

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Billie Amilee Harris Wendt -11/03/12**

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Interviewer: Rosie Moore

Transcriber: Carlos Rubalcaba

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15 Pages



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Transcript

MOORE: Lets start with some basic biographical information. When and where were you born?

WENDT: I was born in Fulshear Texas on July 21, 1923. I am now eighty-nine years old.

MOORE: Wow and you are in good shape. What hospital were you born in?

WENDT: I was born at home. I did have a doctor attending but we had no hospital.

MOORE: No hospital back in 1923?

WENDT: Not where we were, we were in Fulshear.

MOORE: What brought your family to the Fort Bend County area?

WENDT: My grandfather came here in 1865 at the end of the Civil War. He was a surgeon in the confederate army. He was sent from Houston down to Galveston because the war was over. Soldiers got to go their own way and he came up to Fulshear, which was not a town then. There was a town two miles up that was called Pittville. That's where he found some friends who came from North Carolina as he did. They had no doctor in that area so they asked him to stay. They gave him a home to live until he could build his own and establish his family. That's how my family came to this area.

MOORE: What type of work did your father do?

WENDT: At nineteen years old, my father was in his third year at college, but his father was older and he had died. My father was the second oldest of seven children. He and his brother tried farming. Imagine, with the farm and ranch together they had six thousand acres of land. He didn't like farming, and didn't do well. Then his mother tried it, I think for another year, and said no she couldn't do that either. She needed to do some other things. He wanted to board in a house at the town where the children went to school, which was college at Georgetown Texas. So she moved there and opened a boarding house for the college students as well as her own children. My father was called to Fort Bend County at nineteen and he worked here the rest of his life. He's dead, (crying) he came to know the county real well so he ran for Commissioner and he was elected. The Commissioner was a man who thought about the roads and the bridges and ran the city, the county government. After two terms of that he ran for County Judge where he served from 1940 until 1944. The rest of this life he was ranching and farming.

MOORE: What type of work did your grandfather do?

WENDT: He was a doctor and he went into the civil war and became a surgeon there, he was a doctor except after his life in the confederate army he came also the doctor for the whole area around Fulshear, but he accumulated a lot of land there. As he made money himself he invested it in land.

MOORE: What type of work did your mother do?

WENDT: My mother was a gifted pianist, she played the piano and she gave lessons. The main thing before that was that she was a teacher; she thought school before she married my father. She came to Fulshear because her sister was teaching school there. She came to visit and met my father. They were quite young, but they had done so many things in their lives. She had graduated from college at nineteen, because you could start at sixteen. That was from Sam Houston State, it's now Sam Houston University. When she got through she went out teach school. She taught for three years before she married my father.



She always played the organ at church; one of those old organs that you pumped like this. (mimics moving her feet) I remember sitting on the bench with her all the time, while she was playing the organ. Then she gave piano lessons to anybody around the area who wanted them. Otherwise she ran a home and she had three children and she was quite a gardener. She always had the garden, because in those days you couldn't go to the super mart and get your vegetables, there was no such thing. If you wanted any you had to raise it, and that's what she did too.

No, I am the youngest of three. I had a brother and a sister both are deceased now. They were older than I was.

MOORE: Tell me about your grandmother. What did she do?

WENDT: I had two grandmothers. The one on my mother's side had seven children and she was very involved and she was also a church lady, she loved the church and she always contributed to it. She loved to read and she would tell book stories and review a book, she was very interesting.

My other grandmother married a man who came from Ireland as a young man. She was German and she married him and he had nothing to do except to farm. They went into Indian Territory where the land was free for people to come to settle it. So my grandmother went there and my mother was born in Indian Territory. She was a third child of seven children too. There were so many children and life was so brutal in those days.

