

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees: **Burb Jack Wendt**

Interview Date: 01/12/2009

Interviewer: Roberta Terrell

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

Location: Richmond, Texas

Comments: Also present was Billie Wendt (spouse)

24 Pages



This oral history is copyrighted 2014, by the Fort Bend County Historical Commission. All Rights Reserved. For information contact: Fort Bend County Historical Commission, Attn: Chairman-Oral History Committee, 301 Jackson St., Richmond, TX, 77469.

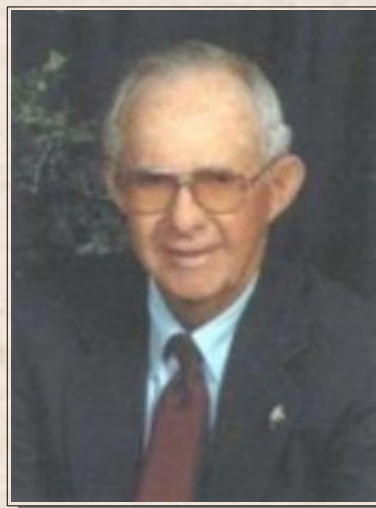
Terms and Conditions

This file may not be modified or changed in any way without contacting the Fort Bend County Historical Commission.

This file may not be redistributed for profit.

Please do not 'hot link' to this file.

Please do not repost this file.



Transcript

TERRELL: I am Roberta Terrell and I am preparing to record an Oral History from Jack Wendt for the Fort Bend County Historical Commission. Could you tell us your date of birth?

WENDT: November the 4th, 1922.

TERRELL: And that was not Fort Bend County?

WENDT: No, Matagorda County.

TERRELL: Okay, and when did you move to Fort Bend?

WENDT: I moved to Fort Bend County in February, 1928.

TERRELL: Why did your family move to the county?

WENDT: My family moved to Fort Bend County to farm rice on the Richmond canal. That was the first time it had opened up, in 1928. My father and my family had one of the first crops that was farmed on the Richmond irrigation canal in 1928. Rice crop.

TERRELL: And could you tell me a little bit about the Richmond canal?

WENDT: Well, the Richmond canal was started in 1925. Of course they didn't have the equipment in those days. A lot of mules were used and some older type equipment to dig the canal, which constituted about ten miles. And it started in 1925 and Mr. Jackson was one of the instigators of it. And Mr. Laher from Garwood, Texas was his partner in building that canal. And it opened up for the first crop in 1928. And they had 10,000 acres in production that year. The pumping plant was also built on the Brazos River and it's still in the same spot that it was originally built. It's been renovated and re-done several times since then. The pumping plant is now owned by CenterPoint Energy, which was originally owned by Houston Light & Power.

TERRELL: And is that over by the George Ranch?

WENDT: No, it's down on the Brazos River. The pumping plant is on the Brazos River. It's down by the State School ...

TERRELL: Okay, yeah. I'm in the wrong area. And so that supplied water for the irrigation for rice?

WENDT: Yes.

TERRELL: To flood the rice fields?

WENDT: Yes. It was capable of pumping approximately 75,000 gallons a minute. The canal was set up to do that.

TERRELL: And so your dad came to farm because of the canal, he had an opportunity here?

WENDT: My father farmed on the George Ranch land. There were several landowners involved in furnishing land for the producers that farmed rice on a canal. It was the Booths, the Meyers, and a number of others. And the Moores, also.

TERRELL: Okay.

WENDT: There was about six or seven different landowners that supplied the land for the producers to farm there. We had our first crop, where we had our equipment, down on Smithers Lake. That's where we farmed for a number of years. Until we moved up on the canal a little further.

TERRELL: And did you help your dad farm?

WENDT: Oh, yeah. I was driving something from the time I was twelve years old. And, of course, in those days, we cut everything with a binder, and we threshed everything with a threshing machine. That lasted until 1947 whenever Mr. George allowed us to bring the threshing machine, the combines, in. He always wanted those haystacks out there for his cattle. There was a certain amount of his land in 1947 which could be cut with a combine. And of course, later on, all of it was cut with a combine. Before, when we cut with binders and horses, the rice with the threshing machine, a lot of horses and mules used to haul that rice to the threshing machine. In fact, that's the only way you got it there. Of course, the biggest tractor we had back in those days was thirty or forty horsepower. Now you got four to five hundred horsepower tractors.

TERRELL: I didn't realize that there was that big a difference.

WENDT: Oh yeah. Yes, you could thresh about, oh, five hundred sacks of rice a day with twenty-five men and a threshing machine and a big tractor. And today you can cut about four or five times that much with one man, with the combines that they have.

TERRELL: Well, are you still growing rice?

WENDT: Yes.

TERRELL: And how many acres do you have?

WENDT: Well, I've farmed sixty-five or sixty-six acres myself. I've farmed for sixty-six YEARS myself as an independent producer. But last year, I farmed--a landlord. I furnished the land, water and seed and my nephew farmed what I had been farming.

TERRELL: Did you have siblings?

