

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Walter C. Todd**

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Interviewer: Jane Goodsill

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

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13 Pages



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Transcript

GOODSILL: Will you introduce yourself and tell us your date of birth?

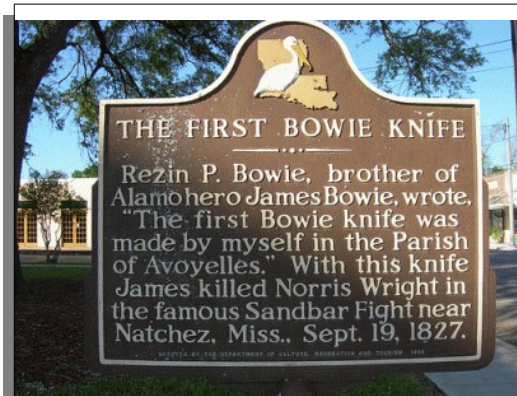
TODD: I am Walter C. Todd. I was named after both of my grandfathers. My mother's dad was Coleman LaBleu, and my father's dad was Walter Todd. I am the oldest grandson on both sides of this family. I am 88 years old. I was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana, in 1929, on June 9th. My mother was Ima Hogg LaBleu and my father was Edward Harvey Todd. My mother was named after her cousin, Ima Hogg, who lived in West Columbia.

GOODSILL: So Ima Hogg was your grandmother's cousin.

TODD: Yes. Evidently my grandmother was from Texas, the Millers. My grandmother's name was Grace Miller.

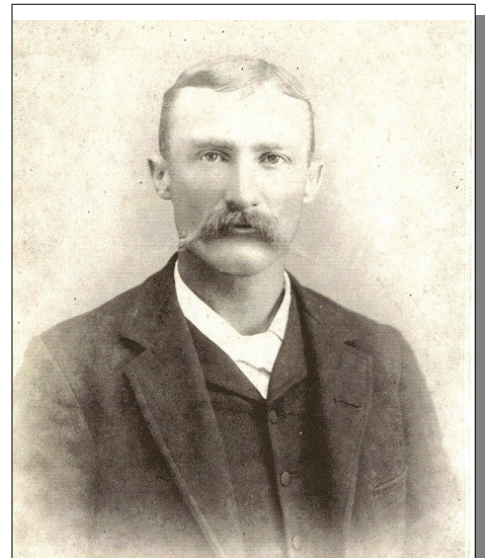
GOODSILL: Tell me about the LaBleus.

TODD: They go way back. They were here before Texas or the United States and they owned 50 square miles from Orange, Texas to the Calcasieu River in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Mexico and the Indians owned it in the 17th century. My grandfather's great-grandfather, Louis LaBleu and his wife, Marie Gentils came from Bordeaux, France and to New Orleans. He was going to settle right at the lake but he decided that was too dangerous and he backed off to the east about five miles, to what is now called Clow. They settled on English Bayou where he had 50 square miles that he ran cattle on. They had thousands of head of stock. He built a cabin on what they called the



Louisiana Historical Marker in Marksville, LA

Old Spanish Trail where they drove cattle from Texas to Baton Rouge and New Orleans. He had resting pens to feed the cattle as people came through there.



Rezin Pleasant Bowie (1857-1949) designed the Bowie knife.

He became good friends with the Bowie brothers, James and his brother, Rezin (Resin). James wasn't the one who made the knife. It was his brother, Rezin. They became good friends with Louis and they would stop there on their way to New Orleans.

He had six children and one was Arsene LaBleu. He was the first man born in Calcasieu Parish, on October 30, 1789. He went on to become a captain on the Mississippi River. Somehow Jean Lafitte would come up the river to Lake Charles. I think he was running away from the U. S. government. He met my grandfather, Coleman LaBleu, and they became really good friends. This LaBleu built a cabin for him, on English Bayou.

He would bring his ship into Lake Charles and dock there for a while. Then when it looked like they were going to come after him, he would come on up the bayou and they wouldn't chase him. He was a pretty dangerous man. He brought silks, jewelry and gold to the cabin. This was before Lake Charles was settled.

GOODSILL: It says, LaBleu was a buccaneer, sailing against the Spanish as one of Jean Lafitte's captains.

