

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Roy Cordes, Junior**

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Interviewer: Jane Goodsill

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

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Transcript

GOODSILL: Can you tell me how your family got to Fort Bend County?

CORDES: My mother's family came to the Sugar Land area, around 1900. The Dunkerlys and the Friends moved in from Southern Indiana and Illinois. They came down for job opportunities.

GOODSILL: Now, when you say Dunkerlys and Friends, those were...?

CORDES: My grandmother's maiden name was Dunkerly and my grandfather was a Friend.

GOODSILL: Your mother's full name?

CORDES: Her name is Betty Jane Friend Cordes.

CORDES: Most of the family at one time or another worked for Imperial Sugar Company or Sugarland Industries. Several Dunkerly uncles worked for Imperial Sugar their entire careers.

GOODSILL: What kind of work did they do?

CORDES: Mostly they worked over in the refinery, either in the actual production of sugar or in what was then known as the machine shop, which was the maintenance side of it. My grandfather, Charles Leo (C. L.) Friend, worked his way up from the sugar boiling area. His last job was as the foreman of the maintenance shop. He ran the maintenance shop for the entire refinery.

GOODSILL: That's a big job because there's a lot of maintenance to be done on all the equipment they had over there.

CORDES: Yes, and done without some of the equipment we have today that ease the work load.

GOODSILL: Where did they live? What part of town?

CORDES: My earliest memories of where they lived, was next door to the Teacherage, 114 Venice. In fact I lived there a short time as well. They lived in several locations throughout the city. They lived in the Eldridge Home in the '40s, during World War II. In fact, that's where my mother and father were married.

GOODSILL: How did it come to pass that they lived in that house?

CORDES: He was working for the sugar company and the house was available, and they moved into it. I don't know the whole story about how they got to live there. But they lived there a number of years. And they lived across Eldridge Road, on what was known as the Wirtz property. It was about a nine acre tract. Wirtz was a dentist who moved away from Sugar Land but kept the property. I grew up visiting them a lot. There were horses on the property and a barn in the back that had a lot of hay in it. For a young boy, it was a fun place to play.

GOODSILL: That was across the street from the Eldridge house?

CORDES: Almost directly. Coming in for US-90A, going north on Eldridge, you had the Weth property and then you had the Wirtz property, on the right hand side. On the same side of what used to be Laura Eldridge Hospital.

GOODSILL: Did your mother have brothers and sisters?

CORDES: Yes. My mother had two sisters. The oldest was Catherine and the youngest is Beverly. And she had a younger brother, Johnny (John William), who was fifteen months older than I am. He is deceased now. But he and I grew up like brothers since I'm an only child. I played A LOT growing up near where my grandparents lived. He was the big brother.

GOODSILL: So how about your father's family?

CORDES: My dad graduated from high school in Columbus, Texas, in 1939. That's where he grew up. My paternal great grandparents moved here from Oldenberg, Germany, in the 1870s, and settled in the Schulenburg/Fayetteville area. A lot of them had some farmland at the time.

GOODSILL: And their name was Cordes?

CORDES: Cordes and Meyers.

GOODSILL: Is Cordes a German name?

CORDES: Cordes is a German name with an Alsatian spelling. But it is German. Instead of the hard 'K', it's got the 'C'.

GOODSILL: So they settled in Schulenburg. What brought them to Fort Bend County?

CORDES: My grandfather was manager of a cotton gin in Columbus and he was hired to come to Sugar Land to run the cotton gin for Sugarland Industries. That's how the family moved here.

GOODSILL: What was his full name?

CORDES: Hugo Henry Cordes. There was a fourth name but he really didn't use it. There was a tradition at the time when he was born that they got three names plus the surname.

GOODSILL: Miss Meyers? What was her name?

CORDES: Alma.

GOODSILL: And they had your father. Any other children?

CORDES: My dad was the youngest of three. Dad's brother was Harold Cordes and Dad's sister, my aunt, was Ethelina Wilhemina Cordes. She got the full German effect. Which got shortened to Ethelyn.

GOODSILL: How old was your father when Hugo Henry moved to Sugar Land?

CORDES: Dad was born in '21, so in '39 he would have been 17 or 18.

GOODSILL: Tell us something about your father's life.

CORDES: He graduated from Columbus high school. They moved here in 1939. Dad worked several jobs for the Industries. He actually worked in the pharmacy or drug store part-time. He played on the company baseball team. Dad was a good athlete growing up. He was working here and he had signed up for pilot training with the Army Air Corps about a month before Pearl Harbor.

GOODSILL: Where was that?

