

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees: **Stewart Morris Sr.**

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Interviewer: Jane Goodsell

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

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14 Pages



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Joella and Stewart Morris Sr.

Transcript

GOODSILL: I am interviewing Mr. Stewart Morris at the Old Richmond Courthouse in Richmond, TX. This interview is being conducted by the Ft. Bend County Historical Commission and is part of the Ft. Bend County Historical Commission Oral History Project. Our job is to talk about your experiences in Fort Bend County.

But before we started you were talking about your time in the Navy. Seven invasions!

MORRIS: About. I'm beginning to now be proud of my service during World War II. I was a 'nobody'. Well, that's a WHOLE 'nuther chapter. Let's go back.

GOODSILL: That IS a whole 'nuther chapter! But tell me your name and your serial number and all that. Just the way you did a minute a go.

MORRIS: Stewart Morris, 310817USNR. I was in the Reserves. I was a graduate of Columbia University, Furnald Hall, and I went on board a brand new ship that had just come around through the Panama Canal from Philadelphia where it was built. And it was brand new and it was DIRTY! And here was this young, fresh, gold braid ensign coming aboard and there wasn't anything for me to do. There was the engineering officer, signal officer, navigation officer, the black gang and there wasn't anything for ME to do. I looked around at that dirty ship and I just started cleaning up. And before I got out, I was Number Two in command but I ran the whole ship. We ran a CLEAN ship.

GOODSILL: How much time did you spend in Honolulu?

MORRIS: As much time as I could, to get to the ice cream place and get another malted milk. I was just in and out, reload--reload--reload and reload.

GOODSILL: Going back where?

MORRIS: Going back to Kwajalien, Atapi in the Java area, then Leyte in the Philippines, Saipan in the Marianas, then Guam, then Iwo Jima and then Okinawa.

GOODSILL: What was your job in battle?

MORRIS: My job was to see that everybody was in position. I usually was in charge of the forward repair committee--committee doesn't sound good. (chuckling) My position--we were prepared to stuff mattresses in bullet holes or torpedo holes. We had two forty-millimeters and four twenty-millimeters and my job was to keep them in bullets--keep the ammo coming up.

Hey--we've got to talk about Texas!

GOODSILL: We can talk about Texas. But has anyone taken your interview about your military service?

MORRIS: No, no. Yesterday was my interview with HBU for an hour. The spotlight's on me and everything about HBU, about getting it organized and putting together the financing.

GOODSILL: Wow, you've had a busy week! Well, tell me how your people got to Texas.

MORRIS: My mother's father, William Stewart, was the youngest of twelve. They were from Tobacco Stick, Cambridge County, Maryland, on the Chesapeake and his father was a ship builder. He built wooden ships. He had a bunch of slaves but when the slaves got to be thirty-five, he emancipated them — he turned them loose. My grandfather, being the youngest, in his mind, wooden ships were going out. Everything was going to steel ships. He was not enthused about the ship building business and he wanted to set out on his own. And GTT was the big deal in those days — Gone To Texas. There was free land down here. People didn't have any money but were looking for something to do, headed to Texas. So he was part of that herd.

GOODSILL: What did he do when he got to Texas?

MORRIS: He went to Galveston. Galveston was the place on the Gulf of Mexico where people came to from around the world. I remember reading the story of how he just about starved to death on that sailing, all the way from the Chesapeake. In those days, that was before the Panama Canal and they had to go all the way around the Horn.

GOODSILL: What year was it?

MORRIS: 1844. And he got off the ship and he was extremely grateful to a man who gave him a big hunk of cheese. And that was the first food he'd had in a week or so. He was literally starving to death. He set foot on shore in Galveston. Some of the early recordings we have of him — he came to Houston and he wrote back, "It's nothing but a mud hole". Then he settled down, looking around Texas, wanted to get out of Galveston for more opportunities. Obviously he had to come through what became Fort Bend County and he went to Gonzales. He later became the first legal mayor of Gonzales. But what is so interesting to me is, he wrote his observations of the governor taking down the flag of the Republic of Texas. Somehow we preserved his letter, describing the day.

