

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Benny Andrew Wleczyk**

Interview Date: 09/05/2018

Interviewer: Karl Baumgartner

Transcriber: Sylvia Vacek

Location: Rosenberg, Texas

31 Pages



This oral history is copyrighted 2019, by the Fort Bend County Historical Commission. All Rights Reserved. For information contact: Fort Bend County Historical Commission, Attn: Chairman-Oral History Committee, 301 Jackson St., 5th Floor, Richmond, TX, 77469.

Terms and Conditions

These oral histories do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the County Historical Commission or Fort Bend County. This file may not be modified or changed in any way without the express written permission of the Fort Bend County Historical Commission.

This file may not be redistributed for profit.

Please do not 'hot link' to this file.

Please do not repost this file.



Transcript

BAUMGARTNER: Benny, I'm going to start with an introduction. Today is September 5th, 2018. My name is Karl Baumgartner and I am interviewing Mr. Benny Wleczyk in Rosenberg, Texas. This interview is being conducted on behalf of the Fort Bend County Historical Commission of Richmond, Texas as part of their Oral History Project. Mr. Wleczyk is a long term resident of Fort Bend County with broad experience in farming and ranching and also business operations experience. He is an important member of the Fort Bend County Subsidence District. Benny, what is your full legal name?

WLECZYK: My full legal name is Benny Andrew Wleczyk.

BAUMGARTNER: What is your date of birth?

WLECZYK: July 4, 1933.

BAUMGARTNER: Fourth of July, that's cool. Where were you born?

WLECZYK: I was born in Rosenberg in the old hospital on the corner of Avenue M and Highway 36. There is a two story building still standing over there that used to be the hospital. A new hospital was established across from Wells Fargo Bank, on the other side of Avenue H. It was torn down many years ago; by then the new hospital had been built in Richmond, Polly Ryon Hospital. I was born in Rosenberg but I grew up on the family farm in Fairchilds.

BAUMGARTNER: When did your family come to Fort Bend County?

WLECZYK: My father came to Texas from Poland in 1902 and my mother came here as a young girl about the same time. Poland was occupied by Germany then and you had to have a permit to leave the country. At that time you had to have a sponsor who would make sure that you would not be living off the government when you got to this country. My father had a cousin here and my grandfather had a brother here long enough to qualify as a sponsor.

BAUMGARTNER: Did they first come to the Rosenberg area?

WLECZYK: My grandfather moved to Burton with my mom and his family, and my father moved south of Austin, to Hutto.

BAUMGARTNER: What was your dad's name; how old was he when he came here?

WLECZYK: Andrew Wleczyk. He was about twenty four or twenty five, somewhere in there. He was a farmer in Poland. He farmed in Hutto for a few years and made a few dollars and then moved to Rosenberg. He had a cousin who lived on Band Road behind the Fairgrounds. He came down and farmed that property and bought that property.

Following his move here, he reared two families as a result of the death of his first wife. With his first

wife, Frances, they had eight children and she died in 1932. He knew my mother's family from the old country; they had also emigrated here from Poland. He and my mom married after his first wife's death.

BAUMGARTNER: Was she was about the same age?

WLECZYK: My mother, Katie, was much younger when she came over, about twenty years younger. They married in 1932 and I was born the next year.

BAUMGARTNER: Were there any others after you?

WLECZYK: A brother, Willie, who is deceased, and two sisters. A sister, Nancy Wenzel, has also passed away, and my sister, Julianne Elmore, is here in town. She works in the office at Greenlawn Davis Funeral Home.

There were four of us. My father's first family had eight children and they have already passed. In other words myself and my sister are the only two left of the Andrew Wleczyk family that came to this country.

BAUMGARTNER: Did you know your grandparents?

WLECZYK: I knew my grandfather and my grandmother on my mom's side. They lived first in Burton and then moved to Washington County between Brenham and Chapel Hill. They came over right after Dad did.

My grandfather, my mom's father, was named Andrew Rybarski. In Poland he worked for the German Army. He applied earlier to come here but they wouldn't let him go. It took him two years to get a permit to take his wife and two kids and bring them to this country. My mother, just a young girl then, had actually been born in Poland but because she did not have a birth certificate they put down that she was born in Galveston. I had seven uncles and aunts and my mother was the eighth sibling. They lived in Washington County; all are deceased.

BAUMGARTNER: Are you still in touch with any of your cousins?

WLECZYK: We have had over thirty reunions.

BAUMGARTNER: Oh really, that's great.

WLECZYK: We still have a Rybarski reunion in Brenham that my cousin and I got started way back when. We still meet; I think there are about three or four of us, the originals, and the rest have passed on but we still get together and socialize with one another.

BAUMGARTNER: You said that you had to have a sponsor here to come into the country attesting that you would be able to support yourself.

WLECZYK: A sponsor responsible for your daily living.

BAUMGARTNER: Today with all the argument and discussion about immigration, a lot of people now are saying that is what we should have, for someone to come in the country, they should have someone to guarantee that they are going to have a means of support.

WLECZYK: Both of my parents had to do that to get to this country.

THE FAMILY FARM

BAUMGARTNER: Where was the farm where you grew up?

WLECZYK: Right in Fairchilds about ten miles south of Rosenberg, one hundred acres on FM 361 next to what used to be the Stavinotha store. When my father first came to Fort Bend County he started farming right behind the fairgrounds where Stella Komandosky had property, later purchased by David Leffer. He farmed there a number of years and he acquired several other properties. He was a cotton farmer but during the depression he did not diversify and that cost him. Cotton got to where it was so cheap it wasn't worth anything.

BAUMGARTNER: Why was that; just too much cotton being farmed?

WLECZYK: It was the Depression. There was no demand for it. The price went down so low.

BAUMGARTNER: So when you were a little boy on the farm I guess everybody had to help with chores when they were little kids?

WLECZYK: Before we started school we started helping with the chores. I was the oldest. I milked the cows, fed the hogs, and picked the eggs. We lived off the garden, and I did a lot of work in the garden. Come summertime I chopped cotton and picked cotton.

BAUMGARTNER: How old were you then when you were doing the cotton? When did you start doing that and how long did that last?

WLECZYK: About five or six years old until I left home.

BAUMGARTNER: What is the difference between chopping and picking cotton?

WLECZYK: Chopping cotton is for when you plant too many stands, and you must chop it with a hoe so that each stalk is about three or four or five inches apart. If there is any grass in the row you chop the grass off. You used a chopping hoe. For the other portion of the row you used a cultivator attached to a tractor which had sweeps on it that plowed up the grass.

BAUMGARTNER: You had a tractor, right? Did you use mules?

WLECZYK: No. My father's first tractor that I remember was a FM12, a Farmall International. It had no power steering, and to start it you had a crank up front. At the beginning I couldn't start it.

BAUMGARTNER: You were too little?

WLECZYK: I was too little to crank it and get it started. I drove that tractor umpteen times. It did not have rubber tires, it had steel lugs.

BAUMGARTNER: So what is "Picking Cotton"?

WLECZYK: It starts with leaning over and getting the cotton out of the bolls all the way to hauling it to the gin. You get a sack around eight foot long, some longer, and you stoop over a row of cotton and you use your fingers to pick the cotton out of the square hull. You pull it out and put it in your sack that you are dragging behind you. You have to be stooped over the row because the cotton stalk is about two feet tall. I swore I broke my back many a times stooping over for a long period. You picked until you got a sack full, or, if you were a little kid, an amount that you could pull. You take it to a trailer where they had a scale and you weigh it and the amount of pounds that you had in there is what you get credit for and what you get paid for. Then the cotton is hauled to the gin.

