

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Joanne King Herring**

Interview Date: 06/26/2018

Interviewer: Jane Goodsill and Dianne Wilson

Transcriber: Sylvia Vacek

Location: At her home in Houston, Texas

16 Pages



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Transcript

GOODSILL: I am interviewing Joanne King Herring at her home in Houston and Dianne Wilson is with us. Thank you for meeting with us, Joanne.

HERRING: Thank you, Jane. I am so thrilled that you asked me and am very honored.

GOODSILL: We want to talk some about of your experiences in Fort Bend County.

HERRING: My grandfather was the first person to start buying property in the Memorial area of Houston. Everybody said, "Nobody is going to buy anything out on the west side of town because you face the sun going home and you face the sun going to work. It is just not the side of town that develops elegantly. So you are going to waste all of your money." But he made quite a lot of money [laughter].

GOODSILL: Tell us his name?

HERRING: William Emmett Sampson. He owned the Texas Sand and Gravel Construction Company. President Roosevelt was building a lot of roads at the time, and my father's company provided all the gravel and sand for them. He had his own railroad, and I was allowed to run the engine. It was a very short railroad, but nevertheless it was his. I used to play in the boxcars.

He had sand and gravel companies all over Texas. When they dug out the sand and gravel in Romayor, near Cleveland, they released Artisan wells. There were these beautiful clear lakes like swimming pools that constantly had fresh water. It was just lovely. We used to spend weekends up there. He called that his fishing lodge, and he entertained his business friends there.

The house that he built in Memorial was a replica of Mount Vernon to honor the fact that we are descended from George Washington. This brick is from the wall that George put up himself at Mount Vernon. The Association gave me this brick in recognition that I am a direct descendant of Washington's sister, Betty. I laugh about it because it was many generations ago, but in any case, our home in Memorial was a replica of Mount Vernon.



The Mt. Vernon-style home was moved from Memorial to Simonton and later damaged by flooding.

My father owned several thousand acres in Memorial, which he sold off, but he still maintained 35 acres. Imagine the taxes on 35 acres. When he died, he left it to the Baptist Church. He asked me if I wanted it, but I didn't because I was young then.

I wanted my own house, and I didn't want all that old stuff that I grew up with. As I grew older, the old stuff looked better to me. So, I began to think that I did want that house, but by that time, he was gone and the house was gone.

Howard Johnson bought the house and built Rosewood Hospital right next to it. Johnson said, "I have built myself a hospital, and I am going to die in this house. I am not going to sell it to anybody". In a few years, he did die in the house, and his heirs found the property so valuable that they didn't want to keep the house because it was taking up too much property. They sold the house to somebody who was going to make it into a restaurant. They cut it into pieces because it was too large to be moved in one piece. I saw it sitting on the roadside one day and it looked like a beautiful woman who had her teeth knocked out and her eyes blackened. I married a man who loved history and he said, "I really hate to see that house go out of the family, let's buy it back."

It was the house that I grew up in. It had a ballroom where I had dances from the time I was a little girl. Five generations of my family lived there. We had to move it very fast, and the only property we knew about was one that my Realtor son had listed on Guyer Road in Simonton, Texas. This land originally belonged to one of the Old 300 settlers as part of the Spanish land grants.

My husband, Robert R. Herring, started Enron. He died at 59. He was a good steward of Enron's money, and he would never have leveraged it. My husband had given a lot of money to A&M and done a lot for them. So, they were very happy to look at all the land in Simonton for him. They did the lake and the well. Supposedly it's the best well in Fort Bend County.



Joanne and interviewer Jane Goodsill discussing the variety of challenges Joanne experienced moving the house in which she grew up to Simonton.

They researched the flood levels and recommended where to put the house so it would never flood. Before the Memorial Day floods and Hurricane Harvey, we had floods but water didn't come into the house, and didn't come into the church because we had built it up to A&M standards.

In order to relocate that house, every power line and every telephone line along the path had to be turned off! We had eighteen police cars, and the cost of moving it...I will not even tell you. After we moved it, my husband died and the house was sitting in three pieces.

James Biddle was president of The Historical Society of the United States, and he came down and looked at the house. "Joanne this is a wonderful house, and I am going to give you a plaque even though it has been moved. It is a beautiful historical house." I still have the plaque. Nine years later, the house was put back together. My children and everyone died laughing at me for fooling with that house for nine years.

