Texas, Mexia. But my mother and all her family's from Arkansas. My dad married an Arkansas hillbilly. (chuckles) She didn't like that! How my mother and father met--my father's mother had a reprobate brother that had gone to Arkansas early on when you could get land cheap. It was almost like farm land-grant. He was a young person, skipping around the country and had gone out to what he's call 'Old Mexico' and then he went to New Mexico, looking for land. And finally wound up, riding a train into Arkansas and found this community called Arden. It's between--I guess the real towns are now called Ashdown and Foreman. It's in Little River County in extreme southwest Arkansas, kind of along the Red River. He [my dad] would spend summers there with his uncle and that's how he met my mother. And they married and came back to Texas.

GOODSILL: So you grew up in Beasley and how did your life unfold?

ADAMSON: (laughs) I'm not sure how to answer that! We went school first through sixth [grade] in Beasley and they would bus us to Rosenberg. There were 10 or 12 kids in a class, all Anglos, most Czech, German, Hispanic. In the homeroom that I happened to be in, there were several people that really had an influence in my life. One of them, I guess the biggest one, was Hilmar Moore, Junior. We were probably as opposite, as far as Anglos of Fort Bend County, could be, but for some reason we took a liking to each other. Because of transportation, getting back and forth, and sports, I'd stay a lot of times with the Moores. We'd play football on Thursday nights. Well, I'd ride the bus from Beasley to school on Thursdays and then I'd spend Thursday nights with the Moores, go to the football game, play football, and then Friday ride the bus back home to Beasley.

I didn't know who the Moores were from anybody, but it connected me to a lot of people that later on in my life meant a lot. And Mr. Wessendorff was one of them. Mrs. Wessendorff and Mrs. Moore didn't grow up together but because Mrs. Wessendorff had family here in Richmond, she would come and visit [as a young girl]. And she and Mrs. Kelley-- Pearson Moore became good friends.

And that's how I met Mr. and Mrs. Wessendorff, through Hilmar Moore, Junior. And then I met his dad, because his dad and Mr. Wessendorff had been long time friends and grew up together. There was another young man, by the name of Jimmy Moses, whose family didn't grow up here in Richmond, but moved here. Mr. Moses worked for McCormick Steel Company; maybe it was the company he founded. He had grown up in the east--I can't remember right now what the steel company it was that brought him down to Texas. Anyway, he was kind of an outdoors person, so they bought some land and built a house upon Hillcrest Drive early on; maybe one of the first houses up there. Jimmy Moses was our age. I spent a lot of time with them. I remember the first time I ever went to the Wessendorff's home--it was probably in the early-early 60s. It was a BIG two story house on Hillcrest Drive. My goodness, this was one of the biggest houses I'd ever seen or ever BEEN in. They were very nice people and it was something that makes an impression on a kid from Beasley! I never knew where that relationship and friendship would go, I had no idea [of the impact it would have on my life.]

GOODSILL: So you were obviously athletic and that got you involved with these Richmond families? How did you start your career?

ADAMSON: Strangely! Undisciplined and having no idea of what I was going to do. I'd worked for Mr. Moore in the summers. I'd hate to call myself a cowboy because that's too high of a word. I was just a laborer who worked on a cattle ranch, and Hilmar Moore, Junior, and I worked for his dad. Several other of our friends--Jimmy Moses-- we would work cattle and build fence and haul hay and chop huisache. All that sort of thing. I guess it's somewhat romantic--the family--the people, at least to me it seemed that way. And I always had it in the back of my mind, if I could be a rancher, that would be the BEST thing for me. A great experience and a great way of life because of what I'd experienced as a young kid. I went to school at Sam Houston because that's where my dad had gone to school. That's where my sister was--going to school there. And not having any idea about what I wanted to do or what I wanted to be, I was just a kid.

I was a lot more interested in hunting and fishing and swimming in the creeks and playing cowboy than I was going to school! So, I wound up majoring in Geography and Business. I majored in Geography I guess maybe because it was easy to me. I had an interest in world things, I think, because I grew up in such a SMALL world that I was intrigued by the bigger world. I still did not know what I wanted to do.

