

# FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

## *ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE*

Interviewees: **Pat McDonald, Dan McDonald**

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Interviewer: Pat Pollicoff

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

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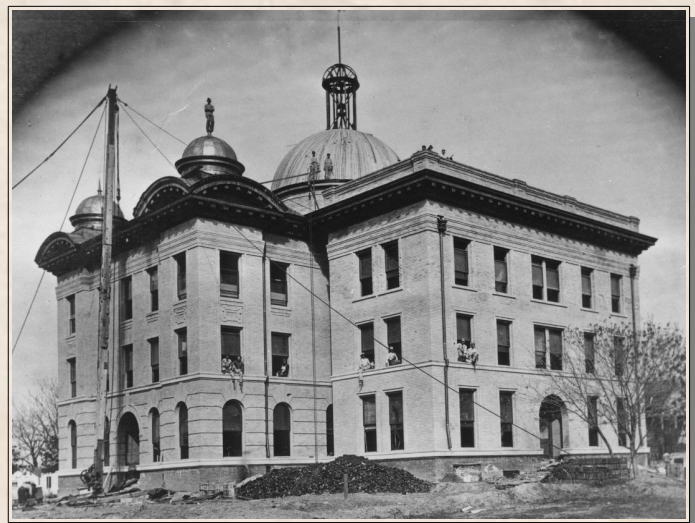
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*Transcript*

POLLICOFF: Let me start with you, Pat. Tell us your name and date of birth.

PAT: I'm Pat McDonald. My date of birth is May 27, 1961.

POLLICOFF: Okay. And Dan?

DAN: My name is Dan McDonald. I was born August 27, 1962.



*Pat McDonald*



*Dan McDonald*

POLLICOFF: Dan, why don't we start with you? Would you please give me a brief outline of your connection to Fort Bend County? Were you born and raised here?

DAN: Yes. Whole life. Born and raised. We lived in Rosenberg early on. When I was in the sixth grade we moved to Richmond. My father had a veterinary clinic in the break between Rosenberg and Richmond. He and his partner ended up moving their vet clinic into Richmond. Then we became Richmondites. My mother and father still live here. He no longer owns the veterinary clinic but my brother and I have lived here most of our lives, other than going to college. I had another short stint away from Richmond for about a year after college but came back and have been here ever since.

POLLICOFF: Where did you go to college?

DAN: Texas A&M. Class of 1986. My brother is class of '85, my sister is class of '83.

POLLICOFF: Pat, fill us in on anything else that your brother might have forgotten.

PAT: I came back from college in '85 and have been here ever since. We've always been in Richmond-Rosenberg.

POLLICOFF: What kind of work do you do now?

PAT: I manage and am the CEO of the Henderson Wessendorff Foundation.

POLLICOFF: And how about you, Dan?

DAN: I am the principle owner of the McDonald and Wessendorff Insurance business, which was formerly the Wessendorff Insurance Agency.

POLLICOFF: Obviously your families are very involved in this community, especially running this foundation.

PAT: Yes, ma'am. Dan and I have worked for the Wessendorffs for twenty-six years.

DAN: He started a short six months prior to me. He was working in another business and living on the ranch. Mr. Wessendorff had leased a house to Pat. I was in the Valley. After college, I took a job in the citrus business down in the Rio Grande Valley. Left that job in less than a year and moved in with my brother, because he said it would be better if I lived with him at the ranch instead of going back to my mother and father's home, having been away in college. We knew Mr. Wessendorff as kids, growing up. Our father was his veterinarian and of course, everybody KNEW him. Being an Aggie, Mr. Wessendorff snagged my brother. He was looking for a young guy to help him with all of his businesses. It's not done these days, but he went over to see Pat's boss, who was a well-known Fort Bend County man, Mr. George Lane and ASKED Mr. Lane's permission to hire Pat. He told Pat, 'You'll work less hours than you're working now and make more money'.

PAT: When I lived at the ranch, he'd come by the house every morning between 5:30 am and 6:00 a.m. He had a lady who cooked breakfast for him and that's when we made our deal.

DAN: They would say good morning to each other before the sun would come up.

POLLICOFF: He really liked that you got up early, Pat!

DAN: Exactly. I would say that's correct. He liked people that were REALLY hard workers. Whether they were executives or the little guy, he liked people who worked hard and Pat was definitely a hard worker.

PAT: Dan and I knew Mr. Wessendorff when we were growing up. My dad and another man had cattle and they leased a pasture from Mr. Wessendorff from about 1976 to about '82 or '83. So of course we knew Mr. Wessendorff. We would go to the ranch and deliver calves with Dad, vaccinate heifers or work cows. I have one memory at the clinic, that he took his gloves off--he was always wearing gloves-- to shake your hand. I asked my dad why he did that. He said, 'Because he's a gentleman'. I didn't know why he would take his gloves off to shake your hand and learned as a kid, that's just the gentleman's mark.

POLLICOFF: So he made a big impression on you, even at that age.

PAT: Yes, from an early age. I was probably in seventh or eighth grade when he did that.

POLLICOFF: How about you, Dan? What are some of your early memories?

DAN: Probably that and that he was a big, tall, real powerful guy. When you saw him, he stood out and had a booming voice just like a John Wayne.

PAT: Tell her about your interview with Mr. Wessendorff.

DAN: It was in 1988, wasn't it? Really a funnier part to that is that Pat goes to work for Mr. Wessendorff and I'm living in the house on the ranch. I see Mr. Wessendorff, just like Pat does, coming in and out. He loved to go to the country. His favorite thing was to go down to the ranch almost every day, if he was in town.

So he would ask me, 'Have you found a job yet?'. I'd say, 'No sir, I'm looking'. It was a tough time, about like it is now. Very difficult for a college kid to get a job."

POLLICOFF: During the 1980s oil bust?

DAN: Right. Yeah, '88. So Pat says, 'Look, one of the guys at the insurance company's having a Christmas party. All the Wessendorff employees at the insurance agency are going. Pat was also involved in that. He was involved in ALL of the entities. He invited me. They knew I lived with Pat. Pat: 'They asked me if I could bring you to the party. So if you'd like to go, you're welcome.' Sure, I'm ready to go, do whatever.

POLLICOFF: Your day was available. [laughing]

DAN: I was available! We go to the party and I don't really know a lot of people. I've been in college the last five years and I didn't know these people that well. I was in the corner, just sitting down, drinking a beer, relaxing. And there was this little old lady sitting there. She said, 'Sit down here, young man, there's a chair there'. So I talked to her most of the evening and then I get up and Pat says, 'Let's get out of here and go do something else'. So we get up and he asks, 'What did Mrs. Wessendorff have to say?' And I said, 'Who is Mrs. Wessendorff?' He said, 'The lady you've been sitting with the last two hours'. And I never knew that that's who that was!

POLLICOFF: All the time in growing up, you had never met her?

DAN: Well, she was kind of a mystery. We didn't really see her a lot. I did not know what she looked like. So, about a month or two after that, Pat says, 'The boss wants to see you if you have time. He'd like you to call him.' So I called him and he said, 'Would you come in and talk to me? I want to talk to you about going to work for us, and see if you're interested in the job.' 'Sure, be glad to!'

Well, I'm already working for a relative of his farming, a guy who we grew up with. This man was his first cousin, Wesley Johnson. Mr. Johnson's father and Mr. Wessendorff's mother were brother and sister. Their property is where the Greatwood development is now. They called it the Johnson tract. Mr. Wessendorff tells me to come in on a day that I'm helping his cousin farm. At A&M we have this class called Senior Seminar, where you learn how to interview and you're supposed to dress up in your coat and tie and look special for the interview.