BAUMGARTNER: So which was a better job, picking or chopping?

WLECZYK: I'd rather chop. I could chop all day long. I would be tired but I didn't have any pain in my back.

When it rained and you had weeds in your field or next to your field, you go in there and pull them. We did not have chemicals to spray weeds then. It was easy to pull them out because the ground was wet, you were barefoot. You would go over there and pull the weeds and that is the way that we kept our field semi-clean from weeds.

Now they use chemicals to kill certain weeds, like Johnson grass and Cabbage Weeds. Some of those like Johnson grass you can chop it off but it will grow right back, but if you pull it when it is wet, you pull all the roots out. Later on we would sometimes hire some people to pick cotton and I was the scale man. I would weigh the cotton for the individual cotton pickers, and mark down how much each one picked.

BAUMGARTNER: That sounds to me a better job than picking.

WLECZYK: Well, I graduated into to it. I did that for a long time.

BAUMGARTNER: You said you had a garden and you spent plenty of time in the garden.

WLECZYK: We had a big garden, maybe an acre and a half. We would harvest the vegetables out of the garden and we would bring that to town to sell. In addition to vegetables we had plums, figs, carrots, peach trees, pear trees...

BAUMGARTNER: Really, plums and figs?

WLECZYK: With the figs we made what they called fig jelly, and I still do it now. I made fifty jars this year of fig jelly.

BAUMGARTNER: When I think of a garden, I think more of vegetables.

WLECZYK: Potatoes, tomatoes, lettuce, all vegetables, cucumbers, cantaloupes, melons. We lived off the garden and the animals, hogs, and cows. We had twelve or thirteen cows and I would milk half and mom would milk half. That was done twice a day. We had a lot of hens, chickens, and eggs.

BAUMGARTNER: What language was spoken when you were growing up?

WLECZYK: My mother was of Polish descent and didn't speak English, so we spoke Polish at home. In the community other languages were spoken, Polish, Bohemian, German...

BAUMGARTNER: Is there a difference between Polish and Bohemian?

EDITOR'S NOTE: Czech was sometimes referred to as Bohemian.

WLECZYK: Yes, there is some similarity though there is a difference. But you could understand what the others were trying to say.

BAUMGARTNER: I didn't realize that. I thought it was kind of the same. Of course German was a different language.

WLECZYK: My father could speak German because he was there long enough; he learned it from the German government. My grandfather took care of horses for the German government, and my father was a farmer for the German government.

BAUMGARTNER: You said your mother spoke Polish; what was your mother like?

WLECZYK: I have to give a lot of respect to my mother. She always reminded me, "Ben, if you want something... go earn it. You may have to suffer, you go earn it." It was all spoken in Polish and that stayed with me and it still does. I guess that is the reason I have worked as hard as I have.

BAUMGARTNER: She must have been a big contributor to your work ethic.

WLECZYK: She was a good demonstrator of it. She worked hard herself and she taught me so much of the things that I learned when I was little, How to do things. When milking cows, you have to wash the udders at times because they walk in mud and get splashed on. You want that milk clean so you have to wash it. That was my part of my job.

BAUMGARTNER: You were the oldest, right? Growing up then took place about the same time frame as the start of World War II. Do you remember anything about the war?

WLECZYK: During World War II we had a battery radio at first. My father would listen to the news and I would go there and listen also. They would talk about the war, on what was taking place in Japan. Later on, in the forties, we got involved in the war and that is how we got our communications, through that battery operated radio for a long time before we went to an electric radio. I remember discussions and talking about the soldiers on what they did and their activities.

BAUMGARTNER: What was your dad like?

WLECZYK: My dad was older because his first wife passed away and he then married my mother, so he was slower in work activity but he had much knowledge. He taught me a lot about tractor work and agricultural ways of doing things. My father could speak German, Polish, English and Czech. He knew four languages.

BAUMGARTNER: That is where you got your brains. That is pretty impressive.

WLECZYK: He was good at it and he also made it a point when he went to town. In those days the time to visit Needville was Saturday when you came to get your groceries or Sunday when you go to church. You visit with everybody; you didn't just go in and leave quickly. You stayed there and talked to different people and he would speak in English, or if they were German people they would talk in German, if they were Polish people they would speak in Polish. He was fluent all the way through.

BAUMGARTNER: Where did you go to church?

WLECZYK: St. Michael's in Needville.

BAUMGARTNER: The Catholic Church. That was the predominant church I suppose?

WLECZYK: Yes. We lived in Fairchilds about five miles from Needville and I remember when the road between Fairchilds and Needville was a dirt road. When it rained the car would get in those ruts and all of a sudden another car would meet you and somebody had to back up and get to an intersection. There were four intersections before you got to Highway 36. Sometimes you had to back out all the way to Needville. It always amazes me, doing it then and thinking about how it is now.

BAUMGARTNER: Everybody went to church on Sunday?

WLECZYK: Yes. You had a lot more participation.

BAUMGARTNER: What language did the pastor speak? You had the different nationalities there.

WLECZYK: Father Joseph Klobouk (1937-1954) was his name. He was Czech but he spoke in English. The church transactions all took place in English.

BAUMGARTNER: What if some of the people could barely understand English or could not understand

it.

WLECZYK: I didn't understand it but I learned it. At that time they used to have what they called beef clubs, a group of individuals and farmers around Fairchilds who raised animals. Every two or three weeks they would decide what animal to kill and slaughter for the purpose of distributing food to everyone that belonged to the club. Two or three weeks later it would be someone else's turn to do the same thing. That is how we got fresh meat.

BAUMGARTNER: That was a smart thing to do. There seems a lot more sense of community in those days. Do you remember some of the other families in your club?

WLECZYK: The Vaceks, Seilers, Richter's, Kreneks, some Zwahrs, several Zwahr families. The Gajewskys were our neighbors and they were involved in it. Also the Novaks, Schneiders, Grigars, Walentas...

BAUMGARTNER: Those still remain such common names around here today.

WLECZYK: As part of the beef club, you had certain animals that it was necessary to keep the meat cold. The Horelica Ice Company that used to be here in town would have a man and a truck with ice comes to Fairchilds once a week. He would be there at a given time, same time every week. You go over there and get your ice and take it and put it into your ice box. Preserve it for several days. I've still got the ice box in my game room.

GROWING UP IN THE DEPRESSION

BAUMGARTNER: Did you have electricity then?

WLECZYK: No.

BAUMGARTNER: You had outdoor plumbing, I guess, or outdoor toilets.

WLECZYK: We called it an outhouse. We did not have any running water and we did not have any electricity till later on. When I was a little guy it was the outhouse and you had some containers that you could keep in the house and had a lid on it if you needed to go to the bathroom and not go outside.

BAUMGARTNER: We had an outhouse when I was growing up in Oklahoma till I was three years old. I had to walk about forty or fifty yards down to the outhouse. When a norther blew in, it got cold in wintertime.

WLECZYK: It is the same thing they had here at school, Concord School. When I started school in the first grade, their outhouse was about eighty yards from the school. Men and women were together away from the school. That's just the way it was.

BAUMGARTNER: Were you still farming any cotton then?

WLECZYK: It did just not bring a high enough price. We didn't make any money on it.

BAUMGARTNER: Back on the farm when you were growing up did you get to see much of your half-brothers and half-sisters?

WLECZYK: No, at that time the youngest one was around for a while, I remember him, Tom, but then he went into the service. They were pretty much all married.

BAUMGARTNER: They had already moved on and had their own lives. So they were not around to help your mom and dad.