I needed a house for a caretaker. A friend said, "They are going to give a building away. Why don't we go out and look at it?" It turned out to be a church in Fulshear on Main Street. It had been a Methodist Church for maybe a hundred years, but it was built in 1850, and it looked its age. They had painted it brown. It looked like a widow lady and was not in very good shape. We went in it, and I could feel the tears and the joy, years and years of love and happiness and history inside that church. I loved it immediately and said, "We've got to save it. I will take the church." When I told my children that I was going to move this church, they said, "Mother, are you out of your mind?" It had become such a joke in our family about my moving the house and now the church. I looked at it and I saw these wonderful huge beams, each beam was a tree. I failed to notice that they were filled with termites!

I didn't know enough about construction, and I did not notice that the 150-year-old building was leaning to the left. I am sure I could have built it three times on what it cost us to rehabilitate it. I had a love for the house, and they could forgive that; but they could not understand my love for the church. When we would drive down the road, they would see an old broken-down building and say, "Mother, there is your Christmas present. I bet we can get that really cheap." Of course, it would be something lying all over the ground.

What I didn't know is that my church would soon be lying all over the ground. The church is very heavy because of these big beams. I got a house mover out there and he said, "I can move this church." Don't ever deal with house movers. They are born con men and they charge you enormous prices for very little. He swore to me that he knew all about churches.

GOODSILL: Never met a church he could not move?

HERRING: Yes! We agreed on a price. The only thing is that the church was very tall with a steeple, and it was not going to go under any of the power lines, TV lines, or the telephone lines. I was very lucky that a very dear friend (and the best looking man I have ever met in my life), Don Jordan, was president of Reliant for many years before it split.

I got an appointment, went down to his office, and I said, "Don, I have this wonderful historical church, and I have to save it. But there are a lot of power lines between the church and my property. I would appreciate it if you would take them down." He said, "Joanne, if I did that for your church, every church in Houston would ask me to do it and that is going to be very expensive. There is no way I can justify it for a church in Fort Bend County. You are out of your mind." I said, "Don, you just have to do it. Tell all those churches who come to complain that if they have a church that was built by Stephen F. Austin and the first 300 settlers that came to Texas, you would be glad to help them." He laughed and said, "Oh, my goodness. All right I am going to do it, but if you run one hour overtime, you are going to pay, and don't you call me because this is all I am going to do for you."



Former Methodist Church Joanne moved from Fulshear, Texas, to her property in Simonton, at great personal expense and later suffered from flooding in 2016 and 2017.

So, on a Sunday morning in August, out came three of the shiniest trucks you've ever seen in your life. It looked like they had just been washed that morning. The men had on their uniforms and helmets and looked so grand. There was this scruffy little truck that was going to pull the church and a scruffy little man that looked like he had a bad Saturday night with a bad hangover. They were beaming and gleaming that this was going to be so wonderful. He hitched up and he pulled and he pulled, [Ur – Ur – Ur] and the church didn't move an inch, not one inch.

Finally, he said, "I can't do it." I said, "What do mean you cannot do it?" He said, "I cannot get it out." So, I turned to the men of Reliant Energy, and I said, "Could you help him? You have these great big trucks, and your trucks will surely move that church."

They said, "No, we can't possibly do that. Think of the insurance. What if that church comes apart? What if it flies through the air and hits one of my men? I couldn't possibly take the chance. They will fire me; they will sue the company, and you have no idea what you are talking about." I said, "This church is very important to save." So, he looked at his men, and they all shook their heads and said, "Let's try."

So, three shiny trucks lined up. We got these ropes, and that church went 'zoop'! Out and down the road we went. It was Sunday morning in August, in Texas, which meant that all the churches along the route were full, and others were at home reading their paper. All of a sudden, the air conditioning went off; people were running out of their houses and were coming out of the churches. All the church people were wonderful. We explained about the church and they said that was fine. But this one man rushed out and said, "I am going to sue you because I am going to have a heart attack. I am calling my lawyer right now because you have no right to do this to me." We just kept going until we arrived in Simonton.

There was a curve in the road that we could not make with all our entourage unless we went across some private land. I went up to the door and said, "Would you mind if the oldest Protestant Church in Texas crosses your property line for just a few minutes?" Everybody said yes except this man named Simon. We found pipes lying across the property and he said, "It is going to cost you two hundred dollars to move these pipes." I did not have two hundred dollars. I didn't have anything. The guys by this time were all into it. They were going to move this church.