[Mr. Morris hands interviewer the text. It reads:]

“And now the Republic of Texas is no more”

- - Judge William H. Stewart 1846

“In December, 1845, Texas was annexed to the United States by act of Congress and the following spring the formal ceremonies took place at Austin whereby the government of the Texas Republic lapsed and ended”

“There were 2,000 or 3,000 persons at Austin when the ceremonies took place. It was a wonderfully impressive scene. After prayer, the President of Texas, Anson Jones, delivered a speech. It was a strong, vivid review of the trials, the privations and the triumphs of the early settlers of Texas, of the making of the Republic, of the war with Mexico, of the tragedies of that war and so on through the ten years of the life of the Republic. Then he told of the movement to annex Texas to the United States, of the ratification of the treaty of annexation and of the purpose for which the people were congregated at Austin. And he closed with a solemnity that was profound. His closing sentence was: “And now the Republic of Texas is no more.”

“Although we all knew why we had gathered there, although we knew beforehand just what was to be done, the services were so impressive and the speech of the President so grave that when he said, ‘And now the Republic of Texas is no more’, the people acted as if they were stunned. The silence was broken only by the rattling of ropes as the Lone Star of Texas, which had been floating from the flagstaff, came down. Then those 2,000 or 3,000 persons looked as if they were about to cry. There was a look of suffering in every single face. The full significance of their act was brought home to them by the single act of hauling down the flag – the flag for which they had suffered so much and which represented so much to them”

“They were still in that unsettled, tremulous deeply sentimental state when the man at the halliards (sic) began pulling at the ropes and slowly but surely another flag was hoisted on high. When it reached the top of the flagstaff the wind whipped it out to its full length and the Stars and Stripes of the United States burst into view.”

“In a moment the crowd that had been still as death changed. A mighty cheer went up, hats were thrown ahigh, cannon boomed and there was a tremendous tumult. Never before and never since have I seen such a sudden change from grief to rejoicing. It was marvelous.”

MORRIS: Progressing with his life, he was in Gonzales and he became mayor and he became representative to the Texas legislature. He was very much of a pro-Unionist, as the Civil War incubated. He was pro-Union but he then saw that it was going to be a shifting of power to Washington, to the control of a central government, rather than a government that just protected us from foreign invasions. And he became very much of a segregationist. He was in the legislature and he got ten of his fellow legislators to band together to write a petition to convene the legislature.

At that point he had a big falling-out with Sam Houston. After that, Sam Houston called him 'Governor Stewart' because the legislature could only be brought into special session by the governor OR ten members of the legislature, signing a petition. So he had a big falling out with Sam Houston over that. And he later became a part of Hood's Brigade and undoubtedly there was a lot of organization going on back here in Fort Bend.

I'd always heard about the Moore's and even later on, the George family. My cousin, Maco Stewart Jr. became a partner of A. P. George. I think y'all have heard the name of A. P. George around here! A. P. George put together 20,000 acres and hit oil all over it, and that's how my cousin came in with him, putting up money, I imagine, to produce the oil. I used to drive my cousin down here, as a teen-ager, and we would sit and talk to Mr. George out at his house. George had an adopted daughter at the University of Texas, and I had a few dates with her. She was very good looking — she was WELL over my head and my class!

But then I wound up somehow getting tied in with Hilmar Moore. He was a Kappa Sig. I was an ATO. But we both were interested in horses and I came down here and stayed in his house, I guess in about 1940 — 1939. But Hilmar Moore and I became very close friends and he had a brother that wound up taking over a lot of the ranch lands and he got what we called the Moore Bottom, which is next door to our ranch in Wharton. Hilmar brought a bunch of bulls down from Canada — he was in the cattle business in Canada--and some of his bulls got loose and got over in my pasture in Fort Bend. I had numerous deals with him.

I ran cattle at the corner of Gessner and Westheimer. All the land, on the south side of Westheimer down to the railroad which was one mile, and then three miles east and west — 1,500 acres owned by my family and others. And then R. E. 'Bob' Smith started acquiring it afterwards.

A little bit more about my grandfather — he had four wives. They all died on him — childbirth, this, that and the other — and my grandmother was the last of his four wives, in Galveston. He went off to war [Civil War] and I think he became a major, maybe it was a colonel, and he was in Terry's Texas Rangers. I read some summaries and he was very much a Robert E. Lee man.

