

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Margaret Vaughn “Peggy” Thomas Wright**

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Interviewer: Jane Goodsill

Transcriber: Megan Moore

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15 Pages



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Transcript

GOODSILL: We are in Simonton today. Peggy will you start by telling me how you got to Fort Bend County?

WRIGHT: It started with my father-in-law who was in the real estate business in Houston. He sold a house, and in order to make the sale work, he took a lot in as part of his commission. The lot happened to be in Valley Lodge. So, they came out and built a weekend house, and my husband and I ended up following suit. Only, we didn't build a weekend house. My husband, Jerry Wright, was in school in Dallas, and we came home that summer. We already had two children. We came home that summer to help out in the real estate business. My father-in-law was blowing and going, and we rented a home in Valley Lodge and decided this was fun. We left Dallas and came back to Houston. We had a home in Houston that we'd rented while we were gone. Then Kenneth Snitzer came in and purchased up the entire neighborhood. He was the builder that purchased all the land around Joel Osteen's church in Houston.

Part of the deal was, we could live in our home rent free for a minimum of five years before they needed the property. Since we were young 'marrieds', we took advantage and left Houston to come out to Simonton. We bought two lots in Valley Lodge in 1973, and have loved it. Been here ever since.

GOODSILL: So you married Jerry Wright and you came out here. Tell us exactly where Valley Lodge is for people who aren't familiar with this area.

WRIGHT: It is right off of FM 1093, south of Brookshire, and north of the Richmond-Rosenberg area. I'd say smaller towns, but people won't recognize Orchard. It started out as a weekend community for people in Houston who wanted to have some place else to go. It had a small golf course and rodeo arena. Eventually people realized we could live out here full time. It's kind of a hodge-podge neighborhood with some old homes and some new homes.

GOODSILL: Valley Lodge is the name of the subdivision? It's not the name of a town or a city?

WRIGHT: Valley Lodge is the name of the subdivision where we live.

GOODSILL: Tell me your father-in-law's name, Jerry's dad.

WRIGHT: George Wright. He was in the real estate business for many years in Houston.

GOODSILL: How did Kenneth Snizter get in the picture?

WRIGHT: We just happened to own a house in that Houston neighborhood that he purchased. I never knew the man. They purchased two or three blocks of the whole area with the thought of building Greenway Plaza.

GOODSILL: He did well with that development, didn't he?

WRIGHT: Yes, he did, but so did we. We got very lucky. He said five years guaranteed, and it ended up ten years. When we moved out, we could rent our house or do whatever we wanted. Then, when they finally got down to it, all they were doing was buying the land. They said you could sell the house. Which we did. It was, you know, a little house, probably 1,300 square feet, but, we sold the land for a huge profit.

GOODSILL: What were you doing in 1973?

WRIGHT: Well, I was a mother of three little girls, Jennifer, Joan and Jami. Jami was three, Joan was seven, and Jennifer was nine when we moved out.

I was working part time in Houston at a school off of Bellaire. I was a speech therapist and I was going in and doing that. But since it was a small school, I managed to squeeze that down to one day a week. So basically, I was a stay at home mom. Let's see, what was Jerry doing then? He's done several things in our marriage (with humor). I think at that point, he was in the insurance business, predominantly calling on medical students in Galveston. So, he drove from Valley Lodge to Galveston three days a week.

GOODSILL: You didn't really pick a central place to be located.

WRIGHT: No, but it was nice out here, and that's where we wanted to raise our kids. It was country. You crossed Highway 6, and if it was after dark, you made sure somebody knew you were coming because you weren't going to see another car. It was just a two-lane road with ditches on either side. It was GREAT. We got out here, and my girls loved horses, and they just had freedom. It was wonderful.

They went to school in Rosenberg. Bowie Elementary was where they started. Jennifer went to Lamar High School. But by the time Joan and Jami got to high school, Terry High School had opened. So, they're all Lamar Consolidated graduates, and I have to brag on all of them. Jennifer has her doctorate, and she's in the administration at Lamar Consolidated. Joan is a science specialist in the Alief school district, and Jami's a speech therapist in the Lamar school district.

