

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees: **Joe Darst Robinson**

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Interviewer: Amy Hardin Pena

Transcriber: Carlos Rubalcaba

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11 Pages



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Transcript

PENA: Today is April 20th 2013. My name is Amy Hardin Pena. I am interviewing Mr. Joe Robinson at 611 Morton St. Richmond, TX. The interview is being conducted by the Ft. Bend County Historical Commission and is part of the Ft. Bend Historical Commission Oral History Project. We are here today at the request of Henderson Wessendorff Foundation taking interviews related to family members.

Please tell us your name and date of birth.

ROBINSON: Joe Darst Robinson September 28th, 1951.

PENA: Could you please give us a brief outline of your connection to Ft. Bend County? How you got here, what kind of work you do, your family, your community involvement.

ROBINSON: I was born here in 1951. I lived at 1222 Burnet St. Anida Darst Robinson and Joe Martin Robinson were my parents. My schooling started at Calvary School for the first couple of years, and then to Jane Long Elementary and then to Lamar High, which at that time was the only High School here. Today I am the Chairman of the Board of the Henderson Wessendorf Foundation. Also, I am the Grants Officer. I am a licensed professional counselor by trade. After college...I went to SMU for college... came back, worked one year for Joe Clyde at the insurance agency when it was over at 203 South Third St. I moved to Austin, came back in '97 when both of them were a little bit older. I worked for Texana MHMR, too, for a little while when I first moved here.

PENA: Could you tell us if your connection was primarily with Joe Clyde Wessendorf or with Loise Henderson Wessendorff or both?

ROBINSON: It was with both. At fifteen years old, when Anida [my mother] passed away, they choose to move me into their house and then adopt me. I do remember them from earlier in my life. They'd had always been Little Aunt Loise and Joe Clyde because Big Aunt Loise was Loise's mother who was the sister to my grandmother, Annie Jackson Darst. My biggest first memory of Joe Clyde being helpful to me was when I was in the eighth grade. There was an incident with a bottle rocket. I ended up having to go into Methodist Hospital. There were no other hospitals between here and there. Dr. Kleinman had taken some of the stuff out of my eye and he recommended we go to the emergency room. My mother called Joe Clyde.

At that time, Joe Clyde was probably a special agent or something with the sheriff department because he had the Motorola in his car just like all the police did in town. While I was in the back seat of his car, he was talking all the way in to the police saying, "I am coming in with my flashers on. I am going to Methodist Hospital." He probably got me there quicker than anybody else could have. Now, that I remember, very very vividly in my life!

PENA: How old were you at that time?

ROBINSON: Eighth grade, thirteen-ish.

PENA: In what context did you best know them?

ROBINSON: All my life I had known them as cousins. I can remember even younger, that my grandmother Annie Darst, would pick up Lourena Farmer and we would go swimming in the pool at 700 Hillcrest. I must have been five or six years old at that time. So I have these remembrances of Loise and Joe Clyde forever. And then I moved in with them at fifteen years old. They had never had children, and I hadn't had a full set of parents. We all learned how to play family together. That was wonderful listening to them talk and discuss...I remember Mr. Henderson, who was Loise's dad, say that Joe Clyde was as handy as a pocket on a shirt. Mr. Henderson and Joe Clyde had unbelievably similar interests in hunting animals, in people, being on boards, and philanthropy. They were amazingly alike. I can remember my mother saying that her mother and father always sided with him when there was a disagreement. The one thing I do remember being told is that they were married at her parents' house because he was Southern Baptist and she was Methodist and they couldn't get the families to come together on which church to marry in. So the wedding was at No. 5 West 11th and the reception was at the Houston Country Club. That was in '47.

PENA: Will you describe what kind of man Joe Clyde was.

ROBINSON: Larger than life... strong, stern but caring. It was amazing, he would give you his opinion and he really didn't really care if I took it or not. He never said, "I told you so," later on. But I always knew...it always turned out he was right! Around town, I remember Richard Joseph always said there is the right way and the Wessendorff way. That was one of the sayings that we all kind of followed in our lives. He could get along with anyone from a ranch hand to a chairman of the board.

I remember being at a party and I can't remember the guy's name, I think it was John Doré, was going on and on about how he had all this, and he had all these cattle, and he had these businesses and everything. Joe Clyde was just standing there nodding. Mr. Doré was new to town at that time. And Joe was saying, "I have a few cattle and I do a little business around here", that's all he said. I am sure Mr. Doré learned within a few hours that there would be more things that he did.

