

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **U. L. (Pete) Davis**

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Interviewer: Jane M. Goodsill

Transcriber: Jane M. Goodsill

Location: At his home in Needville, Texas

7 Pages



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Transcript

GOODSILL: Mr. Davis, we are interviewing you for the Fort Bend County Historical Commission Oral history Project. Today is January 7, 2016. Will you tell me where and when you were born?

DAVIS: March 16, 1922 in Needville. But we lived in the country by the San Bernard River. We were so close to the river I could take a rock and throw it into the river.

GOODSILL: Were you born at home or in a hospital?

DAVIS: At home.

GOODSILL: Were you the first child?

DAVIS: First and last child.

GOODSILL: Oh, the only one! (both laugh)

DAVIS: You want to know something interesting? My daddy used to fish at the river, for big fish. He caught one about 35 pounds! For eating.

GOODSILL: Did your mama cook the fish?

DAVIS: Yeah, sure. She could cook them. She took over after he caught it.

GOODSILL: What were your mother and fathers names?

DAVIS: They met in the George Armstrong Bottom. Her name was Alice Ware and his was McKinley Davis. (laughs) I don't know how he got that name. Some of the old people have names like that. My daddy was raised up by white people; sometimes they would give those kids their names. When my daddy got on his own he started sharecropping. One man owned all that land back there. Sharecroppers farmed on $\frac{3}{4}$ rule; they got to keep $\frac{1}{4}$ of the cotton or corn crops they raised. When I got up big enough to help him, why that is when the white man gave him a spot of land to farm for himself. That is where I came in. I was big enough to help him.

GOODSILL: Can you tell us about race relations back then?

DAVIS: My mother and daddy took us to church one day. Some white people, kind of young, didn't care, didn't know better. They came by the church, dragging a black youngster behind the truck. That's how they killed him and then they drove right by the church house pulling him. When they got to the river, they untied him, pushed him into the river and drove back to Needville.

When I was older it got a little better. A few of them started fighting back and that helped out quite a lot. I don't remember but I heard about a man who had two black boys with him. They were on their way to a town on the other side of the river. It was kind of rough over in Wharton County, very rough. And this guy in a buggy came down the road. The two black boys tried to get off to the raised side of the road but the guy drove his buggy in the middle of them and killed one boy.

GOODSILL: How awful! [pause] Tell me about when you started working.

DAVIS: My mom remarried when I was in the service. My step dad called me Pete and said, "Pete, you find a little job and you can make it. Save your money and what you make and you can live." And that's what I did. I stayed at the cotton warehouse for 26 years.

GOODSILL: Tell me about your schooling.

DAVIS: I went to the 8th grade. At Routt Point School. It was at the church.

GOODSILL: Some people remember that there was a 9 PM curfew for blacks in Needville.

DAVIS: I don't remember that. My dad would send me to Needville to get groceries. Stein owned the store; he was a Jew. At his store there was a dirt floor, no concrete. That was a long, long time ago.

When I was around 18 years old, my daddy died. Mama asked me if I could farm another year. I was a boy but I said yes. I raised so much corn that the big old barn where we stored the corn wasn't big enough to hold it. Some we put on the ground and arranged it so that the rain would run off down the slope.



U.L. (Pete) Davis as a young man

Finally I told mama, "I tell you what I am going to do. You can't keep chopping all this cotton. We need to get some help. I'm going to a Civilian Conservation Corps camp. The money I make will take care of us." She said, "Okay, all right then." I was about 17 when I signed up. I went to Austwell, TX. They had a big farm. Every month I sent mama some money. It was the same as when you go into the army. They give us a pick and shovel. Our job was to put out fires and break dirt. We made about \$20 a month which was more than farming and it was steady work.

GOODSILL: Was it mostly black men or black and white?

DAVIS: A few white, but mostly black men. When I was 18 years old they sent me a questionnaire. I filled it out and they wrote me a letter, "Come to Houston and we will sign you up to the Army." And that is what they did.

GOODSILL: Where did you do your training?

DAVIS: We already knew how to call out. We got in service and we drilled. We did basic training in Austwell, TX. There was another one in Nacogdoches. They were blacks only units. First sergeant, corporal, all were black. The Colonel was white.

GOODSILL: The more powerful you get the more white you are?

DAVIS: (laughs) Yes! That reminds me of General Patton. He was a mean old man. He didn't care. He was a five star general. Stars all over the place. Big guy. He was slapping this black boy and took his stripes away. He would give them back but he did it just to show you what he could do.

GOODSILL: What was your job?

DAVIS: When we would have to move they'd wake your butt up and make you move, walking. Sometimes there was trucks. I didn't kill nobody, don't tell anybody that lie! (laughs) I never had to fight. My job was watching over the guns. I was a guard at night to see that the enemy don't sneak in and wipe out our company. Every company would move forwards and sometime backwards. We'd go to a new town and take all our things with us. We would then have to guard the ammunition. A full field pack weighed 90 pounds. You'd tie your shovel on your back. When we stopped and got everything squared off like we wanted it, the first thing we'd do is get off to the side and dig a hole. So that when the enemy came all you had to do is was roll into your hole. The first thing you would do is dig a fox hole. That was to save your life.