WENDT: Yes, I had one brother and two sisters who all preceded me in death. They have all died.

TERRELL: Were you the only farmer?

WENDT: I'm the only farmer in the Wendt family, yes. I have a nephew that's farming. He's my sister, Betty Greenwald's, son.

TERRELL: And how did you decide you wanted to be a farmer? You just enjoyed it?

WENDT: Well, that's a long story. I worked on the farm with my father when I was about twelve years old. In high school, my senior year, they still have rice that itched a whole lot. I told my father, I said, 'I don't believe I'm going to farm because I don't like these varieties.'

When they came along with a new variety of rice that didn't itch, then I started farming on my own. Right before the war, I had an opportunity to go to A & M for a semester and then I got some land to farm, so I got ready to start farming and the war broke out. That was in 1941 and the draft board told me, says, "You finish that crop and you either volunteer or we're going to draft you". So I enlisted in the Army Air Corps. I was a crew chief on trainer planes and never did go overseas. But I worked on airplanes in the air service for three years.

TERRELL: And where was that?

WENDT: Two years in Ellington Field and one year in Waco at Blackland Army Air Base.

TERRELL: Well, you didn't have to go too far! That was lucky.

WENDT: No. And I had an opportunity to get a three-day pass and get a little time off. I came home because I maintained an interest in the crop those three years I was in the service. And I was fortunate enough to be able to come home and help participate in the production of those crops.

TERRELL: I'm not sure I understood you when you said you didn't--weren't going to be a farmer because the rice itched?

WENDT: Iched a whole lot. In other words, you get that rice dust on you, it would itch real bad.

TERRELL: Like poison ivy?

WENDT: Yeah. And a lot of people could take it and some people couldn't. And I took it because I had to but I didn't like it. But now we have varieties that the dust doesn't bother you as far as itching's concerned.

TERRELL: How did they do that?

WENDT: It was through experimentation. In other words, they found varieties that they bred up through the experimentation, technology to get that out of it.

TERRELL: Well, I understand you're pretty much of an authority on rice in this area.

WENDT: No.

TERRELL: I've heard that!

WENDT: I've just been here a long time. (laughs) I've been here a long time and of course, whatever you do, if you don't enjoy doing it, you're not going to be happy with it. And won't do a good job. And of course, I've enjoyed farming. I've enjoyed the challenges and every year it's another challenge because something new comes out. And I try to stay abreast on everything that's new. And try to go along with experimentation and try new technology and techniques in farming, such as the conservation of water. And being a part of the land in a more economical way, to be able to get the most out of your production. And we've been fortunate that we've made good yields on the farm. And the price sometimes is not sustaining the input of the cost of the production, but most of the time we've made a good living off of it.

TERRELL: Well, are there good years and bad years for rice?

WENDT: Good years and bad years for rice or any crop. Of course, almost any crop/commodity that is grown in the United States or anywhere in the world depends on the weather. It can be too hot, too cold, too wet or too dry. And of course, the rice industry is fortunate enough where it has to irrigate. But if you run short of water, your crop is not as good as what it should be. But rice is the only plant, or commodity, in the United States that HAS to have irrigation at some point.

TERRELL: I always heard that the Chinese ate so much rice, and when I went to China, they absolutely farm up to the road. It is plowed right up to the railroad track--when we see shoulders here, you don't see that in China. It's ALL under agriculture.

WENDT: China, of course, I made a rice study tour in 1985 with the USDA. Was fortunate enough to go in about nine different countries which farmed rice, and a lot of them were Asiatic countries. China at that time wasn't one of them that I was able to go into. But I did go into Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, Korea and a number of Asian countries. And most all those countries in the past have eaten a lot of rice. And most of them are self-sustaining. Even China is the largest producer of rice in the world, but they've got over a billion people and at one time, their per capita consumption of rice was one pound per day. And now, most all those countries have become urbanized, you might say, and they eat less rice and more other things, vegetables and beef, like the Western hemisphere does. But a lot of them still eat lots of rice. Takes a lot of rice to sustain them.

TERRELL: Do we export rice or is it all consumed here?

WENDT: The United States exports probably close to 50% of its production. And its production is around eight million tons of rice per year. And China is over two hundred million tons. So you can see the comparison. But at one time, we were the largest exporter of rice, in the world. And yet we raised less than 2% of the rice production in the world. That is because the rest of the countries were self-sustaining or needed a little rice, and the United States had a surplus of rice, which constituted about 50% of its production.

TERRELL: Well, you went to school in Fort Bend County. Can you tell me a little bit--

WENDT: I graduated from Richmond High School. My wife and I graduated together in 1940.

TERRELL: Oh. When did you start going together? And when did you marry?

WENDT: We were kind of high school sweethearts our senior year. In fact, back in those days, they had a May Fete.

TERRELL: Well, we had a May Fete.

WENDT: Did you have a May Fete?

TERRELL: Mm hmm.

WENDT: Well, she was the Queen and I was the King in the May Fete.

TERRELL: Good going!

WENDT: They took a movie of it, showed it downtown in the Cole Theater. Of course it was a silent movie. Of course they didn't have anybody talking. And I've often wondered whatever happened to that movie.