Because of Mr. Hilmar Moore, Senior, I got a Jack Hutchins Scholarship. Mrs. Louise Hutchins was Mrs. Kelley Moore's aunt. Jack Hutchins' worked for the Armour family out of Chicago who owned the Pierce Ranch in Wharton. Jack Moore could tell you the whole story! They ended up owning a fairly small percentage but it wound up to be a lot of money, because of the mineral interests. They gained a lot of wealth from the oil and gas operation there. Jack Hutchins had no children, so when he died they set up this scholarship and I was able to get a scholarship to go anywhere I wanted. My world was pretty small and Sam Houston in Huntsville was familiar because my father had gone there, I had an uncle that was a Physics professor there at one time and my sister was up there. So it was familiar territory, I guess.

I graduated. I'm going to go to graduate school. The way to do that was--I felt my parents had done all they needed to do to educate me--so I went to work for the prison system. The Texas prison system is headquartered in Huntsville. I went through a two-week training school and you put down which unit you'd like to be on. At that time there were sixteen units but there were five or six in the Huntsville area, so I put one through five in the Huntsville area. Well, as luck would have it, they assigned me to Retrieve Unit outside of Angleton. (laughs) So I had to forego my thoughts of going to graduate school, at least for that period of time. And I started off like everybody else starts off, even though I had a degree, which wasn't in Criminology, I started off in a picket [guard tower]. We worked ten-hour guard tower shifts and it's probably the most boring job you could have in a prison. But Retrieve Unit was a real small unit [with minimal] of recidivisms. They had people that had been in prison multiple years. They really weren't hardened criminals. They just had lived a criminal-type life and 90% of them were African-Americans. So it wasn't a unit where there was a lot of security--mainly it was tank cells where you didn't have individual-cells. Anyway it's a long story.

Because I could type, and because I had graduated from college, I think I was maybe the first person that was ever on that unit that had graduated from college--I wasn't there very long. The bookkeeper, the person that kept track of the officers, could get vegetables and things that the prison grew--they had an allotment. And this bookkeeper kept up with the allotment, and the count of the inmates and how many pigs and horses and chickens and hogs came in and out. Not so much dealing with the inmate side of it, but what business side there was.

Sergeant Campbell had been at the prison too long, he was burned out. Job burn-out. He was kind of a cantankerous old guy and he was going to take a vacation. So they needed somebody to sit in there in his chair. The warden called me in and said, "I want you to take Sergeant Campbell's place. He's going on a two week vacation. They've got inmates to do all the work, you just need to show up." It was a heck of a lot better sitting in that office than it was sitting up in that picket for ten hours a day. So that was a good deal!

GOODSILL: Were you any good at that bookkeeping?

ADAMSON: Not really. The inmate did most of the stuff--told me what I was supposed to do! (laughs) It was pretty much as the warden had said. But there were certain things they wouldn't let inmates do and one of the things is divvy up the vegetables to the officers. (laughs) They would get them and tell me how much this officer, who had three kids, gets and this officer, who doesn't have any children, gets and this guy is a captain or a major and he gets this much. So I kind of divvied that up. When Sergeant Campbell came back from his two week vacation, the warden said, "I'm going to lose my free-world (that's what they called the people who weren't in prison) secretary. She's going to work for Dow Chemical Company and I need you to be my secretary until I get another." Because I could type. But mainly, more important, they had a TWX machine and every day you'd have to turn in the count of the number of inmates you had. Inmates that went out and inmates that came in. In prison slang, the chain bus. The buses that would go, not every day but maybe three days a week, delivering inmates at different units and picking up inmates that needed to go the hospital or go on parole or were being discharged or changing units for one reason or another. So I kept up with that and then I kept up with how much milk we had available that they move to some other units. Or hogs that needed to be killed and slaughtered and that kind of stuff. Also, officers or employees of the prison would borrow money against their retirement. They wouldn't let the inmates get on that TWX machine to that or make out the checks for the retirement.

