

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees: **Ann Covell Council and
Jeff Council**

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Interviewer: Jane Goodsill

Transcriber: Olga Barr

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15 Pages



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Transcript

GOODSILL: Ann, would you please tell you full name and date of birth.

ANN: Ann Covell Council, June 6, 1936.

GOODSILL: Do you want to give us a brief outline of your...

ANN: When you ask how did you get here and this type of thing. I'm a lifelong resident of Richmond, Texas. My great-uncle, William Nelson Covell came to Richmond in 1913. My father was going to work for my great-uncle, and they came in 1935, so my sister, my brother, and I all born right here in Richmond.

GOODSILL: What kind of work were they doing?

ANN: My great-uncle was an electrical and plumbing contractor. My father was a plumber.

GOODSILL: So they had a lot of work to do because the town was...

ANN: It was a little bitty town of two-thousand and something, I think, when my father and mother came in 1935. I've never looked that up. It was a small town. They both came from New Orleans to Richmond. I graduated from Lamar High School in 1954 on a Monday, and on Tuesday morning I went to work at Wessendorff Insurance. I was seventeen years old. The agency was located in a building that is, of course no longer there, but it was located across from the hospital where the Walgreens Drugstore is now.

GOODSILL: Name the highway.

ANN: That's highway 90. That was my first experience with Mr. Wessendorff. I then later worked in the building that's downtown on Third Street. Then I worked for a while in this building.

GOODSILL: This building is 611 Morton Street.

ANN: I did a little bit of bookkeeping. Then I became a realtor in Wessendorff Development next door. I was a realtor and worked out of that office. In the meantime, one of the summers, I worked at Wessendorff Lumber Company. I worked at the insurance agency, the lumber company, and the development company. My father died at age forty-eight, and my mother went to work for Wessendorff Lumber Company. She worked there until she was seventy-two.

My younger brother worked for Joe Clyde Wessendorff when he was in high school mowing with the tractor out at the farm. And then he later worked here in the insurance agency.

GOODSILL: Wow, so the whole family has been involved.

ANN: Yes. Community involvement is what was on that list next. . [Ann begins to refer to notes she has made related to the interview questions.]

Jeff and I had been honored as honorary chairs for the American Red Cross Super Ball, the Fort Bend County Museum Lone Star Stomp, the Fort Bend Regional Council First Annual Helen Cordes Award Luncheon, Asians Against Domestic Abuse Dinner and Fundraiser; honored by the Fort Bend Women's Center as the hall of fame volunteers; and Oakbend Doctor's Center was dedicated to Jeff and I.

We are proud of all that. My personal involvement—I was the first female to serve as a director in the Chamber of Commerce back in the '70s. I am past secretary of Fort Bend County Museum Board. I was on the executive committee for several years for the Lone Star Stomp Fundraiser, which is coming up, and I'm on the committee still [laughs], committee member and live auction chair for the Texian Golf Classic, which benefits the George Ranch Historical Park. I'm board member and past president of the Fort Bend American Heart Association; secretary and member of the Fort Bend Museum Docents—was a charter member--past vice-president of the Regional Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse. We are members of the Rosenberg Railroad Museum Association.

My latest two ventures: I was appointed as a member of the Richmond Rule Commission, and we just completed a charter to be voted on by the City of Richmond; new on the Richmond Historical Commission Board. I stay pretty busy and it's because I love Richmond with my whole heart.

My connection was probably with Mr. Wessendorff. I did not have as much connection with Mrs. Wessendorff, even though I knew her and I think she had a very good sense of humor. One incident I remember is that some of the gals here [at the office] helped pay her bills. This was when it was long distance to call Houston--her family was in Houston. She would not let anyone see her phone bills. She said, "this is my personal monstrosity." She just did things like that. I think she probably had a very good sense of humor.

I think she was probably very caring because I think she took good care of her employees. I'm going to let Jeff talk more about Joe because he worked for him for over twenty years and did a lot of things with him. I knew Joe as my boss.

GOODSILL: You would be able to tell us your perspective of knowing him as a seventeen year old girl. What was he like to you at that time?