CORDES: He signed up here in Houston but he was living in Sugar Land at the time. He was accepted and began training in a couple of months, like February or so of 1942 after the December 1941 bombing at Pearl Harbor. He went through pre-flight and flight school at Kelly Air Force Base in San Antonio. He graduated and got his wings in November of '42, I think. He flew in different commands. At the time whatever class you were in generally went into a particular field. Some went into fighters, the next class may go into bombers, the next class may go into transports. Dad was in the class that went into transports and what they called ferry command.

He flew aircraft to the Middle East to turn over to the Russians, who used them in combat against the Germans. The best way and the fastest way to get the aircraft to the Russians was to fly them.

GOODSILL: They were American aircraft?

CORDES: Made in the United States. Picked up, flown south across the Caribbean into Brazil. From Rio de Janeiro they would cross over to the Ascension Islands and then across Africa into Iran. Maybe just north of Iran. That's where the Russians would pick the aircraft up. Then the pilots would deadhead back on transport flights.

GOODSILL: What does your father say about that kind of life?

CORDES: He enjoyed it. He liked the challenges. He and my mother didn't get married until '44 so he was single at the time. He did this for a while. Then he was transferred to India and flew what was known as 'The Hump', the transports from India into China, across the Himalayas. Although they were a transport outfit, my recollection is they had the second highest casualty rate, second only to the 8th Air Force, the bombers out of England. The high fatality rate was because of the Himalayan mountains. There were no radars and the C-47s they flew had a maximum ceiling of around 17,000 feet and they were flying through mountains as high as 27,000 feet.

GOODSILL: Did he ever say anything about Colonel Tunner, the one who organized the transport planes over The Hump?

CORDES: Not that I recall.

GOODSILL: I just read a book about that and he's the character who becomes very important when they do the Berlin airlift.

CORDES: Dad flew the Berlin airlift as well.

GOODSILL: This is the man who organized the schedules, so the planes efficiently went in and went out on a schedule, carrying the exact right amount of tonnage, etc.

CORDES: I don't remember Dad mentioning him, but the last part of his one-year tour in China, he was the pilot for General Chennault. He flew him wherever he wanted to go.

GOODSILL: And where do you suppose that was?

CORDES: All over China! (chuckles) I remember that the General's plane was a silver C-47 instead of the regulation olive-drab aircrafts.

GOODSILL: Your father enjoyed that?

CORDES: Yes. He flew a lot from India, across the Atlantic, and he flew a fair amount in and out of Kunming, China and a few other locations. How it's spelled today, I don't know. He stayed in the Air Force when he rotated back to the United States. He had just married my mom before he went to China. They got married in May of 1944 and about a month later, Dad went to China. He was there from June, '44 to May, '45.



Claire Lee Chenault was an American military aviator best known for his leadership of the "Flying Tigers" and the Republic of China Air Force in World War II. ca. 1945 --courtesy Wikipedia

There was a whole cadre of pilots flying The Hump, but the last two months when he was flying Chennault, he was the chief pilot.

GOODSILL: How do you suppose he got chosen for that job?

CORDES: I don't know.

GOODSILL: So, then what happened?

CORDES: He came back, stayed in the Air Force and continued to fly with them. He helped lay out the design for what later became the C-74s, which for a brief period of time, were the largest transport planes in the world. He actually flew those in support of the Berlin Airlift.

GOODSILL: What can you tell me about that?

CORDES: He flew a lot of trans-Atlantic flights, carrying foodstuffs and equipment over to Rhein-Main.

GOODSILL: Did he actually fly into Berlin?

CORDES: The last two months of the airlift he flew into Berlin from Frankfurt.

GOODSILL: But the rest of the time he was flying from America to take the food over there.

CORDES: Right, in support of the airlift. The interesting thing about the C-74, is that it was the first aircraft that had reversible pitch props and was the first prop-driven plane that could actually back up.

GOODSILL: And the reason you want to back up an airplane...?

CORDES: Like the jets today, you can put them in reverse and they'll create enough flow to actually back the aircraft away from the gate, if they need to.

After he flew the Berlin Airlift, in 1950, Mom said he'd been away from home enough and that she thought he ought to get off active duty, so Dad did. They bought the cleaners here in Sugar Land.

GOODSILL: Well, THAT'S a leap, from being a pilot to being a dry-cleaner! (both laugh) Tell us where the dry cleaners was located.

CORDES: It was originally located on Kempner Street, adjacent to the refinery. In my earliest memory the old mercantile store was still there. I remember riding up in elevators in it. Then there was a building next to it that was called The Red Barn Café. Then there was the dry cleaners and next door to it was the shoe shop.

GOODSILL: On the corner across from where NALCO is now on Highway 90?