WLECZYK: No. My father went through turmoil during the depression in 1933. He owned quite a bit of property and it was not paid for. The government would let you keep a hundred acres and the rest of it went back to the guy that had the lien on it. So he chose the hundred acre farm in Fairchilds.

BAUMGARTNER: That was about the same time frame when his first wife died, he married your mother and you were born.

WLECZYK: Yes. The economic collapse took the fire out of him. Mother and others I have talked to told me, it just made a different man out of him.

BAUMGARTNER: Going through the Depression like that.

WLECZYK: Yeah. What made it hard on all of us during the Depression was that right after I was born, raw commodities weren't worth anything. Livestock and cotton was not worth anything. If you made a bad crop, you were in bad shape. That hit us two years in a row and that is when we went to a garden for self-supporting food. There were a lot of other people that lived the same way to survive.

BAUMGARTNER: When did you get electricity, do you remember?

WLECZYK: When I started school I know that I studied with a lamp. Somewhere in the early forties we got electricity. It was just for the lights. We had nothing else that you could plug in. A little at a time you got things that plugged into electricity.

When I was first growing up, we had a potbelly stove. You put wood in there to feed it and you had a vent through the wall where the smoke would go out. It was the same kind of system we had for our cook stove. You would put wood in there and it would vent it out and also you had a certain portion of that stove that you keep hot for whatever you wanted to cook for lunch. That was my mother's job.

BAUMGARTNER: You took what you raised from the garden to the grocery in Rosenberg?

WLECZYK: Whatever we didn't use we would bring to town. After cotton failed, the garden was our livelihood. We would bring the eggs and the butter and some buttermilk to Melvin Daily on Third Street

there. We put the milk in; I would start off with a gallon jug shaking it back and forth and made butter. When we had a surplus from the garden or he had a surplus and we still had some left, we took it to Fort Bend Produce, Gene Allison on Avenue G. He was a wholesaler for meat, chickens, and he would buy our eggs and our chickens, too.

In season, if you had tomatoes you would bring them to town and the grocery market would buy the produce from you. If you had made good crops and word got out that you had good tomatoes and if somebody down the road did not have tomatoes, we would swap tomatoes for something else. It was word of mouth communication. You didn't weigh those tomatoes; you just looked at a bucket of tomatoes and made an exchange. We made sure our eggs were clean. Because we had clean eggs, they would always buy our eggs.

BAUMGARTNER: What do you mean clean?

WLECZYK: If you leave an egg in the hen house overnight after you picked eggs, by the time you get there tomorrow she may have dispensed some waste. That waste got on the eggs so you had to clean it up. If you came over there with clean eggs then that was an asset on your behalf.

BAUMGARTNER: How often would you go the grocery?

WLECZYK: We would most likely go to town once a week, every Saturday, to deliver that merchandise and we would get paid for it and we had money for sugar and salt and coffee enough to get by. The garden and the livestock is where our money came from to exist.

LEAVING SCHOOL AND GOING TO WORK

BAUMGARTNER: Growing up in a little crossroads like Fairchilds, where did you go to school?

WLECZYK: Concord School, about a mile and half north of Fairchilds. There is a cemetery there and it was next to that cemetery. I remember going to school walking and I learned to drive a 1934 Ford we had. First was a Model A, then we had a 1934 Ford.

BAUMGARTNER: How old were you when you started driving?

WLECZYK: My father let me drive to the mailbox and back when I was eight years old. That is where I learned how to drive.

BAUMGARTNER: That was like a quarter mile or something?

WLECZYK: Yes. He didn't want to walk, he would drive, so I would go with him and I learned how to drive by watching him. It was exciting for me so I always drove myself to go get the mail and come back. When I was about twelve years old I guess, if we had a bad day weather-wise, I drove to school which was about a mile and half away.

BAUMGARTNER: You drove to school when you were twelve?

WLECZYK: Yes. To stay with the law, when I was fourteen years old I got my first driver's license. You could apply for a hardship license, and I got a license at age fourteen.

BAUMGARTNER: Concord, was that a one room school?

WLECZYK: It was a three room schoolhouse from first grade to the sixth grade; then it went to seventh. I couldn't speak English when I started to school so I wound up two years in the first grade.

BAUMGARTNER: Was that common?

WLECZYK: Yes. There were a lot of Czech, German and Polish children and a lot of them could only speak the language that they spoke at home. If they did speak any English it was a very broken language; that is the way it was at that time. I am of Polish descent, my mother could not speak English, so we spoke Polish at home.

I stayed until the eighth grade; then they eliminated eighth grade at Concord and they bused me to Jane Long in Richmond. I went there for one year and then from there my ninth grade I spent at the Richmond High School.

BAUMGARTNER: Did you go to school with Junior Hartlage; wasn't he about in your grade?

WLECZYK: Same grade, he was one of the farm guys that would play around and get in trouble with the rest of us, just being boys. He was from the Fulshear area.

BAUMGARTNER: What was high school like then? Were any of the boys getting cars?

WLECZYK: A few of them were getting cars. Those that did usually had a job after school and there was quite a bit of that; working in restaurants and service stations. At home we were still having money problems. What we lived on was the garden and the animals. Cotton was not worth very much. Two years in a row it rained and destroyed the crop. Our corn survived so we did have feed to feed animals. I went through the ninth grade and I saw that there was no future in this so I left.

BAUMGARTNER: You left school after ninth grade?

WLECZYK: Yes. I went and got me a job.

BAUMGARTNER: How did you start out? That would have been toward the late forties? What were the different jobs when you were first getting started?

WLECZYK: Yes, sir. I got me a job and I worked for seventy five cents an hour. One of my first jobs was working on a pipeline in Needville, putting tar on a pipe. I blistered because of my fair skin. I quit there and went to work building roads at the George Ranch in the Big Creek area. I worked there for a while

building a board road to an oil rig. They were putting up rigs out there all the time then.

BAUMGARTNER: How old were you then?

WLECZYK: About fifteen, sixteen. A lot of my cousins were from Brenham and had left there because they were from the farm also and went to Houston to get jobs. That is where I got a connection to Houston, because they were living there and a good many of them were older than I was. They helped me to have a place to stay and I got several jobs over there.

BAUMGARTNER: Doing what?

WLECZYK: I worked for the Venetian Blind Company on the north side for a while. I worked for Rainbow Bread but they kept cutting my route every time I built it up so I quit. I worked in a fabrication plant that made roll away beds that belonged to the Robinowitz Brothers. When I worked there I worked the evening shift and I also had a job in the morning for four hours working as a carpenter's helper/clean up man. I started saving money, although I helped my parents some so my brother and sisters would continue to go to school; at that time they were already going to Needville schools.

BAUMGARTNER: The Robinowitz family from Richmond? Did you know Milton Robinowitz when you worked there? Was he a good guy?

WLECZYK: Yes. Later on he used to have a John Deere dealership on Avenue H and I bought equipment from him. He also was a cotton buyer and my father sold him a lot of cotton. Sam Daily and Milton Robinowitz were the two biggest cotton buyers in Rosenberg at one time.

BAUMGARTNER: He must have done quite a few different things; I have always heard his name around.

WLECZYK: He and Hilmar Moore, Mayor of Richmond, were good friends. His family originally owned RB Department Store and at one time they had the grocery store there which they sold out to my in-laws, the Mensiks. It was across the street from where Rude & Sons Sporting Goods was.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Hilmar Guenther Moore was the longest serving mayor in the history of the United States. On September 22, 1949, he was appointed to fill an unexpired term as the Mayor of Richmond, Fort Bend County, Texas. After that, he won 32 consecutive elections, and served a total of 63 years as Mayor. Hilmar Guenther Moore died on December 4, 2012, at the age of 92.



