

# FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

## *ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE*

Interviewee: **Robert Glendell Gilmore**

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*Transcript*

GOODSILL: We'd like to hear your thoughts on Fort Bend County and specifically your knowledge about Mr. Joe Clyde Wessendorff.

GILMORE: My name is Robert Glendell Gilmore and my date of birth is 11/25/1937. I've lived in Fort Bend County twenty-five years. I was born in Houston, Texas, at Saint Joseph's Hospital on Thanksgiving. My mother always told me I ruined her Thanksgiving dinner! (laughing).

At the time the job of City Manager of Richmond became available, we were living in Katy, Texas. My wife's aunt, Mildred Hallmark, lived here and had lived here for years and years. In fact, they had some stores on Morton Street at one time, a confectionery, a dry cleaner and a restaurant. She told my wife that the City Manager's job was available. I had retired from AT&T where I worked for 31 years. It had become boring to stay home all the time, so I put a resume' together and I mailed it to Mayor Moore. The following week he called and wanted to know if I could come over for an interview. I came over, they interviewed me and asked me to step out of the room. They visited a little bit and then he asked me to come back in. He asked if I could come to work on Wednesday of next week. I said I was available and I could come any time.

The City was needing a budget. At that time, in 1989, Richmond had no computers or anything. I had been head of the budget department for AT&T and I told him I could have a budget ready in a week or two. I had bought a computer from AT&T and I asked the mayor if I could bring that computer to use. He said I could bring it, so I brought the computer and I modeled a budget after the one I had been used to, at AT&T, changing the departments to suit Richmond's needs. So we had a budget in a couple of weeks, and he thought that was great. My intentions were to work for 10 years and I ended up staying with the city for 23 years.

GOODSILL: And that was late in your career.

GILMORE: Yes, it was. It's been nothing but an enjoyable experience. Working for Mayor Moore, working with Mr. Wessendorff, Mr. Joseph and some of the people in town was sometimes a challenge but a lot of the time it was a very enjoyable experience.

GOODSILL: Have you now retired?

GILMORE: I have. I retired in October of 2013. I had hired a Finance Director and she was obviously the next City Manager. Our City Commission at that time agreed that if I could stay on a year or two and help her learn the ropes, they would make her City Manager. That's Terri Vela, and she's currently the Richmond City Manager.

GOODSILL: So you started at a time when there were no computers. Tell us about some of the changes that happened as it began to be computerized.

GILMORE: I'd like to say we got more efficient but we produced a whole lot more paper than we ever did before! It was a lot of fun. The biggest thing I remember about the computers was the Y2K in the year 2000. We had to go to special schools to determine what we were going to do. Somebody in Austin would call and want to know how we were going to run the city without computers. My response was we would go back and run it like we did before we had the computers. We wrote the bills by hand then, and we could write the bills by hand again. So that was quite a challenge to get through that, and then nothing happened. We were all on edge the night of December 31, 1999, but everything worked the next day just like it was supposed.

When I came, Richmond did not have a policeman on duty from midnight until six in the morning. We didn't have enough money to pay to have somebody on duty. The County would look after Richmond during those hours. We now have a full police force that operates 24 hours a day, with people on duty all the time. Back then our Fire Department was volunteer. I think we had one or two full-time employees and the rest were volunteers. The problem with that is that volunteer firemen have to work, and during the day most of the firemen would go to their jobs which might not be in Richmond. If we had a fire during the day, we didn't have a crew to put it out. So we took the Street Department and the Water Department and had those people act as firemen so we were able to cover it until we could afford a full Fire Department.

The first year I came, I think our total sales tax was \$250,000. Today it's probably \$1,500,000 and we're hoping it will increase. Richmond has changed in numerous ways. One funny story is about when we developed the downtown area. People seem to think that you should be able to park right in front of the entry door of the businesses. We don't have enough parking places to do that. All the merchants on the north side's employees would park on the south side and the ones on the south side would park on the north side. I tried to think if there was ANY way to improve that. We could make three more parking places if we made Morton Street a one-way street. So we made Morton a one-way street and that caused more confusion and problems and complaints.

I think it lasted two or three months and then we had to change it back to a two-way street. The strange thing is, back in the day, Richmond had a movie theater, there were at least three or four grocery stores on Morton Street, as well as a dry goods store and a drug store. They didn't have a parking problem then and I never could figure out why today you have to park by the front door. If you go to Walmart, you have to walk 100 yards to get to the store. It seems to be okay to do that at Walmart, but not on Morton Street. At one time we had parking meters and that didn't go over very well. You have to have somebody to make the collections on them and activity at court increased because of all the fines so we took them out. We use that from time to time over the years, not as a threat, but as a way that if the county was going to do something we were adamantly against, we would say, "Okay, you go ahead and do it and we're going to put our parking meters back around the court house." That didn't go over very well so we would usually get together and get things worked out.

