

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees: **Robert C. Hargarther**

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Interviewer: Jane Goodsill and Jesse Matthews

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

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Robert C. Hargarther

Transcript

GOODSILL: So nice to see you, Bob. I would like to start with your telling us how you came to Fort Bend County.

HARGARTHER: I was a banker in Rochester, New York, and had been there for 19 years. I was looking to go to the eastern seaboard. I wanted to go to Massachusetts. That was a hot banking spot. I had a banker friend down here in Fort Bend County who had moved down here as a marketing guy. I asked him if he would make up my resume; I'd never had a resume. He said sure, and constructed the resume. The guys at his bank here in Houston looked at it and said, "We need him to come down here".

GOODSILL: What year was this?

HARGARTHER: That was 1976, which makes me a native, I guess.

GOODSILL: No.

HARGARTHER: How about if I married a Houston girl?

GOODSILL: No. You have to be here many generations to be a native! But you're working on it.

HARGARTHER: I AM working on it. I don't think I'm going to make it, but that's okay.

So I was hired by Houston National Bank and stayed with them for three years and found out their banking was different from banking in New York. Susan had to leave the bank when we got married because you can't have both parties at the same bank. It sounds silly but we missed working together, so that's when we decided to go into business for ourselves.

GOODSILL: What is Susan's maiden name?

HARGARTHER: Susan Caradine. When she had to go to another bank she went to Texas Commerce Bank. Anyhow, we decided to look around for something we could do together. I know people laugh at that but that's what we wanted to do. We looked at a lot of things: childcare, flowers, and travel agencies. We also looked at quick-print which seemed like it was going to give us our investment back the quickest and was something we both could work in.

So we bought a Kwik-Kopy print shop. I'm not sure how this happened but we ended up with five of them. We spent 25 years with Kwik-Kopy and then our contract ran out and Susan said, "We're not going to do anything that has employees." So that's when she bought Business Spirit, which is a promotional products company. We had that for about 12 years. That was a neat company. We can put your name and logo on anything. Here comes my advertisement! We can put your name and logo on business cards. We can also put it on anything from paper cups to crystal vases, baseball caps down to shiny shoelaces.

Then we decided it was time to retire so November 23, 2015; we officially retired. Susan was doing some things over here at Vogelsang's Antique Emporium. She went over there as a fun thing and now it's become a permanent job, two full days a week. We go out and buy furniture. Susan and I are now American Pickers in Fort Bend County. (laughter) On Fridays, we go up to southern Oklahoma, go over to the Arkansas-Alabama area and come back down. We take no highways. We take all the back roads and when we see the old tattered beat-up sign that says 'inventory for sale' or garage sale, we stop. I'll go in and I'll talk to the farmer and Susan goes in and crawls around in his garage or barn. It doesn't take very long for us to fill up our Expedition. We come home, dust it off and put it in Vogelsangs.

Back when the garbage people used to come and pick up the big stuff on a regular basis in Sugar Land, people would put out their old furniture and a lot of it was good. Susan brought home a desk that had three legs and said, "Well, you should put this last leg on." But the three legs had beautiful carving on them! I said, "Susan, I'm a banker. I don't do that!" So she learned to buy four legged items. Technically we both call ourselves retired, but we are both still working pretty hard.

GOODSILL: You also decided to become involved in some community activities?

HARGARTHER: I was involved with an awful lot of them in this area. No matter where I have lived I have liked working with non-profits.

GOODSILL: What do think your contribution is to a non-profit organization?

HARGARTHER: Two things. One is at the board meetings, which are usually 'bored' meetings. People are sitting around and are trying to be very professional, which they should be, but I bring humor to the board. I make them laugh and I think a lot of times I stay on a year longer just because they want to be loosened up a little bit.

The other thing I bring is that I was a banker. It's amazing the number of boards who will bring you in and immediately make you the treasurer. The thing is, I never touched a dollar bill when I was in the banking business. I was in the loan business but I had nothing to do with touching money. But they never ask you that question.

GOODSILL: You could help them with some of their financial issues?

HARGARTHER: Absolutely. At two or three agencies that I joined as treasurer, I actually went in and looked at their financial statements and said, 'Okay, here's what we should do. Here's where we should borrow, and here's where we should not borrow' and that kind of thing. That's worked very well for them and made me feel good.