The warden didn't write very many letters and there wasn't anything that we call secretarial work today. But because of that, when the director of the prison system would come to Retrieve, or the head of business for the prison system, or head of security would come, they would always say, “Oh, Warden Harrelson, you sure have a pretty secretary! Where'd you get that secretary from?” and it was funny!

But I got to meet all these people over a period of six months, and the warden knew that I wanted to go to school in Huntsville. They moved wardens around from unit to unit based on the warden's skill and the needs of the prison unit, so Warden Harrelson moved to a unit called Eastham, north of Huntsville in a little town called Lovelady. It was a maximum security unit. Where we had maybe three or four hundred at the most at Retrieve, it had about 2,000 inmates. It was a LOT bigger unit and maximum security. A lot of protection cases people there. I'm telling you a lot more than what this interview is about (chuckles). The prison system had a policy that they wouldn't let employees follow the wardens. There's a lot of loyalty in law enforcement -- people want to follow the warden or the sheriff. The warden made a deal with the assistant director of the prison system that I could come in on Friday afternoons and take a leave of absence until Monday morning, when I'd come back in off my leave of absence. So they let me transfer with the warden to Eastham so I could go to school. I wound up going to school and they made me a lieutenant. I was the head of a shift and then I started going to criminology school. The prison was good about letting you work your hours around your classes.

Sam Houston was early on in their criminology school at that time and most of the classes were at night or in the evening so I could go to school and work. I lived in a dorm. They had a big dorm where all the single officers lived and I lived in one of those dorms. And I was there maybe a year, and was still going back and forth. Happened to be that the director of classifications was a guy named Mr. Leon Hughes. My uncle had taught him physics when he was in school at Sam Houston. And he was one of them that would come up to Retrieve when I was there, and kid me, and ask me if I had an uncle that was a physics professor. And I did. So we had a relationship.

Mr. Hughes knew that I was still having to travel maybe 30 miles one way to go to work, and go to school, so he transferred me to the diagnostic unit, which is in Huntsville. When the inmates come in to the prison system, they spend probably the first sixty days there, going through all kinds of medical checks and criminal background history. And from there they assign inmates to various units throughout the prison system.

I worked as a criminologist and was part of the interview team. And having continuous good luck; the assistant director of classifications decided he was going to go back for his master's degree, and didn't want to work full time and go to school. When he took a leave of absence and they promoted me to assistant director of classifications. This was in a period of about three years. Plus they would pay you, I think it was $500 a semester. You got a grant from the federal government if you were to go into law enforcement. They were encouraging young people to go into law enforcement. In the Texas prison system, and most prison systems, there weren't college-trained people. Most of them came up through the ranks. So that was kind of an encouragement, $500 a semester was a good bit of money at the time. So I did that.

I thought that changing one person's life would be so rewarding. Being naïve I didn't realize that dealing with the negative side of life working in the prison system could have on you. Not everybody--but it DID on me. Such a negative outlook. You get where you don't trust anybody, you question everything. You carry a gun all the time. Anybody that's got a tattoo, they're an ex-con. At a fairly young age I decided I didn't want to live that kind of life. I couldn't see a family--getting married, having children and growing up and living on the prison property and having prison cooks and maids and all the things that went along with being in leadership at the prison system. It wasn't appealing to me. I couldn't see myself there.

In the meantime, I meet a girl through a friend of mine named Jimmy Marsh that went to Sam Houston and was from Richmond. His father, Stanton Marsh, worked for Mr. Wessendorff for 30-40 years, I guess. He's dead now. But Jimmy had gone to Sam Houston and we were in the same fraternity. He married a girl from Bellaire, where my wife went to high school. But she went to the University of Texas. They get married and I'm in the wedding on Jimmy's side, and Judy, who's my wife, was on the girl's side. We met at the wedding. I don't know that it was love at first sight but it was pretty close to it (chuckles). So we got married. She was teaching school in Dallas.

GOODSILL: What year was it?.

ADAMSON: June 7, 1969.