GOODSILL: It occurs to me that part of the problem is there are more cars because of the increased population today.

GILMORE: Yes.

GOODSILL: During your tenure, the population of the city increased.

GILMORE: It did increase somewhat. But it wasn't that much. I think that now, within our city limits, the population is 13,000 or so. Back then it was less than that. And that was back in the day when people would dress up in a suit and come to town and do their shopping. I used to visit with Harry Mellon. The Mellons had a grocery store on Morton Street and it was his job to pluck the chickens and deliver them to people. He could tell quite a few stories. I had a lot of citizens I enjoyed visiting with, who would come in and tell stories of how things were way back when. Harry is a photographer and he has a collection of photographs that I'm sure are very valuable as far as Richmond is concerned. I've dealt with Sidney and Harry ever since I've been here and have gotten to know them fairly well. We've been up and down on different things but it all seems to work out as time goes on.

GOODSILL: Tell me something about infrastructure issues, such as paving or water.

GILMORE: I think it's kind of neat that when I first came, we had one wastewater plant on 2nd Street. That plant was supposed to last us for the next 50 years. The reasoning behind that was, back when the plant was built, people washed their clothes once a week and they hung them out on the line. They didn't have washers and dryers.

So that plant didn't last that long. We built another one, a regional plant on some property the county gave us, over on Golfview Drive. Since then, the North Second Wastewater Plant has been closed. Somebody has some old maps of Richmond, and there used to be a standpipe on the river that held water. It was about fifty feet tall and there was one two-inch water line that ran down the center of Morton Street and that's what they used for water and for putting out fires.

GOODSILL: Please explain how a standpipe works and then the small water line.

GILMORE: The standpipe builds up the pressure for the water. The water is pumped up into the pipe and then the pressure forcing down sends it out the pipe. That's what they did in the old days. We have pictures of it. There were some parts of town when I came that still had a whole block of people with a two-inch waterline. If the first one turned his shower on, the fellow on the very end couldn't get any water. Eventually we replaced the water lines and wastewater lines that needed to be replaced. Today everything is sufficient as far as infrastructure for the water system.

We have five water wells. When I first came, I think we had three. The water system is in a loop that goes around the city. The wells are all tied together, so if one well goes out because it needs maintenance, the other wells will pick up the slack. There are times when we have to ask people to cut back on their water use because of a drought. The surprising thing is that if you ask people to cut back, the water usage goes up! Everybody wants to get their fair share before the water runs out.

GOODSILL: That's a social study there!

GILMORE: It certainly is. People are very strange animals.

GOODSILL: You must have seen a lot of that, running the City. That phenomenon probably occurs in other areas as well.

GILMORE: I'm sure it would.

GOODSILL: So you ask people to cut back and water usage goes up.

GILMORE: We are currently building a surface water plant that is taking water from the Brazos River. The subsidence district requires that by 2017 we have 30% of our water usage from surface water. Our goal is to have that plant built and in use by then. At that time we will be using surface water AND well water. The surface water is taken from the river and treated so it is potable and not used just for irrigation.

The problem is trying to blend surface water and well water. The chemical composition is not the same and if you tell people that they have different water, it automatically tastes bad. So you have to blend it in such a way that it's all the same. That's one of the major issues you have when you use surface water and well water.

GOODSILL: Well water DOES taste different.

GILMORE: Yes, the chemical composition is different from the water in the Brazos River. The wastewater plants upstream are discharging wastewater into the Brazos so we're drinking what they put in as well. It's been treated to the point where it is supposed to be acceptable. I've never drunk any of it. We are almost at the very end of the river. Galveston would be the bottom. They have major problems in Galveston because Galveston gets all of their water from Webster through a pipeline that goes across the causeway into Galveston. They do that because as the aquifer has been depleted, it has reversed. It is flowing FROM the Gulf of Mexico back to the north and the water is salty.

In some of the meetings we had with geologists, we were told that the water we drink here, from where it goes into the ground south of Waco, it takes about 100 years to get to Richmond. Of course it's filtered through the sands, etc, before it finally gets here, but it is 100 year-old water that we get out of the ground. The other thing that I never knew, is there is an aquifer near Amarillo that does not recharge, and when they pump it dry, that will be the end of it. Amarillo, Midland, Odessa and all of the Panhandle is in drastic need of water. I have a friend who lives in Duncan, Oklahoma, and they've been rationing water for over a year because of the drought situation. We are fortunate in some ways, that we are able to have wells here.

