

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees: **Bennett Lachner**

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Transcript

GODBOLD: Today is April 27, 2013 my name is CHRIS GODBOLD. I am interviewing Ms. Bennett Lachner at 611 Morton St. 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. We are here today at the request of the Henderson Wessendorff Foundation taking interviews related to family members.

GODBOLD: If I am not mistaken you are related to the Henderson Wessendorff family?

LACHNER: Yes

GODBOLD: And how what is that?

LACHNER: My grandmother and Loise's mother were sisters. So she is second cousin, I guess.

GODBOLD: How long did you know Joe?

LACHNER: My whole life. They were married well before I was even thought of.

GODBOLD: What kind of man was he?

LACHNER: I would say, professionally and business-wise he was a very strong business man and, of course, obviously very strong in the community, very principled. On the personal level, I didn't get to be very close to him because I would spend more of my time with Loise than I would with Joe, but he was always very kind to me... I thought he was a very great man.

GODBOLD: Do you know anything about his leisure activities, the kind of things he did for fun?

LACHNER: I am sure that my brother probably gave a better account than what I could, I mean I know he liked fishing and hunting and being with the guys and that sort of thing, but I was never really a part of that part of his life other than maybe hearing a story or two here and there. I know in their earlier years they did a lot of socializing in Houston with the Houston crowd and out here [Richmond], of course.

GODBOLD: Do you have a favorite or most vivid memory of Joe?

LACHNER: At one point when my Mom was ill I stayed with them for a while in their home. When I was smaller he would sometimes carry me upstairs, at night to tuck me in, and he was very gentle with me. Other than that I just remember more as an adult having some conversations with him about when I was thinking about going to law school, which I ended up not doing, but talking to him about it. He would always give good advice... not in a way that was... this is what you should do advice but more like a good option might be... kind of thing.

I remember a time; I was probably in my teens. There was a spare bedroom off their main bedroom and there were dollar bills all over the bed. I said, "What happened??" He had gone fishing and fallen in and so he had come home and taken out his money and laid it out on the bed so it could dry out!

GODBOLD: Did he ever talk with you about his experiences during World War II?

LACHNER: He didn't. When I read the [oral history] questions they sent us, I thought, "Wow I didn't even know all that about him..." No he didn't talk about it. I wish he had.

GODBOLD: Loise was your...?

LACHNER: I guess she was my second cousin. My mother's mother and her mother were sisters. So that would have made her mother my mother's aunt, right? So her mother was my great aunt... I don't know, we called them both...we called them Big Aunt Loise and Little Aunt Loise.

GODBOLD: What kind of woman was Loise?

[Editors note: Joe Darst Robinson refers to himself as Joe D. But Bennett Lachner and her brother, Brad Ferguson, call him Jody, so in this interview Jody will be used.]

LACHNER: I would say that she was... there would be lots of adjectives to describe her really. I think first of all she was one of the most generous people I have ever met in my life. She gave so much to other people financially that we didn't even know about. In fact I remember after she had passed away Jody reported that people were coming up to him saying, "She was paying for such and such. Are ya'll still going to be able to pay for that?" And we had no idea she was doing that.

As I was growing up my parents didn't have a lot of money and so she would be the one who would give the extras. We moved into a new house and she bought the bed room furniture for me. I wanted a stereo so she bought me a stereo. Things that were extras that I would ordinarily have not gotten to have. So she was very generous. She was...let me think of some other words for her...she was definitely strong willed.

She had in her mind what was right and what was not right. She would tell you, unlike Joe Clyde, if she felt like you weren't quite on the right path. She liked to have fun. She had a great sense of humor. She really loved to laugh. She loved musicals, she loved humor, and she liked people when they were humorous. She wasn't as sentimental as... she was more like "let's have a good time" kind of thing. She was very intelligent... extremely intelligent. Her faith was very important to her and she loved to share that with other people.

GODBOLD: Which faith was that, which church did she go to?

LACHNER: She was Episcopalian. I believed she was raised Methodist. Her Mom I know was involved in St. Paul's Methodist which was just a few blocks from her Mom's house in Houston. So I believe maybe when she was raised she may have been Methodist. She really believed in main-line religion. For a while my husband and I went to a non-denominational church and she was not happy. She really strongly believed in pretty much supporting the main-line religions. Speaking of her generosity, if she would find a book that spoke to her, she would buy everybody a copy. At one point, probably when I was in college, I'd come over and she'd hand me three books and say, "These are the latest books. You really need to read them." She loved sharing what she had and what she knew.