PAT: Dress for success. (all laughing)

DAN: I was working there trying to make some extra money. They knew I was looing for a REAL job. 'Here, Dan, while you're going in to see Uncle Joe, here's your check; you probably need some spending money for the weekend. While you're in there, the bank's right next to Mr. Wessendorff's office. You can go cash your check.'

Well, I'm dirty that day. They have a breakdown on some of the equipment and I'm head-to-toe grease and dirt. So I go in there and there's Mr. Wessendorff! He was handling his own deposits, never really let anybody else do that. I didn't learn that till much later on -- after eighteen to twenty years with him--that he ALWAYS did that. He'd walk across the street to the bank every day. He sees me and says, 'Don't we have a meeting today?'

And I say, 'Yes sir, we do. It's in about an hour and I plan to go back out to the ranch, clean up, and be back.' He said, 'What are you doing right now? Why don't you come over and we'll just do it right now? There's no sense in going all the way back to the ranch to clean up. I KNOW you.' So in the meantime, Pat's in a coat and tie and knows my interview is that day. Of course, he wants me to get a job, because he's been taking care of me!

POLLICOFF: So, Pat, what were YOU thinking when you saw your brother walk in covered in grease?

PAT: When I saw him walk in, I was just SHOCKED! He WAS dirt and grease from working on that piece of equipment at the farm for the Johnsons.

POLLICOFF: And you know how important this interview is.

PAT: I DO. I'm pulling for him.

POLLICOFF: And you're thinking, 'There's no way. He looks like a grease monkey'.

PAT: Exactly. Prior to the interview, Mr. Wessendorff had stopped in my office. He said, 'Pat, if we hire Dan, can you work with him?' I said, 'Yes sir, I can. We grew up working for the same people, working cows, working on farms. We have always been real close.'

DAN: We go into his big corner office. I sit down and he asked basically the same question. He goes, 'I want you to shadow your brother and do what he's doing, be involved in all the entities.' I ended up gravitating toward the insurance business, but at first I was involved in all the entities.

PAT: He liked guys that could do a lot of different things--you know, we worked cows, we worked for the development company, had real estate licenses, we both worked for the insurance agency and the investment company. We even did a few little things at the lumberyard every now and then.

DAN: He liked that. We were Ag majors, and he LOVED the agriculture business. I asked him one time, what he would like to be remembered for. He said he wanted to be remembered as a rancher. That was what he liked to do best... farm and ranch. He says, 'Can you take orders from your brother?' And I told him, I said, 'Mr. Wessendorff, I've been taking orders from him my whole life! I don't like it a lot of times, but I can take it'. I wanted the job, and sure enough, he gave me a job.

He didn't need me, really. I'm sure Mrs. Wessendorff said, 'You ought to hire his brother, too. And then you can have two of them and you'll get twice as much done.' But we worked together all those years. He loved to go to the ranch in south Texas, so we would alternate taking him. Every other week one of us would drive him the three-hour trip to the ranch in south Texas.

PAT: It was close to Karnes County towards Kenedy.

DAN: To this day, Pat STILL goes there. Pat does a lot of business for the Henderson Wessendorff Foundation. And this property is part of the current big oil play you've heard about--the deal with shale. In those days, it was just his hunting and cattle ranch. We went Thursday at first, and then EVERY Wednesday. He had a partner down there that had the cattle. He would pick us up--and this is a joke between Jack Moore and I--he would call it 'Joe Clyde time'. Pat's better at this than I am, but Jack and I have our own time. Mr. Wessendorf's time - if he said, 'I'll pick you up a little bit before 5:00", that usually meant twenty minutes to five. It wasn't five minutes to 5:00. So you'd BETTER be ready! He was like that.

So you would get in the car. He would drive down to Kenedy. We'd get to the ranch by 7:30 or 8:00, spend the whole day at the ranch and sometimes stay overnight. Most of the time we'd start heading home by 2:30. He would take a nap and Pat or I would drive him home. We went to work for him when he was 70. He died when he was 88. We had eighteen years with him. But at 70, he was still a man's man. Other than that nap, he kept going all day.

POLLICOFF: Pretty remarkable! So Pat, what kind of conversations would you have on these long drives?

PAT: Every now and then we'd talk about just a FEW things. But specifically, it was a quiet time, really, with him. Because he would just kind of get away from all these businesses. So we might talk, just say, 'Good morning' and talk just a LITTLE bit. And then it would be quiet all the way there.

POLLICOFF: So, that was unusual for him, because he was not like that when he was here in town?

PAT: Oh, not at all. That's exactly right! He was on SO many boards: the hospital, George Foundation, HL&P, Centerpoint and Reliant, two bank boards. I mean, the man was just incredible. I noticed, and I think Dan did too, that he liked to be quiet going down to the ranch. Now, if he had a specific issue we were working on, he would ask you what was going on. But the majority of the trip was quiet.

POLLICOFF: It was thinking time.

PAT: Yeah. And getting away time, really.

PAT: He would invite friends-- Dick Raleigh, Richard Joseph, Prowell, would go on hunting trips down there. And it was a standing order with him that you didn't turn on the TV--you could turn it on, but there were NO stock market reports! That was a taboo. It was a getaway from that for him, really.

DAN: And the office would NOT call him unless it was absolutely necessary. He had one of the first cell phones I ever saw. But he had a phone at that ranch. They knew he would be there early--8:00ish or noon. If it was an absolutely important issue, they would call him, but VERY seldom. Or if HE had an important issue that he forgot to do, he would call home.

POLLICOFF: Did you ever have much contact with Loise, then?

PAT: Oh yes, ma'am.

DAN: Later on.

PAT: Intermittently, I would say, from 1987 on. We worked for Mr. Joe but we would help her do things. We also worked for her. She'd call and ask you to do things.

POLLICOFF: You did whatever she asked.

PAT: Exactly! And then when he passed away in 2006, I went to work for her, from 2006 to 2008, really. They had separate property each managed. She had the ranch in Blanco and he had Kenedy and Richmond. But she would ask him to do things, so sometimes we'd go to Kenedy and then go to Blanco and check on some things. Or, there was a big hail and windstorm one time.

She occasionally would ask him to step in and help. He would always help her with problems on whatever she was dealing with the land in Angleton, the Blanco ranch or whatever.



DAN: They absolutely kept things separate, through most of their lives. It was HER stuff, HER ranches, HIS property. They were clear about that. Their employees were separate, but often times, we would get involved when there was 'I need you to help Loise with a couple of things' and we would go do it. And she was the general--she could be charming when she wanted to be, but she was a tough lady. You ALWAYS knew where you stood with her.

PAT: He called her 'Junior'. That was her nickname. I always thought it was because of her father, Bob Henderson. He saw a lot of Bob Henderson in her and he called her 'Junior' til the last days that he was here.

DAN: People that know her or knew Mr. Henderson--we didn't know Mr. Henderson--but they all say that she's JUST like he was except in a lady's body. They were very similar.

POLLICOFF: She had VERY different interests, though. I understand that she had the good fortune of having some of the family money to put into the properties and the retreats and things.

DAN: She was a VERY generous lady.

POLLICOFF: When did the Henderson Wessendorff Foundation start?

PAT: Well, Bob Henderson initially started the Foundation in the late '50s. There were some changes made in the '70s, but the initial Foundation specified that all the residual assets in both of their estates would roll into the Foundation. So the Foundation was fully funded by all their residual assets in January 1, 2012. That's when it became a full-fledged, fully-funded foundation. It was operating but it was not at the magnitude that it is now. I worked for the estates until 2011. I was managing the whole operation, but I was employed by the Joe Wessendorff estate, later the Loise Wessendorff estate. I was an estate employee before a Foundation executive.

POLLICOFF: So because you had worked for them both for so many years, you understood how to keep things going?

PAT: Yes, ma'am. Exactly.