GOODSILL: And tell me what her maiden name was…

ADAMSON: Mikeska. Her family was from a little community between Bellville and Brenham, called Nelsonville and Bleiberville. After World War II, a lot of people up in that part of the world, came to Houston and went to work in the chemical plants. That's where the jobs were. And that's what her dad did.

We got married, she started teaching school in Conroe and we got an apartment in Conroe. She's thinking, "I have a husband with a full time job." And the next thing, I come home and tell her I want to take a leave of absence and go to engineering school. She goes, "WHAT?!" "And I want to go to school at A&M", which that was even worse for a tea-sipper!

So I went to A&M. It's hard to get a job teaching school in College Station because you have all these professors' wives that are teaching school. The first year she couldn't get a teacher's job in Snook or Navasota or College Station or Bryan. But her principal at Conroe knew what was going on. He happened to have coached fifteen years, twelve years, with the guy that's the principal of the junior high in College Station, so connections again! Through him, she got a job. So we were able to move to College Station and I didn't have to drive back and forth from Conroe.

GOODSILL: How did you happen to pick engineering?

ADAMSON: Because I always saw myself as building stuff and being able to be outdoors and not be in an office.

GOODSILL: And did it work out that way?

ADAMSON: A lot of it, it did. Civil engineering, you know, surveying, building buildings--that was what I did when I got out. I went straight through. I didn't have to take any history or English or anything, but I had not had very much math or science in criminology, or geography or business. I was class of 1972, but I started in 1970. A lot of the Vietnam guys that had come back were going to school. We all worked together. Because we were older, a lot of them were married, we helped each other. We had varying backgrounds. But Vietnam made a lot of people get real serious about life, and school, and moving on with their lives. While I had not been to Vietnam, I kind of had that same experience in the prison system.

The prison system--probably the greatest thing it did for me, it matured me, from a young person, pretty naïve, coming from a small community. I can think of two times--somebody broke into the filling station one time, in Beasley (it wasn't somebody FROM Beasley), and somebody broke into the grocery store. And that's the only kind of crime that I ever SAW as a kid. The prison system made me, at twenty years old, grow up. And I was fortunate that I got a lot of responsibility fairly early on. A lot of people helped me and supported me.

It is kind of the theme of my life; PEOPLE help you. People that you come in contact with, that support you and allow you or enable you to do the things in life we wind up doing.

GOODSILL: Let me just ask you a question. Now, in 2013, are you returning the favor to any people that are coming up?

ADAMSON: I'd like to say I have, over the years, because it was important to me. I do it through my work at the George Foundation. Most of the people I don't even know, which is okay. Sometimes that is good. Some of the people that I admire the most in the foundation/giving world, are those people who give anonymously. That to me is TRUE giving. The true spirit of helping people.

GOODSILL: Alright. So we're back in 1972. You've got your engineering degree, you're going into civil engineering. How did you get back to Fort Bend County?

ADAMSON: It's the thread of life! I went to work for a general contractor out of Houston called Linbeck Construction. Mainly they built in Texas but they happened to be starting a job in Richmond, Virginia for a developer out of Boston, called Cabot Cabot & Forbes. We were building a big (to me) office building, fourteen stories. You know, it was kind of like at the prison system, the first day at work, I bring my little sack lunch and there's the manager of the project for Linbeck and then me, I'm the project engineer. And I don't know a set of plans from a forklift! (chuckles) So we start getting costs to do concrete work concrete, we're bidding steel and costs to erect steel. He became my mentor, because I didn't have ANY idea what all that was about.

I worked for Linbeck and moved around and came back to Texas. But I always kept up with the Moores, and through the Moores, the Moseses and Mr. Wessendorff. And I'd come back and we'd go hunting -- I didn't necessarily think I'd ever return to Fort Bend County but I ALWAYS hoped that I would come back to at least the southwest part of the country.

I realized by moving off that there were THINGS about my growing up, living in the southwest, that were important to me. Some of the things were STUPID things, like Wolf Brand Chili--just off the wall stuff.

GOODSILL: Things that make you feel at home. Like the people and the products--

ADAMSON: Yeah. I love to hunt and fish--the outdoors always. And because of the Moores, because of the Wessendorffs, the Moseses, I had places [to come home to]. We didn't have land, we didn't have money. I couldn't afford a lease. But I could go with them -- they would take me.

