

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Billie Amilee Harris Wendt – Apr 2013**

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Interviewer: Chris Godbold

Transcriber: Olga Barr

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Transcript

GODBOLD: GODBOLD: Today is April 27, 2013. My name is Chris Godbold. I am interviewing Mrs. Billie Wendt at 611 Morton Street, Richmond, Texas. The Fort Bend County Historical Commission is conducting this interview, it is part of the Fort 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.

Would you give me a brief outline of your connections to Joe and Loise Wessendorff?

WENDT: Well, I am a native Fort Bender for four generations, but did not grow up here. I came from Fulshear. But my family was very influential here in Richmond. My father became County Judge and was later a commissioner, so he knew the people. I came here for high school after going to a one-teacher school in Fulshear. And after that I went away to school at SMU, can back to the University of Houston after the war had started. And then I came back in Fort Bend County to teach because I was twenty-two, had gone through high school and the University of Houston. And so I wanted to teach. And then I came to Richmond to teach. And then my husband and I met each other. We had known each other in high school, so we went together for a while and then we married in 1947.

We had a new house on what we called at the time, Winston Oaks. It is now called Laurel Oaks. We had that house for fifteen years. And then we built a house next door to Loise and Joe [Wessendorff]. They had been there probably ten years or eight years, something like that, before we built. We knew them socially, had been with them at parties and places all the time. In fact, my parents knew Joe's parents very well. My father knew Loise's father [Bob Henderson] because they were both in the cotton business. So he knew Bob Henderson very well.

We were neighbors all those years. We had four daughters. Our activities really were consumed by those girls. So we were not with them [the Wessendorff's] a whole lot, except at parties. I melted into the life in Richmond, and she really did not do that because she was still from Houston. And she always kept up with her friends in Houston, she went there almost daily. So I didn't run into her in the ways that I did other people. From time to time I knew what she was doing.

I know that the first three years, she was way caught up with the landscaping. And she planted lots of trees and everything. As time went on, she became more interested in people, especially when she became so religious. She bought lots of books, and she gave them to people. And she went to lots of things that carried her faith. She also had a woman that she really carried around, and gave a lot of things to her.

After that she got in with the animals, especially the dogs. And she had a second lot next to us, and that's where she put all the dogs. In the beginning, she started with several dogs, and then a few more dogs. And it turned out, she used the whole lot with dogs. People would tell her about a dog is not doing well, or was sick or needed help so she picked up dogs that were needy. Sometimes she had as many as forty dogs there. It was rather funny at our house because when we had company people would say, "Who are all those dogs barking?? [amazed] Where are they? I can't believe it!!" We'd say, "Well, they are right there next to us, so we can't forget it." We just had to live with it, and that's what we did for all those years.

And the funniest thing is that after she got kind'a sick of dogs, she went to cats. She built a house for them, on their property, small houses and sometimes big houses. And it didn't bother us at all because we didn't even know they were there.

Now I knew Joe in a different way. I came into fundraising because I was a docent and the museum president for a long time; and therefore, I was always fundraising for them. We had a big, big fundraiser once a year, and I was working with that all the time. And so at one point there was one doctor here, a woman, who had been in College Station or Bryan with the Medical Center. And she kept telling Joe that they needed a woman on the board [of Polly Ryon Hospital]. They had no woman there at all. And so finally I guess he took her advice and came to me and asked me to go and be on the board, which I did. And I really think that even though we had been friends, he didn't know me very well, but I had been dealing with him over the fundraising. And I always wrote him very nice letters—long ones. And so he knew I could write. And I think he figured out that I could also deal with people successfully.

So that's how I got on the board. I was there for fourteen years. And during that time, because of health concerns he was unable to do that, so he retired. But I served with him a number of years, and I always knew that he was very, very generous. VERY generous!

He liked to do things for the hospital. It's because of him that we have had this hospital [Polly Ryon] for so long. There was a point where they had to take the old hospital down and build a new one, and he was there. He wanted that to happen. And I know that he made it happen. So we were very thankful to him about that. I was there to know exactly what he did do. In the meantime, I stayed on fourteen years, but about the last five or six years I was with another non-profit. He was the CEO of those years, and he was very good.