TERRELL: You need to find it!

WENDT: Yeah. Hah! I had the first suit I ever owned. Mr. Jackson, the tailor downtown, made the suit for me. It was a white suit. That was the first suit I ever owned. Mr. Walter Whatly bought that suit for me.

TERRELL: That was nice.

WENDT: Yeah. And, of course, Billie [my wife] was all dressed up in her formal evening gown and all that.

TERRELL: Long dress?

WENDT: Yeah. And we went together quite a while, you know, kind of off and on. I went into the service.

TERRELL: And you were married? Did you tell me when you were married?

WENDT: '47.

TERRELL: '47. Okay. And then you had four girls.

WENDT: I've got four daughters.

TERRELL: You're very blessed.

WENDT: Yeah. They're all--all of them are doing well. Of course all of them are different. They all had the same mama and papa but different thinking and different attitudes and everything. (laughs)

TERRELL: Well, it would be boring if they weren't.

WENDT: But they are good girls.

TERRELL: I know it. I know two of them. I love the two I know.

WENDT: Well, you probably know Evalyn and Laurel.

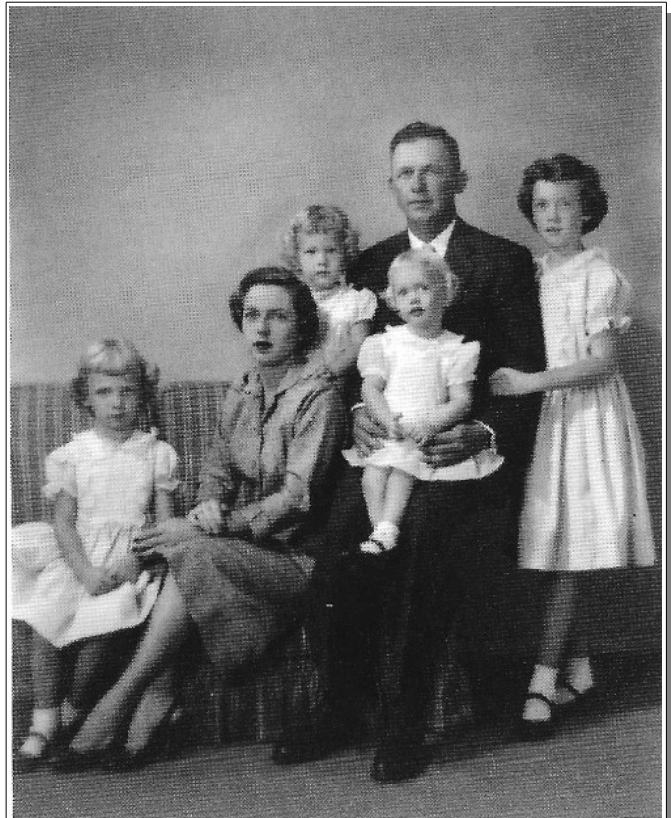
TERRELL: Mm hm.

WENDT: The two middle ones live in Houston. Jackie and Amilee.

TERRELL: Well, going back to rice for just a minute. Who did you sell your rice to? Was it a co-op?

WENDT: Well, no, for years we had about five different mills and they came to our office downtown--the American Rice Growers office--downtown here in Richmond, which was built in about 1950. And they sold our rice from there. We had a marketing association and about six different mills would come there once a week and they would grade the rice, the samples that was there, and bid on the rice. And that was the way it was sold, oh, I guess, for--until about six or seven years ago when we had to close the office down. We got so little rice it didn't pay to have a grader and a manager to run it. So we sold the building and each individual then took his rice to another marketing association to market for them. We take our rice to Bay City to B.U. Growers, to market for us.

TERRELL: Oh, okay.



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

WENDT: And, uh, Uncle Ben's had a--one of the biggest mills in Houston at one time. And we had a co-op there too, called it Blue Ribbon Rice Mill. And it later became American Rice Incorporated. Comet Rice had a mill there and Riviana had a rice mill there. There was a Broussard Rice Mill in Beaumont. And several small ones. Gulf Coast had a rice mill up above Katy. And there's not many mills left at Blue Ribbon Rice now. About three--four is about all.

TERRELL: They imploded, though, Blue Ribbon. Wasn't that between Shepherd and downtown, that Blue Ribbon?

WENDT: Yeah, yeah. They moved that mill--

TERRELL: And they blew it up.

WENDT: They dismantled and sold part of it. But it's in Mississippi now.

TERRELL: Oh, okay.

WENDT: In other words, they really don't buy any rice here in Texas any more. They used to be one of our biggest purchasers of rice in Texas. Of course, at one time in the late 40s and early 50s, Cuba was one of the largest purchasers of our rice. Of course, when Castro got in and had a conflict with our government, they cut them off. They have not been a buyer for about forty-seven years now. They're just now opening it up to U. S. rice.

TERRELL: Oh really? It's open now?

WENDT: It's open under certain constraints. But before it was just free trade.

TERRELL: Well, who is the largest buyer of our rice?