The George Foundation--Mrs. George didn't die until 1971. Mr. Moore ran the cattle operation for the Georges. With him we would work the George's cattle. They had a fairly large cattle operation which Mr. Moore ran after Mr. George died. I began connecting to the George Ranch but I didn't even know what the George Foundation was. I'd see Mrs. George over here at T. W. Davis Park at night when we were playing Little League baseball; this lady in a black Cadillac with this driver, and that was odd -- that was unusual to me. Or I'd see her at the Fort Bend County parade or something like that. I knew they had a lot of land and a lot of cattle.

Once Mrs. George died and they settled the estate, they wanted somebody to run it. The Mamie George Estate it was for the benefit of the people of Fort Bend County, it was run primarily out of First City Trust department. And Vinson Elkins law firm and all the trustees were Houston people and Houston organizations whom Mr. George was connected to all. But Mrs. George wasn't. She was a Fort Bend County person and she didn't think of herself as 'society'. She wanted to help people in Fort Bend County, in her world. Her world was fairly small, too!

So they wanted to get somebody, they being the trustees and the trust department, that could relate to Fort Bend County and that people in Fort Bend County could relate to. They asked Mr. Moore, since he was running the cattle operation and was mayor of Richmond, if he knew anybody that might fit that bill. And he said, "Well, my son might be interested." At that time I think Hilmar (we called him Hil) was working on his PhD in Detroit. So his dad asked him, said they were looking "for somebody to run the George Foundation and would you be interested in maybe doing that?" I don't know exactly what he told his father, but what he told ME that he told his father was, "No, but I know somebody that might be interested".

The middle Moore son, Phillip, was killed in a car wreck. He was working George cattle

and he had gone back to the headquarters to get a cattle spraying rig, and there's a curve out there. There was a car broken down on the side and he got over the line on that curve and got hit and killed. So I thought, 'Hil, you ought to go back to Richmond.' This was before this job thing came up. 'Your daddy needs you, your family needs you, if I ever had a chance to do something like that, I'd jump on it.'

He'd remembered that. And he told his daddy. He daddy said he didn't know where I was. Hil told him that he knew how to get hold of me. I'd stayed in touch. He gave my name to John Heard who was a lawyer for the George Foundation and a trustee of George Foundation. Mr. Heard called me and asked if I was interested in coming back home to go to work for the George Foundation. I'd gone through engineering school and I was finally a project manager. But I knew I didn't want to have to move around a lot. I didn't know whether Judy, my wife, would be accepted in Fort Bend County or Richmond so I was somewhat hesitant. But because I had to travel a lot in my job and I had a two year old and a four year old so I was tempted.

They called us down to interview and I didn't hear from them for a while, and I thought, “Well, I guess I didn't get the job”. Then out of the blue, Mr. Heard said, “You ready to move to Fort Bend County and go to work for the George Foundation?".

GOODSILL: What year was that?

ADAMSON: May 1, 1978.

GOODSILL: And what was your job title?

ADAMSON: At that time, I think it was Manager. Most of the employees worked for the Mamie George Estate. There was a secretary and then there was a lady that worked part-time, so there were one and a half people and then I made two and a half people.

GOODSILL: And what is your job title now?

ADAMSON: Executive Director. At some point they decided to change my title.

GOODSILL: So it seemed to be a good fit for you. You came back, your wife DID fit in?

ADAMSON: You may or may not realize this, and I may be wrong, but unless you came in here with the original 300, it's not the easiest to be accepted. But because of the George Foundation and because of the Moores, the Wessendorffs and the leaders in this community, I was accepted. It was an easy thing. And my wife loves it. They were good to her.

GOODSILL: And so what was your job and what is your job?

ADAMSON: I oversee the George Foundation. It's 23,000 acres, three oilfields, $250 million in stocks and bonds. At the time I came to work for the George Foundation, this is rough numbers because most of everything was still in the Mamie George Estate, the Foundation was worth about $18 million; mainly in land and oil and gas reserves. Some bonds, some stock that Mr. George had bought. He was on the First City Bank board, Texas Eastern, American General, that kind of stuff. A lot of that was still in the Mamie George Estate. In 1979, we moved everything over.