DAN: I had already gravitated toward the insurance business. But I guess I should say I DID help with the cattle. Whenever Pat and the guys needed help, I would help on the ranching side of it. But other than the ranching and maybe a few odds and ends, and traveling to the ranch, I was mostly involved in the insurance business.

PAT: Except on occasion, we both did. The investment company at one time owned ninety rent houses, sporadically placed around Richmond.

DAN: Small tenant dwellings.

PAT: So Dan and I were the rent collectors. We did that job as well.

DAN: He told me that he had started that RIGHT after the war. He came back and he built a lot of those small houses. That was one of his first businesses.

POLLICOFF: Affordable housing for the returning vets?

DAN: No, he just built houses on property that he would buy in Richmond. He put a small frame house up and rented it. And oftentimes it was to poor people.

PAT: And they were located right there where Wessendorff Park is and also where the-- it's now called Access Health--

DAN: But I would have to say, Pat, ninety per cent of these were rented to black folks.

PAT: And Hispanics. They were row houses right next to each other. They were maybe 800 to 1000 square feet.

POLLICOFF: Pat, why do you think that he did that?

DAN: I think he saw of it as a need. When he got back there was a need for that and he knew he could pay for the properties and pay for the houses with these rents. Early on, he told me it was weekly rents. And then it became monthly rents. He told me he would go on Sundays, himself, and collect the rent, when he was just out of the war.

POLLICOFF: So, then, how often did YOU collect the rents?

DAN: Well, we just collected the past due rents. Most of them would come in to the lumber company and pay their rent, often in cash. They knew Mr. Wessendorff's family and sometimes they would need a couple of months and he was very generous to some of them. If they would come in and ask him, he would take care of them. If they were not up-front with him, he would find somebody else to rent the house.

PAT: Evict them.

DAN: But, he took care of a LOT of people.

PAT: A LOT of people. And every entity that he was involved with, he donated incredible amounts of time for these boards. Polly Ryon Hospital, George Foundation--he wasn't your typical board of directors' type. When he bought into something or involved himself, he was fully invested.

POLLICOFF: Pat, tell me about some of those organizations that he was involved in.

PAT: The first one I remember was Centerpoint Energy--HL&P in those days--Houston Lighting and Power. And then the Polly Ryon Hospital--

DAN: Twenty years on it, right?

PAT: Or twenty-five. And then the George Foundation. He brought the George Foundation through a very difficult time. The attorney general was doing an investigation and he was on that board in 1985 through '87. It was a ten-year stint once you got on the board. The law firm, Vinson Elkins, was handling the George Foundation at the time. They replaced the board of directors with Mr. Wessendorff and several other men. And he brought them back to an even keel. To this day, it's a very, very incredible foundation but he had to bring it back to an even keel position. Ron Stone wrote a very good book about the George Foundation.

DAN: He explains it better than we just did! I think they hand picked him because of his character and his reputation in the community, because they needed somebody that could get involved and that was a straight shooter. And basically clean it up. It got real close to being taken over, didn't it?

PAT: Yeah. And to put it in perspective, Mr. Ron Stone asked him, 'Mr. Wessendorff, they say there wouldn't be a George Foundation without your leadership.' And Mr. Wessendorff said, 'I wouldn't go that far.' He was always very humble on everything he did.

DAN: He was a real man of character, and I think that's what they needed to have in that time, somebody that could just see through all the issues and benefit the community.

POLLICOFF: We've talked a lot about Mr. Wessendorff's work, but I know he was also quite a sportsman.

PAT: Oh, very much so! He loved to hunt and fish. He always carried a fishing pole in the Bronco that he drove to check on the ranches. While serving on the HL&P board, he would go down to Texas City to the cooling pond and catch redfish.

DAN: LOVED that!

PAT: He had a lake down by the state park that he fished at and Dan set up several trips with him, to take him on a guided trip to Rockport. And he always caught the most and the biggest fish. He was a VERY good fisherman.

DAN: I don't know if he was a bigger hunter, but he REALLY liked to fish. I asked him one time if he had one more trip to take, would it be a fishing or hunting trip? I forget what he said. But he loved both A BUNCH. He was a southpaw. Shot left-handed. One of the best shots --even the old timers-- Hilmar [Moore] used to tell me how great a shot he was. But he was a great fisherman, too. And all of his friends would agree he was very competitive.

DAN: I think he preferred salt water, didn't he?

PAT: Oh yeah, he did.

DAN: He had a place down on the coast when we went to work for him, at Selkirk Island. But he didn't get to go much. He was just too busy with other things.

PAT: But he let Dan and I go. We'd go down there for trout in the wintertime. The trout would be VERY good trout fishing on the Colorado River.

DAN: His best friend, Colonel Jim Prowell, would use it a lot, too. The Colonel was his right-hand man. He was retiring about when they hired Pat.

DAN: Jim Prowell was a Marine Colonel. You might remember he was also the one that was married to the young daughter that was killed in an automobile accident, the George's niece. Her name was Mary Jones. He was at war when she and her child were killed. And the driver was killed, too.

PAT: Mr. George was in the car, and he was severely hurt.

DAN: Anyway, Colonel Prowell loved to fish, too. And as he retired, he would continue to hunt with Mr. Wessendorff, but he would go fishing on his own down there. That was kind of Colonel Prowell's retirement place for a while.

POLLICOFF: Did Loise go with him?

PAT: No.

DAN: In my eighteen years, I don't know if she went to the ranch in south Texas ONCE. Maybe not ever.

PAT: Not that I know.

DAN: She would spend time at her places in Blanco and Hunt. They would go together to the house on the river once a year, maybe. But she had her world and she spent her time doing the things she was involved with. She would go in to Houston to see her mother at her mom's house. Right when we went to work for him in '89, was when her mom died. That's one of the first memories I have. We had both finally become employees here and her mom dies. We went to the funeral. As you know, she was a very well-known lady in Houston. We never would GO to that house much until Mr. Wessendorff got sick or Pat would need to go there for a reason. But Loise kept that staff together even after her mom died. And then Pat ended up having to dissolve, I guess, retire that property.

PAT: And the employees. But if we'd have a meeting in Houston, we would go eat lunch there. And she had the BEST cook in the world there named Pat. It was the best meals I've ever had.

DAN: She would go in there once a week—Tuesday was the standing day. She would have her meetings with her friends and the staff would cook the lunch. A BIG lunch. It was unbelievable! And that was her day to go in and check on things. Those were the folks that worked for her mom and dad.

PAT: And then when Mr. Wessendorff got sick, we would go by there and eat lunch and then go with him to the appointments at the Medical Center.

DAN: Her place was RIGHT there, a beautiful place right near the Mecom fountain at Bissonnet and Main.

POLLICOFF: Were you ever members of any of the organizations with him?

PAT: I went to work for him in November of 1987, about four months before Dan.

DAN: I was the end of February 1988.

DAN: Well, Pat's followed in his footsteps and is now the president of the George Foundation and that was a job that Mr. Wessendorff had, which is kind of a neat deal, because he spent ten year of his life doing that while we worked for him.

PAT: Ten - '87 to '97.

DAN: I DO sit on the OakBend Advisory Committee, but he was on the BIG board - I'm not on the Big Board.

POLLICOFF: The former Polly Ryon.

DAN: Yes. That was one of his BIG interests and VERY important to him. But it was troubling because it's was a tough business to keep it going.

PAT: Little private hospitals, now, most of them have merged. And it continues to be a tough business to this day.

POLLICOFF: I know about the George Foundation. List ALL the different businesses he had to make sure I have them all.

PAT: Okay, he had the Wessendorff Cattle Company, which ranched in Fort Bend County and Karnes County. He had Wessendorff Development Company, which was a small development company that he built houses on some land they developed--put streets in and then they would also have the notes here, that we financed the houses. I don't know--it might have been 200 customers,

And then he had Wessendorff Lumber Company, which at one time was the oldest lumber company in the state of Texas. I think we closed that down in about '95--'98.