GOODSILL: Wow, they took after their mama's footsteps.

WRIGHT: I'm very fortunate. They're all right here. Two in Fulshear and one in Pecan Grove.

GOODSILL: Oh, that's great. They're close. So, at some point when the kids got a little older, I guess, you got involved with being on the city council for Simonton?

WRIGHT: The great fear that Houston was going to jump over everybody and come out here and annex Simonton is what started the drive to incorporate Simonton. There were the pros and cons, and the back and the forth, but eventually we did decide that it was the way to go. Plus, in 1979 when we incorporated, we could not get flood insurance because at that time the county did not participate in the federal flood insurance.

GOODSILL: If you incorporated you could get your own flood insurance? Regardless of whether the county got it or not.

WRIGHT: Exactly, and also to keep Houston from annexing us.

GOODSILL: Tell me what the pros and cons of Houston annexing a small town would have been?

WRIGHT: We'd be paying Houston taxes and not receiving any Houston services. At least that was my understanding at the time. I was on the original city council (with humor).

GOODSILL: How many people were on it?

WRIGHT: I think the mayor and five council people.

GOODSILL: Wow, that's a lot for a small town.

WRIGHT: We were incorporated as a village, The Village of Simonton.

GOODSILL: Tell me what they mayor's name was.

WRIGHT: Maurice Berkman.

GOODSILL: Oh, is that right?! He gave us a wonderful interview several years ago.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Please read the Maurice Berkman interview on this website at <https://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/home/showdocument?id=30518>

WRIGHT: Yeah, isn't he a sweet guy?

GOODSILL: Yes, yes. I'd forgotten that he was the mayor here.

WRIGHT: Yeah, he was the original founding mayor. Oh, I probably can't even tell you who was on the council at the time. We met in the old Hispanic school just right down FM 1489, though it had long since not been a school. The Simonton City Club had it. Oh Lord, it was a building that was falling down half the time. We baked a million cakes and had Lord only knows how many things to earn money to put that building back together. But city council met there for quite a while. I can't remember what year we built this building. We didn't have very much money because we didn't have any *ad velorum* taxes for the city. We never passed them in the early years.

GOODSILL: What were the pros and cons of that? Do you remember that argument?

WRIGHT: Well, obviously, one of the many arguments about incorporating was people not wanting to be taxed. We operated on a shoestring. But then again, we didn't provide any services to speak of. We didn't have trash pick-up or anything like that. Valley Lodge had that for a number of years. That came along with the property owner's association dues that you paid.

GOODSILL: How did you pave the roads?

WRIGHT: (sigh) A very benevolent county. For a long time, the county commissioner took care of our roads. They weren't paved then. They were iron ore roads, you know?

GOODSILL: Iron ore? Is that the right word?

WRIGHT: Yeah. It's a material, and they would come in with their maintainers, run them down the road, grade them smooth, and get them back in shape. Then fifteen minutes later, the bumps would be back. (laughs)

GOODSILL: And awful when it got muddy.

WRIGHT: Well, not too bad because that particular material wasn't like Caliche or anything else, but it was dusty. dusty, dusty, dusty. You'd see a cloud of dust.

GOODSILL: And into your laundry? (both laugh)

WRIGHT: I think we were all so used to it. We were oblivious to it, so to speak. What was bad was when the road was 'wash-boardy', you know? Sometimes you'd see these kids come flying down the road and fear they'd end up in the ditch.

GOODSILL: Well, that gets me to emergency services, tow trucks, hospitals, clinics.

WRIGHT: Simonton had nothing. We were incorporated and we plodded along trying to think of what we needed. I'm sure we passed some ordinances and figured it out. We had a budget that we worked, and very carefully squeezed every penny. We agonized over them.

GOODSILL: Did you have a volunteer fire department?

WRIGHT: Yes, but obviously we did not have this building. We didn't have any trucks. We were still basically under county. They just were kind to us. We had inter-local agreement with the county to provide certain things.

GOODSILL: Some police and some fire?

