

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees: **Thomas Bradford Ferguson**

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Interviewer: Jane Goodsill

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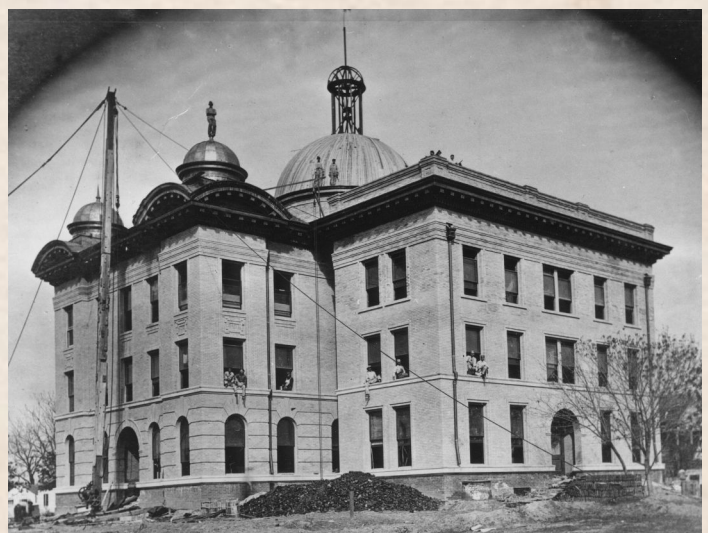
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Transcript

GOODSILL: Thank you, Brad, for your help and for your memories! Would you start by telling me your full name and your date of birth?

FERGUSON: Full name is Thomas Bradford Ferguson. Date of birth is 9/27/1953.

GOODSILL: I understand that you're a member of the Henderson family. Would you tell us some information about the Henderson genealogy and personalities.

FERGUSON: Okay.

GOODSILL: Let's start with your grandparents' generation. Tell us the name of your grandfather--your mother's father.

FERGUSON: That would be Thomas Bradford Darst.

GOODSILL: And he was married to?

FERGUSON: Annie Jackson Darst.

GOODSILL: And Annie had a sister.

FERGUSON: That would be Lois Jackson Henderson.

GOODSILL: And Lois Jackson Henderson--

FERGUSON: Had one daughter and that was Loise Douglas Henderson Wessendorff

GOODSILL: And Loise Douglas Henderson was married to?

FERGUSON: Joe Clyde Wessendorff.

GOODSILL: But you wanted to start your story with Robert Henderson, the husband of Loise Jackson Henderson. Tell us something about Bob Henderson.

FERGUSON: Bob Henderson was a self-made man and he had to quit school, I want to say in the fifth or sixth grade. Basically, I think the reason Loise had told me he quit was to support his family--help support his mother. I don't know what happened to his dad. But he was a very innovative man and started by being a cotton buyer, and would grade and buy and sell cotton.

One of the things that he did was develop and patent a process by which burnt cotton could be cleaned and resold. And sometimes cotton would burn because the tugboats used coal back in the old days, and when they would push barges, sometimes they'd catch fire. So, he developed a way of cleaning, taking a useless product and cleaning it up and reselling it.

GOODSILL: Did he make some money at that?

FERGUSON: He made a LOT of money at that! (laughs). And then the other thing, he would invest 20% of his money, most of it was in land. So he owned numerous ranches and what we would call, a farm-type set-up. Land around Houston that people back then didn't think would ever amount to anything. It was just raw land.

As Houston grew, [this land] was on the forefront of Houston's growth, became very valuable.

GOODSILL: What year do you think it was when he was starting out?

FERGUSON: Probably in the 'teens is when he originally started. I can't remember what year he was born.

GOODSILL: You said he died in 1960 thereabouts.

FERGUSON: Yeah, somewhere I think in 1960, I think he died.

GOODSILL: And do you know how old he was when he died?

FERGUSON: No.

GOODSILL: It would be reasonable for it to be the nineteen-teens.

FERGUSON: Right. And he was a young man when he started. I know that he built his place up near Kerrville in 1931. So he would have had the means by then, to have done that. I don't remember when the house was built, in Houston. Loise grew up on West 11th Place, which was one block from the Museum of Fine Arts.