PENA: What can you tell me about his work life?

ROBINSON: He loved to work; making money excited him... from the stock market to selling cotton to ranching. He always said real estate was good to him. It was amazing the things he would buy that would turn out to be gold mines. He bought some land down in Kennedy... thirty years ago? [looks at Jack Moore who is in the interview room and interjects.]

MOORE: Quite awhile back, closer to 40.

ROBINSON: Yeah. And he would go hunting. I think he bought it mostly because of quail hunting. Now it happens to be over the Eagle Ford shale so it has been an amazing source of income for the Henderson Wessendorff foundation. I went to the horse races with him one time. He lost everything the first day. He pulled out the racing form and he sat there and he read that thing all night long. He got up the next day and won every race, the daily double and everything. So I don't think he was lucky...I don't think the man ever believed in luck. He said you make your own luck, but he was always prepared for whatever opportunity...no matter what it was when it walked in the door. So that's what I remember.

PENA: Tell me about his leisure activities.

ROBINSON: Hunting, fishing, driving and looking...I think he loved to drive and look. He would do that a least twice a day. He loved land. Uncle Bob [Henderson]...Loise's father, had some land on Chocolate Bayou down near Alvin...he would go out there and I think ended up being the one who sold it to Monsanto or General Crude first and then Monsanto...I don't know if you ever heard of popcorn rice...that's where that was developed. I think they still do that there. So he loved land and he loved to hunt, fish, he just loved being outdoors. He loved dogs. He loved animals of all kinds.

PENA: What do you think was his favorite thing to do to relax?

ROBINSON: The driving around...yeah. I think driving around and thinking, because if you went on a car ride with him, he hardly said anything. It used to drive Loise nuts, but he'd be very quiet... but boy...you could drive through a field and he'd get to the end and say... "There are 87 cattle and two calves, eight of them are heifers." Really! If you drove back thru there, you know, he hit it perfectly and you wouldn't even see him doing that. He didn't miss anything. To me his leisure was his alone time because he wasn't by himself much except when he was in his car riding around. That was when he was in his Mercury station wagon. He always had his station wagon.

PENA: What were the community organizations that he was a part of?

ROBINSON: Rotary, Masons, Oak Bend... Polly Ryon Hospital, the History Museum, Calvary Church... the sanctuary that is there now with that beautiful stained glass. He was senior warden when that happened. He never was in government. He never ran for office or wanted to ever run for anything like that as far as I know...I think he was totally happy with who was there at the time. I think he was involved in everything. Every organization at one time or another in this town he had something to do with it. The fair, Oh My God!...he would go to the fair and buy something for the insurance agency, something from a child for the lumber yard, for the bank, for the development company. So eight or ten kids every year would get money because he'd buy their animals and put them wherever. That is one thing he always did. He was always helping the community kind of behind the scenes. I remember that when Calvary was trying to enlarge the school back there, there was a street that needed to be closed, but there was a house on the street. The city was okay with closing the street but there was a house there...I believe the lady that had lived in it had passed away. It was Miss Howell that taught me at Jane Long [Elementary School]. I think in third grade. And all of a sudden that house just got moved. You never knew, but the priest came and told me that Dad paid for all of that and didn't want anybody to know. ...the not wanting anybody to know thing was just huge to him. You knew...everybody knew but ...you had a hard time pulling those kinds of things out of him. I don't know how much was done around this town.

I know that I remember hearing that there would be a police officer who got shot or something and the family needed help. He would call Richard Joseph, probably Hilmar Moore and people around town and they figured out a way to take care of it. There was no welfare or any of that, those guys just did that kind of thing.

PENA: Were there any major changes that occurred in Richmond or Ft. Bend County that he was a part of or helped with?

ROBINSON: I would think that the development of North Richmond, Maiden Lane was one huge thing. I think getting the George Ranch...George Foundation... where it is was a huge accomplishment. I don't know if Polly Ryon would have made it if he hadn't something to do with it. Calvary Church, built a huge sanctuary that is still there. The lumber yard...it was a timing thing. You could come into this town in the late 60's or during the 60's. You could buy a lot, get the house plans, get the house built with lumber from Wessendorff lumber, get it insured here and walk across the street and get your loan. Now I am sure RICO would go nuts with something like that now. But in my opinion, you could come here to one place and all of that could be done at one time for you. So to me the development of Long Woods and Laurel Oaks was because of him. If it hadn't been for him, I don't know how the town would have gone.