GOODSILL: Did you go to France?

DAVIS: Yes, through France toward Germany. We didn't have to fight because troops ahead already took the town. We'd come behind with the supplies. I saw what the Germans did to the black people and the white people. They lined the people up next to a hole and shoot them. They would fall into the hole. Some were dead and some were still alive. And then they burned them.

That would make you mad! They shot your solders. And that is the reason our commanders took us down to see the remains of those men. You serve with fellow soldiers and you get to love them. You fight with them. Before we got there they were killing American solders. You would see what the Germans done to them soldiers and you'd know they'd do it to you, too.

We'd march around and see all that stuff and leave and go to another place. They showed us where American soldiers were locked up in something like a chicken coop or doghouse. The black soldiers who surrendered in Germany did not come back here. They stayed over there. That is right. The Germans killed them because they were black. If he's black he's dead.

GOODSILL: Did you ever see any Jewish people?

DAVIS: Yes, in France. Sure did. They were being treated bad! They didn't kill them all but the Germans wanted to. Why did they hate the Jews? Jews and black people were treated badly.

When you are in the army you hear big guns go off like a ball of fire. There were some guys from Needville who were in the field artillery. Next time we go to Needville I will show you them. But they don't walk like me. They can't move around like me. I pray to the good Lord for being so good to me.

Those German people, they were a whole lot better than the French. France is not as big as Germany. The German people were honest. If they tell you they are going to kill you, they kill you. The other countries they don't care. They can get behind you and kill you and you don't know nothing. I went to Luxembourg, we walked through there into Belgium. You don't lose the way you were raised. There was a white girl in Germany. I had my gun on my shoulder. She sat on the porch and cried. "Why you crying?" "You are going to kill us!" I wouldn't kill you for nothing," "You wouldn't?" "No!" I finally convinced her.

In Germany we rested a lot. Regensburg, Germany that's where I found those guys who needed food. There were these white guys who could not shoot the deer, because it was too far down in the valley. So I got my gun cleaned up and ready and said, "Let's go." What we had to do is get on a car and ride it down into the valley. From on top of the hill I could see a deer. "Kill your motor!" "Pete, you can't shoot this thing from here! It's too far!" I got down on my knees and pulled my trigger and that big guy went down to rest. It was on a Friday night. The officers were all in town. When they were in town we met some of the crew at the mess hall. We had that big deer, we had a time, cooking and eating and clowning and eating deer! (laughs at the memory)

GOODSILL: Were you the best shot?

DAVIS: Yes, (modestly) I was good. I was. Belgium was small. You could walk out of one state into another. Country towns. Those white women, getting back to them. I got there one morning and they had themselves some horse manure. It was to fertilize their plants. They were out there barefooted and picking it up. You could see steam coming up from the manure.

GOODSILL: But things are different in wartime. They had been under siege for a long time and if they needed to walk barefoot to pick up that manure to grow food that is what they would do.

DAVIS: That's right!

GOODSILL: Well, what happened when you came home from the war?

DAVIS: You are over there, you do a good job! They tried their best to get me to reenlist. I dealt with ammunition, TNT, and explosives and they wanted me to stay. I said, I had stayed away from my mother too long so I wanted to go home. We got on a boat, the Sea Cat, and it took 17 days to get home. Rocking, rocking. I can still see the Statue of Liberty; SHE was rocking. I went over to Europe on the Queen Elizabeth.

We all got off the train and were lined up to inventory everything we had. When the black men saw us getting off that train they were laughing at us.

GOODSILL: You come home from war and you got no respect? That was in New York?

DAVIS: That's right! We thought we would get better status and be treated right. That made me mad. It embarrassed us. When I got back home all our people liked us! But other people, oh boy!

When I got home I found Marie Burton and got married and had children. She was from Waelder, TX. We met in a cotton patch. My girl friend was working there and I went there to help her fill that sack up. After that I felt better. Got with my own people.

GOODSILL: Did it take you a while to get over what you experienced during the war?

DAVIS: It wasn't too bad. A while ago I got to thinking about the guys. Thought I'd call them up. Every one that I called had died. We all lived through all that and then died here! Even those younger than me. I stopped calling!

GOODSILL: Tell us about your working days.

DAVIS: I worked 26 years in the cotton warehouse as a tow-motor (forklift) operator. I liked that work! I eventually made foreman.

GOODSILL: Congratulations! You got some military medals! What did you get them for?

DAVIS: For the good things I did! (laughing)

GOODSILL [Reading inscriptions on medals]

- 1) European African Middle Eastern Campaign.
- 2) World War II Medal.
- 3) American Campaign.
- 4) Army Medal with insignia: Efficiency, Honor, Fidelity.



DAVIS: These got burned up in our house fire. But they replaced them! If it hadn't been for my grand daughter, Pam, I'd have burned up. I was down on my knees and she came in with her arms spread, swinging her arms and found me. Pulled me out of the fire. Fire marshal said that if we had stayed five more minutes they would have burned up.

GOODSILL: Wow! Scary! I'm so glad she was there! Thank you for your time and for sharing your interesting story with us.

Interview ends.