WENDT: Who's the largest buyer of rice? It's Mexico. They buy most of the rice rough, not milled.

TERRELL: Oh, really!

WENDT: They mill it down there so their people have something to do.

TERRELL: I think OUR people need something to do! (chuckles)

WENDT: We've lost some of our largest export markets because of conflicts between government beliefs, constraints, like Cuba, Iraq, Iran and some of those countries like that.

TERRELL: Well, tell me a little bit about what organizations you've been involved with.

WENDT: Oh.

TERRELL: I know it's numerous.

WENDT: It's been quite a few through the years. I've been president of the Texas Rice Council about--for six or seven years, and I was national president of the USA Rice Council for two years. That's your limit anyway. And that constituted about thirty-five thousand members, USA Rice. And then I was on the new organization, the Federation Rice Board, which is now split up.

And that constitutes California, Arkansas and Louisiana and they formed a new organization then which has been in existence about ten years, called the US Rice Producers Association. Now it's the only rice producing association that's all rice producers. And it has Missouri, Mississippi and Texas, and some members out of Arkansas and some members out of California that belong to it. And it--both of those organizations are marketing organizations. They market rice on the domestic scene. I say they are marketing organizations. They advertise and promote rice through the media and for the rice that's grown in the United States, not only for the domestic consumption but foreign export. In other words, at one time we were in 120 different countries, promoting USA rice. But when I was president of USA Rice Council, we were 9 countries. And the government at that time participated in part of our funding to help promote the rice in these countries. To get rid of it. And then when I had the opportunity to travel in those nine different countries, I also was in Yemen. They buy a lot of USA rice. It was nine different countries. And in fact, the Philippines at that time, was still planting rice with oxen, by hand.

TERRELL: That was archaic.

WENDT: They probably still are. It's something for their people to do. And of course they were in China like that. That might still be in China, planting like that. Because in some places they plant in China, you can't get a vehicle or oxen up there, over on the side of the mountain. They carry the water up through an elevated bucket up there, like that. They crank it down here and carry it up there and pour it out on the rice. On the side of the mountain, you see all those terraces? That's the way they farm.

TERRELL: That's amazing.

WENDT: But now, you know, they've become urbanized and a lot of the people that were left to farm are working in factories. In fact they are almost second to us in gross national product. Most of the money we borrow right now comes from China.

TERRELL: Tell me a little bit about what you remember in your elementary school days and how large the classes were.

WENDT: Well, our class, what did they have, about forty in there?

BILLIE WENDT: I think so. Fifty-five.

TERRELL: Did you all go all the way through school together?

WENDT: No, started high school together. Fulshear had the first through the sixth. We were in Fulshear and that's a one-room school and that's where she went to school.

TERRELL: And what about you?

WENDT: I started to school here.

TERRELL: But it wasn't a one-room school.

WENDT: No, no. It was--every classroom had--every class had a classroom. Whenever I started school here, they had a superintendant of school named Mr. Scott. He came to school in a buggy, with a whip. If you skipped school, he looked you up.

TERRELL: With the whip?

WENDT: Well, I don't know what he used to whip me but he had that whip on that buggy horse all the time. But he had a black suit on, and a black hat. I remember that! But if you skipped school the parents were ALL for him! Catching those kids, skipping school. Making them come back to school. Anyway, I graduated from school in a year with Billie and I've been a member of the church, the First Methodist Church here, since I was baptized. Of course started the church there in '28, but I was baptized in about 1930. And I went to church there and Sunday School until I graduated from high school. In fact, I went so many straight Sundays to Sunday School, my Sunday School teacher gave me a silver belt buckle. And I think that was one of the things that was stolen from me. When they stole--robbed our house in 1975. Stole all my guns and some other stuff.

I've been Chairman of the Board of Trustees and I've been Chairman of the Finance Committee at the church, and I was on the building committee, Chairman of the Building Committee to build the first building that we had there, that we built. Where Dr. Nickels and Dr. Thompson had their office and it used to be a grocery store, Loves Grocery Store there. You know, we renovated that and made that into--they finally tore it down. And I've been involved in that through the years and then I was president of the Fort Bend County Farm Bureau for two different terms. I served on the Texas Rice Promotion Board. I'm still on that. And the Texas Rice Research Board--I'm still on that.

I was Chairman of the Texas Rice Review Committee and that was for the USDA for a couple of years. That's where they reviewed producers that were out of compliance and had hearings on them to determine whether or not their out of compliance should be penalized and stuff. That went on for a couple of years. I was on the TECAM--that's the Texas Education Commission at A&M for two years, where we--that committee was organized from a person from each region. You had about twenty--someodd members on it. And what they did, they helped raise money and found different means of funding different projects that A&M had going on. And we met two or three times a year.

TERRELL: Well, you've been involved.

WENDT: Yeah. And, oh, I've traveled a number of times. I went to South American and I've been to Africa on different trips for the USDA and agriculture, which I was very fortunate to be able to do. And I enjoyed it. And those trips, I wrote a trip report, so to speak, on each one and gave that report back, when I got back, to our constituents that were involved in wanting to donate.