GOODSILL: What direction?

FERGUSON: That would be south.

GOODSILL: Toward Rice?

FERGUSON: Yeah. It was right off Bissonnet. There's like only two streets between the Museum.

GOODSILL: Did Bob Henderson build that house?

FERGUSON: Yeah. They built that house and there are pictures of it where you can see downtown, because there are no trees. It was just prairie (chuckles).

GOODSILL: Did you ever go to that house?

FERGUSON: Oh yes. Spent a LOT of time at that house, playing. We lived in a little tract house in Houston. They had a two-story house and even had a back stairway. We LOVED to play up and down that back stairway that came in to the kitchen. It was a fun experience.

GOODSILL: Loise was older than you – a generation older than you.

FERGUSON: Yes.

GOODSILL: So did you play with her?

FERGUSON: No. She and my mother were contemporaries.

GOODSILL: Tell us your mother's name.

FERGUSON: My mother's name was Judith Jackson Darst Ferguson. Loise was about three years older than my mother--and they attended camp together at Mystic in Kerrville. And kind of grew up together. Loise would come out and stay in Richmond and I'm sure they'd ride, and do all the stuff you used to be able to do in a little town. And then they would go to Kerrville and spend summers and go to camp.

GOODSILL: And of course she knew how to ride already because she'd been to the—

FERGUSON: She'd been to the Playland Park on South Main--(laughing).

GOODSILL: (chuckling) --as a child! She liked to go there.

FERGUSON: Yes!

GOODSILL: So let's go back to Bob Henderson. Your speculation is that he did very well, maybe, possibly, as a cotton buyer, but particularly well when he patented his idea for reusing burned cotton.

FERGUSON: Right. And then the land.

GOODSILL: And then he invested in land and he had some other patents, so by the time he was of a certain age, he was quite prosperous and bought a nice house.

FERGUSON: Bought a nice house and was very involved in the politics of the day and the businessmen of Houston, which were people like the Worthams and--I'm trying to think of some of the other people that he--

GOODSILL: I wonder if the [George] Browns--

FERGUSON: The Browns, and--

GOODSILL: People in the oil industry.

FERGUSON: Right. Because it was an up and coming thing, the oil, and cotton and cattle, were the main things that drove Houston. The fact the ship channel was there, and the railroads and the banking. Of course, banking came a little later, because I think Dallas dominated banking more in Texas, in the early days.

GOODSILL: What kind of a personality did Bob Henderson have?

FERGUSON: Very gregarious and very friendly and could talk to ANYone. He could talk to a worker in the warehouse as well as the chairman of the board of Exxon. He knew the governor very well, at that time, which I think was Buford, maybe. I've seen some papers where the governor had sent him and stuff, and letters, and various things.

GOODSILL: Was he involved in politics?

FERGUSON: I think in a very small or behind-the-scenes kind of way. I think Joe Wessendorff kind of learned that too. Joe never really was involved that much directly in politics. He kind of left that to Hilmar and people that wanted that limelight more than Joe did.

GOODSILL: Go back to Bob. I know that he set up a foundation, the Henderson Foundation, before he died. And do you know what the commission was? What the goal was?

FERGUSON: I'm not really sure what the goal was. I think it was merely a vehicle in which to help people that--since Loise ran it most of the time because he had died at a young age, I think it was her decision. And she used it to help people that needed education and various things.

GOODSILL: So she sort of had a calling in life, which was to be philanthropic. And to help run the foundation?

FERGUSON: Yes. And I think that was part of his philosophy, to help people. Maybe because of his roots ... of coming from a very poor family.

GOODSILL: What part of the country did he come from?

FERGUSON: East Texas. And I'm not sure exactly what town but I know it was East Texas. He had a love for East Texas. He actually bought a place called Old Moon that he had for a number of years--a hunting place that I went to a couple of times when I was VERY young. It was all log cabins and split rail fences.

GOODSILL: Authentic looking.