I came here May 1, 1978, thirty-five years ago, a foundation to me was a construction thing. I had no idea about the rules and laws and regulations. They told me 'we give away money but we've got these assets and once they get out of the Mamie George Estate, which the First City trust department and which Vinson Elkins controls, it's going to be over here and you're going to be the General Manager. I think that's what they called it. So in 1979, everything rolled out of Mamie George Estate to the George Foundation. It was like $24 million value. So you had to give away 5% of your non-charitable assets - that's what the tax law required you to give away. The trustees make the decisions about giving the money away. We get the information together and deal with the people that are asking for grants. I always think about it as when you go to the bank or a savings and loan to ask for a loan to build a house, they want to know what's your collateral, what are you worth, what are you doing, are you going to be able to pay this money back. I think of grant-making like we're going to give money to this organization. What are they going to do with that organization, with that money to better mankind, to better the people of Fort Bend County? How are we going to judge that and how are you going to report that? To me, that's simple and very basic, but that's the way I continue to look at it.

THEN we had a lot more employees. They no longer worked for the trust department -- they worked for the George Foundation. So we had maybe twelve-fourteen employees. Most of them worked out at the ranch. We had our insurance through Wessendorff Insurance, we banked with Mr. Wessendorff's bank. Mr. Wessendorff put me on the hospital board. I was on the bank board.

Again those relationships with people that I'd known from a kid growing up. That's why I always try to tell my kids and other people's kids--relationships with people and what people think of you and your character, and how you treat people is a BIG thing in life's success. I'm a prime example of that.

In 1982 Mr. Wessendorff got on the Foundation's board. Up to that time he was kind of a father-kind of figure to me. Other men too, like Hilmar Moore. There were four or five people I'd go to for advice and they'd tell me what they thought. I'd usually do it! (laughs) Mr. Wessendorff got on the board and then he became my boss. But I'd worked with him and under his tutelage at the hospital, and through the bank, and through charitable organizations and things that the Foundation was involved in and he was involved with. And Mrs. Wessendorff, some of the things she was involved with-- The Institute of Religion at the Medical Center in Houston--that was something she was really involved with. And once a year she'd put together a seminar--they'd bring people from all over the world to talk about mental health and religion and how that affected people and their lives, and that sort of thing. But it was Mr. Wessendorff I was most connected with.

GOODSILL: Tell me what kind of a mentor his was, what his style was, what he was like as a businessman and tell me what you learned from him. What is it that he modeled for you?

ADAMSON: He was a person you had to prove yourself to first. He was your friend but he really wasn't a mentor until he really TRUSTED you or you proved yourself. Your values, your honesty, your hard work, your principles. That meant a LOT to him. He always challenged me a lot about things until I really proved myself to him. He questioned me about a lot of stuff. Do this, and don't do that, where were you, that sort of thing (chuckles). It wasn't one thing -- I think it was over the years -- once you proved to him, he was VERY VERY loyal and almost with a belief in you to a fault. He would back you to the hilt. That's a trait that I think is very admirable. You need to prove yourself-- it didn't matter that Mr. Moore thought I was a great guy. He was a great business person. That is from a Foundation perspective, beyond being a friend and being a mentor and a father-figure to me, it's the business side that I learned the most from him and that he passed on to me.

It took a while before he would really share with me his beliefs and thoughts about business. You had to earn it with him. He made it clear to you pretty early on. I used to kid him, later on. He'd usually go home around three or four o'clock. He had a very regimented, structured life--at least it seemed like it from my perspective.

He would get up and go out to his mother's place every morning and have breakfast. The few times that I got invited to go with him, was really a neat thing to me. It was a side of him that I didn't see normally.