PENA: So he was involved in the growth of the subdivisions and the town?

ROBINSON: I believe so and the residential development, too.

PENA: Do you know anything about his land in Kennedy? I think you spoke about that a little bit.

ROBINSON: It is beautiful. There is quail and deer out there. He wanted a place... away. That was a good drive out there and I know there was a trailer out there. He would go out there and go hunting and he would take your dad [Jack Moore's dad, Hilmer] and Richard [Joseph] and Moses and all them down there for weekends and they'd have a good time.

PENA: What is your favorite or most vivid memory of Joe?

ROBINSON: He was always there. I mean, I could count on him to be there... whatever problem I had. I see him more as Dad than I do as business or as all the other stuff. I could ask him anything...he was just always there to make me feel safe.

I can't...well you know I can too. I hope Jeff tells this, the year I worked here [giggle]. ... when they built the overpass at 762 they dug a little pond over there. For some reason, I guess the game warden, Bullard, gave him an alligator at some point or another... and a little man across the river called and said, "I have an alligator for you."

So Jeff Council and me and Joe Clyde got in his Mercury Station Wagon and drove over there and this guy had a baby five foot alligator in the back of his car and we got that into the back of Joe Clyde's station wagon. I was sitting in the back seat and he and Jeff were in the front seat and that alligator moved and its nose came up and I was in the front seat. I remember him laughing. He thought that was really funny that I could move that fast [laughter]. Oh, you never knew! [Chuckles]

PENA: Did he ever about his World War II experiences.

ROBINSON: Nooo, he did not! Except to tell me this one thing... one day I asked him, "You take a nap at lunch time." Power nap, we didn't call them that back then. But he would always come in and kind of settle down for about twenty minutes after lunch. He would be dressed, and he would take newspaper and use it like covers. I asked him, "That can't be warm, it can't help." "That's what I used in the trenches... in Italy. That's all we had was news papers to read and to cover up with". That's the only thing he ever said. [pause]

PENA: What about Loise? What can you tell me about her and her family?

ROBINSON: Her dad was Robert W. Henderson and her mother was Loise Jackson Henderson. They lived in Houston at #5 West 11th. Loise was their only child. Joe Clyde was an only child. I am an only child. That's why we argued a lot because we all...knew we were right...because we were "only kids". We were raised that way. She had a good life... Kinkaid, Hockaday, went to the University of Texas. I think the thing about her that is most vivid for me in my life is she was kind of a savior; she was everybody in the family's guardian angel. If your mother would get really sick or something, she was always there to help either financially or with support.

When her dad died in 1960 it really hurt her. I was only nine then, but I learned later, when she bought the land out in Blanco, that he was a very strong part of her life and she really missed him. She was very depressed and she had a spiritual awakening or something. She had a dream that she was supposed to go out and buy this land and let people come out and get to know Jesus and not charge them. When she told me that story I guess I was 15 or 16, and I was out at the land that she had purchased. I remember going out there and seeing it before there where any buildings or anything. This is the Well Spring Retreat Center in Blanco, Texas.

Her psychology and spirituality were big things for her, and reading. I can remember three or four books on the dining room table, two or three books up by the nightstand, books in her car. She read voraciously and I mean...I have some books right now where her underlining and "good point" reminds me of so and so. It is just amazing how much knowledge she acquired by reading and learning. Because of that, she helped start the Institute of Religion a long time ago where getting doctors and psychiatrists together helped them realize that they are both trying to help people, and they ought to get together because there was value in their talking back and forth. Her religious conviction and spirituality and knowledge and her desire to help people with mental things was amazing. It was a very, very strong driving force in her life. Which was good because there were several people in her family and extended family she was able to help by getting them counseling or having them taken down to Galveston for some in-patient care for a little while before anyone had ever considered that. That, to me, is the huge effect that she had on me and on this world.

PENA: How did that translate into her helping the Ft. Bend County and Richmond Community? What did she do? What organizations was she part of?

ROBINSON: She pretty much was a native Houstonian. She did a lot of things more in Houston with organizations, but out here she would adopt a family or a kid. If you had a kid, I mean a family of five or six kids and she knew they weren't going to get any Christmas, she made sure they did. She was altar guild at the Calvary Church for a long, long time. She didn't like the wine that they had so she was the one that bought the wine. She would run things her way and it would usually go very well. She didn't do very well with "no". You just kind of got used to that and went on.

PENA: What is your favorite memory of Loise?