There was an uncle and aunt who wanted to take my mother and put her through school and give her some opportunities. They took her to Okalahoma where she lived from the time she was six years old until she was sixteen. She would go home in the summers and see her siblings but otherwise she was up there going to school and taking piano lessons. Grandmother was trying to make a living out there in the brush lands. It was very hard to do and after a few years they moved. They just couldn't make it there. They moved to Sam Houston at Huntsville because my mother had gone to school there and they could see a place where they could have a boarding house for the students. They did the same thing. He would garden, grow all the vegetables and help her in the kitchen with the meals and being the boy around the house, you would say. That was their life and after that they had a small house in Fulshear where my mother had lived. They spent their last years there; he was gardening and she was quilting. They quilted in a certain room and they would stay up all the time. She had three sisters who would come with her and stay with her while they made a quilt. Then they would go home again and the next year they would come back and quilt some more quilts. Wasn't that nice?

MOORE: Do you have any of those quilts?

WENDT: Yes, I have several, I have several.

MOORE: You mentioned that they were really no grocery stores when you were living.

WENDT: Well there was a grocery store, you have to have your basics there, but they didn't have things like vegetables from the garden and also in the wintertime during the holidays they would have oranges and apples and candies and other things, but that's all. Not all year, they would have meat some time in Fulshear because they would kill something and everybody then could come and get some meat. That was not very regular because they didn't have freezers. I remember the first freezer we had. That was a big thing, a big thing.

MOORE: When you were growing up I guess your parents taught you how to garden?

WENDT: I did things in the house that I could do, for instance I never cooked because my mother always had a cook. My father grew up with having servants to help because they had so many children and the doctor was able to pay them, so they had servants to help them. My father did not want my mother doing the cooking all the time. He wanted her to have a cook and then she could do whatever she wanted. That way she could sew; she could make my clothes or a lot of hers. And she would garden and have all the vegetables together. We used to can them before we had a freezer. You know what a canning is like? Well you bought the cans and you cooked them and put them into a pot that held lots of cans. They would process it. Once in the can and you would use it all year.

MOORE: Wow, very interesting.

WENDT: That's what we did with the garden vegetables before we had the freezer.

MOORE: We have come a long way haven't we? (Chuckle)

WENDT: Haven't we? So many people don't remember all those things, you see it's because I am so much older than they are that I know all these things.

MOORE: And you are 89! Describe the house that you grew up in Fulshear.

WENDT: Well there is a strange story about that. When my mother married, my father was living at the big house because the siblings had all gone away to school and the mother was downtown running a boarding house for the students, so he was there by himself. But the house was old and it was getting run down. So they only lived there four years because. They had moved Pittsville down to Fulshear, that's because the train came there. They bought the house from an older couple that had moved here from New York because he was a racing fan and they had races and horses in Fulshear. Racing was a big thing there.

But they were getting old and they decided they would go back to New York because they were just too old to be in Fulshear with no hospital. So my parents bought the house and they had it a few years. It was fully furnished, with furniture, crystal, china everything was there. When my brother was ten years old and my sister was eight and a half years old and my mother was pregnant with me the house burned down! They lost everything. There was nothing to use to put out fires with so the house burned down.

MOORE: Was your family at home?

WENDT: They were home; it was early in the morning. Something caught fire they don't know what. Maybe they had a man who had milked the cows in the morning and built a fire when it was very cold. It was very cold, as it was January. Across the street was an old couple that had a big, big house, so they took our family in. The two children stayed in the upstairs of that house. The story went that my mother was such a good disciplinarian and the children were so good that the people underneath didn't even know that they were there. So that was nice. So the house where I grew up was brand new and the old house was gone. I can't say that I grew up in an old house.

MOORE: Describe the new house that you moved into.

WENDT: It was nice house, but it was smaller and after a number of years they added a second story. By the time that I was ten or eleven sometime in there, they put the upstairs on and I had a room and bath upstairs. We had one bathroom downstairs and we only had two bedrooms. We had an area we called the sleeping porch and we had our beds in there. It was nice. By that time the siblings were gone, they could only go eight grades in Fulshear and after that you had to go away to school. My brother went to Galveston and grandmother moved down to Galveston with her two sons who went to medical school there. My grandmother was my grandfather's third wife, and he had two older sons by the first wife and they became doctors also.