TERRELL: That must have been interesting.

WENDT: It was. It really was. But we flew into Dubai, in 1985, it was only thirteen years old. It was carved out and given to these people. And they'd had about seven different presidents and generals that ran it. And all of them had been assassinated. And when we flew in there, of course, we had a brochure on every country. What its main source of income of was, what the population was, and what the people did, and what the average income per year was, and all that. We'd read up on that before we got on the ground.

And we hit the ground and I told my people I was with, we had--there were four of us in a group. One of them included a USDA staff, I said, 'Look. When we hit the ground, don't introduce me as president of anything because all these people who were president have been assassinated!' And when we hit the ground, I tell you, somebody could've stuck a knife in your ribs. Those people just gathered around you and pushing you, 'til we got in a car to take us where we were going to go. They were poor people. Poorest people I've seen in my life. You see some of them lying on the concrete with flies all over, you'd think they were dead.

TERRELL: Isn't that a shame!

WENDT: They were sleeping. It didn't bother them. And VERY few vehicles. Nearly all of them were those hacks that people were pulling, you know, with big wheels on them. And those things coming up the side, they were going down the road. And they'd have maybe two people in it.

TERRELL: It's not like that today, I don't think.

WENDT: I don't know. And they had about ninety, I don't know how many million people they had, but it was REAL heavily populated.

Let's see--what else? Oh, a chair, that was presented to me from A & M. The only campus chair that has ever been presented to somebody for participating in research and stuff.

BILLIE WENDT: A named chair.

WENDT: They named the chair after me, yeah. Then I got another one. I got a number of plaques but those two are the most outstanding over there. [points] To get a chair named after you, you give them about a million dollars, but I didn't give them a penny for this. (laughs)

TERRELL: You gave them your words! (laughing)

WENDT: I have to raise the money. The chair is staffed and located in Beaumont. It's the only off-campus chair that A & M has gotten.

BILLIE WENDT: And tell her what it does.

WENDT: Well, it funds research and also it helps fund scholarships, things like that. It's a \$2,000,000 chair.

TERRELL: Wow!

WENDT: The chair provides income off of the money. The money stays intact. In other words, it's supposed to have gotten about \$75,000 a year off the income of this \$2,000,000. Then the head of the experiment station, which at this time is Doctor Wilson, he has charge of this chair. In other words, he could those funds for whatever he wants to; research...

BILLIE WENDT: But tell her where the money came from?

TERRELL: Who funded it?

WENDT: Who funded it? Well, the Bill Larer family funded about \$500,000 of it. And I raised \$275,000.

TERRELL: That was nice.

WENDT: Yeah. And the rest of it came from other individuals, but I raised that much.

TERRELL: Well, can you think of an area that we haven't touched on that you would like included in this? Or something that every time you tell a story, your children just guffaw and say, 'Not again!'

WENDT: Hah! They don't listen any more! (laughing) When they were kids, they would. When they were kids we used to do a whole lot of things. What have I missed?

BILLIE WENDT: Yes, tell them about--you spent thirty-five years taking care of my family's business and wanting to farm over there before it was sold. And it was a different kind of operation.

TERRELL: Okay.

WENDT: Twenty-five years is what it was. My wife's father, Hunter Pinksey Harris, died in 1959. He was the only member of the family that was accustomed to farming operations and this was strictly a ranching and farming operation. They had sixteen tenants on the farm and still farmed with mules to plant the crops. The main crop was cotton. And so the family asked me to take over the operation and management of it and I did. And I ran it for about twenty-five years. And it soon became where one of the partners was Mr. Harris' brother, Doctor Titus Harris. He passed away and the family didn't want to have anything to do with the farming. So they sold out to my brother-in-law and myself. And so we operated--or rather I operated it -- until we sold it in 1982.

That was 1959 to '82 and of course, I was involved with Mr. Harris before that and knew the fundamentals of it. And still had control of it until we sold the rest of it, which was another ten or fifteen years. That's the reason she said thirty-five years. I had to keep it in agriculture. And we sold the last of it in about 1995 or something like that. But anyway, it was a good long stretch in there and I had to manage--to see the taxes were paid on it and the upkeep on the property and all that--even though we were not operating it from '82 on 'til we sold the balance of it.

And, also, during that period, we had bought a ranch in - I call it west Texas. It's out at in Caldwell County and it was large enough to where we had to have a manager on it. So I obtained a manager and put a herd of cattle on it and made a ranch out of it. That's what it was before I bought it, but we had to stock it. And I ran that for--

BILLIE WENDT: Thirty years.

WENDT: Thirty years. Thirty years with a manager. And traveled back and forth at least once or twice a week to see after it. And there's a nice home on it, which my wife enjoyed going to and having visitors and stay. And it was really a nice place. But it finally became to where she didn't enjoy going there.

BILLIE WENDT: It was too large. I couldn't do it any more.

WENDT: And her health didn't permit her to do it. It was an albatross around my neck to maintain it like I'd like to see it maintained. So we sold it about five years ago.

