

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees: **Billie Amilee Harris Wendt -11/19/12**

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Interviewer: Jane Goodsill

Transcriber: Carlos Rubalcaba

Comments: 2nd Interview – Focus on Family

14 Pages



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Transcript

GOODSILL: So nice to see you again. In your interview on November 3, 2012 you told us a lot about your life. But feared that you had not told enough about your family. So why don't you begin with your memories of your father?

WENDT: Okay, My father was born in Fulshear, Texas, his father was a surgeon who was educated in Kentucky for his first degree. He went to Tulane for his medical degree. Then he went right straight into the Confederate Army and he was there the whole time. At the end of the war he was in Houston. They sent him to Galveston to dismiss the troops that were in a ship there. When he had finished that he decided he would go up to visit friends in Pittsville. He had known them from North Carolina. Pittsville was two miles north of where Fulshear is now. It was small but it had a number of people living there and there were no doctors in the vicinity so he stayed.

GOODSILL: Now help me with the year; this would be 1860's?

WENDT: 1865. That's when the war end. He stayed there and they made a home for him. Soon he wanted his own family so he started building a house and he found a lady that he fell in love with and she was one of the people who were friends of his, the Huggins family. They still live there but not in Fulshear anymore, there is a school named for them out there. The Huggins store in Fulshear.

GOODSILL: Tell me what Miss Huggins' first name was?

WENDT: Her name was Francis Huggins.

GOODSILL: You haven't told me your grandfather's name.

WENDT: My grandfather's name was Robert Locke Harris. They had two sons, Robert and Eugene and they were very happy. But as was so prevalent in those days, women died early. Francis died when she was having a baby. Neither mother nor baby lived. The friends all wanted him to find someone to marry and take care of the older boys. So they thought and thought and they found a lady would come and stay with them. She was of the Churchill Fulshear family. He was a racehorse man and he lived in there. He had a lady who would come and stay with Robert and take care of his boys and she would be his wife. That worked out for a while.

GOODSILL: What was her name?

WENDT: Her name was Emma Quinn. She died of malaria or some fever, they had nothing in the world to give people to cure them. There he was again with these two boys and no one to help with them. Before he married Emma Quinn, his friends in Navasota sent him to a lady whose name was Sally Holiday. He went to her and proposed.

GOODSILL: Proposed to her?

WENDT: Proposed to her, yes. She was a teacher and she lived with her mother who was widowed and a little sister was not retarded but she was one that couldn't take care of herself. She said to him, "I'm sorry I can't marry you because I'm taking care of my mother and my little sister." So he went ahead and married Emma Quinn.

When Emma died he went back to Sally Holiday and he said, "You can come and bring your mother and your little sister." So she did. They had seven children, four boys and three daughters, seven children. The mother and sister, Robbie, stayed there. Guess whom the little sister married? The older brother named Robert. In our family the question is always what kind of cousins are we all?

GOODSILL: (hearty laughter)

WENDT: Everybody always wants to hear about the story.

GOODSILL: Well now do you know the names of those seven children? And which one was your father?

WENDT: Oh, I know all of them. I know them well. They started out with a son whose name was Edward. The second one was my father, Hunter Pickney Harris. Pickney was one of the names in Sally Holiday's family. The next one was a daughter named Francis. The next one was a son named Titus Holiday Harris. The next was a daughter named Tennessee she was named after her grandmother. The next one was...

GOODSILL: You mean Sally's mother was named Tennessee?

WENDT: Yes, yes. The next one was a boy name Johnny and the last was a daughter named Joy.

WENDT: Two of the boys here were doctors Donnie and Titus. The girls were teachers. My grandfather, Doctor Robert Locke, was older than Miss Sally, and he died when he was sixty-five. We thought that it was cancer. They took him to New York to find out what was wrong. Treatment helped a lot, but he died on the way home.

Someone had to take care of the farm. By that time he had accumulated lots of land. People would come to him and say, "I am going to sell my land I need some money." He would lend them money or buy the property from them. He had six thousand acres. Part of it in the Brazos bottom and then more over in the Katy area what we call the prairie. It's very different between the prairie and the bottom.

GOODSILL: That's interesting. You want to tell us what the difference is.

WENDT: Yes, in the prairie its dry land and you don't see any mountains or anything and you don't have very much wind, well, you have a lot of wind but you could easily raise cows there. But in the bottom it was farm land and you have to plant your seeds and reap your harvest, in those days it was mostly cotton and they had lots of half hands, people would come here and were furnished a house and some of the food... they had commissaries where they go and get their flour or their lard and their sugar and the things they could eat. Then they would take their part of the crop when it was harvested.