GOODSILL: Our wells pull water from an aquifer below us. What is it called?

GILMORE: There are two aquifers that are below us, the Choate and one further down on the Gulf Coast. The Gulf Coast Aquifer is the major aquifer for our area and a minor aquifer is the Brazos River Alluvium. One of them is shallow and that's the one that most of the rice farmers use. We try to put our wells in the deeper one because there is more sustainable water in the deeper one. It doesn't fluctuate. There is a clay line in between that separates the two aquifers.

GOODSILL: As City Manager you had to learn about all of this?

GILMORE: I didn't HAVE to learn but I DID learn from all the meetings we went to pertaining to this. There were special water departments with specialists in geology that do all of that. The United States Geological Survey (USGS) had a representative at many of our meetings. We could ask them questions and they would explain what was going on.

GOODSILL: As you look forward, what would be your concerns for Richmond?

GILMORE: Water is going to be a concern for the entire state of Texas. It's kind of like oil. We've abused it and wasted it for so many years and now we are beginning to realize we have a finite amount. We have a finite amount of fresh water and our population is changing so rapidly that it is hard to stay ahead of the big influx of people coming to Fort Bend County, which is one of the fastest growing counties in the United States. People are coming from everywhere.

GOODSILL: How does that growth affect Richmond?

GILMORE: We had to build new wastewater plants and we had to drill more wells.

GOODSILL: So, river water is treated and the wastewater has to be treated as well?

GILMORE: That's right. That treated wastewater goes back into the river and the folks downstream of us, such as Sugar Land, receive that. I went to a homeowners meeting in River Park West three or four years ago and the people were upset. They thought they were in the city limits, which they are not, but I felt like it would be worthwhile to go visit with them. They were complaining that this one area was supposed to be a park and the developer was selling it for apartment houses. They wanted to complain to somebody. There were maybe 50 people there and I talked to 20-25 of them. I could understand only two of them because their English was so accented. They were from India, Africa, and Asia and it was really hard to understand them.

GOODSILL: They probably had a hard time understanding you!

GILMORE: I guess so.

GOODSILL: But what you are saying is the population dynamic is changing.

GILMORE: Yes we have a lot of foreign people coming here, and they come with cash in their pockets. They pay for their houses with cash. I don't think it's going to slow down. I think Sugar Land sees a big influx of Asians and Indians.

GOODSILL: How about electrical needs?

GILMORE: That's another company altogether. I can tell you a story about that. The manager of the Parish Plant, which is south of Richmond, lives in Richmond and we became fairly close friends because we are going to use their canal for a short distance for our fresh water station where we take water out of the river. They already have pumps there that pump it up to Smithers Lake. I asked him how the wind generator affects his business. My wife and I made a trip out to Lubbock and as far as you could see there were wind turbines. He said I didn't understand. His plant produces the least amount of pollution when it is running at least 50% capacity. During the night, when the wind doesn't blow, he has to keep the plant online in case the wind dies down, in order to keep the grid supplied with electricity. Consequently he could be polluting more than if we didn't have the wind generators. But that's a whole 'nuther industry of its own. That and the gas company. They are all changing right now.

GOODSILL: Now let's talk about how you met Mr. Wessendorff and what your relationship was like.

GILMORE: Mr. Wessendorff was always very involved in the community. I would stop by once or twice a week and we'd visit in his office. We would talk about general things that were going on in the city.

GOODSILL: When did you first meet him?

GILMORE: It was probably shortly after I came on the job.

GOODSILL: He wasn't at the meeting when you interviewed for the job, was he?

GILMORE: The interview was with the City Commission and the Mayor. But he and Mayor Moore were friends, hunted together and visited together often. I think he enjoyed my stopping by. We would talk about what was going on, what might happen and what was coming down the line. He was interested in the big picture as well as the small details. He had knowledge of things that would help us on whatever development we had.



*Joe Clyde Wessendorff circa 1980*



When I first came, there was very little residential or retail development. Sugar Land was just beginning to grow. He was very interested in what would happen here and how we were doing financially and every other way. At first he wasn't going to sell any of his property on Ransom Road and then he decided he would go ahead and sell the end next to US-59, to Walt Mischer.