GOODSILL: Jesse Matthews is also with us today.

MATTHEWS: What was your first non-profit in the Houston area?

HARGARTHER: The Fort Bend Women's Center and I found out you can't find them. We went to a little house where they had an "office" but I never did see where the women and kids were. When we built the new building, instead of hiding it, we put high fences to keep the opposing spouse out. Everyone always thinks it's the husband, but sometimes it's the wife. I was very involved with them and still am, even though I'm not on the board anymore.

The Exchange Club collects turkeys every year and up until a couple of weeks ago, I ran that every year. We'd get about 50 turkeys, load them up and take them over there at Thanksgiving time. That's a feel-gooder - a goosebumps on the arms. I like to do things that bring up goosebumps.

GOODSILL: What do lay people need to know about the Women's Center?

HARGARTHER: The Women's Center will take in domestically abused people along with their children. They are literally able to escape from the abuse, maybe in the middle of the night or when the spouse is at work. We put them into a building that used to be hidden but now it has really high fences. They are given some very nice rooms. The clothing they get in their clothing drive, are clean and hung up. They will stay in the Women's Center for approximately 30 days. If they need more time than that, they will get more time, but the goal is to get them back into the real world, doing something. They'll go to school while they are with us.

We may teach them some computer things or how to run a cash register, some skill they could use to go and make money doing. When the time comes, we'll go out and find an apartment for them and make the payments on the apartment or house we are renting for up to a year. We'll get the kids in school, and if they need transportation, we'll arrange that. So it gets a woman and her kids back into the real world and away from the abuser.

MATTHEWS: What year did this begin in Fort Bend County?

HARGARTHER: I'm not sure. It was here when I arrived in 1981.

GOODSILL: Let's talk about the organization you were with for the longest time.

HARGARTHER: That would be the Literacy Council. I was on the Literacy board in Houston and I knew a little bit about what they were doing. You look at Fort Bend County and you think it's a growing county and everything here is blooming. Do you know we have 60,000 people in Fort Bend County who cannot read or speak English?! Of the 60,000, probably half of them are very intelligent, professional people who have been brought over here by their son or their father. He is here and making good money and brings his mom and dad over here. His dad might have been a professional engineer but couldn't get into the States without a sponsor, and he didn't speak or read English. People think it's little kids learning to read and write. We have a 60-year old person who is learning to read and write English.

GOODSILL: And that spans all ethnicities?

HARGARTHER: Absolutely. I wish I could give you the percentages. But it's unbelievable when you look at the facts that the County will give you. [Editor's note: current statistics are: 35% White (non-Hispanic); 24% Hispanic; 21% Black; 20% Asian.]

When I ran for an At-Large position for City Council in Sugar Land in 1996, my opponent and I met one evening with a Chinese delegation at one of the libraries in Sugar Land. It was going along very well. At some point, a man got up and said, "I have a problem right now. You have a police force that has a lot of Hispanic people on it so you have someone who can speak Spanish to the Hispanic population. You don't have any Chinese people on the force and that really bothers me."

My opponent, bless him, was great. He said, "Okay, I'm going to do a little test here. Everybody in this room, please raise your hand if you'd like your son or daughter to be a police officer." And not one hand went up in the air. He said, "That's why we don't have any Chinese in the police department. If they made application to the department today, they'd probably get in just because they ARE Chinese."

GOODSILL: When people come into the literacy program, do they tend to stay long enough to actually learn the language?

HARGARTHER: Yes, I think so. It's pretty amazing when you hear a child read a page. That's what I call a goose bumper. Maybe it takes one month, two months or even three months. At first they look at the page and they don't know what it is, and now they are reading a page out of a book.

GOODSILL: And when you hear an adult do it, it might be even more amazing.