My sister moved to Houston where one of my mother's sisters lived and she went to high school there. Now we are not able to send the children away to those boarding schools because they're very expensive. By this time the depression was on, and everybody was poor in the thirties. Very poor, they were barely making it to pay the taxes so they had to really pull their horns in and do whatever they could to do to get by. When they were finished at high school my brother went to Rice University and my sister went to Sam Houston.

MOORE: Your brother went to Rice University, what did your brother do?

WENDT: He became a doctor also.

MOORE: Following in the footsteps of his grandfather?

WENDT: But he did not go back to Galveston where they had the medical school, he went to New York because one of the brothers moved to New York and he really wanted him to come there. We didn't really want him to, but he decided to do that. His medical school was in New York but he came to Houston for his internship. While he was in his internship the war broke out so he went into the war right away and went into the medical field. They placed him with the patients who were having trouble coping with the war. He had become a psychologist and he was one of the first ones ever in Texas and he taught there forever. They even have a club down named for him because he was training psychologists from all over the world.

MOORE: Wow, and your sister, what did she do?

WENDT: She became a medical assistant and did her medical work there. She was some type of medical technician. Her husband went into the army and she went to San Antonio to be with him because he went into Officers Training School. He had also gone to Rice and he had his degree from there. So they made him an officer right away and she was in San Antonio with him. She got pneumonia and died when she was 27 years old. They had no way of curing pneumonia in those days, because penicillin had not been available, otherwise she would have lived. In those days they didn't have things, you had to get by on your own.

MOORE: So sad, such a young age. Let's get back to where you were living when you were growing up. Which families lived near you? Do you recall?

WENDT: Well I had several girlfriends who lived there. One of them was Mary Francis Walker we called her Tida, everybody had a name in those days. My other friend was Maxine Grady. In the summers some of my cousins would come to visit because they liked to come to the country, we rode horses around all the time and we also went swimming at the places where they had rice, they would dig out a big place and we would go swimming and the cold water was absolutely wonderful. We loved it.

MOORE: Where did you and your family shop?

WENDT: We went to Houston. Not all the time, but from time to time. There were two places we really loved, one was Sakowitz in Houston and the other was Leavy Brothers. My mother always got me shoes there because she always said I don't want your foot to be too big for the shoes, because that's not good, it makes bad feet. She would always be sure that I got shoes there.

I was thankful that she had a college degree that she had taught and was willing to live in Fulshear with my father and had all the other things that people had in the cities. She was content, absolutely content to do whatever she could I thought it was pretty nice (crying)

MOORE: Your getting emotional when you think about that. It's emotional going back in time and thinking about your mom. That is tough thinking about them being so kind. (Pauses) So you did a lot of your shopping... your mom took you to these stores in Houston.

WENDT: Yes, we bought things like the shoes. But you see, she sewed my gloves, she made them, yes she did. It was amazing; in those days you couldn't go in and buy everything like you can now. You either had to give a seamstress come and do it or you had to do it yourself. You know you read a lot about the seamstress, that's what they did. They made beautiful clothes but still if you couldn't afford them then you had to do it yourself, that's what mother did. She made a lot of her own clothes and most all of mine. I think she still made some things like skirts and a blouse to go with it when I was in high school. We didn't go shopping like you do now.

MOORE: Describe to me Fulshear when you were growing up. Tell me about the setup of the town.

WENDT: The railroad came though and there was a depot. Across the street from the depot there was a doctors office and one of my uncles had an office. He was a half-uncle of one of my grandfather's wives before my grandmother. He had two wives who died. You know women died all the time, mostly in childbirth or something they couldn't cure. Anyway my grandmother was the third wife, but he had two older sons by the first wife and they became doctors also. One of them has a wife who had a stroke, which paralyzed her. It was hard for him to manage that they moved out to Fulshear where they can get help with her. So he had his little office across from the depot. There we also had a little post office there. There was the big store, which my father owned. Then we went round the corner and there was another store over there. That's kind of what it was like.