GODBOLD: Back up just a bit. Tell me if you know other details about the family history, the genealogy...

LACHNER: I think my brother [Brad Ferguson] pretty much covered it [in his interview]. My grandmother and her mother, had eleven sisters, I believe. My grandmother and her mother were siblings of course and they were extremely extremely close. They were ...very very close and remained that way even though they both had some health issues in their later years, it was almost like a twin connection.

Loise was older than my mother but they were almost like sisters. My mother had a sister who was quite a bit older than her and Loise was in between them. They shared a lot of common friends, and she and my mom were extremely close.

When my grandmother was ill and my Mom was ill, she [Loise] really took care of them financially—to make sure they were taken care of... because that was her mother's favorite sister, and her mother's favorite sister's daughter and then us. She always had a very strong sense of family from the time she was young. When her mother started becoming ill her father told her that you are responsible for helping to take care of your mother. So for years every single day Loise would drive from Richmond to Houston and be with her mom and wouldn't leave town and basically devoted her entire life to her mom because that is what the family valued. That is what you did.

I think my brother said that he covered a lot of the really specific genealogy. He remembers a lot better than I do of that time period and the stories and things like that.

GODBOLD: Do you know if Loise was a member of any organizations?

LACHNER: She was. I don't know what they all are. Probably Barbara [Bleil], or somebody that was her peer would know better. But yes, I know she was involved in a lot of different community organizations both in Houston and in Richmond. Of course she was huge at Calvary [Church]...was on all kinds of boards over there. Those are the ones she mostly spoke to me about. She really didn't talk much about her social life, her garden club or anything like that. It was more of her involvement in Calvary and of course building Well Spring in Blanco I am sure she was involved to a degree in that community.

GODBOLD: What kind of things did she do with her church?

LACHNER: I don't know the specifics; I just she know supported them greatly financially ...I know that she was frequently calling them and suggesting this or that or helping to guide the building of the school.

GODBOLD: Were there any major changes which Loise was involved with here in Richmond or in Ft. Bend County in general?

LACHNER: Well, I think partially with respect to Calvary, going from just being a little church to being a very successful church with a very successful school. I know she was very largely involved with that. I know that Joe Clyde helped build a clinic or something here in Richmond. There are probably things I don't know about that she specifically was involved in.

To me, Loise was more the person someone would come to saying, "I can't feed my kids" and her giving them money. Like I said I am sure she did big things community wise, but my experiences with her were more one on one personal helping people. It helps the community when you've got more people that are functional.

GODBOLD: Oh yes! What is your favorite or most vivid memory of Loise?

LACHNER: I have a catalog of vivid memories of Loise [laughter]. Really I think about this periodically. We lived in Houston and then came out here when I was going into middle school, so I was about twelve. When we got out here that summer, my Mom became very ill. So I went and lived with Loise and Joe for a while, meaning a couple or three or four months, while she got on her feet.

One of my most vivid young memories of her was that she took me to school the first day at Lamar Consolidated Junior High. I remember in my mind's eye seeing her, her, not [hired] help or anything. She could have sent anybody to take me to school, but she brought me to school. Then she stood outside with all the students that were waiting to come in. She stood with me for a while and then she kind of stood off so I could find my way, I'm sure. That was always a very important memory to me because my mother wasn't there, and it was a new town, it was new school, and my mother was ill. It was like my whole world was upside down and she was the one that took me and stood with me while I was waiting to go in. As a childhood memory that would be my most vivid memory.

As far as more recent or adult memories, it is more a compilation of memories. We had all of our holiday meals at her home. That was sort of expected, that we would have all of our holiday meals at her home. Even though sometimes it was stressful, I liked being together with the family. I will always be grateful for her even though it was not always stress free. I am sure a lot family dinners aren't. I appreciated the way she brought the family together. She was truly the matriarch of the family, and when my mom died she was really my last connection to my mom, someone who really knew my mom. There were a couple of other people alive that did, but because she was family she was my last family connection to her and so I felt a really strong connection to her because of that.