ANN: He was a large person—course I'm a little bitty. He was always in command. One little incident that I can remember—Joe wasn't THAT MUCH older than I--his desk was in the back and he had a picture of Loise on his desk. Remember when they had—what do they call the agents—special agents from the insurance companies. Joe didn't like them very much because they would bring us gifts. In other words, he felt like they were trying to bribe the ladies to put the business with their company. Well anyway one was in there and he said, "Oh, is that your daughter?" [laughs]. He said, "That's my wife." It was a very lovely picture of her. I don't know, I guess this guy was just trying to make conversation. [laughs]

GOODSILL: Being a little too nice.

ANN: Yes, yes, it was cute. Jeff will talk about his leisure activities.

GOODSILL: I want to go back to something that's interesting that you said that he was a commanding person.

ANN: Well I meant that he was in charge—very calm. I never saw him get upset. He was always very calm. But I worked with the girls, not so much with him. And I wish the McDonald boys could be in here to hear this. My job was to type policies—four carbon copies [laughs]. And now of course it is all done...

GOODSILL: electronically.

ANN: Yes. My mother belonged to Calvary Episcopal Church, which is the church that the Wessendorffs belonged to. Mrs. Janie Wessendorff actually went to the Baptist Church, but Joe and Loise both went to Calvary Episcopal. At one time I was on the Calvary Episcopal School Board—way back. I just think she had a real good sense of humor. One time Joe and Loise, Jim and Janice Prowell, and Jeff and I went to see a movie.

JEFF: Went to see Patton when it first came out over at the Palms Theater in Sugar Land.

ANN: And Jeff will tell you more, but he did not like to talk about his military experience.

GOODSILL: I had another question. Since you knew him when you were very young and you had an ongoing relationship until he died--right? Did your impression of him change over time?

ANN: NO. He was always in charge, but he was very pleasant.

GOODSILL: Good businessman?

ANN: Yes-- and had more than one business. But he was always nice to me, always nice to me.

GOODSILL: It was interesting that you knew him for so long. Do you want to talk about any major changes that Joe was involved with or do you want Jeff to talk about it?

ANN: Let Jeff talk about that.

[Interview turns toward Jeff Council]

JEFF: Just to start, I was not born and raised in Richmond. I grew up down in Port Nueces, Texas. Ann and I met in college, and married. When we got out of the army, off active duty after serving two years, we came back to Richmond. She brought me back to Richmond--that was in 1962. We've been here ever since.

GOODSILL: Just out of curiosity, where was your military service?

JEFF: In Fort Sill and Fort Hood. After I came off of active duty, I had some more reserve time I had to serve and I went to the Texas National Guard and actually commanded the unit here in Rosenberg for a couple of years and served eight more years with the National Guard—a total of ten years' service between active duty and National Guard.

I actually met Mr. Wessendorff, Joe Clyde, before we came back here. Ann and I were dating—I was going to summer school one summer at Sam Houston to pick up on some grade points that I had lost. A friend of mine was coming down to visit—he lived here in Rosenberg. And I just said, "Let me catch a ride and I'll go down and see my girlfriend while we're down there." She was working that summer for Mr. Wessendorff at the old lumberyard down across the tracks over here, actually where Wessendorff Lumber Company is today, but it was the old wooden structure.

I went in to see her and Joe Clyde happened to be there, and that was the first time I ever met Mr. Wessendorff. And as always, he was a big man who was very friendly. He was very interested in meeting me because Ann had worked for him for several years and he had known her all of her life almost. He was very interested to see and meet me and see who this guy was.

GOODSILL: He had to approve him, I think. [all laugh]

JEFF: So then when we came off of active duty in 1962, I went to work for a company in Houston called Moore Business Forms. I was with them for about a year, or not quite a year, and I went back to my summer camp in Fort Sill, Oklahoma. I didn't like the job that I had in Houston. I was thinking seriously about going back into the army and making a career out of it. I really wanted to do that. Ann didn't particularly want to do that because she didn't want to move around every three or four years. As fate would have it, after I came back, an opening came up in Wessendorff Insurance. They needed someone to sell life insurance for them. I found out about it. Long story short, we talked and I passed all the tests, and all this and that and the other, and became a Southwestern Life representative for Wessendorff Insurance Company in 1963. I worked for him until 1984—a little over twenty years. We had some great times. He was, as Ann said, always in command, but he was always fair. He had many businesses or several different businesses, but he could take care of all of them.

