

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees: **Barbara Roane Bleil**

Interview Date: 04/27/2013

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Project / Group: Henderson-Wessendorff Foundation

12 Pages



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Transcript

PENA: Please tell us your name and date of birth.

BLEIL: It's Barbara Roane Bleil. Date of birth is March 18, 1935.

PENA: Mrs. Bleil would tell us please about your genealogy. Your maiden name is Roane. Would you tell us the name of your mother and father.

BLEIL: It's Toni and George Roane. My mother was born in Needville, Texas, and my father was born in Missouri City, Texas.

PENA: Could you spell you mother's name for me, please.

BLEIL: Her maiden name was Kneitz, K_N_E_I_T_Z. My father's name was Roane, George G. Roane, R_O_A_N_E.

PENA: Can you spell Toni for me please.

BLEIL: Toni is spelled T_O_N_I. That's the nickname she used.

PENA: Where did your mother grow up?

BLEIL: She grew up in Needville.

PENA: Where did your father grow up?

BLEIL: He grew up in Missouri City until his mother and father died when he was young, and he moved into Houston and lived with his oldest sister. He finished his schooling at Saint Thomas, and then went to Southwest Texas law school in Houston.

PENA: How did he and your mother meet?

BLEIL: He came out to this area as a young lawyer. He went to Needville, and she was at her father's store in Needville behind the counter--and they met.

PENA: What was her father's store?

BLEIL: He had a general store in Needville, one of many things he did.

PENA: And they met at the store? And started their relationship.

BLEIL: Yes.

PENA: Was he a lawyer in Needville?

BLIEL: No, No, he was a lawyer in Rosenberg, eventually the Fort Bend County Judge.

PENA: But he went out to Needville one day.

BLIEL: Actually when he first came to this area he rented a room in the Jane Long Cottage upstairs.

PENA: Oh really!

BLIEL: Yes, and he used to come out here after it was moved to the place that it is now, that's when they had it open all the way upstairs. He showed me the first room he rented.

PENA: So they met and married—you know the date?

BLIEL: Yes, in 1933 on January 31st.

PENA: And when did you come along?

BLIEL: 1935 March.

PENA: That's right you told me March the 18th. Did your mother and dad always live out here then?

BLIEL: Yes, they always lived in Fort Bend County. I was raised in Rosenberg until I went off to college and then they moved to Richmond.

PENA: Where did you go to college?

BLIEL: University of Texas.

PENA: Did you ever work in our community here.

BLIEL: No, I married and then lived in Austin a little bit then Houston most of the rest of my life.

PENA: With regard to the Wessendorffs, how did you come to meet them? What is your connection with them?

BLIEL: I knew the Wessendorffs-- the family-- and I knew of Loise and Joe years ago. The real connection I guess came early on when my cousin Joe married Loise's cousin. They adopted Joe D.. I remember when they brought him home. They had a big party. Joe and Loise were there. My mother was Joe D's godmother.

PENA: And you're referring to Joe D. Robinson who is now president of the Henderson-Wessendorff Foundation?

BLIEL: Yes, Joe Darst Robinson. Then I used to come out here [to Richmond] -- family and friends-- because my mother and father were friends of Loise and Joe and there was a connection with the cousins - Anita—it was just a social thing back and forth. I knew Loise then. I wasn't close friends with Loise, but I knew her.

PENA: You knew her cousin...

BLIEL: Anita, very well.

PENA: What was Anita's last name?

BLIEL: Darst, D_A_R_S_T

PENA: So approximately what year do you think it was that you actually met them and begin...

BLIEL: Actually when I really became friendly with Loise is when my mother was dying and that was in 1987 (my father had died). Loise would come down to my mother's house--and visit with me--which is very nice--sometimes before she went to Houston, sometimes when she came back. She went to Houston to see her mother every day, religiously EVERY DAY. That went on for years. We started a friendship then—I mean a close friendship. We conflicted terribly in the beginning. [laughs]

PENA: Tell me about that.

BLIEL: Oh, we really did.

PENA: Why do you think that was?

BLIEL: We were both very hard headed, and we finally said—I'm hard headed, she's hard headed. Loise WASN'T the easiest person to get along with anyway. We decided—she said—well her head was bigger. She loved to joke. So we went and measured our heads, and they're exactly the same.

And we really got along well then, and she let me say my peace, she could say her's and that was—it became much more comfortable saying what I thought and how I thought. That she respected that and I respected what she said. Outside my back door (I bought her, years ago) is a big blue Buddha head.