WRIGHT: Yes. That's where we are still. We don't have a police department. We have inter-local agreements with the county to provide. In an emergency, I think the county must have had some type of agreement with Fulshear. They came because we're at the very absolute edge of the county. And the volunteer fire department is obviously the Simonton-Fulshear, and we've got a truck here. They're wonderful. So, we're still not totally self-sufficient, I'm sure, but far better than we had been. Some years back, we finally ended up having to do an *ad velorum* tax.

GOODSILL: What is the tax rate here?

WRIGHT: You know at one point it was twenty seven cents. I'm not sure anymore. But roads just don't fix themselves. We do have an inter-local agreement with the county. They provide the labor and the equipment, and we provide the material. Way back in the beginning, when we just had the iron ore roads, Ed Helwig was our commissioner, and he took good care of us. The county is wonderful. We couldn't survive without the county. For example, this recent episode over Memorial Day weekend where we almost flooded, the county was here.

We have flooded twice. The first time we flooded was in December of 1991. When we moved out here, I think we did ask about potential flooding, with the river being as close as it is.

GOODSILL: Well, how close is the river?

WRIGHT: It depends on where you are in Valley Lodge. Over in section one, the river's right there. I'm over in section two and the river is closer than I realized. It comes in from the north of us, where there's a bend in the river. It breaches there. It gets across the fields and the properties in the north subdivision, and then there's two roads in our section, Wagon and Pony. We've done an awesome job of backtopping them and building them up. Now they are two wonderful dams, and the water comes right down between them.

GOODSILL: Into the houses?

WRIGHT: Yes. (laughs)

GOODSILL: Oh, unforeseen consequences. So, you remember the flood of 1991 well?

WRIGHT: Oh, yes. Maurice, the Mayor, was in Tyler – his daughter lives in Tyler. I was mayor *pro tem*. I got a call saying, "It's going to be worse than the '56 or '57 flood." And I'm thinking, 'How bad was that?' So, I called Maurice in Tyler and said, "Maurice, how bad was the flood because they tell us we're gonna flood." Bless his heart, he said, "I'm coming home." I said, "You don't need to come home. You can't stop the water. Just tell me what to expect." Well that was a crazy year. This was December 22 or 23, and we looked like an advertisement for every moving van and rental truck you could think of. There were trucks in and out of the subdivision, people loading up their stuff and getting out. Then the weather people came back and said, "Oh, sorry, the computer model's wrong. You're not going to flood." Many people moved back in. Then a couple days later they said, "Oops, here it comes." So, we did flood. We had water in the houses. We had four or five inches to maybe a foot or two depending on where you were.

GOODSILL: How about the fields and the animals and so on?

WRIGHT: Well, everybody moved everything. You could go not too far down the road this way, and it didn't flood. So, you could move. And in cases like that, living in the country is a wonderful place to be. Everybody says, "What do you need? I've got a pasture over here, bring 'em on." So that was the first flood. (laughs) Then the second one was in October of '94. And you're thinking, "Okay this is not good." But, 'knock on wood', we haven't had another one. We did several things while I was still on council to try and mitigate our problem. If the water could have kept going, we would have been okay. I mean, it would have come through and been in our yards. But FM 1093 acted like a dam. The culverts that went under FM 1093 could only handle so much water. Once the water level got to the same level as FM 1093, then it went on over.



Of course, it didn't get any higher in the subdivision because it could move on through and get back to the river. But unfortunately, FM 1093 was just high enough that it put water in homes in Valley Lodge.

We have two huge pumps that we were able to get through, I'm sure it was a matching grant, or maybe just a grant. We have flood gates that we can drop down at a certain place in Valley Lodge that holds the river back. But in May 2015, we had Vulcan across the river. They were wonderful neighbors. They provided us with more pumps, BIG pumps. We have six-inch pumps. Well, they brought us a twelve-inch pump. They rallied to the emergency. The county workers came and they did everything they could do, and we did not flood. We should have. In history past, we would have flooded. It just goes to show with enough perseverance and plain old luck, we pulled it off. We had twenty-four-hour volunteers up there manning the pumps. Even if you didn't have a clue about how a pump worked, if it started making noises or doing something wrong, you knew how to shut it off and who to call. So that's pretty much our flooding history, and hopefully we've got a handle on it.