They said to Simon, "You just stick your pipes somewhere else, and they told him where, because Reliant owns the right of way along the railroad, and we will just go down the right a way. They had not noticed that the right of way was on a slant. Imagine three 18-wheelers and the church on such an angle. They got on the right of way and the weeds were so high that you couldn't see the church at times. They had no idea whether there were railroad ties, parts of the iron railroad there, glass or anything else. They just went trucking right down there. We prayed the whole time.

The town had heard all about the move. All 300 people that lived in Simonton were on the side of the road. They started singing, "Glory, Glory, Halleluiah," as the church went marching on. When we got to Guyer Road, there were two bridges. They are not big bridges, but they are very old bridges. The house mover had not bothered to notice they were on the route. He said, "I don't think those bridges are going to hold these trucks and this church."

I had visions of the trucks overturned, the church in smithereens, and people with broken arms and legs. But the men said, "We are going to try it." We went across one and, thank God, it made it. All the people in the little church nearby came out and said, "We will help you pray over the next one." Everybody was praying to see us go over the next one, and we made it.

We got on our property and they said, "Where do you want the church?" I had not thought about it. All I was thinking about was getting it there. I said, "Put it up there by the house." The road is a mile long. We went up to the house and put it there. But, the church next to this 13,000 square foot three-story house with a cupola, looked very unimposing, and did not look like it was glorifying God. So, I said, "I don't believe this is the place for this church; can we take it down by the lake?" They said, "Okay." So, here we go over this rough land down by the lake, but it looks very lonely down by the lake. "It looks very lonely here, so do you think we could move it up there by this beautiful oak tree?" It is 300 feet wide and 300 feet tall, and it is really just the place for the church.

So, they said "Okay," and they went over there and sure enough, it was perfect. This tree was so gorgeous, and the church was nestled in there. I remember thinking that the Lord was in his Holy Temple. Let all the world be silent and worship Him. I could not get that out of my mind, and all night I thought about the guys that had given so much, risked so much, and cared so much.

When you think of 300 people coming to Texas while the Comanches were raiding literally scalping and killing whole families, and abducting some. Think about the floods, locusts, and droughts. These people needed a place to come together to praise God.

So they built a non-denominational church. They put aside all their feelings about what they thought about their denominations...Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist. They did it to thank God, and you just wonder, thank God for what? They had so little, and it makes us so grateful for what we have. They didn't have screens on the windows, and they didn't know that mosquitoes caused malaria and so many died. Yet, they praised God, and they took what they had. I think that settlement



Dirt path leading through overgrown bushes to the rescued church. Note the large oak tree to the right of the path approaching the church.

was extraordinary. Many of these other settlements, like New Braunfels, were settled by Germans and were paid for by German nobility who just wanted to put people in there to make some money.

But Austin cared, and said, "I want to have a community that can work together because that is the only way they will succeed." The church they worshiped at is still right here among us.

The real name of the Brazos River as you know was "*Brazos de Dios*, which means Arms of God. You can't live in Fort Bend County and not love the Brazos, even though it is not the prettiest river in the world. It goes 840 miles through Texas without touching another state. It has arms, and that is why it was named that. The tributaries off the river are what made Texas rich before we discovered oil, when cotton was king. The Brazos has played a huge part in Fort Bend County.

GOODSILL: I loved hearing your story. Did the men from Reliant charge for overtime?

HERRING: That is the funniest part of all. I wrote and said, "I am going to honor what I promised you, where is the bill?" They sent me a bill, and it was horrifying because this was Sunday, and the pay was three times what they usually made by the hour. We went overtime, as I moved the church all over to find the prettiest place to put it, and traversed the bridges. On the bill was written PAID IN FULL. So you know, we Texans are blessed in our people.

GOODSILL: What has happened to the church since that time?