FERGUSON: VERY authentic. And he named it after his favorite hunting dog, which was Old Moon. Loise later on gave it to the Methodist ministry, or Methodist church, basically as a retreat for the church.

GOODSILL: Tell us a little bit about Bob's wife, Loise Jackson Henderson.

FERGUSON: She was a very loving person. She kind of ran the household because he worked A LOT. Summers were very hot in Houston, and I do remember my grandmother and her going up to Kerrville to Hunt, Texas. The women would go and the kids.

GOODSILL: With your grandmother--Annie Jackson Darst--they would go?

FERGUSON: They would go up to Hunt and spend the summer because there was no air conditioning in Houston, or Richmond. The men would stay down here and work and they would take off a couple of weeks and go up there. But my grandfather, Thomas Bradford Darst, was a cotton farmer, so summertime was his busy time. So I'm sure he was more than happy to have my grandmother, his two daughters go up.

GOODSILL: They would take the kids with them?

FERGUSON: They would haul their horses up to Hunt and can you imagine how long it took? As a kid I remember it used to take us six hours from Houston to get to Kerrville. I can imagine with a Model T or whatever they had, hauling a horse trailer, with a couple of horses in it (laughing), how long it would take to get up those hills!

So they would stay awhile. But my mother would talk about--she and my grandmother and Lois and whatever they would ride all around that part of the country. Because everybody back then would just go anywhere you wanted to go, as long as you had permission. Good summers.

Loise, Senior, was very involved in the church in Houston. And liked the garden club. And probably whatever country club was at that time. I guess Houston was the first one. So she was involved socially in a lot of stuff in Houston.

GOODSILL: She outlived her husband by quite a number of years?

FERGUSON: A number of years. So Loise would go in every day after her dad died and have lunch with her mother and then go about her duties; working on a board and she was involved with the Institute of Religion.

GOODSILL: I have it in my notes that Loise, Senior, died in 1989. So that IS quite a long time if her husband died in the '60s some time.

FERGUSON: A number of years -- thirty to forty.

GOODSILL: But it worked because Loise would go into town and she would have a business. She had a lot of responsibilities with her philanthropy and the Foundation.

FERGUSON: Sure! And she was involved in the Foundation. And then she still had her social life. She grew up in Houston, so a LOT of her friends were from Houston. She attended the University of Texas and so a lot of her friends lived there. She was a Theta, I think, so she did some of that. And she was involved in Junior League.

GOODSILL: Was she close with your mother?

FERGUSON: Yeah, they were VERY close.

GOODSILL: Was your mother involved with all of those activities as well?

FERGUSON: Not my mother because my parents got a divorce and my mother ran our family farm and ranch operation.

GOODSILL: Which was where?

FERGUSON: In Beasley.

GOODSILL: So your mom was busy and she was in Beasley.

FERGUSON: Earlier, when we lived in Houston, she would be involved with Loise a little bit. I mean they would see each other more, and then we moved out here. They were involved more socially, than when Mother moved out here.

GOODSILL: Well, your mother's life took a turn. Did I hear you say that your father was a photographer for NBC News?

FERGUSON: Yes.

GOODSILL: From an early age or was that later in his life?

FERGUSON: No, that was early. He was a free-lance photographer for them, ever since I was a child. And, then later, my mother started an insurance agency in Houston to supplement. My mother wanted a little more security than my dad had.

GOODSILL: He was an artist!

FERGUSON: Yeah, having a free-lance deal. And then later in life, he became--when the cameras became too much or whatever--he did sound and lights. He was very interesting. He covered all the space programs, all the civil rights marches and movements, and EVERY hurricane that hit, until probably 20 years ago or so.

GOODSILL: Oh, so he was an artist and a little bit of an adventurer?

FERGUSON: Yeah. Well, he traveled--his hobby was traveling. So he died twelve years ago, but up until he got sick, he had traveled to 98 countries.

GOODSILL: Were you close with him?

FERGUSON: Yeah. I was close with him, later in life. In early life, after they got the divorce, you know--

GOODSILL: A little harder. Got to go with the mom.