BAUMGARTNER: I used to buy shotguns at Rude & Sons until Walmart opened up and Walmart would sell a 12-gauge for less than Mr. Rude could buy it wholesale. That ran a lot of little companies out of business.

WLECZYK: I worked on a milk truck as a helper which led to my long term career in the milk business. But first, I saved up enough money to buy a gas station. I bought the Humble Service Station at

the corner of Avenue H and Fourth Street catty corner across from the old City Hall.

BAUMGARTNER: You bought a gas station? How old were you by then?

WLECZYK: Twenty or twenty one. I had been working two jobs and I had worked in Houston for a while and made enough money to buy the guy out.

BAUMGARTNER: Do you remember what it cost for you to buy the station?

WLECZYK: I think it was right at \$1,200.

BAUMGARTNER: That is a pretty good sum of money back then for a twenty year old.

WLECZYK: Yes, and he had a big inventory.

BAUMGARTNER: What would be his inventory other than gas?

WLECZYK: Oil, tires. That is how you make your money in a station at that time. The gas was fine but you made your money on polish and wax, washing, greasing, and selling tires.

BAUMGARTNER: How did the deal work?

WLECZYK: Basically I sub-leased the building and bought the inventory. Bill Crosby was his name. I bought him out and then realized I was a little bit short to buy a load of gas for the pumps. They agreed to loan me a load of gas but required that I had to pay for it before I got my next. Before long I was in good shape.

BAUMGARTNER: Humble Oil later became Exxon, right?

WLECZYK: That is right. Hunter Caddel was the Humble Dealer here in town, a good friend. He was the dealer and George Reading was his office manager. He was a good guy and they were just good to deal with. We bought our gas from them.

A lot of things were different then. There were three public pay phones in Rosenberg, and my corner had a pay phone. It was a good way to draw customers to the station and I would make \$80 or \$100 a month commission and didn't have to do anything.

BAUMGARTNER: Off the phone itself? That was a good deal. You got a percentage or something? People have forgotten pay phones. Those used to be everywhere but now they are history.

WLECZYK: That phone was used all the time. I was right across the street from the police station, fire station and city hall. They had two jail cells in there and when the north wind was blowing you could hear guys hollering in there, "Let me out of here, let me out of here" [both laughing].

BAUMGARTNER: They probably got thrown in because they were drunk.

WLECZYK: Yeah, mostly drunk. We had a cab company across the street, catty-corner. Rosenberg Taxi, it was owned by Harley Decker. I drove a cab at night. When the guy wanted to sleep, I drove the cab.

BAUMGARTNER: How many jobs did you have? You have always had more than one job.

WLECZYK: I stayed busy. In back of the station was Garmany and Hartfield, the funeral home. At that time they had their own emergency service; each funeral home had their own. There were many times that when the guy went out, I went along and helped him pick up someone who had passed away. Next door was the police station. Jeff Stovall was police chief. You couldn't find a better guy than that. Because of my age, I had a lot of guys hanging around there working on hot rod cars. At that time Avenue I did not go all the way into Richmond; it just went as far as Lamar High School. Right past the school young guys used it as a race track. Stovall had an officer named Eddie Blackwell, who tried his best to know when these guys were racing so he could give them a speeding ticket. He would hang around there and talk to the guys and try to make friends. They would slip up and squeal on one another. They used to race a lot.

BAUMGARTNER: How did you do with the station?

WLECZYCK: The two biggest operators in Rosenberg were Milton Geick and Johnny Koteras. I was friends with both of them. There were umpteen times when I was asked what am I doing getting all their customers. The key to a service station is the first word: Service. You take care of the service, cleaning their cars. When a car pulled up to the gas pump the first thing you did was get you a rag and check under the hood or a chamois to clean their windshield. If you did that all the time, when they came over there and you washed their car and you did a good job of it, they are coming back. Service was the answer.

BAUMGARTNER: Where were the stations?

WLECZYK: Koteras was next to the Ray Glass business on Avenue H; Geick's is down on the other end next to Texas Grill.

BAUMGARTNER: Milton was a nice man.

WLECZYK: Oh, yes, you couldn't find any better guy. He had Geick's Auto Parts Store and helped me get a credit line and I could start buying parts. The young guys that traded with me were looking for hot rod parts. At that time, the early 50's, hot rods was the thing.

BAUMGARTNER: What were the hot cars in those days?

WLECZYK: Ford and Chevrolet.

BAUMGARTNER: My first car was a 1939 Ford. My granddad bought it new for \$800. He passed it down to my older brother, and then my other brother, then I got it third in line. That was a good car.

WLECZYK: Me, too. I had the same car. It was a good car and I drove it a long time. I drove it to Washington County. I loved to dance and I danced many a dance at the Riverside Hall in Chapel Hill. I had a lot of fun there. In fact while I had the gas station a friend of mine, Kent Kunkel, we went out and bought the dance hall in Fairchilds; Fairchilds Hall.

BAUMGARTNER: Kunkel was a prominent Needville name.

WLECZYK: That was kinfolks. We bought the Fairchilds Hall and he took care of the beer business and I took care of the floor business. You had to hire a band that was popular. The reason you would have a crowd or wouldn't have a crowd was the popularity of the band. You charged a dollar or so at the door so that they could go dance.

The parents of a lot of them would come out and we had two rows of benches all around inside where you could go in and sit down and watch everyone dance and listen to the music. We did not charge those people anything.

BAUMGARTNER: So that was kind of a social outlet for the kids and parents together?

WLECZYK: That's right. Our best money maker was weddings. When a couple decided to have their wedding, the bride and groom would get together with the family and they would start with a Grand March. They would come into the hall, march around, walk around, and dance.

BAUMGARTNER: Big Bohemian weddings.

WLECZYK: Polish, German and even Irish or English, whatever. That was good for us. That was a money maker for us because it was a guaranteed deal.

BAUMGARTNER: For the regular dances, was a dollar pretty expensive admission back then?

WLECZYK: We started off with fifty cents, and we kept going up because we were not making all that much money and it wound up as a dollar.

BAUMGARTNER: Is Fairchilds Hall still out there?

WLECZYK: No, it's shut down. I still have a picture of it here.

JOINING THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY

WLECZYK: I stayed with the service station for a little over two years and I really didn't like that type of business but I did good. Then an opportunity came up where I could go to work for Buddy Hand, who was the Borden's Distributor. I got my own milk route. Before that I was just a helper. I took advantage

of that and we developed a good volume of business. After I got my milk route, I serviced Richmond, Rosenberg, all the way up Highway 90, all the way into Stafford, right this side of Post Oak Road.

BAUMGARTNER: You were getting your milk from where?

WLECZYK: Buddy Hand had an 18-wheeler that had ten-gallon milk cans. He would go to dairies where they would milk the cows and put the milk in these cans, and he would pick them up and take them to Houston.

Borden's would process it; pasteurize it, buttermilk, and chocolate milk, whatever they had to do. I would pick up what we needed already processed in cases, and the next day we would go out and sell it.

BAUMGARTNER: Did you sell bottles?

WLECZYK: First it was bottles, only bottles. All of my business was wholesale. Like my experience in the service station business, the wholesale milk route was based on the same principal, Service. I built up enough business that I hired someone. I got two trucks running. I would get up early in the morning and make the schools and I would work until we finished the route. Then my helper would unload and load a transport over here for the next day. I would check that and take off to check on the farm and whatever else I had to do. After several years I did good and I bought three more trucks. Later on I bought Buddy out.