TODD: When Lafitte fought the British with his crew, the LaBleu's went with him and they ran the British out of New Orleans. The government gave him 50 square miles of land, from Orange, Texas to the Calcasieu River at Lake Charles, Louisiana, on the Gulf Coast. Family and friends settled all that country, from there to Cameron. My grandfather had a brother who had settled in Cameron, Louisiana, and had shrimp boats. Today the family is still there, shrimping. He is buried in Galveston. I've been wanting to meet this guy that had a write-up in July 18, 2015 about Jean Lafitte and Galveston.

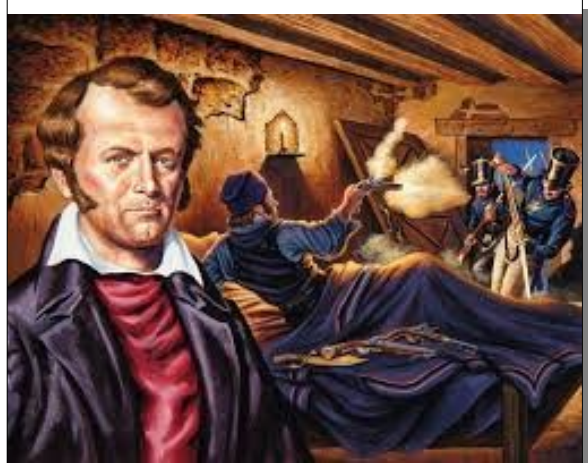


Illustration 1: Col. Jim Bowie, died a hero at the Alamo.



Illustration 2: Jean Lafitte, pirate and privateer who helped General Andrew Jackson in the Battle of New Orleans and was a smuggler who hired his services out to multiple countries on the Gulf Coast.
--Wikipedia

GOODSILL: (reading from a *Houston Chronicle* article) "Lafitte was considered a war hero instead of an outlaw due to his help in defending New Orleans during the Battle of New Orleans. Lafitte was a privateer and not a pirate." It shows *Maison Rouge* and the house in Galveston that is believed to be on the site of Jean Lafitte's headquarters.

TODD: That's about it as far as my mother's side is concerned.

GOODSILL: Okay, let's go to your father's side of the family, Edward Harvey Todd. This document says, "William Todd was the oldest and most highly respected citizen of this community." William was Walter Todd's father and was born in Scotland, in 1845.

TODD: Yes. He was my great-grandfather.

GOODSILL: When he was six, he moved to Canada. When he was 26, he married Azelia DeJardin. Eight children were born to this union, six boys and two girls. The family moved from Canada to Kansas in 1885. I wonder what the story was with that.

TODD: I don't know. In fact, we still have folks in Kansas. But there was some kind of real bad drought and they decided to leave Kansas. They were farmers and moved from Canada to Kansas to farm. They were headed for the Gulf Coast in covered wagons. They came to Louisiana and settled at Welsh, Louisiana. That was my grandfather's dad. My grandfather and a couple of his brothers came with him.

GOODSILL: His brothers were George Todd, Hugh Todd, James Todd, and Robert Todd of Welsh.

TODD: They had a dairy and a rice farm on the bayou there in Welsh. The Todds still have property there, all these years later. I am the oldest grandchild left of that family. I know there were some cousins, twins, and one of those girls is in charge of all that property. Every two years we have a get-together. We didn't have one this year, so it will be next year.

GOODSILL: This get-together is with the Todd side of the family. Does your mother's side have any reunions?

TODD: I am the oldest one left on my mother's side now, the LaBleu. I have two younger cousins and my younger sister, Mary Rose Zdunkewicz and her husband, Victor Zdunkewicz.

GOODSILL: What was your wife's name?

TODD: Juanita. She has dementia and is in a rest home. She's 86 years old.

GOODSILL: How did your family get to Fort Bend County.

TODD: My dad and a couple of his brothers were rice farmers and cattlemen in Welsh and Clow and Holmwood. My dad was affiliated with the McBurnetts who owned an auction ring in Welsh. He lived in Holmwood, Louisiana, on the McBurnett farm, and farmed rice and cattle. He bought cattle throughout the country for other people. He and his brothers and his dad, Walter, who was from Welsh, leased a big block of land near Holmwood, Louisiana. Some of my Todd folks are still there. My dad was acquainted with some people from Dayton, Texas, who owned the Richmond Irrigation Canal with the Booths and the Georges. Somehow they ended up getting him here on the Booth Ranch on Big Creek, Brown Community. He farmed rice.