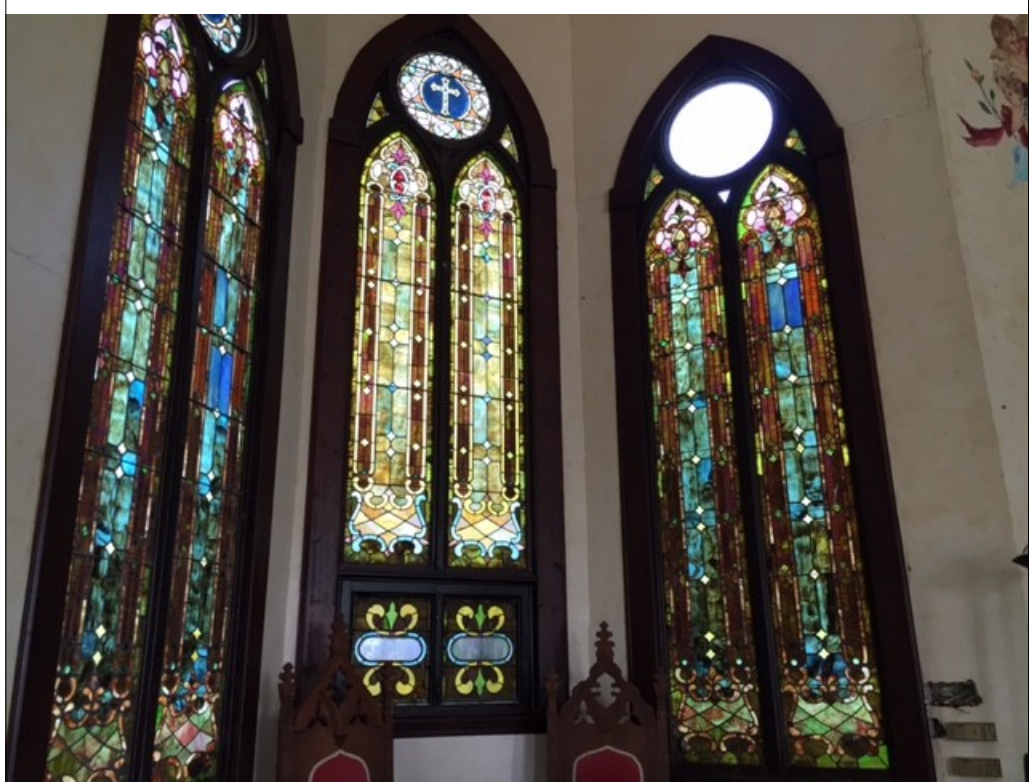
HERRING: The church kept being blessed, and I decided that I was going to be a disciple. I was going to turn people who were not Christians into Christians, but I found out that I was just the worst disciple that ever walked.

When I was repairing the windows, a few days after we got the church situated on the land, the whole thing totally fell apart. We had to completely rebuild it, and I had no money. So, I got these real cheap workers that were tattooed from top to bottom. I had never seen anybody with so many tattoos. They had snakes crawling all around their legs and necks, but they were very cheap. What I didn't know was that they were from the prison yard [all laughing], and they stole all our guns from the house, but they DID put the church back together.

I had seen an advertisement in the Old House Magazine about these gorgeous stained glass windows that were made between 1800 and 1850. I started thinking that I had to have those windows, so I decided we were going to pray about that. Shortly thereafter, I was at a very fancy black-tie dinner party that was given by the Baron and Baroness De Portanovas, who were members of the Cullen family. We were sitting at this very lovely table, and this very rich man was sitting next to me. I said, "Bill, have you ever thought about being a Christian?" We discussed this, and I asked him if he had ever sinned. He said, "No." I said, "You never sinned? You never gossiped?" He said, "No, I have never sinned in my whole life."

In a few minutes, I said, "I have this wonderful idea for this church in Simonton. If I can make a deal to get some stained-glass windows, would you give me the money?" He said, "Yes." I never thought for a moment that he would. Then he said. "I am going to give you the money to buy them, but you are going to have to get those windows down here. I am not paying for moving them." I said, "Bill, I certainly understand. You have done something so wonderful, thank you."

I never dreamed what would transpire next. I called the guy who was selling the windows and said, "We want to buy the windows for half of what you are asking because I cannot get any more money." He said, "I saved these windows from a church they were destroying in Missouri. They were so beautiful, I could just not see them destroyed," and he agreed to my price.



Stained glass windows Joanne rescued from a Missouri church and installed in her church before learning each panel (two per window) required repair at a cost of \$1,500 per panel.

Then I had to get them here. He kept them in a warehouse for a year while I was repairing the church. I could not find anyone to bring them to Texas and he said, "I have a friend in Houston I have not seen in twenty-five years, so I will drive down there with those windows. I will pack them up and bring them." They were so beautifully packed. I had never seen anything like that in my life. They were fifteen feet tall and six feet wide but he was a carpentry wizard. He drove here in the middle of a blue norther. I met him at Landry's and bought him some gumbo [all laughing]. He drove out to the property and deposited the windows. He even unloaded them. He had loaded them up, hired a trailer, drove them here, and did all those wonderful things. I never saw him again.