FERGUSON: Yeah, (laughs) EXACTLY! So later in life we made our peace and enjoyed our time. I get my love of photography from him.

GOODSILL: I wanted to go back to Loise, Junior, because you said that her mother had some religious interests and then Loise seems to be quite a religious woman. So tell us something about that.

FERGUSON: Well, she became--she'd always been involved in religious and she became--a woman by the name of Gert Behanna wrote a book called *The Late Liz* in which she chronicles her life starting as a socialite in New York, being married and I think she had one child, but anyway, getting a divorce and starting this downhill spiral of alcoholism, possibly drugs, and her conversion to Christ to religion. She started doing speaking engagements. And I believe Loise heard her one time and became very interested in her life and story, and decided to kind of follow her. Not FOLLOW her, but become involved in her, and they became friends. Gert had challenged Loise, kind of said she was blessed with an abundance of money and that she should DO something with it, toward the glory of God. And so Loise came up with this idea of Well Spring, which is in Blanco.

GOODSILL: Which is near? Just give us a geographic reference.

FERGUSON: It's about 40 miles from San Antonio, and about 30 miles from Austin, and 30 miles from San Marcos. It's the geographical center of the greatest part of the Hill Country. So Loise had already purchased, I believe at the time, a part of a ranch. And that included the Blanco River. And she had this vision of creating a retreat, a religious retreat, for people to reflect. And so she bought another piece of property they call The Hill, and built the chapel, and a couple of houses, one for Gert and one for her mother. And had Charles Umlauf do a statue in bronze of Christ, which I believe is thirty feet tall. It's very massive. Twenty-five feet, something, with outstretched hands. And she placed it in front of the chapel so when you are looking out the chapel glass, you see Him and then the valley below. It's VERY impressive.

So then, after she did that, she and Gert remained close friends until Gert's death, and I cannot remember--I want to say Gert died in the late 60s or early 70s. I DO remember I was in high school. But Gert would go out there, and they would meet and discuss things. And I think that's when Loise got involved in the Institute of Religion in Houston, was through some of that stuff.

GOODSILL: How is the ranch used? Does it have a philanthropic use or it for personal use?

FERGUSON: No, it's for philanthropic. There is now--they have built three dormitories, a

cantina, numerous other houses, meeting houses and it is used all the time, for religious retreats.

GOODSILL: For any denomination or inter-denominational?

FERGUSON: Most every denomination uses it.

GOODSILL: And it's a non-profit?

FERGUSON: And it's a non-profit. And it's a beautiful, beautiful place to reflect, and she'd be very happy that it's used. And she was very much involved in that. That became a LOT of her focus in later life, as to -- She liked building things. As Joe Clyde had stated many times, "Loise was always happiest when she was under construction." Because she always LOVED building things. Now, she didn't like the maintenance end of it, and occasionally when I would be up there, I would do a little punch list for her. My background is in construction so I would do a little thing saying-- You couldn't tell her what to do, but you could kind of make a little suggestion. 'You've got a little leak up here. You MIGHT need to have that roof fixed'.

GOODSILL: (chuckling) She was fairly strong-willed?

FERGUSON: Yes, very strong-willed. Very much so.

GOODSILL: That hasn't come across yet in this interview.

FERGUSON: (laughing) Well, she definitely was strong-willed! She had her own way. She and Joe Clyde BOTH had their own way of doing things.

GOODSILL: Wasn't he fairly strong willed?

FERGUSON: He was VERY strong-willed.

GOODSILL: I wonder how that worked between them?

FERGUSON: He would acquiesce MORE than she would. But she kind of knew his limit. She knew how far she could push Joe. It was a cute little thing that they would do. She would want something and he would give in, but then if he knew it was not going to work, or whatever the deal was, he'd say 'No'. Or, 'I've got to check this out'.

GOODSILL: I want you to tell us a little bit about him, but do you happen to know what else she did with the Henderson Foundation, besides the ranch at Blanco?