HARGARTHER: Yes. I spent probably the most time in Houston with the Houston deaf children. There was a good feeling. These kids are brought up without being able to hear at all and they are taught to hear and speak. We don't teach them sign language; we teach them how to talk. They don't know what sounds are, so they have to learn by holding on to the throat of the person speaking. They can tell what the sound is they are making. In those days, we had a co-op with Saint Anne's school on Westheimer. They would send some of their children over to us to mainstream them and we would send some of our children over to mainstream them with hearing kids. They would wear a hoop and the teacher would wear a hoop so she could bring sound to these children. I stood in a room one day when the teacher said, "I think we're going to have a breakthrough today." I said, "What do you mean?" And she said, "Listen to this." She held the kid's hand and she said, "Say mama." And the kid said "mama". It was the first time she had spoken a real word. You talk about goosebumps! I used to tell that story and tear-up. It was a great, great moment. That's why I get involved with non-profits.

MATTHEWS: I know you were with the Exchange Club for a number of years.

HARGARTHER: I had the good fortune to establish the Exchange Club in Sugar Land with Steve Ewbank of Sugar Land Properties. We were neighbors and I was in the Exchange Club of Houston at that time. We were raising money for the School for Deaf Children. I went next door and told Steve we weren't selling tickets or asking people to attend a gala. I asked him to write a check, payable to the Houston School for Deaf Children.

He wrote a check for \$1,000 and handed it to me. Most people would give \$100. He told me that when he first started his business, when the time came that he could afford to make a difference, he was going to do so. Steve said, "This is my opportunity to make a difference." I was so impressed that I took him to the Exchange Club of Houston and introduced him to the Club. I told them, "Here's his gift." They all clapped. And I said, "Here's the real gift. You are looking at the first president of the Sugar Land Exchange Club." And Steve had no idea I was going to say that!

After we left, he said, "What did you just do?" I said, "I got you involved in the Exchange Club and everybody knows you're going to be president, so you can't back down." We went out and started the Exchange Club. We started with 35 people and got up to about 200, and now we're at about 150.

GOODSILL: Tell us what the Exchange Club does.

HARGARTHER: It is a non-profit club. My fellow Exchange Club members won't like to hear this, but we are like Rotary and Kiwanis. We are unity in service. Three of us MAY be able to do something that I can't do on my own. The Exchange Club of Sugar Land raised \$160,000 at our spaghetti supper. We give that away every year to the non-profits in the area, depending on their needs. They will come to us with their needs and some of them get the same amount every year. It is giving back to the established non-profits in the area.

We have three different areas. We help children such as taking them to the rodeo or a football game. We'll bring them in to some of our meetings and show them what the world is all about. At Christmas time, the schools would give us names of kids who were in need, and we'd put presents in a pick-up truck, go to the address and take some present to them. Then the kids next door would come running over and ask if we had something for them. We'd have to say we were sorry but we didn't.

So now we do a thing where we use the First Colony Church of Christ's building and when the kids and their family come, they go shopping. The kids go upstairs and play with Santa Claus and make gifts for their parents. The parents go through this 'department store' that has clothes and toys, to 'shop'. We give the parents a ticket for one big gift and three little gifts. The big gift is about a \$30 value. When they have picked all the gifts, the Rotary Club is there and they wrap the gifts for us. They call the kids down and tell them that mom and dad have been shopping and they have presents for them.

Another project for the kids is 'Back to School' shoe program. Payless Shoes will give us a major percentage off their merchandise. The kids and parents come over, and the parents have to stay outside while the kids go in and go shopping for shoes. We give them one Exchange item for every child that comes in. They have to buy shoes that are going to be acceptable for them to wear to school. We take the kids to the register and they 'buy' the shoes.

I had one young man that I was escorting, and he picked out a pair of wing-tips. He went over to the window and held them up. I told him he didn't need to do that - that it was HIS choice. He said he had to show his mother, and she shook her head no. So he put them back. He found some really neat tennis shoes and held them up and she shook her head. Now he's feeling really bad. Finally he finds a pair of loafers and brings them to the window and she nods her head yes. So we went up to the register, and I asked him "What didn't she like about the first shoes?" He said, "My mother was born without thumbs. She can't teach me how to tie a shoe." Now you talk about goosebumps! Those bumps were jumping right off my arms! I couldn't tell that story for a long time. It's pretty heavy.