POLLICOFF: So who started the Wessendorff Lumber Company?

PAT: His great grand father Anton Wessendorff.

DAN: His father and Uncle Tony ran it. During the war they wrote a letter to him and said when he came home from the war, they'd like him to run the lumber company. And he told Pat and I that they also had a funeral business IN the lumber company. He said he told them he would only agree to come back if they got rid of that, because he had seen too much death already.

PAT: He did NOT want to be in the funeral business.

DAN: And they agreed. They sold that piece of it off to Garmany & Carden.

PAT: And the horse-drawn hearse from that business is now at the George Ranch.

POLLICOFF: Very interesting! And the insurance company?

PAT: Wessendorff Insurance Agency... he bought that from an uncle, too, in 1930?

DAN: I want to talk about the lumber company real quick. I used to go over there -- it was one of my jobs. And Roger Meyer ran it for him. I remember looking at an advertisement and he goes, 'Look at that, Dan, there's a typo there on the ad.' It said founded in 1960. The local paper thought it was a typo and changed it to 1960 because NO WAY could 1860 be right. But it was.

POLLICOFF: Did you ever work at the lumber company?

DAN: Oh we'd just go over there and help with things occasionally if they needed an extra hand. The lumberyard was really where a lot of folks paid their rent because those folks lived right in that area. And they were used to walking in and paying for other things. Roger Meyer pretty much ran it most of those years we were there.

At some point, Mr. Wessendorff felt it was just too tough, because of competition from Sutherlands, McCoys and Home Depot, and he sold it to the late Dean Lehmann. By the way, that's who Pat replaced on the George Foundation Board when Mr. Lehmann passed away. But Dean Lehmann and Lee Lehmann came in here and they did a handshake deal with Mr. Wessendorff, sold the lumber company to Home Lumber - their business.

POLLICOFF: How long ago was that?

PAT: I think it was somewhere about '95 to '98. We kept the building, but they moved all the lumber and trucks over to their lumberyard at Home Lumber Company, along with all the employees who wanted to continue to work there.

DAN: It was really cool. No contract--a handshake deal. And it was the biggest one I ever saw!

POLLICOFF: And no one lost their jobs.

PAT: No.

DAN: That was part of the agreement.

PAT: Some of them did go to work for them and others retired. But that was an important part of the deal. Mr. Lehmann thought that was a real special thing, that they were able to shake hands in that office and make the deal.

POLLICOFF: You have spent most of your lives here--If you had to pick the major legacy left by Mr. Wessendorff--looking at all that he contributed to this county, what would you say his main legacy was?

PAT: The hospital was just an incredible legacy in that he took care of it through tough times. He also straightened out the George Foundation. He told me one time, that he wasn't sure he was up to the task. It was THAT difficult. But he was and he hired great people like Dee Koch and Roland Adamson, and they hired additional great people, and it's turned into a first class Foundation. In addition, he rescued a Bellville bank that was floundering and fixing to be shut down. That bank was not in Fort Bend County -- but the reason he rescued it financially was because his grandfather had been the cashier at the bank in the '20s.

DAN: And didn't even know it at the time! He'd bought interest in the bank and then read the original charter and saw his grandfather had signed it.

PAT: And then, he told me that they needed additional cash infusions because it was a terrible, terrible time in banking. That had to be in the early '90s. The reason he gave additional cash infusions was because his grandfather was a cashier there.

DAN: But the folks in Bellville will tell you that it was THE bank in Bellville; the cornerstone of that community, First National Bank of Bellville, the one you go around in a circle when you drive through town. It WAS their main business. The folks in Bellville will tell you that they hold him in HIGH regard because he saved that bank. They wouldn't have had a locally owned bank if it had closed its doors.

POLLICOFF: So clearly his reach was even further. What would you say were his greatest contributions?

DAN: Golly! He was just Mr. Fort Bend County. The Economic Development Council, nobody remembers this, but he basically got together with a bunch of men because he thought the community was not doing well enough economically. They all put the seed money together for the EDC and the EDC is a VERY big clearing house for businesses now in Fort Bend County. Basically if you have an idea or a concept, you go through the EDC, and if they sign on with it, it's usually a successful deal. I would just tell you that everything he touched, he left it better than he found it. Philanthropy was his big deal.

PAT: Oh, HUGE.

DAN: And now there are over thirty major charities in this county. And I would have to say, because of the beginnings of their philanthropy, I think that's how that culture of giving became part of Fort Bend County's culture.



PAT: There was one thing about his philanthropy; he did it silently and did not want his name used. He helped the Texas State Technical College and the Wharton County Junior College campus in Houston get off the ground. Whenever he made a contribution to a non-profit, he made it with one proviso, and that was that they didn't use his name after making the contribution. He and Mrs. Wessendorff, too. They did NOT want their name in lights.

POLLICOFF: So there weren't any buildings named after the Wessendorffs?

PAT: And there wouldn't be, to this day. I'll give you another for instance. When he gave the land for the Wessendorff Park next to the city of Richmond police station, they named it the Joe Wessendorff Park. I drove him by there one time and he'd lost his voice by then [from illness] --he shook his finger. He called Glen Gilmore down to the office and said, 'You can call it Wessendorff Park but you can't call it the Joe Wessendorff Park because there were a LOT of Wessendorffs before me.' That was a BIG thing to him.

DAN: I don't know if moralistic is the word you should use. He called it like it was, he knew he had been given a lot. And he did a lot with it.

PAT: And he used that phrase, actually. He was on the hospital board at the Medical Center. He took care of Houston Farms, after Bob Henderson died, Chocolate Bayou Land and Cattle. And he went to work for General Crude. I saw a doctor tell him one time, 'Joe Clyde, you've done a lot of things'. And he told him, 'I was given a lot. I needed to do a lot'. That's the way he looked at things. There was not ONE day that he didn't accomplish something. No matter how busy the day was the day before, every day was a new day. And I think a lot of that was from the war, really. He'd seen some lives cut short.

DAN: Yeah, he wanted a deal to be fair for everybody. If it was good for both parties, then he was in. He would not take advantage of people. He wanted everybody to benefit. Even selling land--a lot of people were selling land at a lot higher price. He had the theory that everybody had to make a little bit along the way. You can sell it, as long it was a very solid deal, he wasn't going to be ruthless about it.

PAT: A good deal was good for both sides, in his eyes.

POLLICOFF: Was he a man that did the handshake deal more often than not?

DAN: Oh, if he trusted you, he would. But he'd use contracts, too. But he knew Mr. Lehmann was stand-up. Pat mentioned the money that the Wessendorff's helped raise for some of the local colleges. Mr. Lehmann was going around the community, finding some large donations to get the deal done for a matching grant for Wharton County Junior College.

PAT: And Texas State Technical College, TSTC.

DAN: The early vision was to raise a matching grant from the community and then the George Foundation would match it. It was several million dollars. I don't know the exact figure, but they were a good sum short. And he came in to see Mr. Wessendorff and he said, 'I'll do it'. And he finished up the matching grant in a BIG way, but he said, 'This is an anonymous donation'.

POLLICOFF: Never would take credit for it.

DAN: No, and it wasn't just a little bit. It was a SERIOUS amount.

POLLICOFF: Lets talk a little bit about the land in Kenedy. I know both of you took trips down there. Pat, can you describe the land and the operations down there?