By the way, I've got on a Washington and Lee tie. They gave me a PhD--Washington and Lee, up in Lexington, Virginia. And my wife and I restored a house built there in 1842 and it's for visiting dignitaries to the Washington and Lee campus. And it is something to behold! Right on the front façade of Washington and Lee, next door to the house where Stonewall Jackson lived, which was next door to the house where Robert E. Lee lived.

My grandfather was a judge and sat on the district court of Galveston. When they tore down the Galveston County Courthouse, there was a mad scramble for this, that and the other. I know I missed buying the hinges off the doors. I think I was traveling around the world, building Stewart Title, and I was probably in Hong Kong or Singapore or someplace. I came home and my wife said, 'you've got to buy SOMETHING'. And so all I could find left was the sixteen columns; four pink Texas granite columns stood at each of the four doors, north, east, south and west. I bought all sixteen of them for \$100 a piece. Cost a little bit more than that to get Brown & Root to move them!

We stored them and then put up one opposite NASA over in Nassau Bay, which is another part of my life, as a tribute to the astronauts who lost their lives in the explosion. Then I put five of them at the entrance to Sugar Creek, in Fort Bend County, to signify the lasting value of real estate. So that's six of them gone. And then I put ten of them up at Houston Baptist University. They stand there today, symbolic of the Ten Commandments.



Pink Texas granite columns at Sugar Creek entrance

My grandparents lived at 1813 H in Galveston, and my grandmother ran the house. They had an upstairs maid and a downstairs maid and the gardener and my grandmother ran it all while my mother raised five kids. I was born in Houston.

GOODSILL: Tell me your mother's name.

MORRIS: Willie Stewart Morris.

GOODSILL: And your father's name?

MORRIS: William Carlos Morris.

GOODSILL: Well, let's go to your parents' generation. How many children did William Stewart and his wife have? They had your mother.

MORRIS: Yes, Willie, Maco, Minor and Clegg Stewart. Clegg died at an early age. He was over in Beaumont when the Teapot Dome scandal hit, about 1900. My uncle, Maco Stewart Sr. sent him over there to open a title company and while he was over there, he contracted some fever or something, and died. Minor Stewart was pretty close to the age of my father and he moved from Galveston to Houston. In those days there were about five or six families in Galveston and if you weren't in one of those families, you weren't going anywhere. My father talked to Maco Stewart, who was the kingpin of the three boys. My father was an orphan from Arkansas; he was a 'nobody'. He came to Galveston and Maco gave him a job in the title company that started in 1893. In 1900, he pretty well took charge of the whole thing and he ran the company until his death in 1950.

My father died in 1950 — I had the toughest father. He was REAL tough. He believed in his kids learning how to work. My father made me go to work at age ten. I went to the office and he gave me \$5 a week (five and one-half days a week). But the biggest thing he taught me was stuff that I remember even today. Out of the \$5, you give \$1 to the church, you give \$1 to yourself for savings, you waste the \$3. He made me buy my own shoes, pants, hats, coats out of the \$3, teaching me that pennies make dollars. In those days, with a dollar you could buy a lot! So I gradually started climbing up the ladder and by the time I got out of the service, I had been through law school under deferred admission. You could stay out of the military if you were in college but the second you got a degree you went into the service.

I wound up not finishing my BA degree at the University of Texas, transferring to SMU where I got my law degree. In 1943, I got my law degree, I got a marriage license, I got married, I went to Columbia University, I graduated with a midshipman's commission and in December I was on LST38 and headed for my first invasion on Kwajalien. So I DO remember 1943!

Back to Stewart Title, when I got out of the service, I had done a whole lot of jobs in the title company, having started at age ten, and my father had demanded — I always wanted to be a rancher — but when I came back, married and so forth, I said, "Hey, I'd just like to stay here at the title company", so I'm still on the payroll, some 84 years from the day I first started.

When I got out of the service, we had eight offices. We were a Texas company. We had a few agents. And I got on an expansion kick. When my father died, it fell to my position to sort of hold the reins, or maybe to watch the company grow. It took me 35 years to get into 50 states. In the land title business, the land titles are state by state by state by state. They all came into being at different times and you had the land laws. So it prepared me for the international market, because it's no different, going in to Costa Rica, Poland, Czechoslovakia, England, Scotland, Ireland, Australia, Spain. Right now I'm trying to get them into Italy. It's just hiring good lawyers and watching the dotting of the i's and crossing the t's.