GOODSILL: They would take maybe half of it? That's why it's called a half hand.

WENDT: Yes, that's right. Then the owner would take the rest. They worked the land with mules and they had cows for milk. In the prairie land you didn't have the kind of soil to raise crops, the soil is sandy on the prairie. Down in the bottom and it's very different.

GOODSILL: You know I'm looking at that picture right there.

WENDT: That's my husband. We are in the farm... we're rice farmers. He's been a rice farmer since he was a kid.

GOODSILL: Wait, lets get to your husband later. We're talking about the prairie and the bottomland. Your grandfather had a lot of land and he had many children, nine all together. Once he was gone someone had to take care of it. So who did it?

WENDT: First the grandmother tried it, Miss Sally. Oh she didn't do well and it didn't work... she didn't understand things.

GOODSILL: Do you remember her? What was she like?

WENDT: She was tall and had beautiful wavy gray hair and she was talking all the time. Talking all the time and she was very religious, she gave us a bible and a storybook and she was very important in her church. Methodist.

In the mean time what was she going to do if she gave up the farm? So they called the oldest son, Edward and they brought him to try it. He tried it too and he didn't like it either, didn't like it at all. In the mean time the others were going to college at Georgetown which is the Methodist school in Georgetown.

GOODSILL: To be doctors? The ones that were going to school were Robert, Eugene and Edward?

WENDT: Yes, then they called my father. He was nineteen when called him to come and take care of the farm. In the meantime Miss Sally went to Georgetown and opened a boarding house for the students. She had her own children there and she had lots of other students and she stayed there until they were all through school. She was a person who could take care of things. She would make the dresses for the girls for school.

In the meantime my mother graduated from college when she was nineteen because the high school had burned down and they put the children in college at Huntsville. So she went through college in three years and went out to teach. She got on the train and rode down to Angleton. While she's teaching there her sister and her sister's husband came to Fulshear to teach. So she got on the train and went from Angleton to Fulshear to visit her sister. She met my father and I guess it was love at first sight because they waited two years to marry, but she was twenty-two and he was twenty-three. To them that was old, they didn't wait forever to marry. They had things to do and places to go and so they just got married. Her name was Willie McKithean that is an Irish name.

GOODSILL: Willie, kind of like Billie (chuckle) Do you have any idea how her family got from Ireland to Texas?

WENDT: Only the father came. He came over to seek his fortune and he came to Texas because they were asking people to take land in the Okalahoma Territory. That's where they went.

GOODSILL: Now tell me his name, mother's father McKithean.

WENDT: I think it was Quincy.

GOODSILL: Quincy McKithean. What a wonderful name, how do we spell that.

WENDT: I don't know. The name is down in the cemetery in Fulshear, but I think its' only McKithean it didn't have the whole name.

GOODSILL: Quincy McKithean came down to find his fortune in the Okalahoma Territory, do we know what year that was?

WENDT: No, but my mother was born there and she was one of seven, also seven. They lived there for several years.

GOODSILL: We at the point where your mother meets your father so we have to go back and fill in the details about your mothers family. Do you remember Quincy McKithean wife's name? Your grandmother?

WENDT: Oh yes, she was Julia.

GOODSILL: So they came to Okalahoma, and your mother was born?

WENDT: Yes several of the children were born there. Not only was she born there she was born in a dugout. Do you know what a dugout is?

GOODSILL: Tell us.

WENDT: It's a place on the side of a hill where they dug out underneath and they make a house out of it. She was very proud that she was born there. I don't think they lived there forever, but they did stay there for a while. She always said, "We almost starved to death because we could not grow anything in there." It's like the prairie and it was very hard to get anything to live and they just existed that's all.



One of the sisters had resources in Okalahoma and a house. The father was one of the pharmacists in that little town. They had no children and they came to my mother's family and asked to board my mother so she could get to school and have piano lessons. She stayed with them from the time she was six to 16. She would go home in the summer to see her brothers and sisters. They treated her like a princess because she was always dressed up and had nice clothes.

GOODSILL: So she had a different life than they did.

WENDT: Yes, she had a different life than they did. She could sing and they all got around and let her entertain them. When she was sixteen they sent her to Huntsville to go to high school. When she was a senior the school burned down, they had no place to send the students so they sent them to the college. She graduated when she was nineteen and went off to teach. She tried to help her sisters and brothers as much as she could. The brothers didn't take education very well.