PAT: Sure. And how it was acquired, actually. The land that Dan spoke about initially was from Highway 59 where Greatwood is, all the way to the Thompson Highway--I think it's FM 2759. He owned that strip through there and I'd say two-thirds of it or three-quarters of it became Greatwood. There was another little development called Tara that was on some Johnson land. But he did a land swap in 1972, a 1031 exchange and bought the first part of that ranch. Dan and I got to go hunting on it in about 1976 because we were friends with Wesley Johnson. That was the first time I'd ever gone to Kenedy. I broke my leg playing football and I remember sitting under a mesquite tree, hunting doves with Wesley Johnson in 1976. Then we went to work for him in '87 and '88. We would go on a weekly basis, but we really got to go more after Buddy Bullard had his heart attack. He was a game warden here in Fort Bend County and one of Mr. Wessendorff's hunting buddies. Mr. Wessendorff took him quite a few places with him, almost like a security officer, really. Mr. Bullard was going weekly, but when he had a heart attack, he couldn't go anymore. So, that's when Dan and I really started alternating hunting with him.

He had a truck that had a bunch of dog boxes on it and had a bunch of bird dogs, and we'd all load up and go to THAT ranch and go hunting. We'd go on a weekly basis and check the cattle, check the water, meet with different representatives--oil companies, or whoever we needed to meet with. He was very meticulous in taking care cattle, always wanted to check the fences, make sure the hands were feeding enough hay and protein supplement. We covered every acre, approximately 7,000, every week.

DAN: In that eighteen years we worked with him, he bought another place, didn't he, Pat? About halfway through, didn't you think?

PAT: Well he bought that in 1987-- 1988!

DAN: It was several large purchases but that was the largest one I remember. It grew to over 7,000 acres.

PAT: A little under 7,000

POLLICOFF: So primarily cattle operations.

PAT: Yes ma'am. Always cattle.

POLLICOFF: What kind of cattle was he raising?

PAT: He cross-bred cattle.

DAN: Commercial cattle.

PAT: He did have a purebred Charolais operation where he would take the bulls and then put those Charolais bulls back on his crossbred cattle. But he also leased other places to hunt. We also used to go to Eagle Pass to a ranch he leased down there, and we'd go to the Moderno and eat Mexican food. They knew him and treated him like royalty when he went across the border.

DAN: They named one of the dishes after him in that restaurant. He'd been going there that long.

PAT: A steak and--Joe's Sauce.

DAN: We loved going there. Our wives are actually from Del Rio near there.

PAT: But Moderno was the best to me in those days, had the best margarita, the best onion rings and the best steak I've ever had, to this day. I miss it dearly.

DAN: We met and worked with him later in his life, he was already in his 70s and slowing down. But we still had a lot of fun with him. But I'm sure they'd had a lot more fun the previous thirty years.

PAT: Because they leased some ranches from Briscoe Nunnally and they would deal with Rhett Nunnally. And this wasn't a Briscoe ranch. That last one that he leased was with his good friend, Bob Moses. He leased half of it and Mr. Wessendorff leased half.

POLLICOFF: So how many cattle did he run, generally? Of course, some in Kenedy and then he had other acreage that he rented.

PAT: In Richmond. Yeah, he ran about 400 mother cows in Richmond and averaged about a thousand cows in Kenedy.

POLLICOFF: And he was VERY hands on, as far as the cross-breeding program and everything?

PAT: Oh yeah.

DAN: Like I said, I asked him one time how he wanted to be remembered. He said, 'A rancher'. He owned banks, he owned several businesses--a big insurance business--but ranching was his LOVE.

PAT: It WAS. Even as he got later in life, when we worked cows, he'd still be there for the gather. We'd get the cattle gathered and penned, and then he would go to a board meeting somewhere and just let us continue to work the cattle. Some days he would stay the whole day, but most of the time he would be there for a little while and then go somewhere else.

POLLICOFF: Had to get his cattle-fix so he could go do those other things.

PAT: Exactly.

DAN: One of his cool statements was, 'Y'all hurry up and get done here. Get your dress clothes on. Y'all go get cleaned up.' We both had houses in Richmond. 'Get your clothes on and come up to the office and I'm going to show y'all how to make some REAL money'. He KNEW ranching was tough and that if you wanted to do well, that wasn't the business to be in. For him, it was more of a long-term investment and no young guy could make the living we wanted to in ranching.

But it was fun. When you're young getting on horseback and being in the country is COOL. But he knew that long-term, we needed to have a career and he showed us how to make real money.

POLLICOFF: Well, he was quite a mentor. I mean, if you had the most VIVID memory of him, what would you say it was?

DAN: OH, entrepreneur and just a stand-up--the kind of guy you'd call if you needed something. He was the man! He was tough, though. Tough, tough, tough, but big heart. He made some really tough decisions--he would think about things LONG and HARD. He never went into a deal without thinking it through. But when he thought about it and made a decision, there was no looking back.

POLLICOFF: Was there one thing that really defined him?

DAN: I would say, in one word, just character. Lots of character.

PAT: Character. And do what you say. He was a handshake, do what you say guy. If people didn't do what they said, it bothered him greatly. And he wouldn't fool with them again. But if you did what you said, he was your friend for life.

DAN: And he would speak to the maid at the bank, or the lowliest employee, he knew about them as much as he knew about the president of the bank.

POLLICOFF: About their personal lives?

DAN: Oh yeah.

PAT: Everything. And he helped a lot of kids, employees' kids, go to college. But he always had a saying, and he carried it through his philanthropy, 'Always let somebody have skin in the game'. He would pay their tuition but he wanted them to pay for their books. He wouldn't give them a full ride. He wanted them to have skin in the game. That was one of his favorite sayings. Another one of his favorite sayings was 'I'll bet you a nickel'. He was always betting nickels.

PAT: One time the river got out. We had to get cattle out of the bottom because there was a quick, quick rise of the Brazos.

DAN: '92?

PAT: Yeah. Never before had it risen that quickly. And it went to an elevation of 50.2 in Richmond, which flooded most of Thompsons.

DAN: Biggest flood in our lifetime.

PAT: And hasn't happened since. The last time he had seen one like that, was in the '50s. At the end of the '50s drought, there was a big rise.

DAN: He told us about another flood here in the 1932, his father took a boat from Richmond to Sugar Land.

PAT: Joe A. Wessendorff took a boat from the Richmond bridge to Sugar Land, down 90A. A boat! There's a picture of it in the Richmond barber shop.

PAT: But we had to get cattle out and--I can still see that river getting big. There were some cattle hung up on a sand bar. And we went around and got them. I just remember him sitting there, watching us. We put them, what we called 'on top'. We'd get them out of the bottom, close some gates, and keep them up on top, out of the river bottom. They would let the river get around them and then they couldn't get away because they were isolated and they would have had to swim. And you know, cows don't swim that well.

POLLICOFF: Did he ever talk about his World War II experiences? He was very decorated.

DAN: I tried to get him to, but he wouldn't. He told me three stories I'll tell. I was at the ranch when I'd get him to talk about it. I happened to see Saving Private Ryan. So I said, 'I saw Saving Private Ryan this weekend'. He said, 'You did?' I said, 'Yeah'. He goes, 'I don't think I'm going to go see it'. And I said, 'I don't blame you'. Because I knew he had seen a BUNCH.

POLLICOFF: Do you know where he served in World War II, what he did?

DAN: Yeah, he was in Italy. He introduced us to several of his buddies from growing up. And one of them was Dick Rolle. His family owned Leopold, Price and Rolle. That was one of his best buddies. I ended up doing his insurance work so I got to be buddies. Mr. Rolle would tell you everything and Mr. Joe would tell you NOTHING about the war.

POLLICOFF: Your three favorite stories.

DAN: Okay. The first one would be--he said, one time he was in a foxhole and he was a big smoker during the war because he said there was nothing else to do. And he had a set of binoculars and was looking for the enemy out of his foxhole. He sets the binoculars down and bent down to light a cigarette, and they shot the binoculars. So that was once he cheated death.

Another time, he was in a doorway. I never told him this, but the same scene was in Saving Private Ryan. It is of a guy standing in front of another guy in a doorway. Joe Clyde said, 'I basically moved out of the way and a bullet went through the other guy'.