PENA: A Buddha head?! Why did you choose a Buddha head with twenty-three on it?

BLIEL: Both of our heads measured 23 inches so I painted the #23 on the forehead of the Buddha. She loved things like that-- jokes. When she died, I got the Buddha head. So it sits by my back door.

PENA: It is a private joke between the two of you.

BLIEL: Joe D. knows about it because he'll come put notes behind that head and say, "I left it behind twenty-three."

PENA: What kinds of things did you talk about that you disagreed on?

BLIEL: Loise love to be in control of everything. Oh, it could be anything. [laughs] We talked about everything. She was very intelligent. She was very possessive, very intelligent, and went in spurts. When she first moved out here and they built their house, she planted a lot of the trees that are on our street--in the yards--in the church. I guess the next thing she did, she got involved with Girt Bahana --a woman who was an alcoholic--who wrote a book--who had 'fallen'. Loise took on to her—well I guess before that, Loise really became interested in theology and religion—almost a fanatic at one point. Then she started taking courses and she learned about theology, and she became really interested in it until her death. She wanted to perpetuate Christ's teaching, and to teach others to teach.

After her father died she bought the land in Blanco and built Well Spring, which is a retreat—a religious retreat--anybody can use free. It's still going, and it's going great guns now. It's used every weekend and groups go up there from churches to seminars to theologians to people who wrote books. One Rice professor went up there and spent several weeks finishing his book. She had different theologians from Europe come over. She really did beautiful things. And so that was Well Spring—she spent all of her energy in supporting Well Springs.

Anyway she was fun. She loved musicals. Last musical we went to—we saw before she died—was Chicago. She bought us all a DVD of it--friends and family and all—she just enjoyed it so. Actually I had lunch with her every Tuesday there in the dining room. We watched some old movie or some old thing. We talked everything from music to classical —she was very well versed. We like to watch the Kentucky Derby together. She was fun in one way and then very demanding in another way.

PENA: But you found a way to...

BLEIL: We found a way that we got along. I miss her! I was extremely worried about her health. She really wouldn't exercise or walk, she was hard on her health. She had fifty-one people working for her. After she got diabetes she had nurses around the clock at her house. She was afraid of diabetes. She had them check her blood sugar, she had an insecurity about it, every two hours or so. Whatever Loise went into she went into whole hog. We went to church every week together. She read the bible or daily message every day.

PENA: What church were you attending?

BLEIL: Calvary Episcopal Church. She was very good to Calvary and Joe was too. They gave them the land. Loise always had strings attached to her gifts with the church--she did this and she wanted this. If she didn't like the sermon she would--

PENA: You're pointing to your watch as you raise your hand up.

BLEIL: Too long, too long, over the [time limit], you know.

PENA: My goodness. I can see how that would disturb...

BLEIL: She was a character. She was very good. The other person she was closest to was her cousin Mary Frances Couper--C_O_U_P_E_R. Mary Frances lived in Houston. She and Lois were cousins and buddies all their lives. Most of Loise's old friends were in Houston, they are all dead now. She was more from Houston than she was ever from Richmond, if that makes sense. She never really joined anything here, except the church. She was not interested in any women's things. But she would give to things. She loved animals. She would give to the SPCA. She once said that she liked animals better than people. When her animals died she had a storehouse of caskets, and they had a special burial for all the animals—cats and dogs.

PENA: She had cats and dogs?

BLEIL: All named... She ended up with about fifty of each.

PENA: Where did she have them?

BLEIL: She built houses all over her property that housed all the cats and dogs.

PENA: At her home on Hillcrest?

BLEIL: Yes. All air conditioned, and hired people to care for them EVERY day.

PENA: This is part of her staff of fifty-one.

BLEIL: Yes Her veterinarian would come and check them every week. It took him most of the day to check every animal.

PENA: Did she have a particular breed that she preferred?

BLEIL: No. Years ago she had a Peeke or a Pekingesa and just loved that little dog and has pictures of him. Huge pictures, vlown up and framed! Then she just started collecting any stray. People would leave strays realizing she does this. And you know on the highway a stray and another one and then when she died they put some up for adoption. Actually my daughter adopted two—the cutest ones really. [laughs] She loved animals. She built a coon house for the coons. She would never kill an animal. If she had rats or coons in the attic they had to be freed. She wouldn't step on a roach or kill a spider.

PENA: You know quite a different side of her.