BAUMGARTNER: Who were your customers?

WLECZYK: Lamar Consolidated School District was my big customer. I had keys to the cafeteria and we would make them early in the morning. Texas Grill was my customer. White's Cafe in Sugar Land. The grocery stores that I had were all Mom and Pop Stores. In Rosenberg I would go across the tracks to serve seven customers that I sold merchandise to. I think there is only one left now.

BAUMGARTNER: Mostly Hispanic at that time?

WLECZYK: A couple of black and the others were Hispanic. Cantu, Davila, Duran...John Duran did a big business across the tracks. He was the largest. These people lived there and that is where they shopped. In downtown Rosenberg you had Melvin Daily, Stavinoha Brothers on Third Street, Simmons was over there, FBC, Berkman was over there, Palace, Mensik's...those were all my customers. Later on



*Prominent Rosenberg business man
community service recipient and devoted
family man, Benny Andrew Wleczyk.*

Weingarten's came into town. That was the first chain and that hurt everybody.

BAUMGARTNER: Was that the big store down off of Avenue H?

WLECZYK: Yes, Eighth and Avenue H. Then the second big chain that came to town was Kmart. They opened where the fairgrounds used to be over there on the north side of Avenue H where Fiesta is now. When Kmart came they hurt us a lot and then Rose Rich Shopping Center was built on the other end of town, and Kroger's.

I spent twenty seven years selling milk. I ended up delivering merchandise in Rosenberg, Highway 90, down Highway 6 South to Dewalt, all the way up to the 610 Loop.

BAUMGARTNER: So you did it into the seventies?

WLECZYK: I started in the fifties and I got out in 1978.

STARTING A FAMILY

BAUMGARTNER: You had a family by then?

WLECZYK: Oh, yes. Growing up, my mom's family was from Washington County and we'd drive to Brenham for church and sometimes drive up Saturday and spend the night. Later on I got my own car and I went to dances and I really enjoyed myself especially in Chapel Hill. There was a dance hall there on the Brazos River.

BAUMGARTNER: How old were you then?

WLECZYK: Seventeen or eighteen. I had some cousins over there and the cousins introduced me to some girls. I made good friends with my cousins and the kids and I liked to dance Polish music. The majority of the music was played in Polish—polkas, waltzes, two-steps. Of course, I also went to a lot of dances here in Fairchilds. I stayed busy.

BAUMGARTNER: What is your wife's name? Where did you meet her?

WLECZYK: Claudia Mensik. I had heard of her and one night there was a party. A group of us guys ran around together, George Urbish, Miles Podlipney, Ed Gerstenberger, Max Wleczyk, Ted Walger, that group. Somebody put together a party at a church on Seventh Street in one of their recreational halls, about fifteen girls and fifteen guys. This was a Halloween Party so everybody wore a mask. At that time Claudia had long black hair and I just thought that was the greatest thing there was. I made it a point to dance with her and we got to be friends. After a courtship, in just about a year we got married.

BAUMGARTNER: How old were you then?

WLECZYK: In my early twenties. I lived on Mulcahy Street when I got married. We moved here, to this

house, in 1972.

BAUMGARTNER: Wow. Forty six years ago. Do you have children?

WLECZYK: Jeannie, Monica, Paul, Laurie, and Bonita. We have five children, eleven grandchildren, plus a great-granddaughter. Paul and his son Nick farm with me. Nick is married and has a little girl.

BAUMGARTNER: That is a blessing.

WLECZYK: I got serious about business. I realized after I left high school that there were some things I needed to know and I didn't know. I wanted to go back to school and learn some things. I drove to Houston and didn't like what I encountered there but fortunately I found out that there was a place here in town that had a business college, Houston Business College, at Third Street and Avenue H. I took the basic course work and finished it. I took the advanced and finished it. That taught me a lot about business and how to handle certain things.

BAUMGARTNER: What kinds of subjects were covered?

WLECZYK: A lot of accounting, spelling of business terms, typing. I knew how to type but just a little. On those big, old typewriters, I don't know if you've seen any of them. When I left there I could type thirty eight words a minute without a mistake. I was second in the class.

BAUMGARTNER: You know that is an important skill.

WLECZYK: That is right, it was important. I picked up a lot of knowledge, book knowledge, and at the same time I was learning from what I observed of the mistakes that were made by my customers in the grocery business. I made progress and learned from that.

BAUMGARTNER: You said service was the key factor.

WLECZYK: If you go back to the basics of selling, in my line of work it was a matter of having the right product out there and making sure it is fresh. It's basic merchandising. Every customer looks at the date of a milk container; they want to get it as fresh as they can.

If you have a display of merchandise in a box and the customers are always selecting from the back, you are going to end up with some bad milk in the front. You better keep it rotated for the store owner so they all have good merchandise and you don't have to take any back.



Wedding day in 1957

You've got to have the right product on your truck to satisfy the customer. Honesty, there is no word to replace that. If you are honest with your customers they are honest with you. I never tried to shortchange anyone.

OPENING A RETAIL STORE

WLECZYK: In 1970 I had been in and out of all these stores servicing my milk route and I thought it would be neat to have a convenience store. I found out through conversation that Leon Danziger, I don't know if you knew him or not...

BAUMGARTNER: Yes. He was an interesting man. In World War II he was a prisoner in Auschwitz, one of Hitler's Jewish persecution concentration camps, survived, immigrated to America with no money, settled here in Fort Bend County and led a successful life. His arm carried a tattoo that they used for identifying prisoners at the concentration camp. He operated a shoe store in downtown Rosenberg and came to own a considerable amount of commercial property here.

WLECZYK: He owned the property next to the post office in Rosenberg and so I made a deal with him. We built a convenience store and a washateria on the corner of Avenue G and Fifth Street.

BAUMGARTNER: So before long you had the convenience store and a working farm and your milk route at the same time. What did you do in your spare time?

WLECZYK: I stayed busy. I guess I believed in doing what my mother said. If you want something, go earn it.

BAUMGARTNER: Choosing to run these operations as an entrepreneur, why do you think you did well and you made it and prospered?

WLECZYK: I felt comfortable going into business for the good reason that I had customers like the Mensiks, the Blaises, Simmons, and different Mom and Pop grocery stores from Rosenberg all the way to Post Oak Road.

I would just watch these people for many a year and learn from their mistakes and their progress; different store owners. Loves Fine Foods, was a good place to learn. You had Richard Joseph, his father Emil Joseph. Lee Richey was a Red and White Store, there on the corner. I sold him a little merchandise. Walter Gless had the Pecan Inn Restaurant, a big restaurant. I remember when Larry Guerrero opened up Larry's Mexican Restaurant which became kind of a landmark, and it snowed that day.

BAUMGARTNER: Wow, that's unusual, it doesn't snow that much.

WLECZYK: This is something that Larry and I, as long as he lived, we would always bring up, the first day on how it snowed. I used to service his brother EG who became Richmond City Commissioner, there

on the corner. He worked with the brother of Tiny Gaston, the Sheriff. I was good friends with all these people at one time. I had as many as twenty two people on the payroll at one time, but the Avenue G store was a family operation. All my kids worked at the store and we did good. My wife Claudia worked side by side with them. We had relationships with our customers. Our employees wanted to make sure that customers come back. Today all the customers care about is product and price; they'll move anywhere to shop. It's like going into Kroger's — you don't recognize anyone anymore.