Then we take care of the teens. We had contests where they write on the national subject of the year. Once a month the schools would send over a candidate and it's not necessarily the best athlete or the best student scholastically, it is somebody who is good at everything but they never get recognized because they aren't the best. The schools are kind enough to pick those people out for us. They'll come read their essay to us and we stand there and applaud. They probably have never had 100 people stand up and applaud them. These are the only people we stand up for at an Exchange Club meeting! We call them 'Youth of the Month'.

At the end of the year, we bring all these youths back and they have the opportunity to read their speeches again and then we pick a 'Youth of the Year' from our chapter and send them to 'Youth of the Area' and pick one of that group that gets sent to National. They are presented at the National Conference and get a check for \$1,000. That's one of the many things we do for teenagers.

We also do a lot of things for adults and we get involved with seniors. We all work on the "Meals for Wheels" program. We place Exchange people in that program. On 5th Street, there is a Community Center there, and there are a lot of buses that bring their seniors in for lunch. That way they get more of an opportunity to interact with each other.

There are probably 50 seniors who are brought in. We'll bring the ice cream and the cake for birthday celebrations for each month. We'll sing Happy Birthday to them and play some games, probably Bingo, which is a nice game for seniors. We'll have many a dozen Exchange-ites go to that and serve the cake. We also bring in some stuff, maybe shoes of the month or shirts of the month. They can go up to the stage and pick those items up. I quit going at one time because at the end of the meeting, standing at the doorway, one of the escorts almost put me on one of those little buses because of my gray hair!

So we help everybody, from kids through seniors.

MATTHEWS: Milton Wright went on a few of those trips.

HARGARTHER: With his accordion. We have a number of events like our Spaghetti Supper where he was the entertainment. He brings in several more musicians with him.

GOODSILL: You've been part of the Fort Bend County Chamber of Commerce and the First Colony MUD District. I'd like to know about the inner workings of those groups.

HARGARTHER: My work with the Fort Bend Chamber is a little on the selfish side. You join the Chamber so you can network. They have a lot of networking affairs. They DO have community committees that you can join like the Central Alliance Chamber that I belong to. My wife and I were the co-chairs of the Business Growth Committee. I never joined any committees at the Fort Bend Chamber but I went to a lot of their events. And they are both good at what they do. They present opportunities for the small businessman to get to know others and to get to know who is out there who can help them.

The First Colony Municipal Utility District - MUDs out here are our answer to zoning. A MUD controls water. We bring in nice, clean, fresh water for you and we also take out your gray water. If we don't do either of those, it's hard for you to live or run a business. If we don't want to have a strip club there, they are not going get any water nor have their grey water taken away.

A MUD is usually self-contained; the people within the MUD control it. But when it first starts, there will be a big, empty lot. You have to have at least three residents to vote. So most developers will put a trailer or two on the property so they can have those three residents. I have an attorney who assigns me to these MUDs. You get to know a lot of people because we are the ones who hire the engineers to lay out the plots.

The contractors will come in and put in the roads for the housing development. The MUD supplies the attorneys for that as well. Once the MUD gets big enough where they have a good sized population, they can then vote for their own representatives. The first time out, they may or may not realize that. A couple of us will end up staying on the MUD, for the knowledge we bring because the residents may not necessarily understand it.

I was on two MUDs: one here in Sugar Land and one in Katy, for the Katy Mills Mall. That was big enough that it was a MUD unto itself, and it will never have residents. So those of us who were assigned to that MUD will be there forever. I don't think there is anything in the contract that tells how to get rid of you. They know how to get you but don't know how to get rid of us.

Just recently we changed from a MUD to a management district. A management district is one that does the outside improvements. The example I give is that in the Galleria, you have those silver arches above the roads? That's something a management district would do, to make the area look nice. Our job now is to make the Katy Mills Mall look nice on the outside. We set the taxes and use a certain amount and then give the city of Katy a certain amount. It's a neat way to get your city built with the people you need.

GOODSILL: Tell us about your involvement with Saint Laurence parish.

HARGARTHER: When we first moved here, Saint Laurence did not exist. Saint Theresa's Catholic Church was the only Catholic Church. So we went over to Saint Theresa's and when I walked up to the doorway, there was a sign that said, 'Saint Theresa's, run by the Basilian fathers' and I thought, "Wow, this is home!" I went to a high school (Saint Thomas Aquinas) run by the Basilian fathers. There are 55 guys in the Houston area who graduated from that high school in Rochester, New York.