GOODSILL: So that gets us to the other water issue which is drought. Is there any issue with that in this area? You're not a village now, you're a city, right?

WRIGHT: We're a city. Everybody has his or her own well. We don't have city water or city sewage. We're all well and septic. So, yes, it was terribly dry, but what can you do about it?

GOODSILL: It's complicated because there's more development happening. More development sucks the water out of the ground.

WRIGHT: Right. But as of now, Valley Lodge is strictly private wells and septic systems.

GOODSILL: How does the water taste?

WRIGHT: Oh, it's wonderful. It's great. It's just awesome water. When we built our house, we drilled a two-inch well. Four-inch wells were almost twice the price. Our two-inch well was an above ground pump. Probably less than two years later, two-inch wells were phased out and they went to four inch. We're still functioning on our two-inch well.

We had to finally give up the ghost on our septic system. You know, Valley Lodge is a river bottom. It's not the ideal place for a septic. The county adopted the aerobic system. We still have septic systems, but it's sprinkled out onto the yard. We just did this this past March. This tank is huge, I mean, it's just tremendous.

GOODSILL: Underneath your yard?

WRIGHT: Yeah. It's buried. Then you have the lateral lines out that have a sprinkler head on the other end, and it's treated water. I'm not holding my breath any more every time someone flushes a potty. Because it had gotten that bad.

GOODSILL: There was no place for it to go because the water table was so high?

WRIGHT: Yeah, it was just saturated. And that gumbo, you know? These are the problems of country living (with humor). I must say, I resisted the aerobic system as long as I possibly could, and now I wonder why. Probably the expense of putting it in. It is great, and I have no complaints.

GOODSILL: Did you have a dog catcher? Or animal control?

WRIGHT: We do. We have an animal control officer. When people move to the country, they have this mentality – "I didn't move to the country to tie up my dog." You can complain about their children, but don't talk about their dogs. (laughs)

The times that I was on council, we pretty much tried to get people to work it out themselves. We'd say, "Go talk to your neighbor." Or if we had somebody that had a dog that was really a problem, like biting or something, then the mayor got the job to go talk to those people.

GOODSILL: Was Mr. Berkman fairly good at negotiating with people? Did he have a nice touch?

WRIGHT: Oh, absolutely. Everybody loved Maurice. You knew he had the grocery store. I believe it was his father that had started it. Maurice and Flo were there, and if you went in there and you wanted something and they didn't have it you'd say, "Maurice can you get whatever?" And it was there the next time the grocery truck came.

We had charge accounts. At the end of the month, Flo would mail out the statement with the copies of the little 'chit' that you'd signed. One of my girls could drive, and I'd send them to run get me such and such. At the end of the month when the bill came in, I'd ask, "What did you do?"

Well, when they signed the ticket, they would write a note on it, "Mother, you sent me up here to buy this." "This is for such and such." Flo said, "When it came time to do the bills, I loved doing yours because they'd all have a story on them. The girls had written down what you needed or why they got it."

Or if they came and said, "Oh, my gosh, I'm running late, I need lunch money," and I didn't have lunch money, I'd say, "Stop at the store and tell Maurice to give you money." That's the kind of neighborhood it was. If you wanted to know something, go ask Maurice. They were just amazing. Flo used to say, "They're going to carry me out of here feet first. I'm never going to get out of this store." Actually, Jennifer, my oldest, worked at the store as her first job.

GOODSILL: Oh, I bet that was an interesting job. She probably knew everything that was happening in town.

WRIGHT: Oh, she told me, "Mrs. Berkman taught me all kinds of stuff."

GOODSILL: Here's a funny story. When I interviewed Mr. Berkman, I had no idea who he was, and no idea who Flo was. I did the whole interview, which was wonderful. Then I left, never having asked Flo a thing.