Anyway she married my father and the only place to live was the big old Harris home. Everybody else was gone, Miss Sally was still in Georgetown educating the kids and running the boarding house. My father was trying to figure out how to raise some money on the farm to help. After four years they found it was a little scary to be in that big house because there were so many upkeep projects they could not get to. There were rats and they couldn't get rid of them and it scared mother to death.

Fulshear had become a little town because the railroad came through. That left Pittsville with a few houses, one of those was the Harris family's so they lived in that big house they couldn't take care. A house became available in Fulshear, a nice house. A couple by the name of Fulshear came down there because Mr. Fulshear had racehorses. They had no children but they were getting older they wanted to go home to New York. So they sold it to my father and mother and father, with everything in it, Mission furniture, china, cut glass everything. We lived there.

My sister was Evalyn and my brother was Hunter. Since my father's name was Hunter too they used names like Bubbie and Bub and Bubno and junior for my bother. Anyway, when they were eight and ten respectively the house burned down. DOWN TO THE GROUND.

GOODSILL: All the china all the...

WENDT: The whole thing, the whole thing. It was Monday morning and the wash person was coming to get all the clothes. To do laundry they build a fire underneath a pot this big (arms wide) and you put the clothes in there and boiled it and made them clean. The whole week's laundry was on the floor and it was tied over in a sheet ready to be washed. My mother pulled that bundle clothes outside and that was all the clothes she could retrieve.

GOODSILL: Dirty clothes.

WENDT: That's all, my mother always told the story that her husband went and got his suit, found his new suit and walked out with it. That's all he had. (laughing). Anyway she was pregnant with me. The people who lived across the street had a big house. That house is still there in Fulshear. They invited us to come and stay there while our house was being built again. They had an upstairs with several bedrooms. They were an older nice couple. They had plenty of room and they furnished all the meals for us while we were there. Sweet, nice people and they always said that the children were so nice they never even could hear them at all.

After that we only had furniture that people gave us. You would go home and talk about what so and so gave us. So many things people would give when we had nothing. It took six months for them to build new house. In those days you had maybe two people working on it and that's all you had was two people and what they could do in six months.

Titus and Johnny were now doctors. Titus was still single and he lived in Galveston. My grandmother had given up the boarding house when the two sons went to medical school. She rented an apartment somewhere and put those boys through medical school. When mother and father had nothing after the fire Titus came with a beautiful set of dishes. I always thought, how as a young unmarried man would think about doing that? It was such beautiful thing to do.

Anyway my father kept on with the farm and he got better and better and better and so did everything else. So they finally got all the kids in school then through medical school while running the the farm and despite the burning house. He also to supported his mother. She was always wanting something (chuckle). I remember when she would come to visit I would hear my parents talking and my father would say, "I can't get used to mama doing this and mama doing that. She wants this money all the time and I don't know what I'm going to do." My father put all of his kids through school, supported his mother, he just did everything. My mother did everything she could to help him she was always so frugal.

GOODSILL: Fiscally responsible.

WENDT: Yes absolutely that's the way she was. She was also a gardener and she would make all the vegetables and then we would can them. I helped with all that. We did not cook because my father always had a cook in the kitchen.

Miss Sally was too busy to do the cooking so she always wanted my mother to have a cook. Father would go out and hire somebody he knew and she would be the cook. We would have her for years and she'd be like a member of the family, but something would happen then we would have another one.

I did not spend time in the kitchen except when we had big things to do like if we are going to can the green beans. If we did the corn I had to shuck it. I also learned how to sew because mother sewed and she made lots of my clothes and hers too. It was very expensive to have somebody come in and make your clothes. We always did the housework, the cook was always in the kitchen so we did everything else. I learned a lot of things and I taught my children a lot of things because I knew how to do them.

Before you leave today I am going to give you one of my cookbooks because I have one that my daughter, my oldest daughter decided that we had to have one because otherwise all the recipes would disappear and we would have nothing. I didn't start cooking until I was forty.

I was never in the kitchen I had a cook and she was like a member of the family. When she had to leave I had no one to cook for us so I had to go in the kitchen and start cooking myself. I would call my mother. I found out how do things and the more I got into it the more I liked it. I really love cooking so I have been doing that for years and years and people come to me for recipes and I take things out all the time. So they know that I can cook, but I had so many recipes in the house that people in the family would want to have them when they come here. My husband said he would publish it so he did. We have given it to so many people and sometimes they call me and say oh I love that, I love it. They are old recipes some are new but mostly old. You don't see old recipes in the new cookbooks, they are totally different. Sometime you don't have the things to cook with. I find that a lot.