Every one of the dogs, and they had a kennel of I don't know how many--a lot of people knew that if you had a dog that you didn't want, that you had some conscience about it, you would go let the dog out on Ransom Road so Mr. Wessendorff could catch it. And Mrs. Wessendorff likewise. He would go on Sundays to the grocery store and get ALL kinds of dog food and HUGE amounts of it, and all his breakfast stuff. And there was a black guy that he would eat breakfast with out there.

So he'd be very disciplined. He would go have breakfast at his mother's place and see all the dogs. He had names for all of them. He'd touch them and they'd jump up on the thing and he'd touch their noses and talk to them. He'd walk and then he'd come back to the office. He was VERY structured. You could set your watch by him. He'd go home in the afternoon. When he was younger, when I first came here, they started work at 8 o'clock and he was here at 7. As he got older and I guess, wanted to enjoy life more so he'd go by the office--I drove a Suburban--if my Suburban wasn't there, next time he'd see me (this was after he became a trustee), "Where were you?" "Where'd you go yesterday?" "I came by there at 4 o'clock or 3 o'clock and there was no Suburban".

I'd have to answer up to that! Later on, I'd tell other people I was going to get me a box and make a silhouette of a Suburban and park it up there, so when he goes by (he could only see one side of it), he wouldn't always be questioning me about where I was. (chuckling) IF he called the office and I wasn't there, “Where is he?”. But once he accepted me--believed in me--then I could do almost anything. Somebody like him, you don't tell him what you're going to do. You ASK him. But he'd say, 'Let's do this'. But when he became chairman of the board, I'd said, "Well, shouldn't we ask the other trustees about what we ought to do on that?" "Well, you're right, you're right. We'll ask the trustees."

I find that people that are successful and entrepreneurs, they want to MAKE decisions. They're not always team players. It's not that they’re not thoughtful about that, but that's not how they grew up. They want to make a decision; they have ideas, and let's do it. And he was that way. You don't mess around. If he told you, 'Roland, I don't like the way the fence out there at the Berry place looks. Looks like the fence lines are grown up and I'm afraid some of those cattle might get out. We need to do something.

He'd give you about three or four days. It wasn't like you're going to do that next week or next month. If you hadn't started doing something in about three or four days, he's going to TALK to you about it.

So it wasn't like, whenever you get around to it. It wasn't that. I knew that! I learned that pretty quick, that when he said, 'I think we ought to do this' or 'I think you ought to do that', you could get away with about a week without getting something started. And that good for me. That was a good thing.

Just his loyalty to you, once you proved yourself, and he wanted to get something done, he didn't want you to lollygag around about it. But you could change his mind about things, if something came up that you thought was wrong. It took a while for me to have the courage to go to him and tell him something. But he would listen to you and he would change his mind. But most of the time he was pretty stern and he had in his mind what he wanted to do. And that's how you did it. And most of the time that was correct.

GOODSILL: I don't know if you'll know the answer to this question, but, there's a George Foundation, there's a Henderson Wessendorff Foundation. Do you know what the Henderson Wessendorff Foundation is set up to do and how is it different from George?

ADAMSON: The George Foundation is for the benefit of the people of Fort Bend County. When Mr. and Mrs. George were alive, and Mrs. George was, honestly, she was the giver. Mr. George was more interested in the business, in Houston and he might have been the money-maker, but she was the giver. And her interest was Richmond, Thompson, Crabbe, Booth, because that's where the family lands were. That's where family members were, that's where the people that worked for her lived. So she was interested in Morton Cemetery. She was interested in the Baptist Church. She was interested in the park that she named after her brother, T. W. Davis. And she was interested in kids, because they didn't have any children. She didn't question why or what race people were or what nationality they were, but that they needed help. She wanted to help people and she wanted to do it anonymously. But we wound up being ALL of Fort Bend County. And the population is a lot larger now, in Missouri City, Stafford, Sugar Land. We give more money to organizations there, and scholarships there, than we do in Richmond, Rosenberg, Orchard, Needville. But the Henderson Wessendorff Foundation--and I get this from friends--is more focused on Richmond and Rosenberg -- that's what Mr. Wessendorff wanted to do.