Shortly afterward, there was some announcement in the paper about Flo was getting some award, and it listed all of her accomplishments which were impressive. I wrote them a note saying, "I may have interviewed the wrong person. SHE might be the famous one in the family." He loved that.

WRIGHT: Oh, yes. She was very involved in all kinds of things, particularly children. Maurice was wonderful, and yes – nobody ever had a negative thing to say about him because he just turned himself inside out to be gracious to everyone.

GOODSILL: He had the touch.

WRIGHT: He did. He still does. I recently went to his 95th birthday party. He is just a great guy. He was mayor for a long time, and I was mayor *pro tem* for a long time. I was on council maybe 24 years.

GOODSILL: Wow. That is a labor of love.

WRIGHT: I stayed on, and then I quit. Then I got back on to fill somebody else's term. I thoroughly enjoyed it. I really did. I probably would still be on the council today except that the kids were grown, and we wanted to travel. Being here for a meeting every month was a problem for us.

There is a huge piece of property out here that is owned by a gentleman from China. He's had it 20-25 years and ultimately will begin developing it. He has purchased property all the way to Brookshire. They have been magnificent neighbors. The city council has just recently entered into an agreement with them and taken part of their land into our Extraterritorial Jurisdiction (ETJ), that has to be included into the Simonton ETJ. When he finally starts developing Twinwood, they will do it with class. I think it will be a real eye-opener because they own all of downtown Simonton. They've systematically bought up the property as it's become available. When they start, which I'm thinking is not going to be in the too far distant future, they are going to start with a development right at FM 1093 and FM 1489. I think it's going to be the Villages in Simonton. There may be some stores and some houses. I'm not sure, because like I said, I'm not on the council.

EDITOR'S NOTE: A Twinwood project, Antonie's Market Grill, has opened since this interview..

GOODSILL: Do you think the people who come there will be Chinese primarily?

WRIGHT: No.

GOODSILL: Oh, he just happens to be a Chinese American businessman? He is kind of this era's Kenneth Snitzer? (both laugh)

WRIGHT: I think he's even a little bit larger than Kenneth Snitzer. My daughter, who's in the Lamar school district, tells me that one of the next high schools on the drawing board will be built in Simonton.

GOODSILL: We passed the Fulshear High School on the way out here. It's being built.

WRIGHT: It's supposed to be open in 2016. That's a junior high and a high school.

GOODSILL: Tell me about Fulshear.

WRIGHT: It's just blown up! I mean Fulshear used to be just like Simonton, a little bitty old sleepy town, and the Cross Creek subdivision and Fulbrook. Now Weston Lakes has incorporated themselves, so they're not either Simonton nor Fulshear.

When we lived out here all those years when the girls were growing up, there was no such thing as fast food. At one point early on, I'm sure it had to be the 70s, what's now called Ropers, which is the little convenience store, was Barney's. Back then, there was nothing in Fulshear either. I think there was a Dozier's, and Meyers had a market, too. So, I laughed, "You know, we've just gone down the tubes when you can get pizza delivered in Valley Lodge." That's where we are now.

GOODSILL: You've become part of a big city. Do you know how Simonton got its name?

WRIGHT: I think it was named after a gentleman.

GOODSILL: That's what I thought. Simon town?

WRIGHT: Yeah, I think so. But you know what, shame on me, I don't know. They used to grow potatoes here. We had a huge cotton gin right at the end of the road that unfortunately was taken down.

GOODSILL: Is there much agriculture in this area still?

WRIGHT: No. We have development.

GOODSILL: Your husband was from Houston. What part of the country were you from?

WRIGHT: I was born in Dallas. My father was in construction, and we moved a lot. I moved to Houston when I was six. Stayed there till I was fourteen. Lived in California for five years, through high school. And my dad passed away. My mother said, "We're going back to Texas." She was born and raised in Comfort, Texas. So, we came back. I was in college by then. I met my husband through a blind date that his mother and my sister-in-law arranged.

GOODSILL: That seems to have worked out pretty well. (both laugh) Can you think of anything else you want to have recorded as part of your memory?