GOODSILL: I'd like to know a little bit about that diversity in his businesses. He had many different businesses—he took care of all of them. Can you tell us something about his personality?

JEFF: I guess the best way to put it—he was a very smart man. He was very smart. He was a very good businessman. He loved the outdoors. He loved to hunt—fish a little bit. But he really loved to hunt. He loved to bird hunt and deer hunt. I was fortunate to share some of those hunts with him through the years. About his land in Kenedy—he actually he traded some land here and bought a ranch up in Kenedy, which I think the Foundation still has up there. I was fortunate enough to go with him several times up to Kenedy to check on things. While we were there we'd always have time to do a little quail hunting.

GOODSILL: So he used it as a place for his passion of hunting.

JEFF: That's right. He could go and get away. He loved to do that. Had a ranch foreman up there named Newt Porter. The three of us would ride around and look at all the cattle and check everything out. Then have time to do a little quail hunting and spend the night and come on back home the next day. We did that quite a few times. It was always a great experience. He could take care of his lumberyard business, he could take care of his insurance business, he had a cattle company. He was president of a bank—the old Fort Bend National Bank. He was on several boards. He was on the Houston Lighting and Power board for many years. His was president of the Polly Ryon Hospital board. He was a very diversified man. He could handle all. He handled all without a whole lot of outward stress. As Ann said, you never saw him—I was around him more in later years than Ann was. I did see him a few times get a little mad—not at me fortunately. I've seen him get little upset with some people. But even then he always handled himself very professionally--very under control.

I guess to go forward to 1984. You could say we were two hardheaded people—Joe Wessendorff and Jeff Council agreed to disagree. And so, I left the agency. My brother-in-law, Ann's brother Orin Covell formed our own insurance agency. He didn't like that, to say the least. And Loise, Mrs. Wessendorff, liked it even less. But after a few years Joe and I got back to where we'd speak and I would come by and visit with him and he'd every now and then call me on the phone to get my opinion on something. That would always make me feel good, that he had that much respect for me that he would call and ask my opinion about something, even though we had parted company. And I would say this, when I parted company with him, he was more than fair as far as taking care of what my ownership was and everything, which he didn't really have to do. There was nothing in writing. There was nothing there that set the stage, but he was morethan fair with me as he always was.

In those years, I would still come by and visit with him from time to time, and he'd always ask about our sons, Mike and Kevin. "How are the boys, how are the boys?" I tell him what they were doing. He was very gladthat both of them went to Texas A&M--both of them graduated from Texas A&M--because himself was an Aggie. He would always ask me—and my sons always thought--and told me one time—"you know, daddy Mr. Wessendorff is a John Wayne figure." And I told him that and it brought tears to his eyes —I'm a little teary right now. That meant a lot to him.

GOODSILL: That they would see him as a hero, a strong man?

JEFF: Yeah. And he was. He was a big guy. And he was always in control. He was a John Wayne figure. That was their way of describing him. He thought it was something else. [obviously sentimental]

GOODSILL: Why does that make you teary?

JEFF: Well, just thinking of him. You know I was closer to him than I was my own father in many ways. My dad, of course, was older than Joe Clyde but they were down in Port Nueces—my mom and dad. I was with Joe Clyde for over twenty years—hunting with him—doing business with him—going to his ranch in Kenedy. I remember when his mother’s house burned to the ground and we went out that day—good golly, and the thing was up in flames. Most of us were out there trying to help the fire department because there was no water supply out there and the wind was blowing. It didn’t take long for that old frame structure to burn to the ground. I remember we were trying to get stuff out of the house; furniture and things like that and he told me, “Jeff just get out and don’t put yourself in harm.”