ROBINSON: Joe Clyde always went to bed at about 9:00 or 9:30 and listened to baseball games upstairs and she was a night owl, and I was kind of a night owl. Sometimes I would come in from dates or something and she'd be up and sitting and watching Johnny Carson. Watching her laugh and get tickled where there were tears rolling down her face. Those are the memories to me that are just really amazing. I really liked that part of her.

PENA: Is there anything that I have forgotten to ask you but you would like to add?

ROBINSON: I have several things about Loise that listening to Jack Moore's interview stimulated me to remember. She was the ultimate hostess. He spoke about coming over and eating and if you didn't have the cup of coffee and eat the cake you weren't going to get to any business! I watched her give parties and do things. She thought about each person that was coming and if this one didn't like this or like that. There was something special for everyone. She was the ultimate hostess.

The other thing I remember vividly, if it wasn't for Loise, there would be no chapel at the Austin State Hospital for people who have mental issues who stay in-patient. She made sure that chapel was built and it had stained glass windows in it. They were going to build a building with no windows. I remember her saying that was inappropriate for those people. She was also part of the Mental Health Association of Texas back before anybody even knew it existed. Her family had a house out in Hunt Texas about a block and a half from Camp Mystic where she went during the summers. In Houston, back at that time a lot of people left, it was so hot. There was no air conditioning so you went places... Colorado, places like that. They went out to Hunt in 1932? 33? I think Mystic started in '36. There was a big flood that year. The house was right there and Uncle Bob made sure some of the campers got out and did a lot of things to help when there was a flood. I remember hearing one of the reasons Loise didn't get along was everyday Uncle Bob would get up and take her horse over to camp Mystic for her to ride. That may have created some of the issues she dealt with as a child with the other children.

I don't know how many other people she funded to go to camp Mystic over the years. There are people I have met in my life that she went to Mystic with and they stayed in contact from when she was six years old to when she died. A lot of these people had also gone to Kinkaid and the University of Texas so she was around these people all her life. Mystic was huge for her, she loved it. Now this house in Hunt Texas, Echo Rock she has left to me, Bennett Ferguson Chapman and Brad Ferguson. We are allowed with some cash to keep it going for a certain period of time. We still get to go out and I have a lot of old pictures of Echo Rock which was one of her favorite places. That was just the name of it. There is a poem there about Echo Rock. When you go out there and visit it, the chimney and a lot the rock work on the outside is still the original. When you go out there it is as if you're with them [Loise and Joe Clyde] again. It is really a neat thing to do.

I'm going to move over to Joe Clyde now. The man had the most superb manners of any human being I have ever met in my life. When Loise walked into the room he would stand up. I was taught to do that, too. How he treated people, male and female, was amazing to me. His manners were superb. Jack talked about summer jobs. That summer job he and I were together. He spoke true about all of that. Mr. Wessendorff wanted me to understand the value of work. I think I was bad mouthing having to go back to school. So one summer I got to work at the cotton gin. The planters' cotton gin was over here across the railroad tracks on Second or Third Street. I never complained about school again. That was...sun up to sun down, you ate there. If a farmer brought in cotton at dark, you couldn't let it sit because it might get wet, so you stayed and got it done. That was an amazing job to have. I learned many things at that job about cotton and about stands and about people. That was a hard job and it really woke me up.

I also got to work at the lumberyard for him. One year, I remember working during the summer and Dr. Robinson who is now the doctor over at the Health Center was working there, too. So we knew each other at the lumberyard. There are so many people...I believe that any time you run into anybody that says, "Oh yeah, I lived in Richmond." If you asked them, "Did you work for the Wessendorff's?" and they say, "No", then they didn't live here. Somewhere along the way almost everybody has worked for them or for something of theirs.

Now also with Joe Clyde there is something that was taped [in his desk drawer]. I still get to sit at his desk and there is something that is taped in there that I would like to get into this [recording]. [Sounds of Mr. Robinson moving away from the microphone. His voice sounds distant when he resumes speaking]

You can hear me if I am loud. In his desk, taped to the bottom of his desk drawer are five rules:

- ◆ *Be interested in other people*
- ◆ *Do not criticize other people*
- ◆ *Do not brag*
- ◆ *Be able to accept criticism*
- ◆ *Do not hold a grudge*

And beneath that is taped the serenity prayer.

God, grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And wisdom to know the difference.

I believe these are some of the reasons that Joe Clyde could do the things that he did and had the life he had. That is all I really wanted to add.

PENA: Thank you, those were important things.