I also ran my own operation here, including some interests on the canal and other well interests. At one time I was farming here close to three thousand acres myself.

TERRELL: That's a LOT of land.

WENDT: And managing the Fulshear thing and The Bluejay, the ranch there. And the interests that I had here. And kept most of the books myself. My wife kept books too, for a long period of time.

BILLIE WENDT: Until I was fifty-five.

WENDT: In other words, it got to where it really was--from the time that we married, it was a family operation.

TERRELL: And is it in Beasley?

WENDT: Beasley, yeah. That's where my farm is now. And I started purchasing land out there that I own, back in--when did we go to Chicago, Illinois? '67 or something like that?

BILLIE WENDT: Yes.

WENDT: I started purchasing land in '67 and built up a nice farming operation.

TERRELL: Were you familiar with ranching?

WENDT: Oh yeah. I've had cattle--I've had cattle since the early '50s, with my father.

TERRELL: So it wasn't just rice.

WENDT: When my father passed away. And I have worked cattle, since I was a kid. I rode a horse from the time I was three years old. In fact, a horse threw me when I was seventy years old. Broke my back and so I have ridges. We still maintain a good herd of cattle.

TERRELL: How old were you when you broke your back?

WENDT: Seventy.

BILLIE WENDT: He was seventy.

TERRELL: I know, I thought, well, surely if you worked cows, you didn't stop at age seven. That's why I asked you again. I thought I heard seven.

WENDT: Seventy.

TERRELL: Seventy. My goodness.

WENDT: Yeah. And it was a silly accident. I wasn't ready for the horse to pitch and he pitched me off. Just sitting there, kind of loose and all of a sudden--I think fire ants got on her. She just threw her head down and jerked the reins out of my hands and kind of made a jump. And I had sweatpants on and one of my feet went out. So I tried to get off, and she hit one of those high notes and I came out, went up and hit right on my back (smacking noise). Broke it.

TERRELL: Ooooh. Now you might ought to give up after that. (laughs)

WENDT: No, no, I was in the hospital twelve days. They put me in a straightjacket for three months. A steel straightjacket. Whenever I got back out to farm, that was about three weeks, I was back on some

equipment, running it.

TERRELL: But not the horse.

WENDT: Not the horse. It was kind of hard to get around, because my back was stiff. I couldn't do anything in that steel brace. But I could get on and off a tractor or maintainer, stuff like that.

TERRELL: You've had an interesting life.

WENDT: I've been a diabetic for forty-three years and that has put some constraints on me, too, as far as that goes. I take two to four shots of insulin every day.

TERRELL: Do you really!

WENDT: Yeah.

TERRELL: Well, you would never know it. You look great!

WENDT: And, anyway, anything else, honey [to Billie]? I've had a full life! (laughs)

BILLIE WENDT: We have traveled all over the world.

WENDT: Oh yeah, we have traveled a lot.

TERRELL: On business or leisure?

WENDT: For pleasure.

BILLIE WENDT: Yes, and we were very fortunate to do it while we could. When the last daughter went to school, then we went to travel overseas.

WENDT: We started in the early '50s and went on up into the '60s. Our traveling--I don't know whether you remember or not--Tommy and Bonnie Greenwald? We traveled with them a lot.

TERRELL: Well, tell me a little bit of where you went.

WENDT: Well, our first--we had a lot of car trips here in the United States. I guess nearly all over. And we'd just get in one or the other's car and Bonnie was always the leader in picking places out because she liked to do that. And I was the chauffeur and the banker, and that's the way we traveled. And then we started going overseas. The first trip we made, I think it was in 1970, yeah, it was 1970, overseas. Because that's when our grandson was born. He's thirty-eight years old now. We went to France. On Air France. It was the first flight they had, straight from Houston to Paris, France.

TERRELL: Can't beat that!

WENDT: Twelve people on the trip. And we had a bus for about twenty-five or thirty people. So we really traveled in style! And had a tour guide all the time. That was a three-week trip. And we went back, at least once or twice more. And we went to--

BILLIE WENDT: Australia.

WENDT: We went to Australia and New Zealand. And we've been to the Hawaiian Islands on a trip--farmer to farmer tour.

BILLIE WENDT: Several times.

WENDT: And we took the inland passage from New York on the Cattleman's--Texas Southwest Cattle Raiser Association--tour, up the inland passage to--into Canada, to Montreal. And we took a cruise out of Galveston, the--

BILLIE WENDT: Stella Solaris.

WENDT: Stella Solaris. The American Farm Bureau had the whole ship.

TERRELL: Oh.

WENDT: After they had the convention in Houston, the ones who wanted to go, and it was about four hundred some-odd members on it. In fact, Wade McNeil went with us. Of course, he's dead now. And that was an eleven-day tour I believe. It was about three days too long. (chuckles) It's nice to take a cruise because, in one sense, because you don't have to pack and unpack.

TERRELL: Are you a hunter?

WENDT: Oh, yeah. I like to hunt.

TERRELL: What do you like to hunt?