The windows were breathtaking, and when the sun shined through them in the evening, it turned the church to gold. It was just beautiful. These windows were like looking into a beautiful kaleidoscope, with tiny little pieces. But after we got the windows in the church, they started falling to pieces!

I had every stained-glass window expert in Texas come out and look at them. They said, "These are the finest early American stained-glass windows we have ever seen, but they are going to have to be totally repaired, and it is going to cost you \$1 500 dollars a panel." Every window had two panels so that was \$3,000 for each window! I started to try and find people to help, but mainly I paid. Eventually, we repaired all the windows and got them in, and they were beautiful, BUT we had no furniture.

At that time, the George Ranch had a church they were auctioning off. I remember walking in with my friend who was a minister. There was this 1850 beautiful organ with gorgeous pipes. I said, "We have to have that organ." But I also had come to buy pews. The pews were very ugly and kind of falling apart. I didn't like the pews after I saw the organ. They had a wonderful minister stand, too. We didn't have any money, but we had to have some pews to sit on, and there was that organ. So I said to my friend, "Let's just pray about it." He said, "Maybe whoever came to buy the organ will get sick, maybe he has a virus and he will have to leave when the organ comes up for auction."

The organ comes up, and I bid all the money I had, and we got it. Nobody else bid! Nobody wanted all those pipes. They were not something you could put in your house. So we got the organ, but we still had no pews.



Pipe organ auctioned at the George Ranch to Joanne for her church. Note the water damage at the base from the flooding in 2016 and 2017.

The story goes on. I have a friend who is an artist, and she said, “This little church is so beautiful. It is just like the painted churches all over Texas. I want this church to be painted, too.” So, she painted angels on the ceiling, did beautiful work on the walls, and marbled the wainscoting. It was so pretty.

I got some pews upholstered in lavender from an LGBT church. Lavender, can you imagine? They were good pews. I decided that this church had received so many gifts from so many people, and the hand of God had really been upon it. It wasn’t anything but the Lord’s hand on this church, so I thought this church must serve people.

There was a homeless shelter in Rosenberg called The Garden, run by a wonderful woman who had polio as a child. As she got older, she got polio again! She had such a heart for those people and she said, “We have had terrible trouble because the churches don’t want the homeless. They don’t look very good, and some of them are on drugs or liquor, and they don’t fit in the congregation. They have asked me not to bring them.” I said, “You have your church. This one is yours.”

Well, at the time, when we first started with them, we had the stained-glass windows on the floor, lying flat because we had to reinstall and repair them. I said, “Please do not step on the stained-glass windows, walk around them.” They walked right over them. But the stained-glass windows got fixed, and they were back in place, and they were gorgeous.

There have been christenings, weddings and wonderful things in that little church. Single mothers in the country don’t have access to places to meet. I went to one of their lectures, and they said they had run out of money to hire a hall. So I said, “You can use the church.” So every Saturday morning they would come out and, honey, you should have seen them. They had on sequined shoes, they were dressed up to the nines, and some of them brought their children.



Pews for the church, complete with lavender seat cushions, were later damaged by flooding in 2016 and 2017.

I thought they were the strangest group of people that I have ever seen for a Saturday morning. But then I realized that they had no other events to dress up for. They dressed up and had the most wonderful time. The only problem was that they didn't clean before they came, and they didn't clean up afterwards. I wasn't too unhappy when they decided it was too out of the way to use anymore.

We've had services, single moms, christenings, weddings, and funerals. It was always free to anyone that wanted to use it. But it required maintaining the road and the gate, and providing electricity. I had to put in a well and air conditioning. I had to go through the same shenanigans to get the air conditioners. Then I had to build restrooms, male and female, and it just got so expensive, that I couldn't handle it.

Now, the story of the floods! We got everything into the church, and we had a huge flood! The wood and artifacts were not ruined totally, they just needed repairing. I found somebody who could do that work, and he was eager, so he did it all. Since that time, we have been through ANOTHER flood where the water was six feet high in the little church.