I can only tell you that not only did he make the hospital prosper. He would do other things for the schools. He gave to Lamar High School—they have a six grade school right there and it's named after his mother. He gave the land for that. And then he also gave another one right down here where his aunt was, the Hutchinsons. Of course, I don't know everything that he did, but I knew that he was so generous with people, the community, in other words. Everything he could he gave to it. I'm so glad that we've named the park for him because he certainly deserved it! He even deserves more, but we don't know what to do. [both laugh]

But it has been a wonderful thing for him. And I was so thankful that I knew him, and that I could work with him. [voice chokes up with emotion] When things came up that we would need to talk about, I would come and talk with him about it. And sometimes, maybe, I gave him a little bit of a different viewpoint on some things because I knew some other people who have different ideas, you know. So I thought we had a good relationship.

With Loise, I would see her and talk with her, but I was never really close to her because I didn't have the same things on my mind that she did. Well, my things were really for the community and to do with my children and grandchildren. But I can also say that I knew of times that she did do for other people, and so that was nice. Otherwise, if you can ask me some questions I'll answer them.

GODBOLD: Okay, can you describe what kind of man Joe was.

WENDT: Well I thought he was all around a great guy, because he could make himself really good friends with all men. But he was also very nice with women. I think he liked women; he was very nice to them. And I think he really enjoyed being around the ones that he knew. Now that's really all I can tell you. He was wonderful for everybody.

GODBOLD: What did you know about his work life?

WENDT: Well, all I can tell you is that I think he liked being in control. I saw that in the hospital boardroom. And he was a good businessman. He knew how to make things go, and how to do things. So I say he was really a wonderful person all the way around.

GODBOLD: Do you know anything about his leisure activities, things he liked to do for fun?

WENDT: Well, I think he hunted when he could in the fall. All these men around here really enjoyed hunting in the fall. And they liked to have a party too. They loved it. They'd bring cards and they had drinks and they had a great time.

GODBOLD: Was he the kind of guy that would hang a trophy, deer's head in his...

WENDT: Oh yes, oh yes, he liked all that. My husband [Jack Wendt] did all that too.

GODBOLD: You mentioned a few organizations that he had something to do with: Polly Ryon Hospital. You mentioned the museum, I think, a little bit.

WENDT: Yeah.

GODBOLD: Were there other organizations that he was active in?

WENDT: Well actually, I think he was sitting on the board of Houston Lighting & Power for years because his wife had the stock there, a lot. So I know he was there. I know he served there. And I'm sure there were other places that he did, but I'm not really sure about those.

GODBOLD: Were there any major changes that Joe was involved with here in Richmond or in Fort Bend County?

WENDT: Well, he didn't like to sell his land. But he did sell some of it in order for it to develop. And he could see that it needed to be developed.

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

WENDT: No, he didn't.

GODBOLD: No, he never did.

WENDT: Did he ever talk with anybody else about it?

GODBOLD: Well, apparently he was decorated for valor in Europe. He was Ninety-first Infantry Division here it says, Received a silver star for serving in the Fifth Army. So apparently he had some interesting times there.

WENDT: Well, I think it was true that he didn't want to go back. I think that's what he told people—that he did not want to go back [to Europe]. And everybody, you know, when traveling became easy so many people wanted to go. My husband and I went many times. I was so glad that we did because in those days we could walk wherever we wanted to and do whatever we wanted to. And we loved it. And he never came. But I always wondered if because Loise didn't like it. And so maybe if he had had a partner who enjoyed it, he probably would have gone. But she didn't like to fly, so therefore that left it...

GODBOLD: It makes that hard—yeah. [laughs]

GODBOLD: Describe what kind of women Loise was.

WENDT: Well, I don't know. I know that she had lots of servants and she wanted somebody to wait on her all the time. And she never wanted to be alone. That's why she had all these servants. And she did have friends. She had a friend who had two daughters. And she really carried them all the way through life and loved them very much. And then I think she loved her aunt, the one in Houston. And I think she was protective of her family. She was crazy about her mother and father. And really wanted to be with them a lot. And when her mother came so that she could no longer leave the house, she [Loise] went every day her house in Houston. And in those days it was not hard like it is now. But still she just did it every day. And so I say that was a passion that she had about her parents. In fact, she had them buried out here.