WRIGHT: I just remembered that it was such a wonderful, peaceful place for little girls to grow up. The rule on Saturday morning, when they would hit the floor running to get on their horses was, "If I don't see you by dark you are in big trouble." That's the kind of neighborhood it was. If you saw someone's kiddo doing something they shouldn't be doing, you didn't hesitate to go out there and lay 'em low. Everybody appreciated it. If you had to go to Houston for the day, which no one wanted to do, when we came back, before you went home, you'd swing by the club to see what was going on.

It was just a very 'Camelot' kind of neighborhood – you knew everybody. When someone new moved in, everybody went to meet them. I used to know everybody in Valley Lodge. I don't anymore. But perhaps part of that was, you had kids, and you meet people through your kids. It's still a wonderful, loving, caring, giving neighborhood. The flood potential in May brought to the forefront how everybody pitches in. Right now, they're out there picking up the highway, a trash-off for the Simonton Beautification Committee. What can we do? What projects can we take on that benefit the entire community?

I'm delighted our children grew up there. I'm being very prejudiced when I say I hate to see all the growth coming our way because we don't live in the country anymore. There are pluses to that, obviously. But there's minuses too. It is what it is.

GOODSILL: Did you have horses on your property, or was there a stable nearby?

WRIGHT: We rented a pasture nearby. When my kids were growing up, there were the boys with go carts and the girls with the horses. And there the twain shall meet. The club at Valley Lodge, at that time, had an arena. About once a month, they'd have play days for the kids on the horses and do barrel racing and pole bending. They had a little old town village with houses and store fronts. It was very quaint. It truly was. They had a big swimming pool. Like I say, it was Camelot for growing up. The Valley Lodge trail ride still goes into the Fat Stock Show.

Let me tell you about The Round Up Rodeo. That was SO much fun. Just the other day, I ordered something online from Academy. When she asked my address she said, "Oh, I spent so many years in Simonton." I said, "Let me guess – the Round Up Rodeo?" And you know, still today, I will give a check somewhere in town and they'll say, "Is the rodeo still there?"

GOODSILL: For the people who don't know about it, describe what it was like.

WRIGHT: Every Saturday night they had an indoor rodeo in a large, metal barn building. You sat very close to the arena. If the cows came slinging by, you probably got the mud slung on you. It was a family deal. For the younger kids, they tied a string around a goat's neck and during intermission those kids would run up and down in that deep sand, or dirt, trying to catch that goat. Then the little bit older kids had a string around a calf's neck. The big deal was, by golly, you got five dollars. My kids rode in the grand entry. I can't tell you how many times we went across the road to the rodeo. It was a good rodeo. You were right there in the middle of it, and then afterwards, they always had a dance. I pretty much bailed out when the dance came around as the girls got into teenage years.

I have to be honest; there were some negatives that went with it. Sometimes there were fights, squabbles, and drinking. Dozier's had a little restaurant there on the side. You could go and grab dinner or just go to the rodeo. One time, Deng Xiaoping, a Chinese Premier came to Houston. They brought him out to the Round Up Rodeo to see. Secret Service was everywhere. You couldn't get into Valley Lodge without being stopped and showing your ID. (both laugh) They frequently brought dignitaries from Houston out. It was a big deal, to go to the Simonton rodeo.



Former Chinese premier Deng Xiaoping rides through the Simonton Round-up Rodeo in a stage coach, ca. 1979

GOODSILL: When I first moved to Houston, one of the first things I did was go to the Simonton rodeo.

WRIGHT: Oh, well, then you know how great it was.

GOODSILL: It was great!

WRIGHT: It was fun. As my girls got older, every Saturday night they asked to go to the rodeo. I was really sorry to see it finally come to an end, as unfortunately, all good things do.

GOODSILL: The rodeo brought people out here and sort of put you on the map in some ways?

WRIGHT: Yeah, to this day I'll say Simonton, "Oh, the rodeo!"

GOODSILL: It's been a pleasure talking to you. I think you've done a really nice job painting a picture of what it was like.

WRIGHT: Oh you're so welcome. I enjoyed it.

Interview ends