We got as much out of the house as we could. And I can just remember how he took care of his mother when she was out there—because she was blind. He was making sure she could get around and get away. Of course, she was very upset losing the house. When he built it back, he basically built it back on the same floor plan that the house had had originally because of her blindness. This way she could still get around in the house. Now that was his thought.

GOODSILL: That’s nice!

JEFF: He was a good guy.

ANN: Out there at the house now, there’s a couch in the living room that if you move a cushion it’s got a burn place. He put that couch out the window but they saved it and it is still in the house. I think that’s interesting.

GOODSILL: Sentimental.

JEFF: That was a couch that I helped get out the window when he told me don’t put your life in danger anymore.

ANN: And then when you were going up the stairs, he wouldn’t let Jeff go up the stairs. It was too dangerous.

JEFF: I got about half way up and he told me to come down. About that time the door blew open—there was nothing but flames on me, and it was just engulfed in flames up in the upstairs part of the house. Personally he stopped me from going on up. If I had gone all the way up and opened that door, I may not be sitting here telling you about this.

The other thing that was mentioned about his war experience—he very seldom talked about his experiences in World War II. He was an officer. He was an infantry officer because he graduated from Texas A&M and was commissioned when he graduated. He was A&M class of 1937. He was a young man when he went into college. He finished high school and finished college at a very young age. He was a class of '37, of course, the war broke out in '41. He was in Italy. He went up the boot [of Italy] during World War II. He very seldom talked about a lot of things about his war experiences. He was awarded the Silver Star, which is—they don't give those away. That's the third highest honor that they give for bravery in combat.

The only thing he ever told me about his war experiences is that--he told me one time he said, "God had a plan for me." He and another lieutenant, were standing in the doorway of a bunker—somewhere—I don't remember where they were in Italy—going up the boot. They were standing in the doorway of this bunker and a German sniper shot and killed the other lieutenant. He said, "That sniper could have just as easily picked me out. That's why I know God always had a plan for me."

Speaking of God, he was a religious man. He didn't walk around with a halo on his head or anything like that. He wasn't like he was trying to be a preacher or anything, but he went to church every Sunday. He was a God fearing man. He did the things that he should do. He was a great guy. People always ask me did I ever regret parting company with him in 1984, and yeah, I had some regrets about that. I also had some fair success of my own. I was so glad that in future years we mended our ways and still were friends and visited with each other from time to time. Now Loise on the other hand, Mrs. Wessendorff—I don't know that she ever forgave me. In fact, at Joe's funeral she gave me a hard time about changing the name of the hospital from Polly Ryon to Oakbend Medical Center. I was president of the hospital board at the time we did that. I tried to explain to her that I didn't do that by myself. The whole board voted on that, and it was passed by the board.

In Loise's mind, it was Jeff Council that did it. She never really forgave me, and I think one reason was because she never forgave me for leaving Joe. And that just added a little fuel to the fire. Later, after Joe Clyde had passed away, we were dedicating the hospital and I was still president of the board. We were dedicating the chapel. Because of some reconstruction we had lost it and we put it in a different place. The little chapel in the hospital was being dedicated to Mr. and Mrs. August Myers who provided the funds for it—originally and all the stuff in there.

I was getting ready and I was getting brushed up on all the things I needed to say about the proper people and looked down the hall and here comes Loise and I thought--Oh Golly! But she walked up to me—and I have to say—I guess this is the greatest compliment she ever gave me. She walked up to me and she said, "What are you doing?" And I told her, "I'm just trying to get all my facts and things together here so I can give the proper mention to everybody that needs to be mentioned and everything." And she said, "Be sure and give Dedi, Mrs. August Myers, credit too." And I said, "Oh yes, Mr. and Mrs. Myers were never apart, they did things together." And she said, "Okay." So when I got ready to speak, Ann was standing there and she heard this, she looked at me and she said, "Well if anyone can do it; you can."

THAT was a great compliment coming from Loise Wessendorff to me. And so when I got through doing the dedication—and I looked towards the family that was all sitting there and I made mention of Dedi, Mrs. Myers. And I looked back—Loise always sat in the back—she wouldn't come up to the front—but she was sitting in the back of the chapel. I looked back and she was sitting back there with a big grin on her face. So I knew I had done good. I had some great experiences with Joe Wessendorff. I was like twenty-five, I guess, when I went to work for Joe.