Mr. Mischer developed Sharpstown in Houston and he was a friend of Joe Clyde and Mayor Moore. We talked about what effect that would have on the City, and Mr. Mischer being the developer he was, his goal would be to put as many houses in an area on as narrow a street as you can, with no sidewalks and sell it all out and then they are gone. Mr. Mischer and I got a little cross-ways. He wanted to make the streets too narrow. In fact, they were so narrow that if you parked a car on each side, you couldn't go down the middle, much less an emergency vehicle. He had to meet city code and I told him that as far as I was concerned, we were not going to change the code.

Mr. Mischer went to Mr. Wessendorff and told him that I was destroying the project. Mr. Wessendorff called me and I came down. He said, "I guess you know that you're going to kill this development." I said that I didn't know that and I wanted to know the reasoning behind that. He proceeded to tell me and then I told him about the narrow streets, and removing the steel from the streets, cutting the rebar back. There are city standards on all these things. We visited for a while and then he told me to go back and tell Mr. Mischer he'd better straighten up and get this job done right. (laughs) So we won out on that particular deal.

GOODSILL: Those are the kinds of things that will make or break a development in the future. A development done poorly will end up being an impoverished part of town.

GILMORE: Yes, it will. When the developer sells it, then they are gone and the city is left with it.

GOODSILL: Quality of life is what makes a city desirable to live in.

GILMORE: That's correct.

There is one story I wanted to be sure to tell you about Mr. Wessendorff. We had a lady who was a retired schoolteacher and lived on the north side. She was a single woman who was a foster parent. She contracted cancer and got behind on her water bill. In our job, we have to treat everyone the same. If you play favorites to one, you have to play favorites to all.

We carried her for a pretty good while and her bill got to be rather large. I said we just couldn't carry her any more. So I went to Mr. Wessendorff and explained it to him. He said, "Here, I'll give you a check." Then I went to see Mr. Joseph and he gave some money, and we got her water bill paid. Mr. Wessendorff told me that if I ever had anybody else like that who needs help to come and see him.

He was very cautious about his generosity. He didn't want to take any credit for it and preferred it to be anonymous. He donated the land next to our police department, which was about a city block. Our goal was to make it a park, which is what it is today. He signed the deed and gave it to me. The next day I had the Street Department make a nice big sign that said, 'Wessendorff Park, donated by Joe Clyde Wessendorff'. My phone rang the following morning and he said, "You go over there right now and take that sign down." We went over there right then and removed the sign.

GOODSILL: But it IS called Wessendorff Park, isn't it?

GILMORE: It is, but we didn't do that until after he passed away. He was just such a gracious man. I know about another instance where there was a lady who was afflicted in some way and was in a wheelchair. He bought her a house and he didn't want anybody to know that he had done that. But he took care of her.

GOODSILL: He had a big heart.

GILMORE: He did. He had a very big heart.

One kind of funny story was when he closed the lumberyard. It stayed vacant for a year or two. At that time, we didn't have any place to park the City equipment under cover. It sat out in the weather. We figured that maybe we could buy that lumberyard and park our vehicles inside. About that time, interest rates were running around 10% so I came down and asked him if he would sell us the lumberyard. He said he would be happy to. I asked if he would finance it for us. He agreed. And I thought I would try to get the most that I could get, so I asked if he would finance it for 6%. He said, "No, I can't do that." Then he thought a minute and then said, "You know, this is for the City of Richmond. I CAN do it for 6%." The following year we paid it off. I had no idea he would actually do that but he was gracious enough to do it. I felt like I was obligated to get the best deal that I could, for the City.

GOODSILL: And Mr. Wessendorff probably liked that about you! (laughter)

GILMORE: There's one other thing he did that I want to tell you about. Ransom Road had always been Ransom Road but it had never been dedicated to the County. Ransom Road was actually on Mr. Wessendorff's private property. Everybody used it; everybody drove up and down it. The County finally came to the conclusion that they would pave it, and curb and gutter it. Then they discovered it wasn't a dedicated road.

I went to Mr. Wessendorff and asked if he would dedicate the road. At first he wanted to dedicate it to the City. And I said, "Well, if you dedicate it to the City, we'll have to turn around and dedicate it to the County because it is outside of the city limits." So he dedicated that road, 100 feet wide, free of charge, to Fort Bend County and it's now Williams Way. It's been used for years and years as a public street when it wasn't a public street.

GOODSILL: Why did they change the name?

GILMORE: That was Joan McLeod. She had a small piece that she was involved with and in the beginning she called it Williams Wire. I asked her why? She said she did that because when her father (Manford Nation Williams) sold the easement to TxDOT, he was able to buy enough barbed wire to fence his entire property with new wire. As time went on, they determined that Williams Wire didn't sound good and she agreed with TxDOT to change it to Williams Way.