CORDES: Before you get to that. The dry cleaners and the shoe shop were in the same building. Then there was a white building that was the medical clinic. The Sugar company built it and staffed it with doctors.

GOODSILL: So was the dry cleaners a thriving business?

CORDES: I think like many small businesses, it was a challenge. It was one of the few independently owned businesses in Sugar Land. Through a LOT of hard work, Mom and Dad made it work. They didn't take a vacation until the early '60s. But they made it work and then later owned a washateria and a package or liquor store, as well, all in Sugar Land.

When Dad hit 60 he was eligible for his Air Force retirement, because he stayed in the reserves. He retired as a Lieutenant Colonel from the Air Force Reserves.

In 1981, when he hit 60, he had been mayor of Sugar Land for nine years and chose not to run for re-election. He told people that he was dropping out of active life. He and mom did a lot of things they hadn't done before. They traveled a lot in the United States, principally. Lots of long driving trips. They were blessed with good health until about three years ago, so they got to see and do a lot.

GOODSILL: What did he say about his years being mayor?

CORDES: He became mayor in 1972, when Mayor McFadden passed away. This was right when Sugarland Industries was selling all the land that later became First Colony. Once those lawsuits and everything got settled and the land finally transferred out, Dad and the city council members were the ones that planned with the developer most of what is now First Colony in Sugar Land. It's amazing how those plans that were developed in the late '70s and early '80s are very, very closely aligned to what is Sugar Land today. Sugar Land was blessed by the fact that Gerald Hines got involved and turned it into a master planned community. He was someone who cared a GREAT deal about making it a first class development AND across the full range of residences; there are apartments, 'starter' homes, mid-price homes and upper end.

GOODSILL: Did Gerald Hines propose that plan and your dad and the city council approved it?

CORDES: Yes. His companies did. Through some negotiations with the council and their staff, which wasn't all that large at that time.

GOODSILL: How many people on council?

CORDES: The mayor and five council members.

GOODSILL: OH, you're saying the staff wasn't that large! That's a lot of work for a small staff!

CORDES: Yes. Sugar Land didn't get above 5,000 residents to qualify as a home-rule city until about 1979. I ran for and was elected to the Home Rule Charter Commission, and later served as chair of the first Home Rule Charter Commission for Sugar Land, which wrote its charter. That's why I remember the date fairly well.

GOODSILL: I don't know about the Home Rule Charter Commission. Can you educate us about that?

CORDES: Under state law, it's how you write what is in effect the constitution for the city. You have to have over 5,000 people to become a home rule city. Richmond JUST voted to do it. They approved the charter written by their citizens in May. Basically it outlines the form of government the city will have and establishes some of the parameters. It gives them broader ordinance-making authority, annexation authority, and establishes zoning--the right to zone.

GOODSILL: By this time you had graduated from law school?

CORDES: Yes. I was working in-house as a lawyer for a company called Sperry-Sun. They granted me the time to donate back to the city to do things like this.

GOODSILL: It wasn't a paid position?

CORDES: No. There were fifteen of us. Bill Little was on the Commission. Dad was mayor at the time. They elected fifteen people, including me. I was vice-chair and our chairman got transferred out of town one or two months into the writing of the charter, which was about a year-long project. Then I became chair.

GOODSILL: This was an important turning point for Sugar Land, when they began to come up with their constitution.

CORDES: Home Rule Charter. We initiated term-limits as part of that charter – four two-year terms. The attitude we had was, especially for local elections, that's enough. Let's get fresh ideas and fresh blood in. They are effectively volunteer positions, although there is some minimal compensation. I think when I first got elected to city council in 1981, dad went out as mayor and I ran for City Council and got elected – and I think my compensation was \$50 a month.

GOODSILL: What inspired you to do that?

CORDES: My parents. They have always been active in things in the city. Although mom never held elective office, she was always involved in things. The opportunity presented itself, I ran, and happened to win and then served as a City Councilman.

GOODSILL: I've always wondered about that because you have to have a full time job AND do your City Council work, which is close to a full time job!

CORDES: RIGHT! Again, I talked to my employer and they approved it. At that time I was serving as General Counsel at Sperry-Sun. They said okay, so I could do both. I served on the City Council until May of 1990. I had had a short break when we were transferring to district council members and I was going to become a district council member. But I had bought a home in Sugar Creek and I was moving out of my district. So I did not run for re-election. Three months later, one of the at-large council members who worked for NALCO, got transferred away, which opened up his slot. They had a special election and I won it. So I was effectively starting over in terms of term limits. I served until 1990 when I filed to run for County Judge. I won the election in 1990 and served four years as County Judge. The thing about elections, sometimes they have their own term limits. I won in 1990 and lost in 1994.

GOODSILL: Did you enjoy that job?