MOORE: Do you ever go back to Fulshear?

WENDT: All the time, my mother lived there until she was 76 and she lived to be 98, but her mind left her in her late seventies and she moved into a retirement house in Houston. She and one of her sisters stayed there for a long long time. I always went to Fulshear because the cemetery was there and I knew all the people there. It was like old home to me. So I always kept up with it.

MOORE: What did you do for entertainment?

WENDT: My parents played bridge and I grew up around the bridge table. By the time I got into college I started playing and I have always enjoyed it. I have always played a little bit but not a lot. I didn't have that much time, but I always belonged to a bridge club that played once a week in the afternoon, from two to five. You get a sitter from two to five or else you die. (chuckle)

My parents read a lot. They read everything. They got Time Magazine from day one and my father was always, Where is the Time Magazine? Does someone have that Time? We always had it and he always kept up with everything. He could sit down and talk about politics forever. . We were always democrats believe me, always. Until this day I am. I don't get anything to do with the Republicans ever.

MOORE: Did your parents like dancing?

WENDT: No they didn't have any opportunity to do that. If they had lived in Houston or Galveston they would have done a little more than they did and they didn't travel, they didn't care for it. My husband and I have seen the world, we love traveling and while we could we did. So I am very lucky about that.

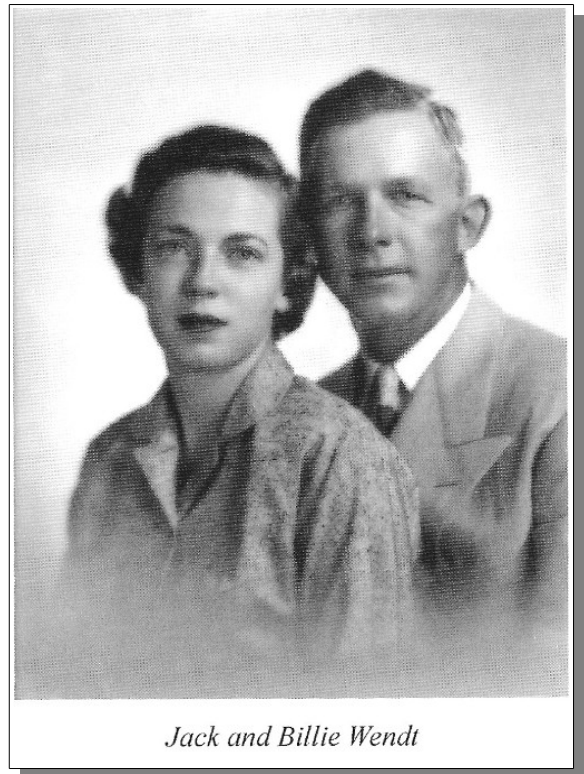
MOORE: Where did you meet your husband?

WENDT: He was in Richmond and the school broke up after six grades, the small schools consolidated with the big schools and they sent busses all around to pick up the kids. So I came to Richmond in the seventh grade and that's when I met my husband. We were in the same grade. We went all the way through high school together and we were friends but we were not sweet hearts at all. The last year that we were there we kind of liked each other a lot, we grew up and I kind of liked him and he knew me a lot, he loved me a lot, but we both went away to school. I was going into Dallas for two years to SMU. He went to A&M and went into the service when World War II came.

My sister had wanted me to come down to Houston and stay with her because her husband left for officer candidate training, she was going later when he finished his training. She wanted me to come and stay with her and go to the University of Houston, so I did that. I never stayed at home without going back to school because the first year after I was in college I went to Colorado with some friends and we went to summer school out there and it was wonderful, it was cool and it was a big campus and it was just really exciting. Then I went back to SMU and the second semester is when I went down to stay with my sister and went to the University of Houston. I finished there in 1944. I took public teaching because my mother always said you have to be able to make do on your own. You could only have to be a secretary, a nurse, or a teacher; now decide which one you want. I decided I'll go the teacher route, so I did and then I taught for years before I married my husband.