*Stewart Morris Sr. and his son,
Stewart Morris Jr. marking
Stewart Title's 120th anniversary.
April 2013*

Today, instead of eight outlets in Texas, we've got 7,600 outlets, forty countries and fifty states. It's been my privilege to watch it grow and to see my son and my nephew take over, and now to see the next generation taking over. So we're down to the fourth generation running Stewart Title. I'm still on the Board and hang around.

To talk about Fort Bend, I can't remember when I hadn't heard of Fort Bend. A little old bridge you could barely get across to get over here. All of the things that I have done in Fort Bend are unbelievable. I remember negotiating with the sugar people and buying 1,500 acres of land. We entered into a contract to buy what turned into Sugar Creek. And it's been a very fruitful trip into Sugar Creek, where we put up five of those sixteen columns from the Galveston courthouse, at the entrance of Sugar Creek.

Working with Jake Kamin, who was a Jew, who's now dead — he's the guy that got me interested in HBU. He came to me, putting the financing together for HBU, which I was able to do, through my connections with Rice Institute, now Rice University. By the way, Rice put up ALL the money, every dime, to start HBU.

Thomas Jefferson, Governor of Virginia, was the organizer of the University of Virginia. He had a philosophy that I studied over and over. He believed that the federal government was to protect us from invaders. The federal government was where states could come and claim they were kin to one another; were part of the federal government.

He believed that the states should all pass their own land laws, and they did. He believed that the states should be broken down into counties and they should have a county judge. He believed that the counties ought to be broken down into cities, each with a police force. He believed the ultimate was to break down the land to the farmer owning his dirt. Governments were set up to protect him, not to tell him what to do.

I got blown away with Thomas Jefferson and that precipitated me finding my way to Monticello. Truly, I think on the world's historic list of great houses, Monticello is number one, even over the White House. When we came down to building the Southern National Bank building I sent my daughter [Lisa Simon] with architects and contractors, to study Monticello, because we were going to reproduce it.

When we got the bank up and running we had a boardroom with a beautiful round wooden table. Lisa invited non-profit organizations to have their meetings at our bank, which made it a center of the community.

My wife, Joella, was the one interested in history. She was interested in everything that's good in my life. She came up with the ideas and I just made them happen.

How did I get to Monticello? That would have been Joella. Joella built the image of the Stewart Title Company by having dinners around the country, at all of the conventions. People have never been to Seattle and we're going to have a meeting in Seattle. Joella would find out the names of the five best historians that could tell the history of Seattle. She then would choose the one she thought was the best, and that person would make a speech at these title company conventions, about Seattle and the history of Seattle. All I know is, it worked, and our little old company grew to where we now have about 15% of the world market in title insurance. It built on the foundation of what Joella thought — history. She convinced me that QUALITY people — there are all kinds of people in this world — but quality people are interested in history.

I'll tell you about Miss Ima Hogg, who became a dear friend of ours. We spent a LOT of time with Miss Ima Hogg. She was interested in history and she was just QUALITY. And old Governor Dolph Brisco, he was interested in history. Allan Shivers too.

GOODSILL: Speaking of Joella's interest in history, I know she had something to do with the renovation of the old jail out here in Richmond. Tell me how that happened.

MORRIS: Well, she became interested in Robert E. Lee. She could tell you the history of Robert E. Lee and The Confederacy. Some people started the Confederate Museum in the old [Richmond] jail (chuckles) — it was a MESS. It was dirty, indigent people lived next door and did all kind of tricks in the back yard. Grass grew everyplace. But that was the home of the Confederate Museum. Bert Winston was a NUT on the Confederacy. I mean, an absolute nut. Bert Winston had his home out there in Richmond, and he and my wife became very fast friends. And somewhere down the line somebody was admiring how the Museum had progressed.