My worst enemy was I was too spread out. Sometimes I could not keep track of things, things would disappear. Claudia took care of the inside of the store because it is important to watch the cash register. I had good people but you always hire somebody else that you do not know that much about them.

BAUMGARTNER: What happened that caused you to close the store down?

WLECZYK: The city shut down the railroad crossing at Sixth Street and it killed the traffic in the neighborhood. It knocked the traffic out; neighbors just went down to Third Street crossing and never came our way anymore. We closed it down after in 1989 after almost 20 year's operation.

Meanwhile we had opened another store in 1985, Holiday Market at the corner of FM 2218 and the Southwest Freeway. We entered into a ten-year lease for a service station/convenience store with the owners, professional NFL football players Diron and Don Talbert. We expanded it adding a bakery, sandwiches and a liquor store and did good, but Claudia got tired after a ten year stretch and we got out in 1985.

VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES

BAUMGARTNER: What were some of the volunteer groups you participated in?

WLECZYK:

Volunteer Fire Department. When I sold the service station, I joined the volunteer fire department and stayed in it for twenty years. I have a twenty-year plaque they gave me, started in 1954, I believe. About half way through we were given radios to install in our bedrooms or somewhere where we could hear it. If a fire got started, the dispatcher at the fire station would go on a short wave radio and tell everybody the location of the fire. You didn't have to go to the fire station to go to the fire.

BAUMGARTNER: Do you have any particular memories of any particular fires, tough ones or scary ones or dangerous ones?

WLECZYK: I guess the ones I call the most dangerous were car fires. Cars used to catch on fire more regularly than now. You had a car on fire and cap on the gas tank--if it got hot enough it would explode. The first thing we would do would be go over and pull the cap off of that gas tank. I have done that several times.

BAUMGARTNER: That is pretty dangerous.

WLECZYK: We had a fire right across from the fire station one time, where the Pickards used to live. They owned Pickard and Hudgins Drug Store, now it's Another Time Soda Fountain. It had a garage apartment at their home that caught fire. An elderly lady lived there, either a Pickard or Hudgins. Kenneth Kunkel got there early to the fire and he burst into the door and found her in bed and carried her out in his arms and saved her.

BAUMGARTNER: He was your partner in the Fairchilds Hall.

WLECZYK: He was a milkman also. I saw in the paper the other day that his daughter died, fifty years old.

THE FAIR RODEO ASSOCIATION

WLECZYK: One event that I still remember is when the fairgrounds were here in town off Avenue H. Back in the late fifties the Rodeo Association needed a clown for the rodeo. They gave me some britches and shirt, everything was bright and flashy and they gave me a red handkerchief and they told me what to do.

BAUMGARTNER: Who was "they"?

WLECZYK: The Fair Rodeo Association guys. I knew all these people at that time, they used to buy a lot of milk from me and I was giving back. So I went out there and was the Clown and everything was fine until the bull riding got started. That bull was not happy with a rider on him and the only thing he could see was me standing out there in that open field and he came after me. I had to do a heck of a lot of dodging. There was a lot of laughter and I will say that I had fun but I didn't do it again. That was the one and only time.

BAUMGARTNER: Do you remember the guys that were around then?

WLECZYK: Most were older. Diz {Walter} Ansel was a personal friend.

BAUMGARTNER: I saw his brother just passed away.

WLECZYK: Bert just passed away. Bert was older than I was and Diz was a couple of years younger. I knew him from Jane Long School. He was in the grain business over here, Ansel Grain; I sold grain to him for a while. We knew each other pretty well.

Lions Club. I was a charter member of the Fort Bend Lions Club, which started in 1962; I've been a member for over fifty years.

BAUMGARTNER: Are you still a dues paying member?

WLECZYK: Yes. We have a stand at the Fair that we have had ever since it was over here. I remember flipping burgers out here and then it went over yonder and that was my position where I worked --back at the stove.

BAUMGARTNER: Do you know Than Colvin who was president?

WLECZYK: Oh, yes

BAUMGARTNER: There is a second Lions Club here, Rosenberg Lions Club, of which I've been a member for many years, too. It used to be all -- male in the old days, and some members feel it's lost some of its volunteer drive today because the ladies step up and do the lion's share of the work and the men can sit back.

WLECZYK: I have heard that same expression before but whether that is true or not, I don't know. We used to not have any female members but the wives of our members worked alongside us. We had a lot of turkey shoots at the Moore Ranch over past Walnut Street. I remember sponsoring bike rides to make money. We had stands along the road from here to Fulshear where riders could get refreshments or use restrooms.



Service – Benny Wleczyk, 2nd from right, is pictured with, from left, Fort Bend Lions Club president Clarence Higgins, membership chair; Andrew Schroeder, Vice-President Stacey Higgins, and secretary/treasurer Than Colvin, receiving his lengthy community service award, March 6, 2017

— Fort Bend Herald

FORT BEND GRAND JURY

WLECZYK: In 1986 I served six months on the Fort Bend grand jury. It was important and interesting. It started out as a three month term but was extended to six months. I learned a lot about my neighbors, good and bad; on the surface everything looks rosy but a lot of things are going on that are surprising.

One week I was served notice that the jury would be convening but at that time I was farming over 1,000 acres out at the George Ranch and I had a new hand who I needed to meet with and show him the fields that he would be working. I called the District Attorney's office and told them I couldn't be there that morning. We were out at the field and I saw a sheriff's pickup coming down the road. There were a couple deputies in it that I knew and we visited a bit, they had found me by contacting Rocky Parr, foreman at the ranch headquarters and he knew what field I was in. I was surprised when they told me, "You need to go to the courthouse for the trial; if you don't we are going to arrest you." It was our duty; they weren't interested in excuses.

KNIGHTS OF COLUMBUS

WLECZYK: The Knights of Columbus are a charitable organization affiliated with the Catholic Church. It is strictly charity work. That is what I was involved in for a long time. We had fundraisers and we basically supplied scholarships to individuals and raised money for church organizations that were affiliated with the Catholic School. If they needed money, we would raise money and donate money and things like that. I have been an usher over here at the Holy Rosary two different times. I guess it has been around forty years at Holy Rosary.

BAUMGARTNER: Does the Catholic Church play as big a role in the community as it used to many years ago?

WLECZYK: I think it plays a bigger role today.

I have belonged to Farm Bureau and was on the county Farm Bureau Board for over twenty two years. Farm Bureau is a two phase organization. It represents agriculture and it also sells insurance. The insurance is a money maker to support the agriculture end. We would get together once a month and discuss issues pertaining to agriculture that happened during the course of the month. We have our state office and national office that we communicate with to get input from producers themselves. I had other interests but I was involved in cattle and ranching and row crops.

In the seventies farm prices were so bad that we were trying to get something going so we could survive and stay in agriculture. We started what they called a Protest Organization. We had a Farm Strike. A. J. Wleczyk, kinfolks of mine, we got organized and we wound up bringing in people from Fort Bend, Wharton, and Matagorda County into our organization. The problem was the middle men were making a pretty good profit but the producers, the farmers, were not making any money.

We started going to rallies attended by some people in government to get their attention. Different guys would travel to different places. I went up north to the Panhandle and went to Washington three times to motivate. I went to the Valley several times. A lot of grain from Mexico and South America was coming in by truck and coming down Highway 59. Our organization got to the point that we were going to start stopping the trucks carrying grain.

The Texas Department of Public Safety got involved. They talked us out of it. We were not trying to hurt anybody. We were trying to get a better price to stay in business. I have a picture over here where we were over on the freeway.