GODBOLD: I understand. Where was their house?

LACHNER: Here in Richmond?

GODBOLD: Yes

LACHNER: On Hillcrest, where Jody lives now.

GODBOLD: You mentioned something about help they had.

LACHNER: As long as I knew her, she had a nice size home and large grounds. They loved animals and so forth. They always had pens full of dogs and things. They always had help that would help with the housework and so forth. They were always really kind to me, in fact some of the help that they had at the Houston home, I just loved them. They were like friends.

Both Loise and Joe just loved animals. I mean Jody was just showing me some pictures of when Loise was just this big [indicating a small child] having a dog. She is two and she already has a dog. That was another thing; people would drop off stray animals at their home because they knew they would take care of them. I would go over there and their whole kitchen would have this big pen in it with this latest dog that someone had dropped off at their home. She was very tender hearted towards animals and kids.

GODBOLD: Was there a specific breed of dog they liked?

LACHNER: I think Joe Clyde had some hunting dogs that he liked. Loise when she was younger, younger being 40's - 50's maybe had Peekapoos? That was her favorite. I think she had a couple of different Peekapoos. She would pick up or take in anything to the point where at one point she built a cat house, a house where all the cats could be because she could not have that many of them in the house. Yes, she and Joe both loved animals. Very generous in that respect because it is not cheap to take in a litter of five cats and get them spayed and fed and taken care of.

LACHNER: I will just talk of another memory.

GODBOLD: Sure go ahead.

LACHNER: Another memory talking about her books, ...I don't know what her system was but she would take her books and six highlighters, not highlighters but red or blue felt tip pens and when I'd look at her book everything was underlined, everything was color coded. Whatever point a certain thing would make, that is how she would analyze her books and really read and try to understand them.

You asked about the community. She was involved in the Institute of Religion in Houston and very involved in that and very responsible for bringing in amazing speakers. They would have a conference each year that she would pay for me to go to. It was very interesting to feel the energy, feel the energy of a room like that. So she was for many years single handily responsible for bringing together the religious community and the medical community to get them to talk and understand how their roles overlap. She had a library at her house. One summer I worked for her and cataloged books in her library. She had a pool house. In the back of it there was a big room. It had shelves on the walls ... as I mentioned she'd buy copies and copies of the same book... and so I cataloged the books. I think after her passing they moved a lot of those up to Blanco to Well Springs where they have a library. She loved books.

GODBOLD: So most of them were religious books?

LACHNER: Yes, or self-help something like that, yes. If somebody came out with a new biography on someone that was interesting she might buy that too, but most of the books that I received from her were either self-help or religious books.

When she would shop she would buy five of everything, so that everybody could have one. She would buy five for herself and then she would buy five for other people. You would walk in at Christmas or Easter and there would be five pies on the floor and then there would be five Easter bunnies and then there would be five jackets or something. So you would walk in and she would say here's your pie here's your bunny, here's is your jacket. She was the ultimate hostess and she also had the best taste in dressing. She really taught Brad and Jody how to dress as men, young men. She really taught them the proper way to dress and me too in some regard, but a dress is a dress or a suit is a suit for a woman. But for men she really taught them what ties you wear and what quality of shirt you wear. It was never a showy thing. That was just part of her fabric, part of her make up. She just knew this is what you do. She could walk in and in five seconds and have you dressed to the nines, and I always thought that was a gift that she had. She passed it on to Jody and Brad. I'm so happy that she did that because they now both dress really well. I liked that aspect of her.

GODBOLD: Did she and Joe Clyde host a lot of parties? Were they big socializers at their house?

LACHNER: I think when they were younger they did. When I was an adolescent I actually paid [little] attention to what they were doing in their lives. She would have luncheons or things like that for the ladies. If it was Super Bowl day or something, I think they would have people over. She would tell stories, though. I hope that Brad told some of those stories because I am sure he remembers them better than anybody. I don't remember the name of the game but there was some game where you have all your friends together and you turn off all the lights in the house and then you all huddle together and hide and one person has to try to find you. She describes one time where everybody stood on this baby grand piano. You know how expensive and wonderful one of those would be. All of them were huddled on this baby grand piano when the lights came on because this person could not find them. There they all were huddled together.