Now Mrs. Wessendorff, I'm not so sure about. I would suspect the Medical Center and animals and religion, her place at Blanco--those are the kinds of things that she thought were important. That's kind of how the foundation evolved.

And it's a NEW foundation. All of the people that serve on their board, everybody that works here, KNEW both of them. And that's great. And I think--I suspect--that Mr. Wessendorff AND Mrs. Wessendorff had conversations with people that they knew, that were going to carry on after they were gone, which I think is a great help. I don't know if they wrote a lot down, but I KNOW that Mr. Wessendorff, the businessperson he was, was going to make sure that it was done like he thought it should be done.

The George Foundation was a little looser than that. The George Foundation was set up in 1945 and the laws at that time, Texas laws wouldn't allow you say 'Fort Bend County'. You could say for the benefit of the people of Texas but the way the trust is set up, it's for the benefit of the people of Fort Bend County, but at the discretion of the trustees, it may benefit any organization in the state of Texas.

GOODSILL: Great interview. Pause for a minute and think back; is there anything you wanted to say that we haven't talked about?

ADAMSON: I probably have talked about ALL of it in a way, but I think about communities Richmond is an old, old city for America--for Texas. People that have been here for a long time and have made their wealth from this area tend to be a LOT more charitable, a lot more giving to their community than people that may have come here and made their wealth somewhere else.

From Mr. Wessendorff's perspective, and Mrs. Wessendorff too, they saw the Elkins and they saw the Jesse Joneses, and they saw the Gus Worthams, and what they did with THEIR money. And I would think Mr. Wessendorff saw what the George Foundation, the Georges, did with their money, and it was GOOD. And I think that's an example for us, for all of us. And if you knew them personally, maybe through this book, people benefited from their lives and what they did and their charitable giving.

Career-wise, being able to have somebody like Mr. Wessendorff in your professional life as well as your personal life was invaluable. There's no way that money or school or anything I could have gained in any way would have the same affect on me as somebody like Mr. Wessendorff. That's a lesson to me, too.

It's kind of a personal thing but I was fortunate enough that I came here, now thirty-five years ago, spent the time from when I was twenty-four years old to sixty-eight today, in this community. And my son, now, is going to take my place. And not from any of my doings; I didn't recommend him, I didn't mention his name to the trustees. But he's going to take my place and that's unbelievable to me.

It's through relationships with Pat McDonald and Jack Moore and others, Mr. Wessendorff, Hilmar Moore that has allowed him to continue on in my place. It's a very, very rewarding thing for Judy and me, his mother and I, for him to move back. Because of this community, he went to West Point, he was a commander in Iraq, he got his MBA at Kellogg and worked for Caesar's and wound up being a vice-president. From New Orleans, he's coming back to Fort Bend County.

GOODSILL: Tell me the names of both of your children.

ADAMSON: Roger is our son. Roger Edwin (Edwin is Judy's father's name). And Stacy Jean Adamson Lamons. And she and her husband and my seven year old granddaughter, who sung me a song this morning, first thing--Happy Birthday song--and the dog was barking, too! They live in Birmingham, Alabama. But our son and his family live in New Orleans, but he's been back here since April 9th, staying with us until they can sell their house and move the family back here. So it's a big circle. People, relationships, have made it possible. It's good stuff.

GOODSILL: Thank you so much. Wonderful interview.

GOODSILL: Roland Adamson, continued:

ADAMSON: Mr. Wessendorff was, to me at least, very private about his military career, but he had a very distinguished military career. And I hope there is somebody around that can help with that, to understand it. But he was awarded the Silver Star…

GOODSILL: My paper work says… while serving in the Fifth Army.

ADAMSON: Our son was awarded the Bronze Star from Iraq, and I remember he wanted to see it, Mr. Wessendorff did. It's in a padded kind of case. Roger and I brought it up here. Mr. Wessendorff was proud to see it. It meant a LOT to my son and it meant a lot to me, to make him proud. I've heard--all I know is stories about what he did in the Army. I hope somebody better informed about it than I can tell you about his military service.

GOODSILL: We have it on our list of questions and we ask everybody about it, so hopefully something will turn up.