The other story is Mr. Rolle's story and it was really funny. Mr. Rolle said that their families had been close, a Houston family and a Richmond family. He said we never knew where each other, but our families, through letters, would keep each other informed. They would write and say, 'Well, Joe's getting close to you. He's over there.' And Dick, because of his expertise in the family's merchandising business was a supply sergeant. He was in the back of this office in a truck. If you needed something, you went to Mr. Rolle and he would make sure it got to you. It was Dick's birthday and he said, 'I was standing outside of my unit, where we were staying, and I had this funny, weird feeling and here comes this Jeep up the road' and the driver was Mr. Wessendorf. Mr. Wessendorff was a captain. He told me one time that, 'They found out I could fight. I hated to practice but I was a good game day guy'--and apparently he WAS really good at fighting because they made him a captain.

He told me another story at the ranch one time that he always lost his weapon. He said his colonel would say, 'Joe, you're going to need that one day. You need to make sure you know where your gun is'.

PAT: His pistol would always fall out. Not his rifle, just his pistol.

DAN: He was in the Infantry, leading his troops. A captain leads a group of men. He said he never had a gun because he could never keep up with it.

DAN: He was really a warrior. He never told us how many men he killed. But I'm sure he's killed several.

DAN: Let me finish this story right quick. So Mr. Rolle's standing there and here comes his buddy, Joe Clyde. They get out of the Jeep says, 'Joe, let's go have a drink'. He says, 'Well, there's nothing to drink here'. And he (Rolle) says, 'I've got an idea'. So he went down to his guys and he said, 'Look, I need to order some of that alcohol that we use to clean the scope sights on the tanks.' Grain alcohol. And then he ordered some grapefruit juice. The kitchen guy said, 'I'm not sending you any grapefruit juice, Dick.' 'I'm the boss here,' he told the kitchen guy, 'if you want any more stove parts, you're going to send the grapefruit juice to me. Because I'm in charge here and I'll make sure you don't get what you want.' So they send up the grapefruit juice and there they sat, drinking grain alcohol. So, Mr. Joe's getting after it. He could drink. Even at 70, he could bury us! He was a drinker, loved Scotch. You know, he was tough.

So they're having this party and he said, 'Joe, you need to slow down. This is serious stuff, here. This is grain alcohol, you know. It's WAY proof...'

DAN: High-proof stuff. 'You need to slow down. This isn't Scotch'. What he didn't know--and I'll tell you now what he didn't know, was that Mr. Joe had been given an assignment the next day or the next couple of days--he was going to be a forward observer, and Dick said, in the war the job of a forward observer was a death sentence. So Mr. Joe was basically drinking his troubles away, knowing what he had to face.

Well, later on, Dick says he runs into that driver for Mr. Joe, and he says, 'Did you get my buddy home okay?' He said, 'Oh, it was terrible, Mr. Rolle.' He said, 'We were standing in a monastery in Italy--a Catholic monastery--and I get him out of the Jeep, I stand him up. I was going park the Jeep and put him in bed, and he falls down in the mud'. And he says, 'He's a big man, so I have a hard time getting him up. I get him up and I take him in the monastery and he gets in bed with this colonel, his boss. It was just a wreck.' Dick told me to ask Mr. Wessendorff about it. 'You need to ask your boss about it', because Dick was really good --he was a gigger--he liked to 'get' you. So one day I was at the ranch, we were having fun, and I said, 'Tell me about that time you got in bed with your colonel.' He said, 'WHO told you that?' And I said, 'You know who told me that.' He said, 'Yeah, old Dick--he's talking too much.' He said, 'what Dick didn't know was that colonel had the same assignment I had the next day and he was drunker than I was.'

DAN: So he didn't get into any trouble but--guess what? They cancelled the mission and he didn't have to go.



PAT: I've got one more story. After the man that got shot, had moved out of the doorway, this was the same day--he got in a Jeep and was doing some more forward observation and our own United States Air Force almost killed him by bombing him. He told me that day was NOT his day and he didn't go anywhere else after that.

DAN: Oh, one thing he didn't tell. Mrs. Wessendorff was good at trying to get him to talk about it, too. She'd say, 'Joe, tell the boys. You tell them about Paris.' And he wouldn't. But then she would push him to do it. We would go have lunch at their house sometimes, together.

PAT: And again, that was the best lunch in the world! Dit [Hattie May Bailey] was the cook there. She could really cook a redfish.

DAN: Mrs. Wessendorff always wanted young guys to get their fill. Anyway, she said, 'Tell them about the time you got shot at, Joe, in the Eiffel Tower.' He had never told us that story. Apparently he was in Paris and he wanted to see the Eiffel Tower, so he went up in the Eiffel Tower. And a sniper started shooting at him. So he said he hot-footed it, came down as fast as he could.

POLLICOFF: Did he ever go back to visit the Eiffel Tower?

PAT: I don't know, but I know one thing. He never would buy Simmental cattle because he had slept with them in the war.

DAN: He told us he would not do two things ever again, after the war. He would never camp under the moonlight or buy Simmental cattle because he CAMPED underneath Simmental cattle, in a barn.

POLLICOFF: No aversion to Spam, though?

PAT: No, he never had any when I was with him. He always had steak at the ranch. But the other story about the military was how he helped rescue some men...in the 91st. I think a book and possibly a movie were made about it later. And we didn't learn about this until after he couldn't talk. But there was a story in a book of his about some men who were behind enemy lines that had to be rescued. Mr. Wessendorff rescued them, went in through a mine field behind enemy lines and saved them all. He was awarded the Bronze or the Silver Star for this rescue through a forest.

DAN: And he never lost a man.

PAT: And behind enemy lines, too.

DAN: Never lost a guy--the people he helped rescue behind enemy lines and not any of his men.

POLLICOFF: He was a captain at that time?

PAT: Yes, there was a write-up about it in this magazine, probably in 2004 or 2003.

PAT: He pointed to it and told me, 'That was us'.

POLLICOFF: This was also in Italy?

PAT: Yes, I believe so, but I'm not sure.

DAN: His words to me when I asked him about going to see the movie (Saving Private Ryan) were, 'Dan, by the time D-Day had happened we had lost two-thirds of our battalion. We weren't worrying about those guys. We had our own problems.' And if you know how big a battalion is, and I don't know the number, but it's a lot of people, and they had lost two-thirds of them.

PAT: He always thought he was charmed that he made it back. And I think it probably worked because he never wasted one day of his life, not one.

DAN: I think he thought he was spared and that he had no choice but to make the most of it.

PAT: There was a man in Sugar Land who used to come see us and we did his insurance as well. He served with Mr. Wessendorff in Europe, and he said he was the finest senior officer he ever served under.

DAN: He was the finest senior officer we ever served under, too! He was tough, though. He made us into, really, I think, pretty good businessmen, and also kept us going down the right road, being timely, just doing the right thing--ALWAYS trying to do the right thing whatever you did.

POLLICOFF: Tell me more about the insurance business.

DAN: Well, Mr. and Mrs. Jeff Council are being interviewed today too. Jeff had one of our jobs, actually he was here beforehand and he and Mr. Wessendorff had a disagreement over some things, and he left. But they remained friends and Mr. Wessendorff ended up appointing him to a board or two, including the hospital board. That's how he was. He looked past that and NEVER would hurt their friendship. They were ALWAYS very nice to each other, and I think they still cared for each other a great bit. But Mr. Council left and that's really one of the reasons we were involved, because he felt like the agency needed some young guys to help maybe get it going again, as well.

PAT: Then Colonel Prowell retired from the development company and a guy retired from the cattle company, so he needed several people for both the insurance and the cattle company, too.

DAN: There was a LOT of retiring going on--

PAT: That's why he hired both of us and we worked for all of those entities at the same time.