I think in their younger years they had some good times with their friends and in their later years they would have friends walk down on Hillcrest, their closer friends would come by or what ever. She loved to be a hostess. She was diabetic in her later years so she had to kind of watch what she ate, if people came over. Every day, every single day she planned breakfast lunch dinner for her and her staff. When you are 80 something years old that is kind of an undertaking. But she was the ultimate hostess so she wanted everybody to be happy. Sometimes she would say, would you like some water? No thank you. Five minutes later oh don't you want a Dr. Pepper? Five minutes later - are you sure you don't want some water? - Yes I would love some water -you learned quickly to say yes the first time because she wanted you to be happy. She wanted you to be comfortable in her home.

GODBOLD: Was her home a comfortable type of place or was everything in its little place?

LACHNER: She had a formal living area, of course, and a formal dining area, then the den and the back of the house. I always felt comfortable there. She would accumulate things, so sometimes the living room or the dining room would have a bunch of things in it so you really couldn't go in there. She would get busy and say, "Oh we are cleaning this all up". If you walked in when it was clean, it looked very formal but it was very comfortable. She loved plants too and she would come in and say Look at the new whatever I bought and I would say, what is that? She liked to find new plants and plant them.

GODBOLD: Did she have specific favorites?

LACHNER: Oh, have you ever heard of that...I think it is called a trumpet plant, the flower comes out and it hangs down like this. In recent years ...she really liked that one. She had a bunch of bamboo out back. I don't know if she liked it or it just went crazy. She loved trees; she used to tell me these stories. She had a tree...I don't know, is Mayhaw a fruit? I don't know is there like Mayhaw jelly or something? And plum jelly that she would tell me about...I don't know if she had the trees then or had them previously, but she would always pick them and make jelly.

Her cats ate better than a lot of people would eat. Literally they had shrimp for dinner and things like that because she loved them they were her children and she loved them. And of course she took Jody in when his mom, my aunt died. My mother was single and struggling a little, and of course Loise and Joe were married and established and so there was a discussion whether Jody should live with us or should go with Loise and Joe. Brad and Jody were so close. They are only two years apart. Of course it was deemed better for him to go with Loise and Joe. But I mean can you imagine? They're childless, and I don't know how old they were at that time. Jody would know, but to just take in this child at sixteen.

It couldn't have been all fun. But they assured that he got his Eagle Scout and taught him about dressing and taught him all the social skills and sent him to SMU. I thought that was really commendable to take in a son at that age. Brad and I were always kind of her little adopted kids, too, because my mom became ill when I was twenty-one. Loise was always there filling in the gaps.

GODBOLD: Do you have any photographs or other documents that we could borrow or copy?

LACHNER: I think I have a few but looking at the amount Jody has...

GODBOLD: He has got mountains.

LACHNER: I know, my gosh, it is so fun to look at. Did you look at some of them?

GODBOLD: I've seen some of them, yeah.

LACHNER: Wow, just different stages of their life that we had never seen. A lot of them are the same ones I have. But if I think of any that are different I will pass them on.

GODBOLD: What have I forgotten to ask about that you would like to add? Is there some important thing that you think we should know?

LACHNER: Loise could sometimes be difficult, but I would hope that throughout all of these conversations that what would really stand out is her heart. She had a strong sense of obligation that was instilled in her by her father and she certainly lived up to way beyond what anybody would ever expect of a person in terms of self sacrifice for other people. I really feel that even if she didn't have financial means that she would have still been the kind of person that would give ...it may have been a hundred dollars instead of a thousand dollars but I think she would still have been that kind of person. I think she always just had other peoples' best interest at heart. Even if she expressed to you that she didn't like what you were doing, she did it because she loved you and wanted you to be successful and happy. It was just that she...she had a really good heart and loved people and cared about people.

GODBOLD: Please, just for the tape, go ahead and state your name date of birth.

LACHNER: I am Bennett Lachner, born April 11th 1957. Speaking of that, I found a document in my baby book that Loise was there when I was born, and when I was confirmed or christened. This is pretty significant because it was only her and my parents and maybe her mom. I can't remember. So she literally knew me since the first day of my life.

GODBOLD: [laughter] Great.