

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Joseph Daniel (J. D.) Meyer**

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Interviewer: Jane Goodsill and Diane Meyer

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

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13 Pages



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Transcript

GOODSILL: Today the topic of our interview is Sartartia Dairy. JD is joined by his wife, Melinda, for this interview. Where would you like to start?

MEYER: Let's start with Mr. Herbert Helmcamp. He was the head of the Houston Milk, Ice and Ice Cream. I think they had as many as four locations in Houston, where he lived. Sartartia at one time was the third largest dairy in the greater Houston area. He became Sartartia Plantation Dairy manager in 1949 after Mr. D. C. "Buck" Buchanan died.

Buck lived on the farm and liked to ride. One day he rode his horse down to the Brazos River where a calf had fallen off the cliff and was down by the water. The calf was still alive, so Buck took his rope off his saddle and got the calf back up somehow. It was a 10 or 14 foot drop but he got the calf back up, put the calf across the saddle with him and took the calf back up to the barn, which was not too far from his house. He got in the house, sat down and asked his wife for a drink. She came back with it and found that he had died of a heart attack.

At that point they moved Mr. Helmcamp out from Houston to become the manager. I'll tell you a little bit more about Mr. Helmcamp. He was a very, very nice person. He was a motivator and a very positive person. Everybody performed for him. I understand from the reading that I have in this book that the dairy was established in 1932.

Sartartia was originally bought by Mr. Benjamin Clayton, the Clayton of Anderson Clayton (cotton merchants) but nothing to do with Anderson Clayton that I know of. It was always Mr. Clayton that we heard of. He went all over the United States, in the South, the Southwest, and the West and was involved in farming. He started buying properties in the early 1920s and they didn't start the dairy until 1932.

By the time they started the dairy part, there were about 2,400-2,500 acres in Sartartia itself. The dairy occupied only the northeastern part of the plantation.

GOODSILL: Let's get it located in place and time.

MEYER: It was on the edge of Sugar Land. It was south of US-90 (today's US-90A) and went from there all the way to the Brazos River. It started where the prison property on the south side of US-90 stopped. It went all the way down to Bob Smith's property. But I don't know when Bob Smith bought that property.

There were 2-3 miles of frontage along Highway 90-A. The whole thing is what is now New Territory, including the part west of SH 99.

GOODSILL: So the dairy was established in 1932?

MEYER: Yes, and it was all Jersey cattle. They bred and raised their own calves. Jersey is one of the most productive milkers and has very high butterfat. They were originally from the Channel Island of Jersey. They did very well in our area. Their milk is second only to the Guernseys (also a Channel Island breed), which Sartartia later added to their herd. Sartartia advertised their milk as "Jersey milk". They had about 400 cows and would milk about 250 at a time. The rest of them were in-between milking and getting ready to have calves.

MEYER, DIANE: Were these cows hand-milked then or did they have machinery to do the milking?

MEYER: Sartartia Dairy was the most modern dairy in this whole area. They had a barn where the cattle would come in and there were drinking fountains. They would feed them and get them ready for milking. They milked them twice a day.

GOODSILL: The Sugar Land Heritage Foundation has a photo of that?

MEYER: They would walk from this farm, all the way down to the milking parlor. They were so proud of this thing! Nobody could go in there except for the attendant. They washed the cattle, the udders and everything, and made sure there was no dirt on the cattle. Then they milked them. They had glass windows for people driving by on Highway 90 to stop and watch. Then it came into the processing area, all through pre-cleaned, ventilated piping mechanisms. They had their own refrigeration system. That's where my dad worked.

I got to go down there once or twice. We were not allowed to go there on a regular basis. My parents really didn't let us run around very much. The dairy was closed to outsiders. It was extremely clean and had this great reputation for the milk it produced. They did not make ice cream here. They pre-mixed it and sent it in to Houston where Mr. Helmcamp was and he made the ice cream.

Mr. Helmcamp came to manage all of Sartartia after the dairy closed. The thing the dairy was famous for was its quality – the greatest milk around. And the greatest cottage cheese. My dad became known as THE best cottage cheese maker they had ever had.