BAUMGARTNER: Who is this? Oh, that is you, how neat. This was in 1975. You haven't changed a bit (both laughing)

WLECZYK: I don't know about that.

FORT BEND SUBSIDENCE DISTRICT

BAUMGARTNER: I know you're a senior board member of the Fort Bend Subsidence District. Subsidence is an extremely important economic issue today for all of us. How did you get involved with the Fort Bend Subsidence District?

WLECYK: I had some experience back in the early eighties where a big landowner in Alief got permits from the City of Houston to drill a bunch of large water wells, eight deep wells. I was farming the Clodine area and had three water troughs with cows. One evening after I finished my milk route, I went to the farm and the cows were standing at the water trough with no water. I went to another trough, the same thing and went to the third one and it barely had a little bitty drip to it. And for my employees who were living on the property, there was no water for them either. I realized that there was something wrong with my wells. They drilled those deep wells and our water table in Clodine failed to the point that my shallow wells all went dry. They were drawing that much water out of the ground.

At first I moved some cows. I had a 280 gallon tank on the farm, and I wound up getting a 1,200 gallon tank from Katy. I had me a fiberglass tank built and I hauled water for about two months that I got it from the TXI plant on Harlem Road. I farmed their land and they let me get extra water so I could take care of my cattle. I would go in there every day and fill the trough up. That would be enough for just one day.

That kind of problem started showing up in the newspaper a lot. Excessive pumping from wells was draining the aquifers. Fort Bend County was going to have to do something about future water issues. In 1989 Fort Bend Subsidence District was put together. A lady attorney in town was selected as the Rosenberg Representative but that didn't work out and the Mayor, Dr. Larry Wilkerson, appointed me to the Subsidence Board to represent Rosenberg.

BAUMGARTNER: That was in 1991 when you were appointed, I believe. You've been on the board longer than any other member.

WLECYK: That's right. The other problem with subsidence is when the surface of the ground starts sinking, because the water has been drawn out. When the ground surface that you walk on or drive on starts sinking and that water doesn't drain, it starts standing or slowing down and that is one of the reasons you have flooding.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Fort Bend Subsidence District was created by an Act of the Texas State Legislature in 1989. The purpose of the District is to control and prevent subsidence by monitoring water well usage and regulating the withdrawal of groundwater from wells. The Act provided the District with all the legal powers necessary to carry out this function, and a fifteen-member governing Board was appointed comprised of residents representing different areas of the county. When water is withdrawn from the ground by a water well, subsidence may result.

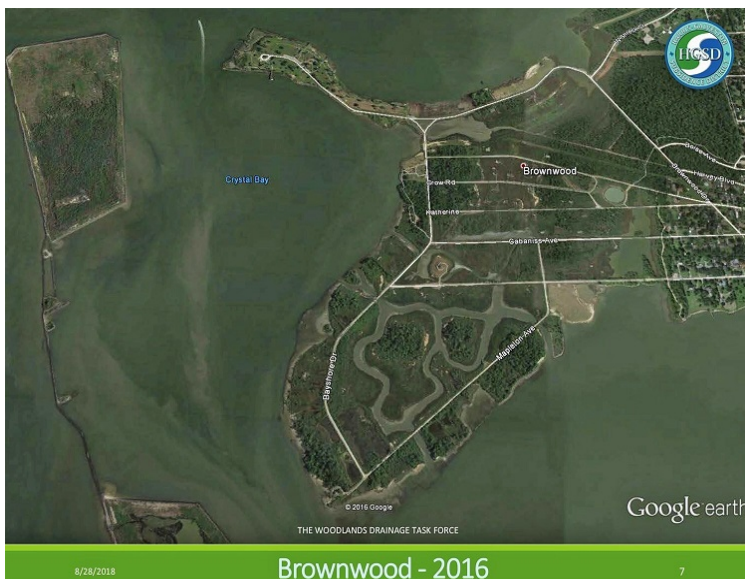
Subsidence is caused by compaction of clay soils which can result in lowering the ground surface level, and this may contribute to flooding and rising water levels. Subsidence can also contribute to reduced water availability from underground water sources known as aquifers. The District has determined that there is a link between subsidence and extensive use of water wells, and has created a Regulatory Plan which requires community members to reduce their reliance on groundwater extracted from wells and to convert to surface water sources such as rivers and lakes. All wells except smaller single family residential wells are now required to be registered and permitted, and the District is authorized to impose financial penalties on entities that do not adhere to regulatory requirements.

All municipalities and registered well owners are required to provide annual well-use data to the District. A role of the District is to protect the future water supply of the community and it is required to gather and monitor the data in order to carry out this function.

BAUMGARTNER: Were you familiar with the Brownwood Subdivision event near Baytown? That was a major wake up call for the City of Houston.

EDITOR'S NOTE: In 1944, the area that would become Brownwood in Baytown, TX was starting to show signs of development. The entire subdivision started sinking, in increments, during the 70's. It was a high cost housing development with four hundred expensive homes and the entire subdivision had to be abandoned.

There were so many wells dug in the area that the ground began sinking so much that in heavy rainfall events the water running through the streets engulfed the houses. By 1978, Brownwood was well developed...and sinking fast. Then, in 1983, a 12-foot storm surge from Alicia destroyed the entire community. All the houses were eventually demolished. Now it's a nature park.



WLECZYK: It sank because the ground sank. They took the water out of the ground. When it sank that is what you call subsidence.

BAUMGARTNER: Do you remember back in its early days when the District worked in stages and developed steps and rules to regulate the issues?

WLECZYK: People were drawing too much water out of the ground, beginning in Harris County. The Fort Bend District started off with the eastern side of the county, for instance Sugar Land, Missouri City and Stafford, telling the rest of the county how to run the operation. That kind of created an uneasy feeling on this side of the Brazos because most of the subsidence took place next to Harris County and the amount that we have here is a relatively small amount.

We had a lot of long discussion when the plan was being put in place. For a long time the members wanted all of Fort Bend County to be on one plan. Then they split the county into two zones, Zone A and Zone B, with a separate designation for Richmond and Rosenberg. That was one of the most important and intelligent things they could have put together. They came up with a regulatory plan. They set up guidelines for us to follow. We just followed the rules that were authorized through Austin for us to control subsidence.

BAUMGARTNER: It became more manageable. For instance each larger city was required to provide a plan and develop a program to reduce reliance on ground water from water wells. Legally binding deadlines were established and are being met.

WLECZYK: Also what we have accomplished thus far is we are getting a better idea on how much water is actually drawn out of the aquifer. You need to know how much water you are using and who is using it. That is very important for future generations. We have pumped so much water and if we are not careful we are going to start sinking. It may not happen in the next ten years from now but twenty years from now your children are going to be wondering how come we did not something about it.

One of the things that is still missing is that the public is not educated on what the Fort Bend Subsidence District is doing and how important it is for our water future.

BAUMGARTNER: What do the farmers say? Do you hear dissatisfaction with it from your acquaintances around town?

WLECZYK: Yes. They are unhappy and they blame me, I guess, in a way because I am for it. I can understand where a guy has a four inch well that provides water for his cattle and all of a sudden he has to have a meter on it and spend hundreds of dollars on it. That is hard to swallow. There are a lot of unhappy people in the county when we went after these small wells, but if you stop and look at all the small wells that are out there and if you don't know how many you got, you don't know what they are pumping. I think we need to know what we are pumping and what we are doing.

BAUMGARTNER: I believe that as time goes by and they get this initial data issue resolved this thing is going to shift with enforcement activity more related to commercial wells and the big users and not so

much on the small four inch wells.