High school, the last two years I taught the juniors and seniors together and they looked up to me like I was a queen. I was very diligent with my planning primers and taught them a lot of things they didn't know and they looked up to me like I really knew something!

The students that I taught here I saw all my life because when I married I moved over here. So they were all our friends, I was only a few years older than they were at that time. So many of my classmate and friends are dead, you know. I've lived beyond a lot of my friends and I have made younger friends because I've been out in the community doing things and I meet other people, young people. My classmates are gone.



Jack and Billie Wendt

MOORE: When you were growing up way back when, how did the races get along? I assume there was segregation.

WENDT: There was really segregation, absolutely and we had a lot of black people who lived on our farm. They were the people who tilled the land, planted the crops, but they were third and fourth hands is what they would say because the people who owned the land get a third or forth of the crop or half of it or something.

You provided them with their basics during the time that they are farming; their flour, their lard, their sugar, their salt. We had a place they called the commissary and they would come and get these things and then when the crop was over they would get a settlement on how much they made.

We had nothing in common as far as social business. We didn't even shake hands with them. Can you believe it? I remember the first time I shook hands with a black man. I was very nice always to all of them, but there was nothing equal about us and I grew up that way. That's the way it was always. Since then it has certainly changed, now if you know from where I came you know how much more it has changed. They had their own school in Fulshear and they had another school for the Mexican people, they didn't come with us.

MOORE: So you had a white school, a Mexican school and a black school.

WENDT: That's right, we did. It was amazing.

MOORE: How about outside of school, where the neighborhoods segregated too?

WENDT: Oh yes. They had another part of town where they lived. I came from Fulshear over here on the bus. Until I was out of high school then I went to college in Dallas, then I came back to Houston and graduated from the University of Houston, then I moved out to teach school in Katy the first time.

My husband knew me from Fulshear and he use to come over to Fulshear to see people. He would come see me and he would go see one of my friends and he thought we were the prettiest girls in school.

I had my horse and some of my neighbors had horses that children could ride and two of us would get our horses ready... my mother would be sure that I knew how to ride. So she went and rode with me for a long time before I was let go and then my friend would take one of the horses from other people and we would go all over. They weren't worried about us, there was nothing to worry about. Nothing like now, everybody is scared to death about everything.

MOORE: What are the major changes that you have seen during the last eight nine years?

WENDT: Time has changed so much that I can't just say it. All I can say is that I have been blessed in my life all the way through because I had wonderful parents, they were educated, they were smart and they were content! That's the most important thing. They loved what they did and they did what they could for the community and they had friends. I was just so lucky to have those parents, not the ones who wanted to drink all the time, never. That was something I was thankful for, very thankful. They were family people, they always wanted to be with their family and they loved my children.

MOORE: How many children did you have?

WENDT: Four girls.

MOORE: Four girls! Do they live in Richmond?

WENDT: Two of them do and the other two live in Houston. They are all absolutely beautiful. They are so talented, they are so talented. We gave whatever opportunity we had to let them know things. They all do, wonderful things, it's amazing.

MOORE: Well because they had good parents.

WENDT: That's right. (both laugh)

MOORE: How many grandchildren do you have?

WENDT: I have five grandchildren and then I have several greats.

MOORE: Wow, so what are the names of your two children who live in Richmond?

WENDT: One is named Evalyn Moore. Her husband is the major of Richmond, Hilmar Moore. He is twenty years older than she is. His wife died of cancer. Evalyn was here and her daughter was in school in Houston. They were living here because it was better than having the daughter in Houston running around all the time. To go to school was fine and then it was good to come right out here. That's what she did and wasn't that smart?

MOORE: Did you raise all of your kids in Richmond?



WENDT: Yes,

MOORE: Wow, so what do you think of the schools here in Richmond, since you are a teacher, since you use to be a teacher.