DAN: But back to your original question, the insurance business was founded in about 1928?

PAT: There are some old policies in there. I think Mr. Wessendorff got involved after the war, in about '46?

DAN: He bought them out of the business and he was a BIG investor with American General. He told us several stories where he went to American General stockholders meeting. And I remember him telling me he sat next to Gus Wortham. And Jesse Jones, I think, was even in the meeting. He said 'I'm this young kid out of the war, and they couldn't have treated me any nicer. Here I am, I'm at the meeting I'm not even supposed to BE at. I got there early'. And they let him sit in at the actual board meeting. They said, 'No, you're not going anywhere, Joe Clyde. You just sit right here'. And he said they conducted their business and let him sit there, and they treated him like an equal. Apparently they knew the family and knew where he came from and the history. And probably him coming out of the war had a lot to do with that.

I've been in the business, what, twenty-six years? You've got to be KIDDING me! But he KNEW insurance. He knew ALL of it. But at that time in his life, I think he was ready to do other things. He told us, 'Y'all make what you can of it, if you want to'. He had other interests but would help us on a prospect if we needed it.

PAT: At a bank, or--

DAN: He TRIED to look interested. He tried to look excited for us whenever we'd get a new deal. He really didn't like to see us disappointed and would try to make sure we didn't get disappointed. He would say, 'Hey, you might not have this and here's why. You might ought to do something else'. And he'd give you plenty of advice.

POLLICOFF: And what areas of insurance did you concentrate on?

DAN: We are mostly a property and casualty agency, but about halfway through, when the insurance business was so tough, we tried to do almost ANYTHING we could. And we STILL try to do almost anything we can, but we have experience in ALL lines. There are bigger agencies in Houston, we're pretty much a generalist agency.

POLLICOFF: Concentrated mostly in Fort Bend County?

DAN: All over Texas, really. Predominately we have a base of business here, in Fort Bend County. But we'll do business anywhere in Texas, and DO business all over Texas.

PAT: He writes a feed lot, south of Uvalde.

DAN: Yeah. We'd write water districts in north Dallas. We have special programs we do here that we developed then. Someone came to me about the idea of being a MUD [Mixed Use Utility District] guy. 'Wow, Dan, if that works out for you, you might be able to buy you a ranch one day'. And I said, 'I hope so!' He was always encouraging. But I think he really disengaged himself from the insurance business.

PAT: His main interests were obviously ranching and banking. He was involved in three banks at that time.

POLLICOFF: And what were the three banks?

DAN: First National Bank of Missouri City, First National Bank of Bellville and of course he had sold this one by then.

PAT: Yeah, sold this bank across the road, the old Fort Bend National.

DAN: National Bank of Richmond. He had sold that to First City, prior to our coming here, right?

PAT: At about the same time.

DAN: One story about that. Pat and I were working on some MUD District business and that day we were going to the famous Vinson and Elkins law firm for a meeting. Mr. Wessendorff had been involved with that firm forever. He never told us that much about it, we'd hear from other people say, 'we worked on this or that with Joe Wessendorff.' He would TELL you about it if it was something interesting, but he wouldn't tell you 'I did this' or 'I did that'. So Pat and I go to the meeting in Houston, and he says, 'Before you leave, if y'all get into a situation where you need some help, ask for a guy by the name of Don Howell'. So Pat and I went to the meeting. We'd done fine, the meeting went well, but we wanted to see this Don Howell. So I said, 'Pat, I think I'm going to ask for Mr. Howell, just to tell him hello and meet him'. Apparently he was a big part of Mr. Wessendorff's life. So the junior lawyer we were working with asks 'How do y'all know Don Howell?' 'Well, we don't. Our boss said to look him up while we were here'. I said, 'If he's busy, we don't want to bother him'. Well, he sent this lady off to go get Mr. Howell. In walks this big, tall, good-looking man, had a two or three thousand-dollar suit on, and just looked like a million bucks, you know. He said, 'Who in here knows Joe Clyde Wessendorff?' And we said 'We work for him'. And he said, 'Well, let me tell you a couple of stories about that man'. And he told one that I will ALWAYS remember. He said, 'Before Mr. Henderson passed away we had always worked for him, Captain Henderson. We worked on the Chocolate Bayou Land and Cattle and all the Brazoria County and Houston farms issues. We were the law firm that handled all that.'

PAT: That was 47,000 acres at Alvin.

DAN: And by the way, I can still remember Mr. Wessendorff saying, 'Boys, when I was your age...' He would leave in the morning, check his ranching and farming operations, check on things at the bank and the lumber company, then go to Alvin, Texas--and the roads weren't very good in those days--and he would come BACK at the end of that day and he told us he would put OVER 200 miles a day, sometimes upwards of 250 a day, on that car. He did that for YEARS'. I'm telling you this story because Bob Henderson dies unexpectedly.

PAT: Age 59. Staph infection.

DAN: Don Howell is regarded as one of the brightest water rights lawyers in Texas. When Mr. Henderson passes away unexpectedly Mr. Howell says, 'We hear that this son-in-law, named Joe Clyde, from Richmond, Texas, is going to be the man that takes over for his father-in-law. And we're thinking, what kind of country bumpkin are we going to get to deal with NOW? So we go and meet Joe Clyde Wessendorff' --

Mr. Howell said, 'What we found out soon enough was that the old country boy from Richmond knew more than the Captain. And we were VERY lucky to have inherited him, because we were able to do MUCH more than we would have because Mr. Wessendorff was a bright, bright man.'

PAT: Sold the first water rights to Dow Chemical, off of that ranch.

DAN: In fact, I would suggest you visit Mr. Howell. I think he would have some great memories and be a great one for you to talk to.

POLLICOFF: That would be great. I think most of your contact was with him but did you meet Loise and what was your connection with her?

PAT: Well, when I went to work for Mr. Wessendorff, if Mrs. Wessendorff invited me over, I would see her. And she would call me and ask questions. Just pick the phone up and ask me questions about what's going on. Even when I was working for HIM, you basically worked for both of them. (chuckles) But after he passed away, we'd have meetings at her house, around her table, Jack Moore and I, and Joe Robinson, later. She had some of the most incredible history stories that I've ever heard. I mean, she was a VERY, very sharp lady.

DAN: I wish I would have gotten to hear more of those.

PAT: And she was SUPER intelligent. I mean, she could recant just incredible stories about Houston.

POLLICOFF: She was in her 80s, I think, wasn't she?

PAT: Yes.

DAN: She REALLY took care of Mr. Joe when he got sick with his cancer. He relied on her a whole lot.

PAT: She hired the nurses for him, 24 hours a day.

DAN: She made sure he got the best of everything and she really, really cared for her husband. You could tell they liked each other a whole lot.

POLLICOFF: Did you ever meet anyone else in Loise's family?

DAN: She was pretty famous in Houston circles. She was considered the city-girl marrying the country-boy from Richmond.

POLLICOFF: She was very much Houston society.

McDONALD, P & D: (emphatic) Yes, yes.

PAT: AND an Aggie!

DAN: Yeah, she says, 'Yeah, I married this COUNTRY boy Aggie'. And she was high society.

PAT: University of Texas.

DAN: Her dad was in that 8F group, you know--

POLLICOFF: Jesse Jones and company.

DAN: Yes, Mr. Abercrombie and all the big players. Mr. Joe was the young guy but he knew all of those men because of Mr. Henderson. Mr. Henderson was obviously proud of his son-in-law. He told me there were two pictures in his office, this room, his dad and Mr. Henderson. And those were the two greatest influences in his life.

PAT: Mr. Henderson used to say that Mr. Joe was as handy as pockets on a shirt.