MATTHEWS: What year was this?

HARGARTHER: This was in 1982, when I moved here and found this connection back to Rochester. I saw this Basilian plaque. About three weeks later, we had a visiting priest giving the homily, and he talked about how many people thought the Basilian fathers were strictly missionaries in the Southwest. He said they had missions throughout the United States and one of the big missions is in the Northeast, in Rochester, New York. He said there were some poor areas in Rochester and that's what today's collection would be for, to send it to help those folks in Rochester.

That brought back memories. I couldn't play football when I was in school because I had to work after school, but I boxed. I boxed for four years in high school, and in college, and in the Marine Corps. In high school boxing, you broke noses and bled. I broke this thumb twice. You did it because you were sending money to the poor Mexican missions in Sugar Land, Texas and down to Holy Family in Stafford, Texas. That made it okay. At the end of the year we'd have this big mission bout in the coliseum in Rochester and the whole city turned out for it. We raised a ton of money that we could send down here. Now the priest is talking about sending money UP to Rochester!

After mass was over, he came out and I told him I wanted to talk to him. I said, "I'm on to you guys! You're making us in Rochester send money down here and you're getting money from us down here and sending it up there. Who is getting it in the middle?!" We laughed about it. What I didn't know was there was another little old priest standing there, and he didn't say anything. When I was running for City Council, I did the door-to-door thing and I stopped at the Basilian Mission House on Main Street. I saw a tall guy coming in and he used to be the band director at Aquinas in Rochester. So I chatted with him. They were just coming back from the grocery store. He told me that Father Whalen wanted to talk to me. Father Whalen said, "I just want you to know I wasn't really pleased with what you were saying at church a few weeks ago." I told him I was sorry.

So, about a week later, I get a letter in the mail, hand-addressed to me. I open it up and it is full of newspaper clippings, of Mexicans in Sugar Land, all living in these mud huts and how Saint Theresa's came in and built this church for these folks. And how Saint Theresa's raised some money so they could live in real buildings. There was a letter included with the clippings, saying, "I wish you wouldn't spread the fact that we didn't have mud huts, because we did. I don't want people to think we are raising money and spending it indiscriminately." So I said I wouldn't tell that story again. And here I have! (laughter)

GOODSILL: But it's an interesting story.

HARGARTHER: (talking about his not being elected to City Council) A friend of mine sent me a letter about Abraham Lincoln, who ran for office eleven times before he won his first election. It didn't make me feel better but she did send me that. (laughing)

GOODSILL: Let's talk about Saint Laurence Parish and your involvement with them.

HARGARTHER: When we first moved here, we were moved into Sweetwater Villas, which was an office building on Sweetwater Boulevard. We rented 3-4 rooms and converted them into a 'church'. We put a lot of folding chairs in there and put an altar up at the front. There was glass on two sides, floor to ceiling. In front, behind the glass, was a pond, pretty trees and bushes. It was really quite nice. But when we walked in there, he had us facing the blank wall, so he could see our faces. So he preached up there and we looked at a blank wall. The following week, he had all the chairs turned around, facing the window.

After mass, he said, "Next week we are going to change it and we are going to be against this wall. I'm pretty proud that I have three different churches in three weeks." Someone asked, "Why are we moving again?" He said, "I could tell where all the ducks were at any given time. Instead of watching me, you were watching the ducks go back and forth. I'm not sure that's what God wants you to do. I think he wants you to watch me." So we got to move again.

The Architectural Committee was a group of people who visited with and worked with the architect. They would come in with their most recent drawings, and they had done churches before so they knew where we were headed and what we wanted. We also picked out colors. Again, they are the professionals but we wanted to feel like we had some involvement. And we came out with a pretty church.

GOODSILL: What else did you want to talk about today?

HARGARTHER: Another thing we should mention is the Regional Council Against Alcohol and Drug Abuse. It used to be that when a teenager was picked up by the authorities, he/she went to jail. There were certain people that the judges felt they could work with and decided not to send them to jail. The judge would send them to the Regional Council, and we would set them up with a program where they had to come in and see us so many days a week or evenings, depending on if they were working or going to school, and talk about what drug and alcohol abuse was doing to them. That was a good program.