GODBOLD: In Morton Cemetery?

WENDT: Yes. She had them moved to make sure that they were out here.

GODBOLD: You talked about how you would go to parties at their house.

WENDT: Yeah.

GODBOLD: Was she a good hostess? Was she well known for that?

WENDT: Yes, she was a good hostess. And she liked to have parties. And she had plenty of help to do it. And she had more parties than we did. She would always have a big one on the Fourth of July. And there were four or five birthdays in July. Joe and I had the same birthday. And so we always had some kind of a little party together with things like that. And she really liked that, to have parties. She always had the place to do it. In the old days, she did several down at the old house where Miss Janie was. It was a beautiful place.

GODBOLD: Was she a good cook, or did she always have help to do that?

WENDT: No, she always had help. She didn't even do her breakfast. She had the help to do her breakfast. Not too many people have that kind of help.

GODBOLD: Their house, was it a nice house? Was she kind of strict that everything had to be in its place, or was it more of a comfy sort of thing...

WENDT: No, no, no. The house was lovely in the beginning. But she put so many things in it, that it became overwhelming. And it got more and more and more, so it was hard to-- in those days--the last few years--it was hard to really enjoy yourself since it was so crowded. There was too much everything.

GODBOLD: You talked about you were members of organizations with Joe. Were you in any groups or clubs or anything with Loise?

WENDT: No, I was not because she would never a part of anything over here that had women in it. If she did things she would do them in Houston, not here.

GODBOLD: And you and she didn't go to the same church.

WENDT: No, no. We did not. She went to the Episcopal Church, and I go to the Methodist Church. So we were not really together at all with that. My children went to their school. They had a school that started when my children were one and two. And so I had a lot of friends there, but I was never part of the church.

GODBOLD: You have a favorite or your most vivid memory of Loise?

WENDT: Well, I used to see her at different places, at somebody's house. But she really didn't care about going to things here very much because she didn't know all the people like we did. She would know someone in Houston, but she did not know the people out here. So she didn't take much part in things that happened here.

GODBOLD: You talked about how she was more involved with things in Houston. Were there any big projects that she did for Richmond or Fort Bend County?

WENDT: Well, I really don't know. She had a sorority from Texas when she was there - the Thetas. And they have a big [event] every year in the fall. They had an antique dealer. And they started that about twenty years ago or twenty-five. And I think maybe she may have helped with that. I don't know. But her aunt was a Theta and she helped them a lot. So she may have had something to do with that. I'm not sure. But that is the only thing I would know that she would have done things.

GODBOLD: You talked earlier about she liked having dogs and cats. Did they have a favorite breed or kind of?

WENDT: Really I don't know, I don't know. I saw that they had the Shih Tzu. And I don't know about the cats at all. I have no idea what they were. And I'm not really a dog person, so I don't too many about them. I never had one in my life, only one time, and that was a Maltese. And she knew I had that dog. She teased me about it, because I only got it because my daughter had it and she moved into a place where she couldn't have a dog. So she parked it at our house and before you know it was a baby, you know. [chuckles]

GODBOLD: I know how that is. [laughs]

WENDT: So then she wouldn't come and get her dog, so I had it for twelve years. But after that I would never have one again because I just can't fool with them. They're so much trouble.

GODBOLD: Was there anything I've forgotten to ask or that you have that you've gone over that we...

WENDT: I don't think so. We were very close from the fact that we knew each other and we have seen each other forever and we have respect for each. But as far as close, real close, we were not. They had many other things to do, but they still stayed at home all the time. And they didn't have much company in the old days. They got so they just couldn't handle it you know. She was always with a lot of weight. She had to be careful about what she would eat or do. And of course she was had diabetes about the last two years, and that was her focus at the time.

My husband is like that, and he had it for forty years. And she couldn't get over how well he did it because he knew exactly how to take care of it. And she had two nurses all the time. And I don't know how many shots that she had, but it was a passion with her the last years. So I think it was hard for her after Joe died too.

GODBOLD: Well, I think that's all of our questions, so I will go ahead and turn it off.