DAN: But back to Mrs. Wessendorff, she was in the first class at Kinkaid. Josephine Abercrombie was in that class and there were four girls. I want to say Mrs. Elkins, wasn't it? Mr. Jim Elkins' wife was in that class. Oh and Wilhemina Robinson, wasn't it! That's who it was.

PAT: And she was friends with Denton Cooley and Denton Cooley's brother.

PAT: I knew OF her because my dad worked for them, took care of their dogs. My dad was mostly the large animal guy [vet], horses and cattle. But he had a partner, Dr. Robinson. But in those days, they did emergency care. They didn't have emergency clinics. So if Mrs. Wessendorff had a problem, he would go over to her house. I had seen her and knew of her, but nothing like I knew Mr. Wessendorff because we would run into him pretty often. He was just a BIG mountain of a man and was a big presence to Dan and me.

POLLICOFF: Now you've described her earlier as being a tough, bright woman.

PAT: Incredibly bright. But she expected a lot, also. Everything she did was to the fullest extent, including taking care of that church camp in Blanco. I really got to know her after Mr. Joe died because I was managing everything for them, then. If she had employee problems at the house, I would take care of those. So we've had some really good visits and long conversations. She cared about you. She would call you and ask how your kids are and your wife. She was just an interesting, interesting, super bright lady. I miss her dearly. I miss both of them.

POLLICOFF: Dan, how about you?

DAN: Well, Pat had a lot more to do with Mrs. Wessendorff. My wife worked for her. We were married and I think Marian's probably been with her twenty years. She's a bookkeeper for the Foundation and worked for her for a long time. After he passed away, Pat was mostly involved. I was more involved in the insurance business and Mr. Joe. Pat was more of the operations guy who knew ALL the aspects of all the different Wessendorff entities, and I was doing the insurance business.

PAT: It HAD to be that way. I didn't have time to be in the insurance business, you had to be one or the other. The business had changed SO much by then that Dan had to have 110% commitment to the insurance business.

DAN: I had a family and I knew I had to make a living, somehow.

POLLICOFF: And did you have a family as well?

PAT: Not at that time. I didn't get married until I was 40. And I married a girl that's ten years younger than me, so now I have a family. My kids are 8, 5 and 3. So I'm pretty--

POLLICOFF: Busy!

PAT: Yeah, I am!

DAN: He's OLD, too! (laughter)

POLLICOFF: I think you look just fine.

PAT: Thank you. Thank you.

DAN: He's VERY old for that young of kids!

PAT: It worked out perfectly. I stayed pretty busy, in those early years.



POLLICOFF: So if you had to describe the major changes that Loise was involved with, what would they be?

DAN: The Blanco foundation was her focus. It was really HER foundation. She controlled it. And then of course, it was funded--REALLY funded when her parents passed away.

PAT: She took care of everything unless there was a problem. Then we had to go see the employees. We DID take care of the cattle at the ranch in Blanco. That was another part of the operation. She didn't want to sell the cattle, so Mr. Joe would buy the cattle (laughs). We would send guys up there to pick them up and we'd take the cattle either to Kenedy or bring them to Richmond, because she didn't like that aspect of the business, selling them to the sale barns. So we just bought them from her.

She ran that church camp. Her BIGGEST thing would be the Calvary Episcopal Church and school. She loved that dearly. And she helped, again, behind the scenes. They would make contributions to Calvary school. And a BIG commitment to Houston with the Institute of Religion and then Saint Marks chapel by the Medical Center. She was always super involved in the religious aspects of Houston, Richmond, and I'd say state-wide, really.

DAN: VERY well read, too. She knew EVERYTHING that was going on. She got after us--'you need to read the paper to know what's going on'. And I do to this day, because of her. She KNEW what was going on in the world, and she had an opinion on everything. And she knew theology, too.

PAT: Oh, she did! She told me stories about Muslims and Christians. She had read SO many books about religion that she knew it backwards, forwards and upside down. And she really enlightened me to some Muslim/Christian issues after 9/11. She was just amazing; amazing what she had read about and knew about. Super, super intelligent.

POLLICOFF: Any children?

PAT: Yeah, they did try. But they adopted Joe Robinson when he was a teenager.

DAN: I want to say in 8th or 9th grade is when he came along. The story I was told is that her cousin had gotten him as a baby and Mr. Wessendorff's best friend was married to her cousin, Joe Robinson. Joe Robinson and Nita Darst adopted Joe and then their marriage failed. And there was Joe left. And Mrs. Wessendorff was VERY worried about Joe D. And they asked if they could take him over. That was in middle school, I think.

DAN: Jack Moore was more involved. We didn't get to meet Joe D. until the last ten years.

PAT: Yeah, he worked for Texana Center. He has a masters degree in counseling.

DAN: But we really didn't KNOW him.

PAT: No, no. He would come through the office every now and then. But after Mr. Wessendorff passed away, Mrs. Wessendorff wanted to get him involved. So he went to work for us in 2007 and now works for the Foundation as our grants officer.

DAN: It's not been ten years since he's been back here.

PAT: Yeah, he lived in Austin and then came back when both of them kind of got sick. She had severe diabetes and he moved back here to Richmond. He moved back here about ten years go and worked for Texana MHMR as a counselor. Then he came to work for the Foundation in about 2007.

POLLICOFF: We were looking at some photos before we came in here, and there were several that sparked memories for you...one was the dedication of Polly Ryon Hospital.

PAT: It was the emergency room center--

DAN: The whole Wessendorff wing.

PAT: They built on a new emergency room and dedicated it to Mr. Joe.

POLLICOFF: And so you guys were there?

PAT: You bet! It was a BIG deal.

DAN: Around 2001--2002?

POLLICOFF: And that hospital was established by...

PAT: Mainly Mrs. George. It was named after her aunt, Polly Ryon. And she had set up some money to be able to fund it and keep it going. At that time it was a LONG way between Houston and Richmond, and there wasn't any real good hospital care for the people in Richmond. It's had a struggle as Houston has grown, and market share of Southwest Memorial and Methodist has grown, kind of expanded to Sugar Land and that's cut into their service area. So it's an ongoing challenge for them.

POLLICOFF: But having that hospital care and better emergency room facilities was very critical. Something that obviously the Wessendorffs were very committed to.

PAT: Yeah, and the indigent part of that hospital takes care of people that would have no medical service without it. It was, maybe, ten new emergency room rooms, and then the waiting area, the unloading area.

DAN: Heliport.

PAT: There was helicopter service. All of those things were done when they did this wing. The other one was cramped

and old. This wing is very, very nice.

PAT: Mr. Wessendorff went to the county fair every year. At the heifer auction he would buy the animals of kids whose parents he might have had to terminate as he was streamlining the from the George Foundation operation.

DAN: He would always try to make things right. If it was a situation where a family wasn't doing so well, he would make sure he always took care of the little bitty guy. Of course, there was a grand champion and he would buy it, but he'd also buy the--

PAT: The rabbits.

DAN: He did other stuff before our time, but during our tenure, it was the heifer auction he was most involved in because he loved to ranch and he would take those heifers and ranch them.

PAT: There's a picture in the next room of that mule at the George Ranch. I don't know that it's STILL there. Gabriel was his name. And he liked that mule.

POLLICOFF: What was special about the mule?

PAT: Well, part of his streamlining of the George Foundation was there was a HUGE horse operation and they had to liquidate some of the horses to get it down to a manageable number. But the mules got to stay. He liked those mules. They were draft mules and they'd pull wagons with them.

POLLICOFF: Low maintenance, too.

PAT: There's a picture of when he was on the HL&P board. They built the nuclear plant and Mr. Joe was on the environmental committee. And there was a picture of an alligator at that cooling pond, and I don't remember which president of the board sent him a picture, but it said, 'We save the wildlife, Joe'.

POLLICOFF: Well, thank you both VERY much.

PAT and DAN: Thank you, Pat!