WENDT: I can say this, my children were not the smartest kids in the world but their world was big. We gave them the opportunity to go to camp every summer and they knew so much there and made so many friends and it made their world very big. It made their world very big. Then we gave every opportunity to learn. They took art lessons. I have a house full of pictures, drawings everything that they did. We have a house in town and we have a house at the farm. It has all the pictures that they have done. Paintings, drawings, all kinds of things and they have profited from the fact that they learned so many of these things.

This oldest daughter was getting ready to go into law school when she met the mayor. She was working with the law firm here. The mayor's son was one of lawyers in the office and they were good friends always, always. After the mayor's wife died the son said I'd like for you go out have a lunch with Evalyn because I want you to know how nice she is and how much she knows. You would enjoy her. So they went to lunch and then Hilmar said how about dinner? (laughter)

MOORE: (chuckle) Then the rest is history, they have been together.

WENDT: Twenty-five years.

MOORE: Wow! What organizations are you a member of?

WENDT: Starting in college I was a member of the sororities and I always enjoyed it very much. I have not been able to go on with it like you do in Houston, you have the alumni who get together you know. I stay in touch with it, I recommend girls from here that go to the schools where they have sororities and I can recommend girls, I have always done that. Then when I came here I was busy with children for so many years that I didn't do anything. After that I had raise the children thing. I had the PTO, room mothers and then I got into the church, also I was teaching Sunday school.

MOORE: When you talk about Sunday school are you referring to Saint Johns United Methodist Church? How many years have you been a member of this church?

WENDT: I think in next April its going to be sixty-five.

MOORE: What do you like about this church?

WENDT: I am a Methodist from day one. My parents were Methodist and the only church in Fulshear was a Methodist church, so I have not known anything else. But I have been very active in this church. I was one of the delegates to the college for this church for many years, but I just gave it up because it was getting to be hard for me to get to the conferences, but anyway I have been steeped in it and I like it very much.

MOORE: Sixty-five years ago, describe this church to me.

WENDT: I don't know whether you know it or not but people like me are not here. A lot of people go from church to church, I can tell you. I have seen hundreds, hundreds of people come here and then they either move or they find some friends in another church so they move. We have changed preachers and they don't like the new one. I don't have a lot of friends my age here.

MOORE: How many years have you guys been married?

WENDT: Tomorrow is his ninetieth birthday; we are having a big party tonight at the farm. He was twenty-five and I was twenty-four when we married. It is so amazing that both of us still have our minds. He's not real healthy but he's okay, he works on it.

MOORE: What's your tip for longevity? I always like to ask people that.

WENDT: I don't know, I don't know. I am not very good because I was a smoker for many years, but I gave it up and finally I have had very good health. When I was twenty-three I had surgery that took an ovary out, after that I was healthy enough to have four children.

MOORE: That's a blessing from God.

WENDT: In fact I was a case study with only one ovary because they thought I was not going to be able to have too many children. They didn't know what that ovary was going to do, they didn't know. Finally he said if you really do want some children you better not wait too long. So we started with our children and the first one was so happy I wanted a second one.

MOORE: And then a third and then a fourth.

WENDT: Yes, that right.

MOORE: All girls, (giggle). Is there anything that I forgot to ask you, that you would like to add to the interview?

WENDT: I would like to say I have had very good health and I have been blessed with this church because I have been a part of it for so long and I think the community has been wonderful for us. We had so many nice friends and we were able to travel a lot, we didn't go anywhere until the last daughter was in college. Sometimes we would go around the USA for one and then the next would be over seas.

I have been everywhere I really wanted to go. I do not want to go to China ever, do not want to Russia ever, I did go to Saint Petersburg to see the museums, but I did it from a cruse ship. Came over there, did that and got back on the cruse ship. I did not go into the Orient. We have been all over Europe and all over Australia and New Zealand and everywhere that I really wanted to go. I have been to Germany and Italy many times. I have studied the art there.

MOORE: I am so grateful that you were able to come in this morning and share your stories. We traveled back in time, which gives us a perspective of growing up in Fort Bend County.

WENDT: Thank you.

Interview ends