GOODSILL: The Fort Bend County Historical Commission keeps copies of interviews, but we also keep other materials. Would it be okay if we put the cookbook on our website and let people access to it.

WENDT: Oh sure, oh sure.

GOODSILL: You don't want it just for your family? It's okay to share it?

WENDT: Oh it's all right. It also has pictures in there of my husband and me and both of our mothers.

GOODSILL: Nice. Do you think it would be a good time to talk about how you met your husband and what his story is?

WENDT: My husband was Burb Jack Wendt. His mother who shortened another name, I think that the name she shortened it from was Bourbon, the name of the whiskey.

GOODSILL: Bourbon (laughter).

WENDT: Why did she use that? It was so horrible. They used it in the army when he was there for World War II, they called him Burb, and when we married I said I will never use that. I will NEVER use that, so we haven't. Anyway we met when we were in the seventh grade because he lived here and I lived in Fulshear.

The year before they consolidated the schools, there were small schools all around and they had to send a bus out to pick up the kids. I remember crying that I couldn't get to go the first time but the next year I did go all the way from Fulshear to Richmond and we always stopped and somebody would get on. They lived in the country and they would walk to the bus. That's how I first met Jack when we were in the seventh grade.

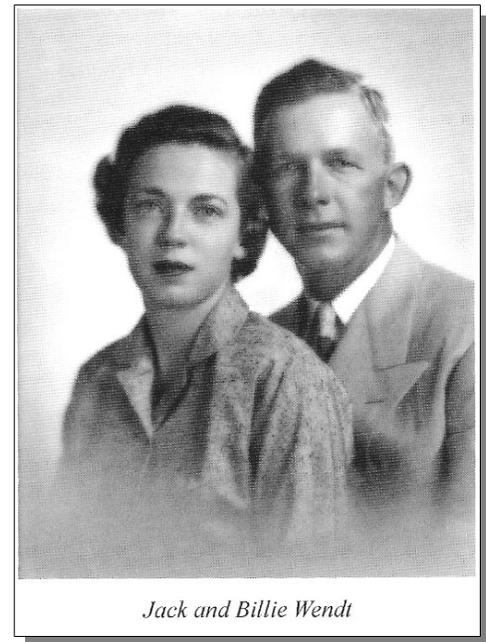
We went through high school together and I liked him, he was just a boy to me. We had older boys on the bus and I was very enthralled with older boys. The first two years that I rode the bus I was very interested in the older boys. I would sit in the back and we would talk but after two years I was tired of all that. So I would sit up in the front and do homework. I was valedictorian of my class.

GOODSILL: Valedictorian?

WENDT: Yes. But we only had fifty-five people in the class.

GOODSILL: That's still quite an accomplishment.

WENDT: Yes. I was always trying to get my children to study more and make better grades. My family never said anything to me. I would show them my grades and they would say, good. They expected good results.



When we were seniors I was tired of the boys in that class. Jack and I liked each other a little bit. By the springtime they had a May Fête. They elected me as queen of the May Fête. I thought about it a long time I asked him to be king. Wow that started something. My old boyfriends were really hurt because I didn't ask them, especially one boy that had been nice to me. Anyway we saw each other a lot for the year or two that I went to school. When I would come home I would see him but in the meantime the war started and he went into the service, he went to A&M first and they were going to draft him, he was one year older than most of the people in his class. They were going by age. So instead of being drafted he left school and went into the Air Corp. He was not in the army he was Air Corp -Ellington Field in Houston. He grew up on a rice farm. They had machinery that would need fixing so he would go with his father and learn. He knew how to fix machines. When The Air Corps found out that he knew about machinery they put him with the trainer planes. He was in charge of the trainer planes and he stayed there two years until they needed him in Waco at the maintenance pool where they trained the pilots.

GOODSILL: He kept the planes in good operating condition so that they would no incidents when they were flying?

WENDT: Right, exactly. They needed him in Waco after two years.

GOODSILL: What happened in Waco in World War II?

WENDT: A big air field, oh yes, Lackland Field.

GOODSILL: It's where they train people to become pilots to go off to the Pacific or Europe?

WENDT: Yes absolutely. He never went anywhere else they needed him right there and it was not easy to find the people who knew what he did. Anyway, when he came out I was teaching and we got together. I went to the school superintendent and said, "I'd like to have a job." He said, "You are too young, I can't hire you right now because you look too young." I said, "Well I'm twenty-four." So I got a job in Katy. The next year I was in the bank one day in the summer and a bumped into him. He looked at me and said, "Where are you teaching now?" I said, "Well, I'm at Katy. He offered me a job. He said, "I have a place for you now, I want you to come." I was teaching seventh and eighth graders in Katy and I was dying to get with the seniors. In my new job I had tenth grade and eleventh grades.