BLEIL: Well, I saw her all the time. She'd come down all the time to my house and we'd sit and visit about EVERYTHING—history. She really did a whole lot to get her Jackson family—that's her mother's family were the Jackson from Corsicana. She was very proud of it. Those were very close sisters.

PENA: Who were her sisters?

BLEIL: Her mother's sisters, not hers. Loise was an only child. Her parents absolutely doted on her, but she doted on them. It was passionate love.

My oldest daughter, Diane, married one of her second cousins. We'd talk about the family, we'd talk about my family, we'd talk about her family, we'd talk about her husband, you name it—it's just two people talking about everything that goes on all the time—her health, the church, philosophy.

PENA: So she kept a staff of fifty-one and they did everything for her from nursing to pet care.

BLEIL: Pet care, to planting, to driving--if she went to Sam's to buy stuff--she never bought one of anything--dozens. If she's going to buy Christmas presents, she'd buy them all coats or all something. Oh, it was wonderful. She sometimes spent money like water.

PENA: She was very philanthropic.

BLEIL: Very giving, but very controlling--she was VERY, VERY generous to her help, but she expected them to...

PENA: There was something owed back.

BLEIL: All the time. You had to do this for me. She kept a staff in Houston at her mother's house. Actually that staff is still being paid. It's a trust. But the house in Houston was never touched, except that it was her mother's house and Loise went in there every week, or more--and they'd fix her lunch. I went with her almost all these times to that house in Houston. It stayed intact as it was when her mother died--not changed one iota.

PENA: What has happened to that house?

BLEIL: It was in the Foundation; it was unsellable. It has been torn down and the property sold. But all the furniture that was in the house is now at Joe D's house. It was her mother's furniture. She kept everything intact. She didn't like to change anything. Like if these three things were like that way all the time, it took an act of Congress to get her to change it. I could get her to change it occasionally or move her stuff around in her house. The only way I could do it is we are not going to throw this stuff away. It's, I won't say junk, but just stuff, stuff, stuff. We'd buy big bins--plastic bins--and I'd show her as I'm doing it--all these things--this is going here--and store it, so if you want it again you can pull it out. Then we'd actually clean the house up a little bit. It was too much stuff. She didn't like to even cut a plant. I said, "Plants like to be cut, like a haircut. I'm going to make it more beautiful." "Don't touch that." We were cutting down a Magnolia tree in my yard--my husband hated it because it shredded all the time. I never did tell Loise, but the man was out there cutting and she came and stopped him because that was such a terrible thing--made him quit and go home. [laughter]

PENA: Well tell me--if you know--what was her favorite thing to do as far as leisure. Did she have a favorite thing?

BLEIL: She enjoyed watching the movies together, enjoyed going to Well Spring. She would be passionate about things because she did the spiritual... she was very into her Well Spring—every time up there. She loved to decorate for holidays. She wouldn't have just one big bunny in the house for Easter; she had hundreds of bunnies. She loved to decorate for Halloween, for Christmas. Hundreds of Santas too. This is what she gave me for Christmas. I told her I couldn't store it, so she stored it for me for years. [shows a photo]

PENA: Oh my goodness that is a....

BLEIL: Huge Santa. She bought her one, and said I had to have one. And I said, "Loise, I don't have a place for it. I don't want it." You see I could tell her "I don't want it." She said, "Well this you have to have because I have one and then we'll be twins when we put them out." I said, "Then if you store it for me I'll set him up in the house." So she did every year after Christmas. This is her cousin Mary Frances [shows another photo] whom she absolutely adored. See she liked fun things that came to wish her happy birthday. [Photo of someone in a chicken outfit...]

PENA: That chicken came to wish her happy birthday?

BLEIL: This was a birthday party she gave me, and it was the most fun ever. This is the place up in Echo Rock. We used to go over there—on the other side of Hunt.

PENA: And you're going to let us keep these pictures?

BLEIL: They probably have some of these. She gave me a birthday party every year.

PENA: Oh my goodness, what a beautiful cake.

BLEIL: Loise did everything gorgeously. This is us —we had fun going to...

PENA: What beautiful ladies you all are!

BLEIL: ... when she gave me this. [pointing to a bracelet] I wear this most times.

PENA: Is that a James Avery bracelet.

BLEIL: You see she signed everything to me twenty-three—we did that.

PENA: You have to read it to me.