WENDT: I've hunted all my life. I've hunted ducks, geese, deer, and hogs. I've made it--I went on one big game hunt up in Montana when I was only about thirty-two years old. Not too long after we were married. I was twenty-five when we were married. It was a group from here. We drove up. And we had a ten-day hunt; packed in to the National Forest, on horses and mules. And hunted out of tents. Froze EVERY night - cold as hell! My gosh! Anyway, that was an elk hunt. And mule deer and a bear hunt. I don't think there --wasn't any elk killed. We saw some elk.

Then I went on a big game hunt in New Mexico. Yeah, that was in New Mexico with that bunch from the - Mr. Pearson and Mr. August, a bunch of them. We drove in there. It was in an area that used to be for a movie and they had a bunch of houses there, and that's where we stayed. It was a BIG ranch. Thousands and thousands of deer and elk and some people killed elk and deer. We all got deer.

Then I've hunted in Colorado. There was a big ranch that a bunch out of Houston and Richmond bought. It had 84,000 acres and they called it the Blanco Chinchero Ranch. Had 84,000 acres. I hunted there and I killed a big, nice mule deer there. And then I hunted in south Texas. Had leases down there for years. And I hunted on Ed Huggins place in Junction, my last few years I hunted. I just went there and stayed on his place. And, of course, I've got deer out at the place. I've been out there sixty-one years and see a lot of deer but I've never even shot at one. Had my rifle with me, but I never have shot one. (chuckles)

TERRELL: Kind of like the 'house doves'.

WENDT: And then I've been dove hunting. In fact, I took five people with me to Hondo on a white-wing hunt last season.

BILLIE WENDT: And you went to Argentina to hunt.

WENDT: Oh, yeah. That's my big trip, I forgot. I had Billie's cousin, Titus Harris and his wife were BIG bird hunters. And they were national skeet shooting champions, too. She in the women's and he was in the men's. And then they had another couple they traveled with, so they asked me did I want to go and I said yeah, "We'll go before I get where I can't go."

They made the reservation and everything. And I had to register my guns in Houston. And we met at the airport in Houston. They flew to Miami and we took a straight flight from Miami to Santiago, Chile. And we changed planes there and flew into Argentina--Cordoba, Chile. And of course all those countries, you know, have an uprising, but never had any trouble this particular route. So we didn't have any trouble at all. The worst hassle was the airports. Getting around the airport - going from one end to the other. Of course, that was when it was getting where I couldn't walk too good. It was pretty pressing on me there. Because we got in there--it was a three and a half day hunt and we were the only ones at the lodge, too. Five of us.

We stayed in the main lodge. Had ten-foot ceilings. Every room had a fireplace. They were old buildings. But well maintained. Just immaculate. And everybody had a room to themselves. And just like I said, had a fireplace in every room, a BIG bar. Of course you're furnishing your own whiskey. They furnished--you had wine. You could drink wine all day long if you wanted to, because they made wine there.

TERRELL: Oh, yeah.

WENDT: Argentina's a BIG wine country. Anyway, first evening out, I couldn't hardly hit anything, because it was just many. Doves have always been hard for me to hit. The next day, I got on to it. And I figured I wouldn't shoot, maybe two or three boxes the whole trip. I killed over 800 birds. Birds were like blackbirds. Finally you learn how to shoot one. You don't just try to shoot into them. You pick you one out. When you pick one out, they're so close together you might kill two.

TERRELL: It's amazing.

WENDT: And the food we had was just outstanding--outstanding! Breakfast--you've never seen the layout for breakfast. And waiters and waitresses that waited on us. Black tie, white shirt. It was uptown! And each one of us had what they called a 'bird boy'. Mine could barely speak English. He looked just like I looked. Argentina. Except his skin was a little darker. He was forty-seven years old. I had two guns. If one of them jammed, I'd give it to him and he'd work on it and slam it. He kept them loaded too. And he'd put one back and load it up, take another one, and bum-bum-bum. Then in the evening, we'd get in before dark. Everybody of course would go take a shower and shave, and come on out for dinner. Have a toddy. Talk a little bit. A little bit big. And while we were eating, everybody had a story to tell. And still, didn't anybody stay up late, maybe nine o'clock--nine thirty. Of course, you get up at five o'clock.

TERRELL: Sounds like fun.

WENDT: It was, it was. I really enjoyed that trip.

TERRELL: Well, you've had an exciting life.

WENDT: And then last year we went to Hondo. I took everybody. That was a white wing hunt. It was a three-day hunt. We had pretty good shooting. Of course, I found out, since I had this [health] problem and was in the hospital for so long, my legs have gotten weaker. I couldn't stand up and shoot. I'd lose my balance. I can't stand up and shoot!

I've got to either back up against something like that. I sit down in a swivel chair. And that's not like standing up, moving around, you know. So I couldn't do that. Well, we found an old swivel chair in the house, and they took it out in the pickup and set it down, and that's where I sat.

BILLIE WENDT: Don't forget, you went to North Dakota.

WENDT: Oh yeah, a pheasant hunt.

BILLIE WENDT: Pheasant hunt.