FERGUSON: That's basically it. Until later on, she would support people education-wise. Both of them would do things very low key and behind the scenes. They were not people that wanted the limelight and the notoriety. The most notoriety that Joe would get would be, probably when he would always buy the animals of either his employees or friends or whatever, at the fair, every year.

And after a while, he even quit doing that, and started sending Pat and Dan to do it, because he didn't want to stand up there and do all that. So he didn't mind spending the money or doing the whatever, he just didn't want to deal with all the notoriety.

GOODSILL: They both liked to be behind the scenes, even though they were strong-willed! And kind of want the world to go their way.

FERGUSON: EXACTLY! And they had the power behind the scenes to make it kind of go the way they wanted it to go. It's kind of like 'who has the gold, rules'. If you have the money, you can do that.

GOODSILL: Well, tell us about Joe Clyde, because he married a woman of means. Did he have means when he married her?

FERGUSON: Yes, he did. I don't really know how his dad made HIS money, Joe, Senior. But I believe it was in ranching and land, which would have been in this area. Joe was VERY smart. Went to--and Joe D. [Robinson] can verify this --but I think-- at that time there weren't twelve grades. I believe Joe Clyde got out of high school in tenth grade, and went to--started at A & M. I think he finished because he was older than Loise. I think he finished and then the war interrupted--I think it was just three years of college and he graduated.

GOODSILL: Since we are going chronologically, do you know anything about his wartime experience?

FERGUSON: No, I really don't. He really never talked to me about the war. Loise tried to get him--I'd be over there and we'd be visiting, and she would try and drag some of the stories out of him. He was like a LOT of men of that generation. He did his duty and just went on with his life.

And didn't really care to rehash some of the horrors that he saw. I know he was stationed in Italy, and she tried to get him to go back to Italy numerous times, and he would not. He said, 'I saw it once and I've seen it. That's done.' (chuckles) He had no problems with HER going, but—

GOODSILL: Do you know what he did when he came home from the war?

FERGUSON: When he came home from the war, he immediately got involved in business. He bought the insurance agency.

GOODSILL: From?

FERGUSON: I believe, my grandfather had an interest in it--Tom Darst. He was not interested in doing that. He was either too old (I think it was his age) to serve in the war, so he bought some various businesses around and kind of ran them while the boys, per se, were gone. Then when they came back, he sold them [to the boys]. Joe started, I think, with the insurance agency, and of course, he always ran cattle and enjoyed that end of it. He didn't like the farming much, but he enjoyed the cattle business, and stayed true to that to the very end. He LOVED the cattle business.

GOODSILL: So, he came back from the war and went into insurance and began to diversify into some other businesses. So he combined his means with Loise's and they had--

FERGUSON: Yeah, and I can't remember how many years after he came back--OH, after he came back, and before he started the business, he went to UT to law school. And finished law school, or almost finished--one of the two, I can't remember--but decided he didn't really WANT to do law, just wanted to know law, and never took the bar. So, it always kind of gave him a little one-up on attorneys, I think (laughing), because he could see the business side AND the law side.

GOODSILL: What was his personality like?

FERGUSON: His personality was strong. To me, he was like a John Wayne-type, bigger than life type of person, that when he walked in a room, you knew he was there. He was a presence to be seen. But he was like his father-in-law. I remember many times of his talking to people on the street, not of means or anything, and next thing he was serving on the Board of HL&P for twenty-five years.

GOODSILL: I wonder why he had an interest in that?

FERGUSON: Because it was a good stock to own, and back then utilities were guaranteed profits. He saw the opportunity there, and being on the board allows you to see where things are going.

GOODSILL: He was a good, good businessman.

FERGUSON: He was probably the finest businessman I've ever come across or have seen; a businessman in ALL facets. At one point, he could take a piece of property, develop it. He had a company that would build the house, he owned the bank that would finance the house. He owned the insurance company that could insure the house.

So it went full circle and he got a little cut out of each one of those. And he saw the value in owning all those things. He owned numerous banks in his lifetime. He actually took a bank, Wells Fargo across the street, which was Fort Bend National when he bought it, and it was a viable bank, but he took it and made it bigger and better.