GOODSILL: Can you tell us more about that? What would make your dad the best cottage cheese maker?

MEYER: He was a perfectionist. Everything was done just right and they all had to wear white clothes, gloves, and everything. Even back then! This was in the 1940s. The dairy closed because after World War II, in 1948, they widened US-90 (doubled it). So they had to tear down part of the milk processing plant. At that time, several other dairies had come into the greater Houston area and there was more competition. So they decided not to invest the money to replace the processing and creamery area. Instead they went into beef cattle. Everybody who lived out there moved away, except for us.

GOODSILL: Tell us about your family. What brought your dad here?

MEYER: My dad was Otto Ferdinand Meyer and he was from the Schulenberg area. He lived out in the countryside. His father came from Germany when he was nine years old. He married my grandmother and they were all German. They lived in Schulenberg on a farm, maybe 150-200 acres. They raised a few cattle but mostly farmed cotton and corn. My grandfather Meyer was raised by Germans and they all spoke German but he learned English. When I was a little kid and we would go up to see them, we'd sit out on the front porch. He called it the gallery. He and I would talk. He said, "Lean your chair back against the rail." We would talk about machinery and farming. I liked all of that when I was a kid. He would take me out to his machine shops where he repaired everything. He even bought a tractor before he died, in 1953-1954. My grandmother died within a year or two.

GOODSILL: What was your grandfather's name?

MEYER, M: Joseph Meyer. His grandmother's name was Mary Kleosel. Spelling Kleosel is like spelling Meyer. You can spell Meyer umpteen different ways.

GOODSILL: What do you remember about your grandmother?

MEYER: She was always nice and attentive, and very excited to see us. She liked us grand kids. That's the big thing on Dad's side of the family. On my mother's side of the family, they were a little bit older and didn't speak much English, so we were not a big thing.

GOODSILL: So your grandfather was a farmer and a machinist in his own way.

MEYER: He had his own blacksmith shop.

GOODSILL: He raised your father, Otto, and what were your father's skills?

MEYER: The same thing. He grew up doing everything, including farming. Mother and Dad got married in 1938 and moved here between Christmas and New Year's. The first year or so that Dad was here, he worked with the calves in the barns. Then they moved him to the creamery to do all the milk processing.

GOODSILL: Why did they move down here in the first place?

MEYER: They had a connection through a friend.

MEYER, M: I think it was a relative of the Lorfings. Apparently a lot of people from Schulenberg moved down here right about that time. They wanted was all these Germans to come here because of their work ethic. They had an opening in the dairy and they took him because of his work ethic.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Mr. Gus Ulrich reportedly brought a lot of German workers to Sugar Land from Schulenburg.

GOODSILL: What was your mother's name?

MEYER: Hertha Gebauer.

GOODSILL: Where did they live?

MEYER: They lived on Sartartia. This is a little figure here (looking at a photo and pointing at the photo) This is Highway 90A right here; here is the main entrance to the dairy. This is Field Road. Here were the big barns and down here is the milking parlor. See the railroad right here? That's where they had to tear down all of that to make way for the widening of US-90A.

The houses were all along here, on Field Road. This was a little road that went down to a couple more barns that were here.

GOODSILL: Each road is called Field Road!

MEYER: Yes. But if you look at this part right here, this road came down and the people lived here, here, and here. There was another house here. The foreman of the dairy was here and there was another house here, here, and here. This was a little barn that people parked their cars in.

GOODSILL: It's labeled "car shed" on this map.

MEYER: This road turned here and goes all the way down (this is a low spot here) and back up here. Here were the calf barns. At one time they even had these as chicken barns where they raised chickens, but I don't remember any of that. Good friend of ours, the Lorring family, lived right here and he took care of all the calves. This is prison property. My parents lived in this house, this little dinky house.

GOODSILL: It's labeled "dwelling".

MEYER: It was basically a two-room house. It had a big room with beds in it and then a kitchen/eating area. And no bathroom.

GOODSILL: Were you raised in that house?

MEYER: That's where I started. I was born in the hospital on Lakeview and Wood Street in Sugar Land. Then, not very long after I was born, they moved from here back down to here, to right here.