GOODSILL: Any other Mr. Wessendorff stories?

GILMORE: No, but I have some stories about Mrs. Wessendorff.

GOODSILL: I'd love to hear some of those.

GILMORE: Strangely enough, my oldest boy was at the University of Texas in Austin and he needed a little time off. He got a job working for Mrs. Wessendorff. She had a staff of people that did various things for her. It was probably in January and he left home and forgot his coat. She saw that he came to work without a coat and she sent a fellow up to the store and bought him a brand new coat and hat. He worked for her until she passed away. She had a full time nurse, others would trim trees, go to the store, or do whatever she wanted them to do.

GOODSILL: What is your son's name?

GILMORE: John David Gilmore. She called Mrs. Moore and got a recommendation that he was okay. He enjoyed every bit of the time he was able to work with her. It was only about three or four months and then she passed away.

GOODSILL: She was very generous as well.

GILMORE: Absolutely. Every day, before they went home, she would call the staff together and give each one of them a \$20 bill. This was not their wages.

GOODSILL: WOW! No wonder he loved working there! (laughter)

GILMORE: She was really a nice lady. She lived down the street from us. There would be a few neighborhood activities and they would come, although they didn't get out in the neighborhood much. I don't think many people on that street did. When we moved here, our boys were 5 and 7. Robert Brian is now a senior English teacher at Terry High School. Every night, my wife would read to the two boys and it soaked in on Brian but didn't soak in on David.

GOODSILL: David is more of a man who makes his living with his hands.

GILMORE: That's exactly right. Brian can't fix anything and David can fix everything.

GOODSILL: What is your wife's name?

GILMORE: Mary Hallmark Gilmore. Her great-aunt Mildred was the reason I sent a resume over here (see beginning of story).

GOODSILL: I don't want this interview to come to an end because I feel like you have a wealth of information. If I could just think of the right questions to ask you, we could go further. We've talked about Wessendorff, your time as City Manager, but I feel like there is more for people to know that they will be interested in years from now. They'll be interested in what the thought processes were for some of the decisions that were made during your tenure. Decisions about business, tourism, etc. What else can I ask you?

GILMORE: We have an economic development person whose only job is trying to get businesses to come to Richmond. That used to be one of my jobs. I used to be Finance Director, City Manager, Economic Development and anything else that needed to be done. Now we have a city planner who is full time. They help review specifications and things like that. The city has definitely grown. I think we have 183 people now.

GOODSILL: What was it like, working for Mayor Moore?

GILMORE: It was wonderful. He was a great man. I felt like he was a father. I could go to him with anything and he was there to help. He said, "You won't see me unless you've got a problem. And when you do, come and see me and we'll put our heads together and solve it." You always knew where you stood. If you made a mistake, he would let you know.

GOODSILL: How was the city set up? Was it a strong mayor or strong city manager?

GILMORE: It was set up as a strong city manager.

GOODSILL: So you were the boss of the city.

GILMORE: Yes. I would follow the policy of the Mayor and the Commissioners. Mayor Moore could tell stories about when Richmond had a racetrack.

GOODSILL: Tell me about the Richmond Racetrack.

GILMORE: It was a quarter horse track on FM762, between the railroad and town. At one time, Mr. Moore was on the board of directors of the King Ranch, and he took three of us city employees to the King Ranch to hunt. That was an experience within itself. The wildlife was amazing. When we were coming back, I was riding with Mr. Moore and the other fellows were in a different car. We all had shot a deer and Mr. Moore had shot a turkey as well. When you go down US-59 to Mexico, there are check stations where you have to pull off and they verify that you are an American citizen and they check your vehicle. We could see this check station in front of us, and Mayor Moore said, "Durn, I forgot my turkey." So he made a U-turn across the esplanade and headed back. I looked in the mirror and said, "Mayor Moore, we've got about three red lights following us." They pulled us over and he told them he had forgotten his turkey and was going back to get it, and that he was the mayor of the city of Richmond. We went back, got the turkey and came back through the check station. They checked us out fairly closely!

He was quite the gentleman. He had so many friends and so many contacts. He was dedicated to the city of Richmond. He said, "I don't own any business in Richmond, I don't owe any favors to anybody, and I'm going to do the best I can with what we have." When I came to work, Richmond didn't owe any money to anyone, and that was VERY unusual for a city to be debt-free.

GOODSILL: Have they stayed that way or have things changed?

GILMORE: It's changed somewhat. It had to, to keep up with the growth. But we've tried to run it the same way, using the same philosophy he had. I think it has made Richmond quite successful.

GOODSILL: I've really enjoyed this interview.

Interview ends