Loise was my cousin. She was my second cousin because her mother was my great-aunt. But Loise and Joe were like an aunt and uncle to me because of the age difference. My family was only me, my sister and Jody, my cousin Joe D. Robinson, whose mother, Anita was my mother's sister. And when she passed away in (I don't remember, I should know this!), but Loise and Joe adopted him.

GOODSILL: Interesting history. So as you think back on the story you've told me about Joe Clyde and Loise; Loise's father, Bob; Loise's mother, Lois; any other stories or thoughts or memories that you think should go into the history?

FERGUSON: I know Loise was one of the most giving people and was always worried about everybody--taking care of everybody. Christmas was always her time of year. She loved giving stuff! I remember, I was working down at Richard Joseph's, which was a store down here in Richmond, and I worked there during high school. She would come in and buy, let's say, ten bicycles. And have a list for Richard. So Christmas eve, we would deliver all these things. I remember those bicycles. Richard would call the people and they'd say (whispering) 'Okay, put it on the side of the house'.

And it would be poor black children over here, maybe some other children over here-- whoever she saw that she felt needed something. She would do that. She would say 'Don't tell 'em anything. Just leave it there.'

GOODSILL: Did you learn something about being generous from her?

FERGUSON: Oh yeah!

GOODSILL: A good model for you?

FERGUSON: Sure! Sure. You should always give and give back to a community. Give back where you're from, however you are blessed. Whether it's a LOT of money or whatever you've got that you can give.

GOODSILL: So it was more than just the money. It was a generosity of spirit.

FERGUSON: Sure, sure.

GOODSILL: She believed in helping people that needed a little bit of a boost.

FERGUSON: Yeah. And not just for their name up in lights. I know it made her feel good to be able to do that.

GOODSILL: Obviously it was important for you to be able to witness that.

FERGUSON: Oh yeah.

GOODSILL: Somehow that forms your character – it made an impact on you?

FERGUSON: It DEFINITELY made an impact.

GOODSILL: How much more could she want than that?!

FERGUSON: You know, just to be able to form people's lives and help people.

GOODSILL: To complete our story, Brad, tell me your sister's name.

FERGUSON: Ann Bennett Chapman.

GOODSILL: Tell me, do you have children?

FERGUSON: No.

GOODSILL: And does Ann have children?

FERGUSON: She's got two.

GOODSILL: What are their names?

FERGUSON: Anna Lachner and Joshua Lachner.

GOODSILL: I'm interested just because of the family tree, from the Darsts and we have to go down to the youngest generation.

FERGUSON: Joshua is Joshua Darst Latchner.

GOODSILL: I like it when the family name goes down.

FERGUSON: Yeah, and it's sad because the name is gone. There's no Darst, no last name of Darst left. My grandfather, Thomas Bradford, had three brothers, and he was the only one that had any children and they were two girls. And it's a very old name. They fought at San Jacinto and the Alamo and helped settle Texas, so it's a very old name.

GOODSILL: Are you close with your sister's children?

FERGUSON: Oh yes.

GOODSILL: Have you been able to teach them anything about generosity.

FERGUSON: (laughs) I've tried!

GOODSILL: It's NOT an easy thing to teach!

FERGUSON: No, it's NOT an easy thing to teach. But there again, Anna's in graduate school, and she's going into counseling. She got her degree in Psychology and she's getting her master's in counseling. So she's got a pretty generous feel. Joshua on the other hand is an engineering mind, so you kind of have to get through some of that. But he understands.

GOODSILL: But it's interesting, philosophically speaking, go back to Bob Henderson. He sounds like HE had an engineering mind--and business acumen. Then when you succeed, you begin to say, 'Okay, now paybacks.'

FERGUSON: He had it all! Exactly. And he believed in that. He got all those gifts involved. I recently gave Josh his great-grandfather's bed that was made for him. He couldn't have been more excited, because of the history. And I said, 'Well, you've got to pass it on to your son.'

GOODSILL: I think your ancestors would be very pleased with this part of the story, with the generosity part of the story. Brad, this was a very good interview. Thank you so much.

FERGUSON: Thank you!