GOODSILL: Right next to the car shed. And that's also labeled "dwelling".

MEYER: It had three rooms: a bedroom, a living room, and a kitchen/dining room, AND a bathroom! That's when mother was expecting Marjorie, I think. So they moved across the street, right here, into this house. This house had TWO bedrooms, a living room, and a kitchen/dining area. And that's my mother's house, the one which is right next door to us now. (It was moved from Sartartia.)

GOODSILL: And that's the house you are trying to find a home for?

MEYER, M: Yes.

MEYER: But they moved into that house and stayed in that house until 1954. The dairy closed in 1948 and everybody moved out, away. Nobody lived on the dairy part, except my parents.

GOODSILL: So you grew up on Sartartia Plantation.

MEYER: Yes. But the dairy closed when I was nine years old (1948).

GOODSILL: And your parents kept living there?

MEYER: Yes. And my brother, Herbert, was born there.

GOODSILL: Was he named after Mr. Helmcamp?

MEYER: Yes.

MEYER, M. (wife, Melinda): Mrs. Meyer's brother was also named Herbert.

MEYER: But he was mainly named after Mr. Helmcamp. Dad and Mr. Helmcamp were very close. Dad was one of his best workers. I don't know how it all happened, but Mr. Helmcamp said, "You can live here for a while. You can mow the fields at nights and weekends when you aren't working." Dad also got a regular job as a janitor for the Sugar Land School. When he died, he was the second in command of all the maintenance of Fort Bend ISD. He was also a motivator and he knew how to fix everything.

GOODSILL: Did you go to the Sugar Land schools?

MEYER: Yes. I was in the 2nd to the last class that graduated from Sugar Land. I graduated in 1958 and there were 31 or 32 of us in that class.

GOODSILL: I didn't ask you when you were born.

MEYER: September 26, 1939. Everybody loved Dad. We lost Dad in 1978 when he was 67 years old, to cancer. He fought that for about a year. When we had the funeral, the church was packed. We're all Catholics but there weren't that many Catholics there. It was everybody who he had interacted with.

MEYER, M: He was a school bus driver, too?

MEYER: Yes, he drove the school bus, back when we had three school buses. His route was near Four Corners, Dairy Ashford up and back in there. He also drove the bus for athletic events. We had one of the best football teams in the whole area. We were a Class B school, which is very small. Dad drove the school bus by request of all the football players and the coaches.

GOODSILL: Were these the Ken Hall years?

MEYER: Absolutely.

GOODSILL: Did you know Mr. White?

MEYER: The superintendent? Oh, yes. Mr. White. Mr. Perfect. He would work until a certain time, look up and say, "Excuse me. I have other things to do." This is what I was told. He would go in, take his coat off, loosen his tie, walk down to the football field and that's when we got some of our best football coaching. It was from Mr. White!

GOODSILL: Were you a football player?

MEYER: Yes. But I wasn't that good.

GOODSILL: Carlos Tarver gave a great interview. You'll love reading about when he talks about Mr. White.

NOTE: See Carlos Tarver's interview on the FBC Historical Commission website at <https://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/home/showdocument?id=30480>

MEYER: He knew everything! And not just football. He knew how to coach the track team. I did a lot better at running track than I did at playing football. I wasn't tough enough for football. But I was fast. Ken Hall helped me learn how to get out of the starter blocks when we would run the sprints. That's because Mr. White asked him to help. He was such an honorable man. He is just a gentleman all the way around.

NOTE: See Kenneth Hall's and Ron Miller's interviews on the FBC Historical Commission website at <https://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/home/showdocument?id=40325> and <https://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/home/showdocument?id=44761>

GOODSILL: I have a couple of specific questions about Sartartia. It was not only a dairy, it was also a farm. Do you know what crops were grown there?

MEYER: I understand that in the beginning, before my time, they raised some sugar cane. But they got rid of that when Sugar Land started getting their cane product from Cuba. They went to cotton and corn, and they grew a lot of hay to feed the cows in the dairy. All that was raised by tenant farmers.

GOODSILL: Please explain what you mean about tenant farmers.