CORDES: Yes. It's a fulfilling job. You get to meet a LOT of people. You get to work with a lot of folks within Fort Bend County and try to make the county the best it can be. You 'sell' the county. You work with the elected officials. We were much smaller than we are today, a lot fewer employees, and in some ways, less professional, in all honesty. The county had about 240,000 people when I was elected. Today it's 630,000. I've generally stayed active in the community. What I found when I was County Judge is that people, even within the cities, talked a lot about Fort Bend County. Not necessarily just Sugar Land, Richmond, Rosenberg, Missouri City – it's Fort Bend County.

GOODSILL: Four years hardly seems long enough to get your feet wet when you take on a job as big as that?

CORDES: There's a learning curve that you go through, it takes a year or so just to get the feel for it. While I was County Judge, I was the budget officer for the county as well. Now there's a staff of professionals.

GOODSILL: I suppose they don't teach you in law school how to be a budget officer?

CORDES: No, but fortunately my undergraduate degree was in finance and accounting, so that helped a little bit.

GOODSILL: I bet it did! (both laugh) So what did you do after '94?

CORDES: I worked as a consultant/lawyer. When I was with Sperry-Sun I did a lot of international law and transactional law and had met a fair number of folks. As County Judge you do as well. What I did for a year and a half was practice international law. I helped people set up operations and negotiate contracts in Colombia, Brazil, and Poland. I represented the owners of an English company when they were selling it to a U. S. company. Then I helped run a small investment company that was based out of Bermuda, for a couple of years. Not huge dollars but part of this was from some people we had met and become good friends with, in England. When I was General Counsel at Sperry-Sun, we bought their company and became friends. When they started other companies I helped them.

GOODSILL: What sounds interesting about your career is the diversity.

CORDES: Yeah, I could never hold a steady job very long! (laughs)

GOODSILL: (laughing) You just kept doing more and different things. And THEN what happened to you?

CORDES: We met Bill and Debbie Schwer and became very good friends. Bill and I started talking, and he had an opening at Imperial Sugar and I started doing some work for them as a contract lawyer on the transactional side. After a period of time, almost a year, Bill offered me a full-time position and I switched. I stopped doing everything else I was doing and went to work for Imperial Sugar.

GOODSILL: In-house counsel?

CORDES: In-house counsel. I was their Deputy General Counsel while they were growing the company and in the process of acquiring Savannah Sugar and then later, Diamond Crystal brands. Because Bill had other responsibilities, not just as General Counsel – he had HR reporting to him and IT and other areas – so I basically ran the day-to-day of the legal group. Then later I became Corporate Secretary of Imperial.

GOODSILL: More diversity! Something you hadn't done before.

CORDES: They were good opportunities. I was especially thrilled about becoming corporate secretary because back when Imperial was a closely held company. My aunt, Myrtle Stabler – back in the '40s and '50s – was corporate secretary of the Sugar company.

GOODSILL: Isn't that interesting, the family connection in having that job.

CORDES: Yes. My great-grandfather was a Justice of the Peace when I was born. He actually signed my birth certificate.

GOODSILL: Which side was this?

CORDES: My mother's side. He was W. L. Friend. On my birth certificate, it says 'W. L. Friend, great-grandfather'.

GOODSILL: AWWW! That's nice. Did you happen to look at the records, when you were the corporate secretary, to see what kind of records Myrtle kept?

CORDES: I had occasion to go into them several times, but they were probably not as detailed as ours. Once we became a publicly-held company, at that point your legal requirements are entirely different.

GOODSILL: Interesting! Then what happened in your career?

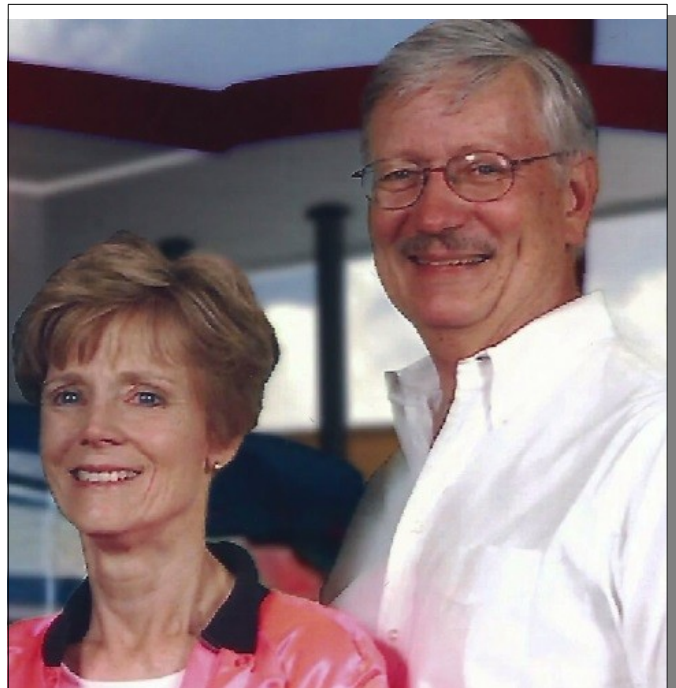
CORDES: I was still at Imperial when my wife, Helen, was diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's in 2002.