WENDT: Yeah, I went pheasant hunting two different times.

BILLIE WENDT: And one time they took a motor home.

WENDT: Yeah, and everybody got to ride in it.

TERRELL: Oh how fun.

BILLIE WENDT: Can you imagine how fun that was?

TERRELL: Oh, I bet that WAS fun.

WENDT: I think it was seven of us. I had--these were young people, you know. I think I paid for nearly all of them, except for one or two that just wanted to come along. But I rented the motor home. They bought the gas.

TERRELL: How fun.

WENDT: They went up there and hunted. Everybody killed his limit. And we stayed in a lodge and it was similar to the same thing. We played dominoes at night and had a bar. Had a big sitting room and nice--every room had a bath, you know. There was one trouble with--well, I went to--I took some people down to--two years ago, to Sanderson, mule deer hunting. I hadn't been mule deer hunting in forty years, and I wanted to go one more time. So I got this lease. It was a bunch of friends of mine. All of them were rice farmers. So I took it for three of us and I took my nephew and a fellow that farmed with us out there. And that was the only place I've ever been where the facilities were not to my liking.

They put me out on a screened porch. Of course they had it glassed in, with five other people. And they'd rattle the windows. Snore! I got up in the middle of the night and got my clothes on and went out in the pickup. It had a big back seat. And I laid there for about thirty minutes. And it was freezing. And it finally got to me. So I packed up and went back in the house and laid there. So the next night, I filled my ears full of toilet paper and it worked a little better. But that ranch had 80 some-odd thousand acres on it. Everybody had Jeeps and stuff.

TERRELL: Do you have anyone in the family who will follow you as a rice farmer? Or a farmer? Do you farm rice in Beasley?

WENDT: Yeah.

TERRELL: Rice.

WENDT: I have a nephew that's my sister's son that's been out there for thirty-five years. Now he'll probably farm for a few years, but--then I have another white fellow that's been there for about thirty years. Now he's farming most of it. My nephew farms a certain amount of it, and he does other things. But, no I don't have any grandson or sons or anybody like that that would. I have a grandson that's thirty-eight, but he's better off where he is, than he is out there. Of course, farming got worse. It's bad. It's a good thing we made it back and stacked up before the last five or six years. And been able to put something together.

TERRELL: Can you think of anything I've left out? You've been very nice to do this.

WENDT: Well--

TERRELL: We're trying to get as much as we can for the--

WENDT: Well, they say, you don't mind talking about yourself, and a lot of times you don't want the general public to hear all about it. (chuckles) Some people might be envious and some people might think you're bragging or something like that, and I sure don't want that.

TERRELL: No, nobody's going to think that!

WENDT: (laughing)

WENDT: Farm programs.... It's just enough to keep us in business when times are the hardest. But people hear about somebody getting a million dollars. Well, some people get money through any program, they shouldn't be getting it. A farm program was created-- all farm programs were created --to help the producer during hard times, so that he would not lose his farm. And be able to continue to produce.

Without that, if you had to import your food, you'd be paying ten times what you're paying now. And maybe not get it! But, yet, the American people have the most abundant food in the world. You don't realize it but the food you buy--just like wheat--you might be paying \$2.00 for a loaf of bread a week. But that farmer's only getting about twelve or fourteen cents out of it. You see. And you can always give them the cotton that goes into this shirt, which is 100% cotton. And that cotton shirt would cost you the same thing, because it's the process that it goes through, which is labor-intense.

And the matter of economics involved in all of it, it helps support the nation. This helps support the nation, because it creates jobs. What if you imported all of these shirts and clothes you wear? Which there is a LOT of it is imported. You look over there--Taiwan, China. If you import it all, well, then it puts people out of work here. That's the reason that Mexico likes to buy rice in the rough--still got the hull on it. Because they want their people to mill it and package it and sell it. Gives them something to do.

No, it's such a misconception about the farm programs. And as I say, there is some mis-use in it. There's a lot that I know about that shouldn't be! But it hadn't been policed properly and hadn't been written properly. But they've tightened up on it now to where some of these people--movie stars and financial giants in Chicago and New York--won't be getting those subsidies any more. And it should've been that way to start with.

I used to travel a lot to Washington to see the senators and congressmen. And when they created the 1986 Farm Bill, we told them, we said, 'Now that could--that particular clause in that farm program could be VERY detrimental to the farmer, because the landlord could really keep the tenant off the land and take the payment himself.' And one of the congressmen said, 'Oh, we can solve that problem with rules and regulations'. Well, it didn't happen. Texas lost over 50,000 acres of rice because the landlord keeps the rice producer off and took the payment himself.

TERRELL: That's crooked.

WENDT: Yeah, yeah, that happened. In California, a producer there, he pays the landlord the equivalent to the payment of the land that the rice gets per acre, you see. In other words, that's a subsidy. In other words, if it's \$100 an acre, he charges them \$100 like a rent. He gets the cash where they get the subsidy because he doesn't qualify for the subsidy payment. If it's \$200 an acre, they give him \$200 and the farmer gets the subsidy.