MEYER: As a tenant farmer, I didn't know that much, but most of them were minorities, mostly black but there might have been a few Hispanics. They lived in little houses and I don't know for sure but I assume it was the same as the people who lived in the houses at the dairy.

You didn't own it but you had to maintain it. Water, electricity and sewage was provided and paid for by Sartartia.

GOODSILL: When they grew the crops, was there a certain percentage that they were allowed to keep?

MEYER: I don't know any of those details. Cotton was one of the major crops they grew. The soil was extremely fertile. It was Brazos River soil. The old story is that people would ask, "How rich is the soil?" "Oh, it's so rich, you could take an old fence post, stick it down in there, and it will sprout."

GOODSILL: Was there a blacksmith's shop?

MEYER: Yes, and the person who ran that was Jesus. He was very skilled. After the dairy closed, they moved all the buildings and homes away, except they left the old barn, the silos and a couple of other small sheds. Mother and dad had a little corner of the cotton field and they would plant their garden. We would get a tractor to plow that area. Jesus and his helpers maintained all the equipment for farming, right there at Sartartia. Some of the first gray Universal-type tractors, with big wheels in front, were Massey-Fergusons originally. Then Ford copied that and developed those. Sartartia bought them back when they were Massey-Fergusons. But they didn't farm with those. Those were for mowing. That's what dad used on the weekends when he mowed grass.

GOODSILL: What was your childhood like out on the farm?

MEYER: I was eight or nine years old when the dairy closed so it's hard for me to remember very much. We had to do little things. You had to mow your own grass in your yard. We had to keep everything neat and clean and that was my job as the oldest kid. Never have any trash around. We always had the nicest yard.

GOODSILL: What do you remember about Central Prison Farm?

MEYER: Not really much of anything except that I remember maybe once a week a mule or horse-drawn wagon would come down and go all the way to the dairy and get something, and then go all the way back on that field road down by the houses. They would come all the way down this road, come here, go down here, go over here, all the way to here, and then they would come back, maybe an hour or so later. I don't know what they did.

GOODSILL: Were they prisoners?

MEYER: Yes! They were trustees. There were usually two of them. We were supposed to stay out of the way and we did.

GOODSILL: Do you remember anything about the Clodine area?

MEYER: No. I had a friend who lived there but we didn't go to Clodine. We went to Sugar Land for everything.

GOODSILL: What do you remember about Sugar Land?

MEYER: The old train station. I got to ride a train there once, to go to the Shrine circus. We would go into town, to go to the doctor or the drug store, and to the grocery store for things.

GOODSILL: How would you get to Sugar Land?

MEYER: We would drive. When I was fourteen, I did the driving! That's just the way it was. To get a haircut, I had to go to Stafford because the Ruffinos had a shop there. Then when they opened a shop in Sugar Land, run by their cousins or brothers, I started going there and I went there until I moved away. For clothes and things like that, we would go to Rosenberg. There wasn't much shopping for clothes available in Sugar Land.

GOODSILL: Do you remember any significant floods?

MEYER: I remember in 1941 we couldn't get to Sugar Land because part of the road close to the entrance of Central One was flooded. That's the only one I remember.

GOODSILL: That's a good way to described where Sartartia is. It's a little bit west of the entrance to Central One.

MEYER: That's the northeast corner of Sartartia. Then it goes way on down to the other side of SH-99, and then south to the Brazos River. Every now and then we'd lose power for a day or two and we'd burn candles. We didn't have air conditioning; we had screens on the windows.

Mother tells this story but I don't remember it. I was a baby! This is maybe 1941. Mother and dad hadn't quite moved out of the little house up by the prison property. They all went into one of those calf barns before the storm hit. Their house was fine, the other house was fine but a big tree fell down and just missed the barn where they were huddled!

GOODSILL: Do we have enough background on your mother's house? It was one of the ones that was at the dairy.

MEYER: I have a little sketch here. Mother and dad bought this house and stayed there six years. They moved this house six years after the Sartartia dairy closed. That's how long dad stayed there and did jobs for Mr. Helmcamp. They added a utility room, enlarged the bathroom, and made this bedroom longer. Then this whole porch was added and a big, over-sized, single-car garage.