I didn't want to come here. I was 11 years old and had just finished 5th grade. We lived right across the road from Grandpa LaBleu and my grandfather had over a thousand head of cattle and owned two sections of land. I remember two of his brothers laughing about it. They were playboys and they spent their time in Lake Charles and leased their land to my grandfather. My grandfather LaBleu had a rice mill and a big steam engine that he ran all this stuff on. He ground feed for cattle and he had a syrup mill for the sugar cane he raised. He also raised rice and corn.

People would bring their cane to him and he would extract the juice and make syrup out of it. We lived about 200 yards from there and when they would cook it and when the south wind would blow, you could smell that good syrup.

I didn't want to leave the area because grandfather had me working cattle with him. He was Catholic, and when you got out of elementary to go to high school, he sent you to Lake Charles, to the Brothers' School, where you finished your last four years and then you went to LSU (Louisiana State University). He wanted me to be a doctor because I helped him work on the cattle, the sheep and the goats that he had. He asked my dad if I could stay, but my dad wouldn't let me stay but he let me go back every summer until I was 13. After that, I had to stay and help my dad here in the rice fields. We lived on the Booth Ranch on Big Creek and there my dad farmed rice, between there and Long Point Texas.

GOODSILL: What was life like in the Brown Community for an 11-year-old boy?

TODD: Life was pretty quiet. The Booth's had some nice homes on that ranch. It was right on the creek. And the Booth headquarters are still there. My sister and I went to Brown School one year. Then my mother let her go back to my grandmother LaBleu. My oldest sister, Earline, was in the Catholic convent in Lake Charles and she stayed there. She married a Cuban who was in the Catholic school, Raoul Fernandez. He was a rich Cuban who owned a lot of store buildings in Havana and a beautiful home on the beach in Havana. They came to Texas one year.

We left the Brown Community and moved between Fairchilds and Richmond. My dad was farming rice over there. We had a big home near where the canal turns, with barns and everything. We were living there when I was a freshman in high school. The road was called Mennonite Road. The old Richmond High School was three stories high at that time. I'll never forget it. I was sitting up there, and the fire trucks went out that morning and before school was out that evening, Mr. Milford Gless, the fire chief, came up there and told me and my younger sister that the house had burned down. My father, mother, and two younger sister and brother had headed back to Louisiana that day. My sister and brother-in-law came to pick us up. Mr. Mellon, who had a grocery store where my father always traded in Richmond, came up to the school and told us that he wanted us to come stay with them at his house until my folks got back. My parents had called Mr. Mellon from Lake Charles and asked him to do that.

We lost everything. Clothes and everything. I used to play the fiddle and I lost that. I never did replace it. The Wessendorffs had a house right across the street from the old gym and that's where we lived until Dad bought two houses (I can't remember the street name) there when you come in on the Thompson Highway by the church to the red light, you turn to the left. You go two blocks and to the right to go to the hospital and there's a big two story house? The next two houses. At that time the Georges owned all that land behind it. That's where the big home on the George Ranch came from. I was a freshman in high school and we moved there. Dad bought five acres and he raised horses too.

GOODSILL: Let's go back to where we were. Your house had burned, you lost your fiddle and eventually you moved to the Wessendorff house?

TODD: We moved to the Wessendorff house in Richmond, across from the old elementary school. My younger brother went to school there. They had trouble with him because he would go home because all he had to do was walk across the street! (laughs) Mama had to stay with him once in a while to keep him in there.

GOODSILL: Give me all your siblings names. I have Earline. Who was born next?

TODD: Ruth was next, I was the third. There was E. J. (Edward Harvey, Jr.) and then Mary Rose. She is the mayor of Weston Lakes in the Fulshear area.

GOODSILL: So, you are living in the Wessendorff house across the street from the elementary school.

TODD: I was a freshman in high school, Lamar High School. After high school, I got married the next year. I went with this girl from Needville. In those days, Needville was such a small school the students were sent to Richmond for the last two years of high school. So that's how I met her. Her folks owned a hatchery where they hatched chickens, and lived on a ranch. I knew her parents because my dad would go over there to buy baby chicks and I would go with him. Her name was Juanita Reininger. She came to Richmond and I met her that year. We went together the last two years. The last year I went to school until Christmas.



Juanita and Walter Todd

The war was going on and they were taking all the people they could for soldiers when the boys got old enough. I had joined the Civil Air Patrol that year, in Rosenberg, for Fort Bend County. We weren't flying, but were learning to fly. We were marching, and we had to go watch for airplanes. They had towers for that.