Old Jail House, Richmond, Texas

I was standing there, and she was talking to some person, and he said, "Man, you sure must've had a sugar daddy to put up all this money". She said, "I had two of them, but one of them just died." That was Bert Winston. He got the politics turned around to where Joella became president of the Confederate Museum. I remember going to the last meeting for the installation, and a young lady on the board said, "Now, look here, we've got \$6,000 in the bank. You be careful and take care of it." My wife could spend \$6,000 in an afternoon. [chuckles in an amused way]. We cleaned up the jail area. I remember they had the hanging place — stories ran wild about the last black man that was hung right there. Joella and Bert Winston said "We've got to get this thing out of here where people can see it." So Bert Winston says, "I'll give you ten acres." I said, "You know, there's twenty acres in this tract here. Why don't you give us the whole thing?" And Bert Winston says, "Well, we'll see how this ten acres goes and then we're going to give you the rest." Which he never did. And his heirs never did. Then he said, "Well, okay, you've got the dirt, now what about the building?" And so I said, "Well, we don't have any money." He said, "Well, now, look. I've given you the land. You've got to have a building. You've got to use it!" For some reason \$25,000 comes up in my head, that we could build a shell for \$25,000. I said, "Okay, Bert. If you give half, I'll give half." So that's how it got built.

In my experience museums are not profit makers. They're not profit centers. But that was Joella's obsession. I'd bought control of Bellfort National Bank and I told Joella, "If you will change the name, from Confederate Museum to Museum of Southern History, I'll change the name of the bank from Bellfort National Bank to the Southern National Bank."

There had been an old Southern National Bank down in Houston but it had gone away. And I will keep everybody SO confused — is that a bill for the Southern Museum or the Southern National Bank? And we could do all kind of things together and just keep them all confused. And we'll get a lot further down the road, both the bank AND the museum with both of them as Southern. And that's how that became Southern National Bank.

I said, "We've got to get out of this location but let's build something that's attractive." If you notice, Prosperity Bank sits back, my recollection is it's 150 feet from the freeway. It sits WAY back. A lot of valuable land, sitting out in front. But I said, "It's a little jewel and we want it to be something to be talked about. I'm not trying to see how much money we can make out of every square foot."

At any rate, that's how the museum was moved out of the jail, then to Highway 359. We decided we needed a first class headquarters, so that's when we moved the museum [to the grounds of Southern national Bank in Sugar Land.] That's when we built Poplar Forest, which is a copy of the original Poplar Forest, externally. Lisa Simon, my daughter, is on the board of Poplar Forest today. She's able to touch me every year. [both laugh]

GOODSILL: Speaking of moving things, tell me your recollection of moving the depot in Sugar Land.

MORRIS: It was an historic building. The Chamber of Commerce moved it but we, Lisa Simon and Harvey Zinn of Southern National Bank, financed it. My recollection is we financed the deal. It was to create and upgrade the neighborhood. It became the headquarters of the Chamber of Commerce. We wanted to put it in the swim of things. And that's why we moved the museum to the bank and why we ultimately moved it again to the HBU campus. By the way, we've got a unique deal going at HBU. I said to a Jewish friend of mine, Isaac Heinbinder, "We built the Morris Cultural Arts Center, we've got the museum, but how do we get students to come look?" He said, "You've got to PAY them." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, PAY them!" I said, "Okay, but we don't have any money." "Okay, well here's \$8,500. You figure out the plan, turn it over to the professors and figure it all out."

I think it is SO funny. The president of the university sets the policy but the university is run by the provost; 126 professors report to the provost. Nothing happens without the provost. He reports to the president. Now the president is the CEO (now speaking in a whisper) but the provost runs the place.

Trying to bring that in focus, I said, "You know, unless the professors get behind this museum, I don't think it'll survive. How do we get the professors?" I went home and got to thinking, "We've got some money And I came back and I told them, "We'll pay the professor that supervises the museum \$1,000 a year, and he'll need three people to help him, so we'll pay each one of those \$500 a year." We HAD 'em! It took THAT (snaps his fingers) long. For money, things DO move.

They figured out what to do. There have been 17,000 diplomas issued to graduates from HBU. But you've always got a new group coming in. We set up a deal where we got four professors organizing it. If you're a student, you visit the museum and if you will write a paper--not less than four pages long and not more than ten pages, and submit it, we'll give you \$100.