BLEIL: “I hope you will wear this to know how near Christ is to you, to comfort you always even to the end of the world. Much love twenty-three.” We wrote notes back and forth on things and especially things we disagreed on sometimes to clear the air. But we’d always did get along at the end. She was always ringing for her help with the bell. So when she died if you go to her grave there’s a little bell sticking out at the bottom. I put it there. She was fun and a MESS in a lot of other ways. It’s hard to describe Loise.

PENA: You’re doing a marvelous job of it.

BLEIL: I don’t think it’s anything you can write in a book. You can pick up little funny things about her maybe.

PENA: She was quite a beautiful woman.

BLEIL: She encouraged people to write books, she encouraged different people to do things. She always had her hands in something! She read her daily church message every day--her mother did that too. You know one thing reminds me of something else. I guess her big thing was her retreat in Blanco and Well Spring. That was her final push. Everything else with the Foundation is for Fort Bend County and especially Richmond-Rosenberg, except for Blanco which is a very expensive thing to run. But I really think if she came back down today she would be SO PLEASED with what’s happened there. I really do. She built a chapel there, and she had a HUGE twenty-foot statue made in Italy—the sculpture man in Thumoth in Austin did for her. It is a beautiful statue of Christ. There’s a picture around here of that.

She gets on one project--like when she did that statue—she checks with him—he has to send her all these sketches. I found them later and framed them for her and we hung them. But she controls it—if he wants her money she’s gonna have exactly what she wants. It is an absolutely gorgeous statue—out of the chapel you look at it against the hill country and it’s spectacular. It is very inspiring. The lady, Girt Behana—in her life—Loise took her all over Texas, basically giving lectures on alcoholism at AA. If Loise got into something, boy, she held on to it—I mean just hold on—I mean just take it to the hilt. Like that little house for Girt up at Blanco—and that’s still there. And then Girt finally left, and then she gets into another intense project. She follows it through to the nth degree—very detailed about all these little things.

The Institute of Religion--she got way into that and I helped. That was a wonderful thing. She really was in to THAT for a number of years full time. Each thing she did was a wonderful thing. They are still there and they're still going strong. They're still having their seminars once a year. She used to finance those—pay for some of the speakers to come. She loved for the speakers to come and have a big fun dinner party and all—drinks—the night before. She liked that! She made it fun! But again it was “we gonna do this” and “you do that” or “you have to come spend the night”. I'd say, “I can't do that. I'm just not going to do that.” And then after she said, “Okay, well whenever you can get there.” I was probably the only person that could say “No” to her. It's probably true, I bet, —for my own sanity and my space because I had to. And we really did get along. We got along very well.

Loise was avid about books. If she liked a book about religion, an inspirational book etc., she'd buy it by the hundreds to distribute to anyone who might read them; and store the rest. She had an entire house filled with books. She had a large library at Well Spring too and many books stored there.

At one point in her life she became an avid photographer. Took many pictures; mainly of birds and squirrels. She was quite good. She framed her pictures and she collected or purchased about every kind of camera.

PENA: She was obviously a very strong person.

BLEIL: Very strong, yes.

PENA: Hearing about her husband; he was a very strong man.

BLEIL: You'll hear more about him because more people really knew him than Loise. When she got diabetes that was her big concern. She almost died! She really did. I went down to see her. She had a nurse with her then or somebody just to help—was in the back room. I went back there and I realized something was terribly wrong. I called Joe and said, “I think Loise is dying, something is wrong.”

PENA: Is that before she knew she was ill?

BLEIL: She had been sick and she just kept getting worse and worse and getting more frail. I rode in the ambulance with her to Houston. Joe asked me if I could, and he followed in the car. I mean, she was in serious, serious condition in ICU for a long time. We called her best friends; they came down. Then she came out of it and did very well. It was just the diabetes; she had just let it go.

Then she was into all the cures and people getting her different doctors—and people would give her what she should eat. She hired all these nurses, who every so many hours checked blood sugar. She had the help cook her certain things—certain meals. Yes, she was intent on whatever she did. Then she got very healthy again. But the diabetes is, over the long run, what she died of because she shut down in the night. I remember the night very well. They were rushing her to the hospital and I got there.

Loise did not like to be alone. That was one thing that was very different about us; I had to have quiet time and time—I don't want people around me all the time—she had to have somebody with her around at all times. If I would be sick or I couldn't do something, she'd say, "I'm going to send someone to help." I say, "No, no, no, I don't want anybody." I'm better off quiet and I want my space, quiet.

PENA: You really were opposites in many respects, but you found a way to make it work.