That was Hurricane Harvey. It struck us a blow, and it seems that I always end up paying for the restoration. It is just an unending flow, but we hope to be able to rehabilitate and open it to the public again because it is beautiful. The furnishings are beautiful. The pews did not make it through Harvey because they were made of fiber board, but everything that was real wood made it.

One lady was giving away sheet rock. I told her what we were doing, and she said, "I've got sixty pieces of sheet rock that I am giving away. I will give them all to the church." Again, we had to prevail on friends to lend me the truck and the men to load and unload the sheet rock. We have the sheet rock, but now I have to raise the foundation of the church.



Photo of the minister stand acquired by Joanne for her nondenominational church in Simonton, Texas. Restoration is ongoing. Note the waterlines on the wall and furniture.

Despite A&M doing the engineering for the main house, it is a disaster after the floods. We have had two floods in two years, and I don't know if it is worth rebuilding if we are going to have the floods like that. The house is only three hundred feet from the Brazos River. I thought it was so wonderful to be so close to the river! Then I found out why there were no buildings close to the Brazos. The church I am going to save. The house I do not know because it is just too much.

GOODSILL: There are a lot of miracles in this story, just one after another.

HERRING: Everything was a miracle. It is such a beautiful little building, and I feel that I can support it, and I will. What we are dreaming of is doing a tour. Houston has a tremendous number of conventions. They have begged me for years to open the house and the church, which would be splendid because the house has beautiful antiques and chandeliers. It would be fun. We can have lunch out there and go to the John Nau Brewery. He has a wonderful thing. I think it has played right into our hands that he was turned down by the city.

I have not gotten the complete story, but he wanted to give all those marvelous things that he has collected over the years to the city, but the city doesn't want them. He got unhappy about that, and now he is considering giving it to Fort Bend County.

My dream is to make this church open to the public to help tell the story of Fort Bend and the Old 300. It is an hour drive to destinations like the Rose Emporium in Independence or the Hilltop Herb Farm. We thought we could do something like that. We could go to San Felipe de Austin State Historic Site, talk about how and why the settlers were there, then drive through where the settlers lived and show them the church and the house if they want to see it. Then maybe go to the George Ranch and come back to Houston. On the bus, we can show them the Alamo movie going out and the Battle of San Jacinto coming back, which of course takes place just outside of Houston. It is an hour out, an hour to see stuff, and an hour to go back.

GOODSILL: But the floods slowed you down and broke your heart and you have not figured out where to go from there. I read in your book, *Diplomacy and Diamonds* how you to put heart and soul into renovating the house and making it a beautiful showplace. It was magnificent, and then came the floods and my heart sank with you.

HERRING: How sweet, thank you. I really appreciate it.

GOODSILL: Dianne went out to see your house and brought back some pictures showing the beautiful silk on the walls and how it was just ruined.

HERRING: It is several life times of collections. We had dreams. I believe Dianne came and took photos after the first flood. The second flood has been such a killer.

My family lived on the bayou on Kirby, and in 1936 we had that horrible flood. I remember they were telling me that the water was up to their knees in the library and things like that. They were a hundred feet above the bayou, so it came really high. When they built Addicks Dam, they had all that property out there. The whole idea was that when the floods came, they had property so the flood could just spread way out, all over everywhere.

My family lived on the bayou on Kirby, and in 1936 we had that horrible flood. I remember they were telling me that the water was up to their knees in the library and things like that. They were a hundred feet above the bayou, so it came really high. When they built Addicks Dam, they had all that property out there.



Joanne Herring and Dianne Wilson during Joanne's interview regarding her historic home and rescuing a former Methodist church.



Asian silk wallpaper covering this room and ceiling was also flooded. A mirror in the ceiling reflects the chandelier and adds illumination to the room.

The whole idea was that when the floods came, they had property so the flood could just spread way out, all over everywhere.

WILSON: Until the developers thought there is empty land there.

HERRING: I tell you there were always builders; see my family has been in real estate for three generations, so I know Houston real estate. They always said there will never be anything beyond the dam. You can't put anything, it is federal land, and you can't do that.

The last time I went out there, it looked like New York City. The houses were this close to each other; cement streets, and wells for the lakes that they built were just not adequate. I felt so sorry for the people in Valley Lodge.

GOODSILL: We have taken a lot of interviews with people who lived in Valley Lodge before Harvey. It was after the Memorial Day Flood and they were feeling pretty good. They had recovered from that and then came Harvey.

HERRING: I know and it is such a pretty place.

Interview ends.