Now we're going to have a contest to see which one is the best, and I think #1 and #2 each get \$500 in addition to their \$100. And then we will have a dinner at the River Oaks Country Club for the professors and for the top winners, every year. But we're holding it to twenty people. Can't be more than twenty people in the Chippendale Room, up on the 3rd floor. Want to make it a special occasion. And what's so interesting to me — we get there and my daughter, Lisa, can tell the story better than I because that's her job as president — but she calls on different ones to tell what they wrote about. And the student stands up in front of twenty people and says, "I never did know anything about a Gatling gun or what a three-pounder was. I never did know anything about Lynchburg."

One of the best I EVER heard was a student, who was a freshman — he stood up and said, "Well, I'd never been in that museum before, but I went in and I got on this subject and I got real carried away. I got that little segment of the museum that I'm interested in, and, man, it is EXCITING."

To me, that's mission accomplished. So that's the story about the jail museum. And by the way, it's endowed under a foundation that I set up and right now they don't get but \$30,000 a year. They'll soon be up to where that will be \$60,000-\$70,000 a year to support the museum. What else?

GOODSILL: Do you remember when George Bush came to town for the Sesquicentennial and there was a HUGE flag hung from one of the buildings. Did you have anything to do with that?

MORRIS: That was when he was in Congress. I just remember visiting him in Congress. I remember the flag.

GOODSILL: How did that get made? That was the biggest flag, ever!

MORRIS: That was really Jake Kamin's project. I was there but I did not handle the details. I can tell you why President Kennedy came to Houston, but that's another story. And then the next day he was shot and killed in Dallas. I can sure tell you that in great detail. But that's not for today.

GOODSILL: Okay, so we've talked about the bank, we've talked about the museum, we've talked about the depot, we've talked about Sugar Creek. Do you want to tell me some more about Hilmar Moore?

MORRIS: Hilmar Moore was a one and only. Hilmar Moore used to keep a bunch of dogs. He had hunting dogs here in Richmond. And I think one of the interesting things is that one of the last times that I talked to him I said, "Well, hey, I'll buy you lunch". And he says, "Okay, let's go to lunch." And I said, "I'll take you to the River Oaks Country Club." He says, "It's not in Fort Bend County." (said in a lugubrious tone of voice).

GOODSILL: (laughing)

MORRIS: "It's not in Richmond". So, we didn't go. He said, "If it's in Richmond, we can have lunch."

GOODSILL: Tell me why so many of your business activities happened in Fort Bend County? You were living in Houston. Was it just that there was opportunity here?

MORRIS: Opportunity, opportunity. But I was doing business all around Houston, all around the United States. The furthest I got from home was South Korea. That's one of the most lovely, automated, up-to-date, clean places I've ever been, Seoul, South Korea. Those are great people, great people. And they are right on the border. The Seoul River runs east and west. If you are really somebody, you live on the north side of the Seoul River (chuckling) and that means it's ten minutes by slow moving car to the North Korean border. But that's where the upper class live.

Talking to my friends over there, they said, "Listen, if they built an A-bomb, all they've got to do is drop it right here and there will be NO South Korea. There will be no Seoul and it will probably blow over and there will be no North Korea. That ain't anything but to raise money from the U. S." That's what a Seoul banker told me.

GOODSILL: You haven't told me about your children.

MORRIS: I have three. The oldest is Carlotta Coffman, the middle is Stewart Morris Jr. and then Lisa Simon is the youngest. Their Christmas card shows you the results of our 70 year marriage.

Oh, wait a minute! The house I lived in was my ranch headquarters. It cost \$17,500 to build that house. We've added on to it two or three times and the lot cost \$7,500. I ran cattle from Westheimer one mile south to the railroad.

There was an old railroad back there in those days. And three miles east and west on Westheimer. I used to bring cattle across Westheimer. There weren't any cars on it at any rate, but I drove bulls across Westheimer to my house, where I still live. Same house since 1948, the year that Stewart Jr. was born. I live in the middle and my daughter, Lisa, lives on one side and my son lives on the other side. So the three of us live there, and all we've got is fourteen acres. I paid \$7,500 for my lot and it was the prettiest one around. We've got a pasture in the middle and we have horses and carriages, and we have tailgate parties there. We can have 100 cars and it's no big deal.

GOODSILL: Sounds wonderful.

This has been a GREAT interview. Do you know why it's a really good interview? I never said a word. I didn't have too! (laughing) You followed your train of thought and you told me a story and then you went to the next. Just great. Thank you so much Mr. Morris.

Interview ends.