The tower that we watched in was on the Davis estate across the railroad tracks there between Richmond and Rosenberg. People would go up there and watch for airplanes. They had these towers throughout the country. There was one between Needville and Beasley and another between Damon and West Columbia. They had them scattered out all around the Gulf Coast because they were watching for enemy airplanes. You had to know the various types of airplanes. We had a room in the school where we learned to fly airplanes and talked about the Civil Air Patrol. We marched where the Ford Motor Company was in Rosenberg was located. It was just down the street from the school.

After Christmas of my senior year, my dad said he needed help. He was farming rice on the Avil ranch and also on the Richmond Canal. I helped him and then the war ended, so I went back to school and finished. We graduated in 1947. I started going with her in 1946. We got married February 15, 1948. We didn't go to college. In those days right after the war, there was no transportation and a lot of kids didn't go to college.

We got married and I moved to Needville. My dad had a little house on Mennonite Road and the man who was living there left. Dad gave it to us and we moved the house right here, where this house is, in 1948. We built a garage and a little porch onto it. A few years later, about 1959-1960, I was farming with my cousin over in Damon and West Columbia. I went to Richmond Irrigation in the fall of 1956 after I got finished with my rice crop in the Damon area. Dad passed away that February, and we had a rice crop ready to plant on 500 acres then. I stayed there on the Richmond Canal from 1957 to 1959. I was the one who broke that land up, right across from the George headquarters, going to the lake, and put it in rice.

GOODSILL: Was that quite a big undertaking?

TODD: That was in 1958. It wasn't much. I was used to doing that kind of stuff. I had worked at the Kitty Nash Ranch down below Damon. She owned land from Highway 36, off and on, across the Brazos River, all the way to the prison farm at Rosharon. She used to have a buggy. I did a lot of work for her when I was young, between the creeks down there. My cousin and I would break up the land and get it in shape for her to farm. She always called me Honey, because my hair was the color of honey when I was young. I never wore a hat. Bill Curtis was her foreman and she would send him to invite Billy Todd, my cousin, and me when we were working on the ranch, to come have dinner with her cowboys. So we'd go have dinner with them.

She wanted to talk to me and she called me in to visit with her. So I got to know her really well. She liked me and she invited Billy and me to have dinner with her. So when my dad died and her rice farmer went to his own land on the Brazos, she sent a man after me. She knew where I was. So I went to see her. She said, "I want you here. My farmer is leaving me, and I'm going to lease you a thousand acres for rice. There's a well there. I'm going to give you a 10-year lease and you can run 60 cows. But I want you here." And bless her heart; she gave me that 10 year lease. So I left Richmond and went there. That was in 1958. She passed away in 1958 before I moved there, but she had already signed the lease. I've been there ever since.

GOODSILL: So that changed your life!

TODD: Oh, yeah. Of course in later years, I've had my own rice dryer, and in 1967 I bought the old Morton airport, 303 acres. Carl Nichols had a flying service that I had an interest in, but I didn't want it known. He used to have two brothers who were pilots and they did a lot of crop dusting work.

Then I sold Carl and one of his pilots and another guy, the 303 acres and I bought a farm in Lane City, right out of Wharton, going toward Bay City. It had a brick home and two lakes on it and it was 320 acres. There was a bass lake and a catfish lake and an irrigation well. My oldest boy is Walter Coleman Todd, Junior. He now is 68 years old. He builds fences. He graduated from Needville High School and went to A & M and graduated. He has an insurance company he and his wife run, but he's out there with his men, building fences. My next child is Sandra Todd Dorr. She is 65 years old. The next was Timothy Craig Todd. He was killed in an accident 30 years ago, between here and Beasley. He, his five-year-old twins (a boy and a girl) and my youngest were all together. We thought we were going to lose them all. They were life-flighted to Houston. His wife was working for the dentist here in town, and the rest of them were going to East Bernard to the bank where he did business. An old man ran a stop sign and hit them. The next one was Mitchell Brian Todd. The last one is Cody Egon Todd. He was named after his grandmother's dad.



Pictured are Walter's sons, Walter C. Todd, Jr., Mitchell, and Timothy. with an assortment of trophies earned by Walter C. Todd, Sr.

GOODSILL: Did it bother you, not becoming a doctor?