GOODSILL: What's Helen's full name?

CORDES: Helen Rae McHenry.

GOODSILL: When did you get married?

CORDES: We were married in 1987. It was a second marriage for both of us. Helen was VERY active in the community. She served as a Fort Bend ISD trustee; she had her own business – a travel agency, International Tours. She chaired a number of fund-raising events in the '90s, such as the Challenger fund-raising event, raising around \$600,000 to put a Challenger Center at the George Observatory at Brazos Bend State Park.



Helen Cordes, who actively supported many community organizations, including three years as president of the FBC Regional Council on Substance Abuse, with her husband, Roy Cordes, Jr.

She chaired the Lone Star Stomp and other things. She also served six years on the board as a director of the Gulf Coast United Way. That was back when they had only about 30 directors on the Gulf Coast Board.

GOODSILL: So she was a bundle of energy.

CORDES: Yes, and three years as president of Regional Council on Substance Abuse.

GOODSILL: Wow. So when did she get diagnosed?

CORDES: She was diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's in April of 2002.

GOODSILL: What a shock that must have been.

CORDES: Yes. She was 56 at the time. I continued to work at Imperial through May of 2004, when I turned in my resignation. Helen and I took a year off, to enjoy and have fun before the disease progressed too much.

GOODSILL: Smart!

CORDES: We did a lot of fishing and having fun in Rockport, and traveled to see family up in Alaska.

Helen has two daughters, Katherine and Allison. I'm their step-dad. Katherine's family live in Fredericksburg most of the year but their main business is in Alaska, so they're up there for four months of the year. Allison is a school teacher and he works for Dell Computer in Austin.

GOODSILL: So you took a year off! How smart.

CORDES: Yes. Most definitely. Probably, looking back, the best thing I did.

GOODSILL: What drew you back into the workplace?

CORDES: Bud Childers, then County Attorney in Fort Bend County, had an opening as 1st Assistant and I could take it with some flexibility for time off as I needed it. Plus, we were getting to the point where Helen and I would not be traveling as much, because of the progression of the disease. Although we still did a lot of things. I was hired as Bud's 1st Assistant and then he decided to run for the bench, so he had to resign. I ran for his job in 2006 and won, with a whole lot of help.

GOODSILL: And you've been in that position since?

CORDES: Yes. I was re-elected in 2008 and 2012.

GOODSILL: Tell us a little bit about what the job of County Attorney involves.

CORDES: It's kind of like being General Counsel of a corporation. The County Attorney in Fort Bend County is strictly civil. We do not have any criminal authority, unlike most counties. In most counties that have county attorneys, the county attorney handles ALL misdemeanors within that county. In Harris County and Fort Bend, the offices are purely civil.

GOODSILL: So, what does that mean?

CORDES: It means we don't have any criminal authority; we don't represent the State of Texas prosecuting criminal cases. We represent Fort Bend County in lawsuits, we act as a general counsel that drafts and negotiates contracts and advises County Commissioners' Court, county elected officials and employees on the law, and will represent them. We give opinions. I have three lawyers that are part of the office that represent the state of Texas in child protective custody cases. We represent CPS, on parental-rights terminations or modifications.

GOODSILL: Another different job! And a very diverse career. Well, you always wanted to go from one thing to another! (both laugh)

CORDES: It's been challenging and fun. It's like what we ALL have had at various times in our lives. There's lots of ups and downs. But it's been good. I've lived most of it in Fort Bend County, at first by accident, and later by design.

GOODSILL: We skipped over the part where you went to law school. Where did you go?

CORDES: I went to law school at the University of Houston. I finished my undergraduate degree and law school after I got out of the Air Force. I spent three and a half years on active duty.

GOODSILL: Where were you on active duty?

CORDES: I spent a year in Denver and two and a half years in Germany.

GOODSILL: What was your job in the Air Force?

CORDES: I was a Special Electronic Technician. The actual job was classified.

GOODSILL: That's interesting. So you can't tell me anything about that!

CORDES: NO! (both laugh)

GOODSILL: I like that! Adds a little mystery.