Every once in a while it got a little short on money, so they would have to have some kind of fund raiser. Helen Cordes was the president of the board at that point, and I was her finance guy. I would say, "Helen, I need some money." And she'd say, "Well, I'm tired of going to galas. I don't want to have a gala."

She thought about it and came back with an idea, called 'No Go/No Show'. I asked her what she was talking about. Helen said, "I want you to buy a ticket to our gala for \$100. But on the day of the gala, I want you to go down to the river and go fishing, or go out in a boat on the bay, or go play golf, because there won't be a gala to attend. We want you to go and do what you want and we got what we needed from you, and that was \$100." She used to raise a lot of money that way. Others wish they had thought of it and wish they could copy it, but they know they can't because it would be so obvious that they copied the idea. It was a good program and Helen was the president for two years, and she made that thing go.

GOODSILL: Do you want to talk about Fort Bend YMCA in Missouri City?

HARGARTHER: Sure. I wish I could tell you who brought me on. It might have been Doug Earl, who was the director at the time and was in my Exchange Club. I came in as a director. Then I worked my chairs, being Secretary, then Treasurer - which doesn't mean a lot in Fort Bend because the money is all controlled by downtown. Then I was president. That was a nice job because you got very involved. You could make a difference. So many of these non-profits, you go in and you make a statement and suggest they do this or that, and you get the nod saying that's a good idea. But with the Fort Bend Y, they really made some changes, some purchases, and did some things.

One thing was a piece of property that was across the street and it was just sitting there. I had seen in years past, where people don't take advantage of opportunities, and then as they grow, that property isn't available any more. So I worked very diligently to get that piece of property purchased and failed. The same thing with the swimming pool. We had an outdoor pool and I suggested we put one inside and that became a very popular spot. When I first went on that board, it was a Y without a building. The board used to meet at a local church and had all their events at pools or parks that they rented. Finally we started growing and built a building. I think we called ourselves 'YMCA with no walls' or something like that. The T W Davis Y in Richmond is huge. They do a great job out there for their community and have been around a long time.

GOODSILL: It's always full. Is the one in Missouri City (Fort Bend Y) always full, too?

HARGARTHER: Yes. Anybody in Fort Bend County can go there. There's a program called "Silver Sneakers". Are you familiar with that? It's for people over 65. Whatever non-profit health club you belong to, such as the Y, the "Silver Sneakers" membership gives you full advantages and your insurance company pays for it.

My wife got it, too and it's worked out quite well for us. Not because SHE was 65 but rather that she was the spouse of a 65 year old. That Y has grown into a very large facility. They have added basketball courts, the indoor swimming pool, a couple more classrooms, and they have all the current equipment and keep it up to date.

GOODSILL: Do you and Susan have children?

HARGARTHER: I have two girls. One is 54 and the other is 52. The older daughter and her family (two grandkids) live on Bainbridge Island in Puget Sound, near Seattle. The other has one son, and she lives in Bangor, Maine. You can't get any further apart than that in the continental United States!

GOODSILL: Ha! As you think about this story you have told us, is there anything you'd like to add?

HARGARTHER: I haven't lived in a lot of different places - Rochester, New York and Kingwood and then I moved down here. I can't imagine a city that is more diverse and has everything you want. It's pretty, it's kept clean, and it's a city of trees because they plant trees like it is going out of style. I like the physical part of Sugar Land and I definitely like the city part. It's a good mixture of folks.

GOODSILL: And you feel as though Fort Bend County is moving in a direction that you are happy with?

HARGARTHER: Very much so.

GOODSILL: You like the way the non-profits are helping the community?

HARGARTHER: Absolutely. Their duties are all here and they are addressing needs that are here. None are going out there just because they think it would be a nice thing to do.

GOODSILL: Thank you for your contribution to our community. And thank you for giving us this interview.

HARGARTHER: I contribute to our community because I like to do it. I love your thanks but I enjoyed doing the work I have done.

GOODSILL: I appreciate people who give their time, energy, and money to a cause that they think is worthy. I appreciate your talking about the inside workings of these organizations and what they do. That's the contribution you are making today.