TODD: No. Juanita and I got married and my dad started me off farming. We spent the second night of our married life with my grandfather LaBleu. That next morning we were getting ready to leave to go to New Orleans. My grandfather followed us out the door to the gate where I was parked.

My nickname was Buddy. He said, "Buddy, I'm going to offer you and Juanita an education. I want you to go be a doctor and whatever she wants to do, and I'll support you all the way through." He was a rich man. I told him, "Let us talk it over." Well, we talked it over and Juanita didn't want to go. She was an only child and she knew she'd have to leave and live in Louisiana and she didn't want to do that. So I said, "We won't do it." Grandfather was disappointed, but I told him, "Grandpa, I can't spell. The first six weeks of school they failed me in spelling. But I can read and I'm an A student in math, history and science." But to this day, I can't spell.

Dr. Joe Yelderman was a close friend of mine. I used to hunt with him. His wife and I went to Richmond High school together. She was a couple of years older than I was. Ada Frances Marsh was her name. I met Joe through her. When Dr. Joe got out of high school, he was valedictorian at Rosenberg High school, and he couldn't spell! (laughter)

He was the youngest in the Yelderman family and went into the Navy. He went to college to become a doctor and they drafted him during the Korean War. He was a doctor on a ship. But they married before that. He came to Needville to be a doctor. Their daughter was 6-8 months older than our oldest son. He bought a lot of land around here. He made house calls to see the old people. He loved history, too. My home here and my in-laws home were the only homes here at that time. Dr. Joe bought all this land and leased some to me for cattle. He planted trees on the property.

He and I hunted in West Texas and we hunted arrowheads more than we did deer. Joe and I would always take the old route even after they built the new freeway to San Antonio. We came back from hunting one day, in the '60s, and he said, "Oh, boy, my oak trees are here." The state was giving him trees to plant in those days. He asked me to help him and we planted trees together. I planted these over here. That's how that was developed. There were no streets here on the other side of the railroad.

GOODSILL: I think you mentioned that your father bred horses. Are you a horse breeder as well?

TODD: No, I'm not. My father had them on his uncle and cousin's ranch in Damon. We used the horses in the rice fields. We rode horses in there to wallow that rice rather than walking. You have dikes/levees to hold the water back and we rode the horses to the fields. These horses were not really tall but very muscular. When the quarter horses came, we trained them for cattle work.

GOODSILL: The life of a rice farmer is difficult, isn't it!

TODD: It is. It is full time, from the time you plant to the time you harvest; you work seven days a week. In those days you couldn't plow the piece of land that you were going to plant rice on, until after the first of January so the ranchers didn't lose their grass for grazing. You didn't plant the same land every year. You skip two years for the cattle and then come back and plant. It's very different today. Dad and Burt Ansel farmed land on the Avil land at Orchard, across from the Moore Ranch. He farmed on the Richmond Canal. My dad farmed 500 acres and he had turning plows, three-bottoms they called them.

You plowed in January and worked it up, and planted in March and April. You had to disc it and harrow it, and level it and smooth it out. Or drill it in, with grain drills. That's a tool that's made on two wheels and has a bunch of little discs and holes that open the ground about 10 inches apart. You have a hopper above there, and the grain is fed in there.

GOODSILL: How many grains of rice in a foot, for example?

TODD: Oh, about 10 or 12, I guess. You harrow over it to cover the rice with dirt. In the Beaumont area, they work that ground and cover it with water. They take the seed in sacks and put it in water and sprout it and then take airplanes and fly it in. We don't do it that way here.

Once the rice is covered with the dirt, if it doesn't rain, you flush it – you run water over it, deep enough to cover the ground and soak it, two or three inches. Then you cut the levees and let the water run into the next area, and then on down to the next.

We didn't stay in the fields continually all day. We would cut the levees in the morning and then go back and change shoes and clothes. We had what we called a camp – a building on wheels that we moved around with us.

GOODSILL: After you flood the fields, how long do you leave it soaking?

TODD: After you drain the water, you wait until it sprouts. Sometimes the land would get a crust on it and the rice couldn't come up. So you'd have to put water on it again, to soften it. The water came from the Brazos River on the Richmond Canal, through Rosenberg.

GOODSILL: How long does the rice grow?