CORDES: Various aspects of it went anywhere from 'Confidential' all the way up to 'Top Secret' on certain aspects. We reported to a group in Alexandria, Virginia.

GOODSILL: OH, I see! I think I know that group! So tell me the sequence of events again.

CORDES: I graduated from high school. I'm going to give you more information than you want, but, what the heck! I went to Wharton County Junior College because I'd tried to get in the Air Force Academy and found out I had substandard high frequency hearing. So I had my appointment through the Kempner family and the Congressman in Galveston, to go to the Academy and had succeeded in everything other than when I found out I couldn't hear. That kept me out of the Academy, and I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. So I went to WCJC for two years and got my associate's degree. Then I went to the University of Texas, joined a fraternity and at one of the low points of my life, I succeeded in flunking out of school. (both laugh)

GOODSILL: A lot of accomplished men, Roy, have things like this in their past!

CORDES: Embarrassing, but its part of my history. It makes me who I am today. It shows me what lack of effort will do.

GOODSILL: Is that when you joined the Air Force?

CORDES: Yeah. I got my head on straight!

GOODSILL: They obviously saw you had SOME potential because they gave you an important job! (both laughing) So you were redeemed!

CORDES: Yeah! So I joined the Air Force and went back to school, finished my degree. I actually made the Dean's List my last three semesters at UT and then got accepted at law school. I got accepted to a summer entering class at U of H, so I finished law school in two years rather than three, because I felt like I was behind. I think my class ranking was 10th out of 90, so again, kind of redemption. The only reason I'm bringing it up is because I'm probably embarrassed about flunking out of school! (both laughing) But as I said, that's part of the history. I used that at times in talking with young adults and high school seniors when I've given talks on Career Days.

I used the fact that my mistake delayed me a few years, but you can still overcome your mistakes. Just because you have a bad year educationally, you can still focus if you want to turn it around, and achieve your goal.

GOODSILL: It's obvious that in your career you've been willing to learn new things and put your mind to different problem-solving sets. At the time that you flunked out, did you not have an idea of where you were going and so you weren't very interested?

CORDES: Didn't have a clue.

GOODSILL: Weren't intellectually engaged yet?

CORDES: No. I had gone to school, taking a lot of science courses and becoming a physician and then decided I didn't want to do that.

GOODSILL: What year was this?

CORDES: I graduated from high school in '65.

GOODSILL: Well, there was a lot going on in the world right then that made young people skeptical.

CORDES: A whole lot. I decided that wasn't what I wanted to do – something about blood. (chuckles) As a government major/economics minor at UT I realized that government wasn't really my focus either.

GOODSILL: Very odd, considering what your future held.

CORDES: When I went back, I had a real tight focus and knew I wanted to get a business education. I knew I wanted to be in finance and accounting and focused very hard on that.

GOODSILL: What led you toward law school?

CORDES: Talking to people about becoming a lawyer. Then I had a couple of professors in my finance group that wanted me to get an MBA and maybe go on to get a Ph. D. They thought I had the ability to do that. I decided I really wasn't focused enough or have the desire to do it. I probably could have stayed and gotten my MBA at Texas.

GOODSILL: That would have been a whole different career for you.

CORDES: I probably would not have gone in law. I picked the legal side of it and never looked back.

GOODSILL: Think you made the right choice?

CORDES: Of course!

GOODSILL: It seems to have used a lot of your natural skills, your problem-solving and your ability to focus.

CORDES: Many people say, "Don't be afraid to fail." That's how you can succeed.

GOODSILL: Do you spend some time mentoring younger people?

CORDES: Some time, yes. A lot of the attorneys in the office are younger lawyers. I try to work with them. As I indicated earlier, while I haven't done much in the last year or so, I have gone out to some high schools and spoken.

GOODSILL: Are you on any boards or commissions?

CORDES: Yes. I'm currently on the Fort Bend Museum Association board and hold the position of Vice-President of Operations on that board. I'm a member of the Sugar Land Heritage Foundation board, and I'm on the Advisory Board of the Children's Advocacy Center for Child Advocates, Fort Bend. Those are the three I'm on now. In the past, I've served on Fort Bend Seniors board, Regional Council board, YMCA board and have been president of both Fort Bend Senior Citizens and Regional Council boards.

GOODSILL: Just can't help rising to the top, can you?! (both laugh)

CORDES: Part of it is just following mom and dad. They were involved in a lot of that and Helen, from the time I've known her, was heavily involved civically as well.

GOODSILL: Some of this you can do in honor of her, since she can't do it now?

CORDES: Yes. And especially the '90s and in early 2000's, Helen and I were heavily involved in LOTS of things. We were both active in the community, starting in the mid-2000s, probably 2005.