GOODSILL: Take a look at your notes in the front of your book and tell me if there is anything I've forgotten to ask you. Melinda, did you grow up in this area?

MEYER, M: I grew up in Alief. I wanted to ask about this Phoenix Dairy reference. Neither one of us has ever heard of that. Phoenix Dairy was not associated with Sartartia that I know of. There were a couple of buildings at the entrance to Central Prison System No. 1 in Sugar Land, maybe a quarter of the way toward Sugar Land on the north side of US-90A.

EDITOR'S NOTE: reference found to Phenix (sic) Dairy and Dairy Day in the Cleveland area.

MEYER: But I don't even remember seeing those buildings there. There was a terminal there. It was a Phoenix Ice Cream thing, but that was across from Sartartia.

GOODSILL: Is there anything else you'd like to mention?

MEYER: My closest friend at that time was Carleton Lorfing and he is still a friend today. The other kids I played with were Freddy Martin and one other fellow who's name I don't remember. Carleton and I were very close friends. He was a grade ahead of me in high school. We both went to University of Houston. He was also very interested in Sartartia history. This book came from him. He said that he put this together. I don't know if y'all have seen any of this, *Sartartia: An Historic Dairy and Tenant Farm Complex in Fort Bend County*.

GOODSILL: Produced by Espey Huston and Associates in 1989.

MEYER, M: Sometimes the women got rides into town because in those days, a lot of women did not drive. According to his mother, some of them would hitch a ride into town.

GOODSILL: What did Carl Lorfing's father do?

MEYER: He took care of the calves. And as soon as this place shut down, he had another job waiting, at Frost Ranch. It is just outside of the city limits on Highway 6, toward Missouri City. So Carl went to the Missouri City school.

There was a school on Sartartia. I never went there. I knew of it and may have driven by it several years later. I think only Hispanics went to school there.

MEYER, M: That's what I read. Only Hispanics went to that school and the African-American school was back in some other little area.

MEYER: Y'all may not be old enough to remember this, but I can remember that in Sugar Land, there weren't two public drinking fountains. There were THREE of them. Black, Hispanic, and White. It was written on there. Can you believe that?!

GOODSILL: One thing we didn't talk about is your mother's side of the family. What was your mother's father's name?

MEYER: Joseph. I was named after both my grandfathers.

GOODSILL: And Hertha's mother's name?

MEYER: Antonia Pohl. They were German as well.

GOODSILL: Melinda, what was your maiden name?

MEYER, M: Sommers.

GOODSILL: How did the two of you meet?

MEYER, M: Sugar Land High School. I lived in Alief and our school only went to the 6th grade. So they pawned us off on whoever would take us, probably at the cheapest tuition rate. First the kids all went to Missouri City. I went to Missouri City for a year and then I went to Sugar Land for three years. Then I graduated from Bellaire.

GOODSILL: Did you know him during those football and track years?

MEYER, M: Oh, yes. I didn't like him but I knew him. (laughter) I mean, we weren't boyfriend/girlfriend.

GOODSILL: Do you have children?

MEYER: Yes, two. JoAnna and John. JoAnna lives in Houston. John lives in Fort Worth. Each has three children.

GOODSILL: One of the things that got handed down in your male lineage was the ability to fix things. Were you good at fixing things?

MEYER: I was fair.

MEYER, M: He was VERY good at fixing things. I don't know how we would have existed. He could fix anything. Plumbing was his least well qualified area, but he could fix anything.

MEYER: I did everything. That's the way I was raised. If you want it, you maintain it and you fix it and you keep it. I wired this house.

MEYER, M: One of his proudest possessions he was using just last weekend was Grandpa Meyer's saw.

GOODSILL: Don't you love those handmade tools you inherited!

MEYER: We were up at her mother's house (her mother has been gone for 17 years now) up in Central Texas and we were doing some repair work up there. We still have the property. I had to be careful using this saw because it isn't just a regular handsaw. It has fine little teeth on it for cutting fine boards, like trim boards.

Interview ends