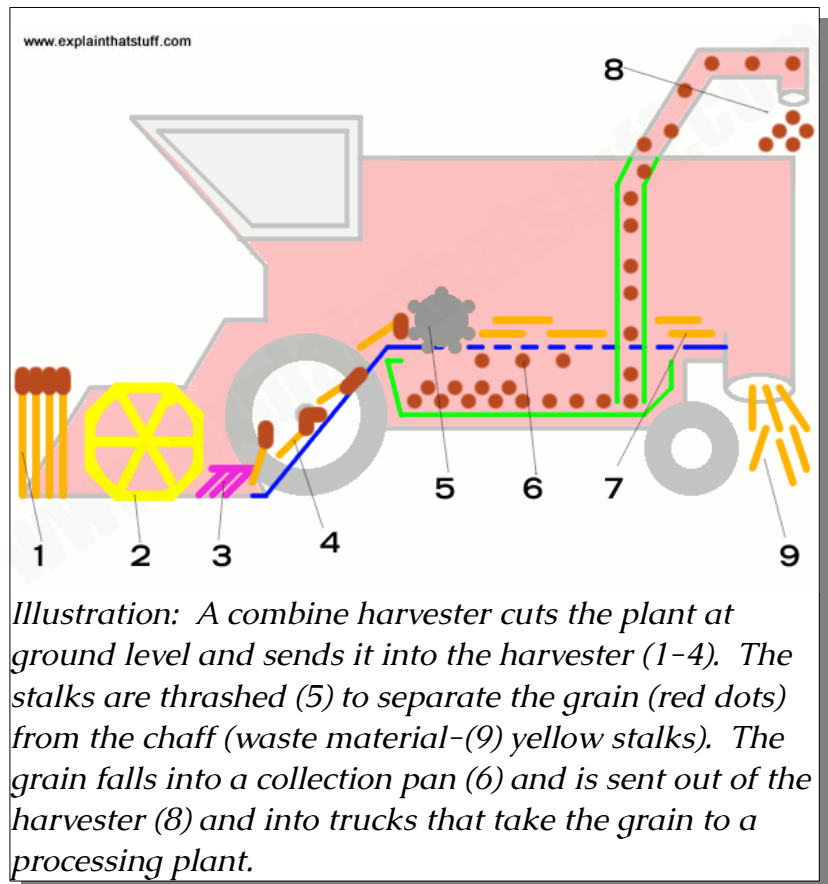
TODD: In those days usually 130-140 days.

GOODSILL: Did you use fertilizer?

TODD: We fertilized just one time in the early days, dropping it in when we planted. In the 1940s and '50s, they flew it in with airplanes. After the 130-140 days, you have to drain it and let it ripen, dry to a certain percent. It is still growing. In the old days the rice would get about four feet tall. The wind and rains would knock it down and you would have problems. Nowadays it gets only about three feet tall at the most. My dad had the first rice combine to come to this county until they built the dryer at Crabb.

GOODSILL: Tell us about rice combines.

TODD: Dad and Walter Schultz, who owned Schultz Equipment in El Campo and Rosenberg, were friends and went to Kansas and bought some International wheat combines. Schultz was an International dealer. Those combines were self-propelled. The year before that Dad bought two John Deere Pull Tights from Bert Ansel. The combine harvests the grain. It cuts the stalk and takes the grain off and puts it in a tank and the straw goes out the back.



GOODSILL: Before you had a combine, how did you harvest the rice?

TODD: You cut it with binders, and it would wrap it and tie it into a bundle and kick it off into the bundle carrier, which would hold eight bundles. There would be a man sitting on it, with a tractor pulling it. Then you would dump the bundles on the ground. People would come in and shock it. They would take those eight bundles with the heads standing up and the butts would be on the ground and take one to spread it on the top to protect the other grain heads. Then you let it dry. Then you take them to the threshers.

Men would take the bundles on wagons to the thresher. You had to feed them into the thresher and the grain falls down into the sacks. So a combine was so much more efficient!

My dad had bought two combines. He knew the people who owned the rice mill in Houston, on Washington Avenue. You had to pull the combine with a tractor. He was farming on Mennonite Road and we'd haul that rice to the mill in Houston, down South Main, to Holmes Road and then to Washington Avenue. In later years he and Schultz bought three combines in Kansas. They had regular tires instead of mud tires. They were shipped in by train but the train didn't stop in Rosenberg. So the combines were delivered to Alvin. Dad told me and my friend, John Hartman, and one boy Schultz sent, that we had to go to Alvin and drive those things back to Rosenberg. That was an all day trip!

GOODSILL: Great stories, Walter, and well told. Thank you!

Interview ends