GOODSILL: I want to go back to something you mentioned earlier. You were talking about the development of First Colony and the changes that were happening in Sugar Land. You said, "Once we got all the legal suits settled." To what were you referring?

CORDES: The initial suit involved the shareholders of Sugarland Industries and the sugar company, who initially sold the land. There was a lawsuit involved that said it needed to go out for bids, in order to see if they could get more money for the land. And that DID happen.

GOODSILL: As opposed to selling it to one person, like Gerald Hines.

CORDES: The initial buyer bid on it, that they were going to sell to, but did not come in as the high bid the second time around. I think Thomas Cousins – here's where the memory gets murky – out of Atlanta, had the high bid for the property – made the commitment with Ford Motor Credit as his financial backer and later Shell Stichting was involved.

GOODSILL: Shell?

CORDES: It's a pension trust for Royal Dutch Shell. At that time it was called Shell Stichting. There were some lawsuits on roads that some local folks had filed that delayed the project for a while. With the delays and some economic issues, Cousins had to drop out and ultimately Gerald Hines acquired the interest.

GOODSILL: Which turned out to be a good thing?

CORDES: Which turned out to be a wonderful thing.

GOODSILL: So as we're looking back over your personal story and your business career, and history of Sugar Land and Fort Bend County, is there anything that we didn't talk about or that you feel we didn't give enough time to?

CORDES: I can always talk about Helen. I've hit the highlights when I talked about her involvement with people. When she had her International Tours travel agency, she met people like Bob Brown. They were involved in a breakfast club together, almost like a networking club.

GOODSILL: I bet THAT was a powerhouse!

CORDES: OH – back in the '80s.

GOODSILL: Did they especially invite people to come and join them?

CORDES: Only certain people, I'm sure! (laughs)

GOODSILL: Other powerhouses!

CORDES: It was a good group. Helen was also one of the people who cared a lot about the community. It was evident with her involvement with so many different charitable functions. She was actively recruited to serve on the United Way board. I think she was very proud of that accomplishment and chaired several of their subcommittees while she was on it. Then she chaired some of the fundraising activities for United Way in Fort Bend County in the '90s.

GOODSILL: That's a LOT of work. With the fundraising – I think people sometimes underestimate the wind beneath the wings in the community. How important it is to DO the fundraising for charities?

CORDES: The United Way asked Helen to serve on the Regional Council Board at a time when the Regional Council had been through a very difficult time. Helen agreed to do this. She and the other directors helped turn it around and then her last three years on the board she served as president of Fort Bend Regional Council.

GOODSILL: So she was more than just an enthusiastic personality. She was a problem solver and a critical thinker as well.

CORDES: Yes. Her undergraduate degree is a BS in Education from the University of Houston. So she and I are both U of H graduates. At different times! (chuckles) She had a love for people, a love for the community, and a wonderful personality; the drive to go for it. It was not unusual when she had a project on-going, I'd wake up at 4:00 in the morning and she was awake. She might be in there working on it.

GOODSILL: The two of you together – talk about powerhouse! (laughing)

CORDES: But none of us can accomplish anything by ourselves. It's how we can engage other people and involve other people in the process.

GOODSILL: That's entirely true.

CORDES: And EXCITE other people!

GOODSILL: While we're talking about it, is there anything about Alzheimer's, any educational or interesting material that we need to know?

CORDES: There is. There's a lot of information. The Gulf Coast Alzheimer's Association out of Houston [now the Houston and Southeast Texas Chapter – www.alz.org/Texas], which is a 27 county area that they administer to – has a great deal of information for care givers, for early-onset or early diagnosis people for early stage. They are very helpful. When Helen was first diagnosed, we met the then executive director of the Alzheimer's Association, and Helen volunteered to do anything she could for them, to help raise awareness. She spoke at a couple of their meetings. She spoke at a clinical meeting in November, in the Medical Center, about the diagnosis process, from the perspective of somebody who went through it. She was honorary chair of one of their walks that they had in Sugar Land. She helped raise money for them. She was heavily involved the first two or three years of her diagnosis.



Former Fort Bend County Attorney Roy Cordes Jr. with a photo of his wife, Helen, taken before she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease nearly 18 years ago. Today Cordes volunteers with the Alzheimer's Association and cares for his wife of 30 years, who is now in late stages of the disease. --courtesy fortbendstar.com

Not long after President Reagan died, his family had given permission to the Alzheimer's Association to have a Ronald Reagan Spirit of Courage Award that they could give out. Helen received the first award for the Gulf Coast Alzheimer's Association, for what she did.

GOODSILL: That's very touching.

CORDES: She used the phrase, "If I can be your poster child while I can, I'll be glad to do it." And she did.