GOODSILL: Could you tell us something about how he mentored you, how he trained you, how he helped you to be good at your work.

JEFF: Actually you got a lot of it on your own. Now of course when I went to work for him as a life insurance agent the Southwestern Life people would train you. The company people trained you in the life insurance sales and helped you getting going and everything. A few years after that, I guess I went to work for him, as I said, in '63. And around 1966, '67 we decided to also get me licensed to do fire and casualty work—homeowners auto insurance, etc..

GOODSILL: Did you do that in time for the big fire on the house?

JEFF: I did. He got settled pretty good on that. We were able to get that settled with the insurance company—pretty much a no brainer—it was burned into the ground—it wasn't any doubt that there was a loss. About the time we were going through all the changes in the industry—as Ann said, when she worked you had to type the policies. And even when I went to work for Joe in '63, they were still typing policies every month. They pulled those things out—they had a schedule where they had to pull them on a certain date, type the policies, get them all separated, file it and so forth. We went through changes in the way we filed everything. In doing all that, the companies were requesting that we have pictures of all the fire risks—all the home, all the commercial buildings or whatever.

We had an old Polaroid camera. And I say old—it was new at the time, but it was a Polaroid where you took each one and had smear over it with this stuff to keep it from fading out. Roy Christian was Joe's manager of the insurance agency. They gave me the job, which was good because and then I learned where all the risks were. I had to go around and look up and find all these different houses and buildings and take pictures of them for the insurance companies. In doing that—and that was his way of telling me okay you go out here and you are going to find out where all these thing are—you'll know if they're in good shape, bad shape, how big they are. We insured them to value.

There were times that he would take me when he was going on real estate deals. Later I got a real estate license as well. He would take me with him and I would just sit there and listen to him when he was negotiating with somebody about a sale of some property or buying some property. He even took me a couple of times when he was buying some bulls. I didn't know anything about bulls—as far as buying or anything like that. I knew what a bull was, and that was about it. He would take me with him and I would just sit there and shake hands with whoever he was negotiating with. After that I didn't say anything until we got ready to leave. It helped me in many ways to learn how to negotiate regardless of what it may be, whether it was a real estate deal or whether it was buying a bull. I think he took a liking to me.

We used to go down and hunt in south Texas—deer hunt down on a ranch out of Eagle Pass called the Saner Ranch. He and a good friend of his, Bob Moses, had this lease on this ranch and it was thousands of acres—I don't remember how many now--a big place. We would go down and stayed at a motel in town called the Holly Inn. We'd go over to eat at Piedras Negras across the border at a place called the Maderno—great restaurant. In fact Ann's been there because he would let us take our families down—we could go down and hunt with the boys and take our wives there on Thanksgiving and between Christmas and New Year's. A lot of times we'd go down and spend several days with some other couples. He allowed us to do that.

When I'd go down with Mr. Wessendorff and eat dinner—go over and have a few margaritas and come back. I was always with him and so those guys over there—the waiters and maître 'ds and all--thought I was his son. That paid off for me in one way because then when I would go down with my family—there's what they thought was Mr. Wessendorff's son—and they would see that we got a table right away. We didn't have to wait long regardless of the crowd. He knew that and it was fine with him. He thought that was great. So it was things like that that I was able to share with him that were just SO GREAT and lot of fond memories. Obviously we had our disagreements. As I said we agreed to disagree in 1984. Fortunately before he passed away and for many years before that, he and I were able to communicate and have some good business together.

GOODSILL: It may be common knowledge, but just for historic record would you tell us where his mother's house was located—the one that burned down.

JEFF: Back where the one is today, out on the Wessendorff Ranch, just outside of Richmond on the Brazos River bank.

GOODSILL: And he rebuilt it completely.

JEFF: He did rebuild it to one story. The one story area was pretty much put back in just like the ground floor was of the original house, but he did not build it back to a second story--there again because of his mother's blindness.

GOODSILL: Do you have any other information about Loise—her charitable activities. Do you know anything about that?