I came to Houston from SMU because my sister's husband had gone into the service. She wanted me to come and stay with her and go to the University of Houston, which I did. I loved it because I was in my major. In the first two years at SMU I had to take everything they told me, I hated some subjects. I didn't like math and I didn't like all the stuff that they made me take. When I got to Houston I could take everything I wanted to.

GOODSILL: Education courses.

WENDT: Yes and also English. I always had two English courses every semester and education and psychology too I loved that. I loved everything I took over there. Anyway I taught in Richmond and Jack and I got together. He told me later that he had already heard I was back the very next day. We were married the next year at twenty-four and twenty-five.

WENDT: I had been teaching for three years and farming and being in the service those three years and then he had been farming again. We both kind of had our heads on straight and knew what we were doing. Anyway it's been wonderful.

GOODSILL: Tell me the names of your children.

WENDT: Okay the oldest is named Evalyn.

GOODSILL: Is that how the other Evalyn, your sister who died early, spelled her name?

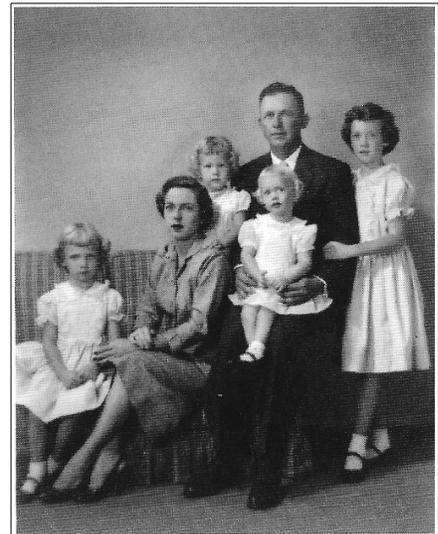
WENDT: Yes, yes it is.

WENDT: The next one is named Amilee...

GOODSILL: That's your middle name.

WENDT: It's my second name and that was my mother's second name also, remember it was Willie Amillee.

The third one is named Jackie, she was named after my husband's father. The younger one is Laurel, by the time I got to her I was out of names, I knew that I wanted to have one named Laurel. I didn't give her another name. So when she got a little bit older she said why didn't I get a second name? I said I was out of names, but I know one now. I will take you right to court and give you a second name and she couldn't wait. My grandfather's second name was Locke.



*Jack & Billie Wendt,
Amilee, Jackie, Laurel & Evalyn*

GOODSILL: Oh I love that name!

WENDT: I do too, I do too.

GOODSILL: So you took her to court?

WENDT: But no, no she wouldn't go. So when she had her two girls the first one was named Jennifer Jean. The second girl and she named Julia Locke.

GOODSILL: Ahhh, good girl.

WENDT: Now, Jackie has one daughter only and she's named Jaclyn Locke (chuckle). I know the name will go on because they love it.

GOODSILL: It's sweet. It goes back to Robert Locke Harris.

WENDT: Yes that's right. That's right.

GOODSILL: Well can you tell me Jack Wendt, your husband's father's name?

WENDT: Yes, his father's name was William George Wendt.

GOODSILL: You said that your daughter was named Jackie, was she named after your husband?

WENDT: No, his mother, Jackie Jones.

GOODSILL: Do you have any idea how his family got to Fort Bend County?

WENDT: The Wendt's came from Germany in the early 1900's, maybe 1906. Two brothers came. One came to Texas and the other one got lost. They cannot find him at all. The one who came to Texas went to Yoakum but also to Sweet Home, Texas. He was a carpenter. He had a big family. My husband's father got a job with people who were rice farming down in Bay City and went over to Markham, right outside of Bay City. That's where Jack was born, in Markham. The father had made a name for himself because that he knew how to rice farm. They stayed there until Richmond built a new canal that was for rice farming. The canal is still there.



GOODSILL: Where is it?

WENDT: It goes through town here and goes out into the country. If you go down to the George Ranch you see some rice down there. Jack came here when he was five and he had two sisters, I think one was born there and the other was born after they moved here.

GOODSILL: Is Jack the oldest?

WENDT: No, he had older brother who was killed from a horse.

GOODSILL: I know your time is up. Thank you for such a good interview. Thank you so much for telling us your family history.

Interview ends