GOODSILL: Do you have any hope that we're going to be able to make some progress in the treatment?

CORDES: There's always hope. Put enough resources behind it and really understand what causes it – that's one of the issues right now. They know about the amyloid plaque build-up that basically short-circuits the electrical impulses from going across the neurons. The way it's been described as a layman, the memories are there it's just you can no longer access them. Everything is stored and the brain gradually shrinks as the disease progresses. There is no good terminal disease. Let's face it. There aren't any. But with Alzheimer's, there's no remission, there's no hope for a cure. You have it and there's one ending.

GOODSILL: The mind ceases to function. The brain gets smaller. Physically the body gets weaker.

CORDES: Yes. If you live long enough, because frequently you'll have another issue. But eventually even the involuntary functions we have can ultimately shut down.

GOODSILL: Because they are all connected to the brain.

CORDES: But that's the very last thing to go.

GOODSILL: That's a tragic disease, especially somebody who was as vibrant as Helen.

CORDES: Yeah. And like you said, for anybody, especially the early-onset. Because what we discovered is there are people in their 30s and 40s who come down with it.

GOODSILL: Any other thoughts about Fort Bend County?

CORDES: Growing up in Fort Bend, the river was prevalent when I was in high school. We always made fun of Lamar Consolidated. We were not in their district because we were smaller until my senior year in high school. Then we were both in AAA then, so we started really playing them. But there were always rivalries whenever we played the 'big school on the other side'.

The river was a physical barrier, because the politics of the county as I understand them, were controlled by the folks on the west side of the county, principally. Was it socioeconomic? Probably not so because you had the sugar company on this side and a lot of farmland, too. But a lot of the rice farmers – and I say this very good naturedly – the old timers, the old families that had been here a long time, were generally on the west or southwest side of the river. The politics, at least to my understanding and my high level knowledge of them in the '60s, everything seemed to be on the Richmond-Rosenberg side.

In the period of time I'm talking about, Fort Bend County was a very small county compared to what it is today. The population centers were Richmond-Rosenberg. Sugar Land, when I graduated from high school, had around 1,800 people in it.

GOODSILL: So, kind of the step-child politically, though a force of its own because of Imperial Sugar?

CORDES: Yes!

GOODSILL: Huge employment center here.

CORDES: Employment center, the wonderful attitude the sugar company had for its employees and folks, and the plans it had for the city. Of course, those plans helped the sugar company and Sugarland Industries make money, too. But that's okay! They did it in such a way that we all benefited.

GOODSILL: That's the story I hear over and over again. So the growth in Fort Bend County?

CORDES: Dramatic. I would say a lot of it started, and again, goes back maybe – as I understand it – to Sugarland Industries. Imperial Sugar donated the land for the right-of-way for the expansion of US-59, through their land to the river. That basically set the path of US-59, which obviously later became a major transportation artery to enable the growth in this area.

The areas where we have the growth now are on US-59 and IH-10 and the Grand Parkway in the Cinco Ranch area. A lot of it was master-planned communities and it is now one of the fastest growing areas in the United States.

GOODSILL: So as the whole area opened up because of US-59, what has happened to the political power? Is it still on the west side, or is that too political a question?

CORDES: I think it's very diverse now, because we are a big county. You still have the historical base of Richmond-Rosenberg. But you have the new kids on the block – Sugar Land/Missouri City/Stafford. But we're all going to be eclipsed in the future, probably by the Cinco Ranch/Fulshear area, if it continues to grow.

EDITOR'S NOTE: please see James Warren Roberts' 2012 – 2013 interview on this website at <https://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/home/showdocument?id=48690> where he also forecasts growth of the Fulshear area.

And Rosenberg has annexed HUGE areas of land, going out even as far as Beasley and Kendleton. With their extra-territorial jurisdiction Rosenberg will be an enormous city soon. Maybe not in my lifetime but they're planning ahead. They are to be commended for that.

GOODSILL: This may not be anything you know about, but do you know anything about water issues for our county?

CORDES: Not enough where I could really talk about it. Anything I know is more historical in terms of the formation of the subsidence district and things like that. But as far as the availability, I know there are several plans about bringing water in from other areas but I don't know enough to really talk about them.

GOODSILL: The growth of Fort Bend County has made growing pains for everybody in county government. (chuckles)

CORDES: Most definitely. You try to gain efficiencies, you try to establish infrastructure that's needed to encourage the growth, but in a cost-effective way. I think our Commissioners Court has done an admirable job of doing that.

GOODSILL: Well, this sounds like a good place to stop.

CORDES: Seems I talked more about me than I really thought I was going to. I don't always do that.

GOODSILL: (laughing) Thanks for the great interview, Roy.

Interview ends