JEFF: I knew very little about it. I do know there was a Henderson Foundation before there was a Henderson-Wessendorff Foundation. Ann mentioned Loise was a very generous person. In fact, there's a big article in the paper this morning about St. Luke's Hospital being sold.

Loise was on the St. Luke's Hospital board for a number of years, and a very good friend with Dr. Denton Cooley. She was very generous. I know she was very supportive of Calvary Episcopal Church and Calvary Episcopal School for a number of years, as well as Mr. Wessendorff. Loise was very generous. She did things in a way; she didn't want a lot of recognition for what she did. She would do it and she didn't want to be in the limelight. I can't tell you about too many specific things that she was really funded through her generosity.

ANN: She liked to do it because she wanted to do it. She didn't want people coming to her particularly. It is what I surmised. She did it because she wanted to do it. I know one story; her driver had her at Wal-Mart and she was buying a bunch of jackets. Somewhere she had seen a group that didn't have jackets that needed jackets. She was loading the cart with jackets.

JEFF: She had a cart load.

ANN: I didn't see it.

JEFF: Maybe fifteen or twenty. They were coats because they were needed in the wintertime. These people didn't have any coats--who those people were I don't know.

GOODSILL: Nice story.

JEFF: But that's the kind of things she did. There was nothing in the paper about it. There were no big plaques given or anything like that. She just did it.

ANN: Did you need to know anything about Jeff's community service?

GOODSILL: I'd love to know about Jeff's community service. It sounds like he took after his mentor.

ANN: He's the only person that has ever been chairman of the Chamber of Commerce for three years--three different times--well one of those times was back to back. But no one has served three years.

JEFF: That was of the Rose-Rich Chamber, which is now the Central Fort Bend Chamber.

ANN: And he was selected as the Literacy Star by the Literacy Council, and was the 2008 Salute to Fort Bend--he was an honoree. And then the Rosenberg Rotary gave you an appreciation award. They just caught him and asked him to come to the meeting, and they presented with this appreciation award for his community service. I thought that was kind of special.

JEFF: The Richmond Rotary gave me a nice award—Lifetime Achievement Award. The Fort Bend A&M Club gave me recognition as the Lifetime Aggie Award for work done with the Fort Bend A&M Club.

GOODSILL: You two have been very busy in public service!

ANN: Well, Jeff is a charity auctioneer and he use to do thirty to thirty-five auctions a year. So we were involved in a LOT of functions, and they were, of course, all fundraisers. That's how we got some of these awards because of our participation over the years. Jeff said when I brought him home he really took hold. [laughter]

GOODSILL: Yes, you embraced this community.

JEFF: That I did. It is an easy community to do that in—it's Fort Bend, Richmond-Rosenberg especially. They are a good community. There are a lot of good people here that help you get involved.

GOODSILL: Will you be working in the auction tonight at the Fort Bend Stomp?

JEFF: I will be doing the auction tonight at the Stomp. I'll be doing the auction tomorrow night at Aggie Muster—April 21.

GOODSILL: Still just as busy as ever, aren't you?

JEFF: Just about.

GOODSILL: Joe Clyde would be proud of you.

JEFF: Well I would hope so.

GOODSILL: Do you know anything about the Henderson-Wessendorff Foundation and the things they are trying to achieve now.

JEFF: I really don't. I know of the Foundation. I know some of the people that are on the board, but I really don't what their goals are at this point.

ANN: One of the things that I have to say is Jeff and Joe D. are good friends. Joe D. was going to work here. He said, "I don't like this business."

JEFF: Joe Robinson. We called him Joe D. Robinson, and Loise called him Joe D.

ANN: We're the only ones that have known him that long.

JEFF: Joe D. actually worked for the agency for a while when we were still down on Third Street. He didn't particularly like the insurance business. He went a different route. Joe D. and I became good friends.

ANN: I came down to see Joe D. after he had his illness, and I walked in and I said, "I'd like to speak to Joe." And she said, "May I say who's calling." I said, "Yes, Ann Council." Well by then he had heard my voice and he came up. I gave him a big hug. And the receptionist was like—who are you? But he's a good guy. We are crazy about him.