WLECZYK: Shortly after we got involved there were a lot of questions, and I got some personnel from the District staff to come to our city meetings at City Hall in Rosenberg. We would set aside so many minutes to discuss issues pertaining to subsidence and water issues that took place and bring them up to date. Some people started by stating they would not agree with the regulations. We would have a conversation and tell them that this is a state law. I do not know of anyone that did not go along with it after the reasoning was explained. At a city council meeting I have had a bunch of people comment to me how they appreciated us for coming out and explaining what subsidence was all about because they were not aware of the problem.

We must and I will repeat that we must protect our water for the future. Times have changed and water one of these days is going to be very precious, and in my opinion, the Subsidence District along with the State is on the right track.

CATTLE & FARMING

BAUMGARTNER: Benny, with all the business activity that you were involved in, I didn't know you got into farming and ranching. When did you start running cows?

WLECZYK: I got started when I was about twenty seven, somewhere in there; right across the road from that store at the end of FM 1464 in Clodine.

BAUMGARTNER: How did you end up in Clodine?

WLECZYK: I had a friend who told me about a tract of land that some people were farming and the owner wasn't happy with the tenants. I made a telephone call and they moved out and I took it over. It was two hundred acres with a house on it. I hired a guy to watch it and put cattle in there.

At one time in the sixties the railroad replaced some of the line between Houston and Wallis and they left a whole bunch of railroad ties. I hired some guys to pick them up and made a bunch of hog pens out of them. Then I also acquired a lot of hogs.

BAUMGARTNER: You had hogs on the property with the cows? You were quite the entrepreneur, weren't you [both laughing].

WLECZYK: When I was in Houston I worked for Rainbow Bread. I knew what they were doing with the wasted bread, they were throwing it away and you could have it if you came and got it. I took a trailer, parked it over there, and they would put that stale bread in it. I would go pick it up and exchange that trailer with my other one every day. I fed that stale bread to the hogs.

I did good with that for a long time until the City of Houston paid me a visit and told me that I was

operating in their ETJ and the hogs were leaving a smell and I had to move them. I ignored that for a while and eventually they threatened me and I had to sell the hogs.

BAUMGARTNER: How many cows would you have on two hundred acres?

WLECZYK: I had about twenty cows there because part of it was in hay. There was a fence in the front where I had the hogs and a small pasture. I converted the acreage into row crops and that is where I started farming.

BAUMGARTNER: What kind of crops were you growing?

WLECZYK: Cotton, milo and some corn; mostly cotton and milo. TXI, the big heavy building materials company, had a large dirt excavating operation at Harlem Road and Westheimer. They had some extra land so I leased that land from them. Then I found some other land. I had a pretty good sized farming operation in Clodine.

But by 1983 I had lost several tracts of land.

I looked around and found an opportunity

to get on the George Ranch. There was getting to be too much traffic on the road to Clodine so we gave up the rest of it.

BAUMGARTNER: The George Ranch. You were able to lease property there?

WLECZYK: We started off with eight hundred acres and before long we had about fifteen hundred acres.

BAUMGARTNER: Who was running the George Ranch when you guys leased your property? How was the George Ranch set up then?

WLECZYK: The George Ranch had already been set up as a foundation. Albert and Mamie George did not have any children so they adopted a person and this guy went the wrong way. After it had been turned into a foundation it was designed to help the poor in the county. There were neighbors and different individuals leasing or renting land from them.

BAUMGARTNER: When was this? What kind of time frame?

WLECZYK: In the early fifties. Then later on they got a Board appointed and the Board ran the operation with a general manager. Basically another big operator was the Booth Estate people.



Benny Wleczyk in field with combine harvester

BAUMGARTNER: Were they part of the George Ranch or were they separate?

WLECZYK: They were separate. I remember Tom Booth, I knew him personally. He wore high top cowboy boots, walked straight, and he was a good guy. As for Mrs. George, when I went to high school in Richmond I was in FFA {Future Farmers of America} and Mrs. George came over there several times and we got to be friends.

BAUMGARTNER: That is how you met her?

WLECZYK: Yes. She was a very nice person, she was easy to talk to, and friendly. So was Tom Booth, both of them were nice. I enjoyed talking to Mrs. George.

BAUMGARTNER: How many different individuals were leasing land from the George Ranch then?

WLECZYK: At that time probably twenty five. Everybody that had land under lease farmed a smaller amount than we had. If you didn't have equipment you could not farm a lot of land because there wasn't much equipment available.

BAUMGARTNER: The George Ranch is huge, about twenty five thousand acres.

WLECZYK: They had a lot of property. They owned property on Collins Road in Richmond going to the river where George Park is, the ballpark over there. They owned land on Westheimer at one time closer to Houston. They owned a lot of land around here. They have a big tract on what we call the Thompson Bottoms, Thompson Oil Field and that bottom land in there, those woods.

Right before we left Clodine my son Paul graduated and he came to work with me. Our first crop on the George Ranch was in 1983 and we have been there together ever since.

BAUMGARTNER: It's interesting, the long-term continuity of your activities.

WLECZYK: Then I got another farm and Paul joined me. We bought about 1000 acres down near Guy. We formed a partnership named Fort Bend Farms, which is a company that farms under its name and it belongs to Paul and me. I was still farming it up until three years ago when my health started giving me problems and so I got out and my grandson Nick took my place. I was also the bookkeeper of the farm. I knew what was going on. At that time I did all the buying and selling. Of course I got help from my son regarding merchandise and chemicals that we needed. I didn't spend much time on a tractor anymore.

BAUMGARTNER: Paul and Nick are still doing it?

WLECZYK: Yes.

BAUMGARTNER: That's great. Benny, we are winding down our interview. When you were growing up, there were a lot of hardships. Do you think that was a motivator that got you going?

WLECZYK: In one way you didn't expect anything different because if it wasn't there, you didn't know the difference. At that time if you ate well you didn't know the rest of it existed. If you wanted to cool off you laid down in the breezeway. There was no a/c to turn on. When you got up in the morning, whoever was appointed in the family got up early and put wood in the stove to start heating up the house. There was no gas to turn on, no electricity to turn on.

From the beginning the only lights we had was a lamp. You didn't know that anything else better than that existed. If you had that, you were happy with that. But the thing that still stands in my mind is I remember what hardship is. We were known as "one hundred acre farmers." Weather conditions and price conditions right after the war caused us to live off the land. It's like when you don't have something and there is no way to get it because it is not there. As I became old enough I realized that the money we should have made off the farm wasn't there. I remember wearing shoes that had holes in them and there was no money to get another pair of shoes or get them repaired and stuff like that.

I just made up my mind that I wanted to have that. My goal was to not sit around. Get busy and do something about it. I am grateful to say that my wife and I have taught our kids to feel the same way and do the same thing. We tried to instill that to our kids and all our kids at that time were involved in our business, retail and wholesale. Paul worked on a milk truck helping me and he earned money. We lived on Mulcahy Street and he was the first one his age in the neighborhood who had a bicycle; he earned it and paid for it himself. The girls worked in the store when they got out of school and on weekends. I think that taught them a sense of responsibility and that created a family tie to work together.

BAUMGARTNER: Comparing the old days to today, were things better than in many respects or are they better today?

WLECZYK: After I look back I enjoyed my younger days considerably and of course I am still enjoying life today but it is in a different form. Kids and grand kids all live close by. It is still as important for family ties as it was back then. So many drift apart and you do not know where they are at or what they are doing. I think that families that stay together enjoy life better than otherwise.

BAUMGARTNER: Do you remember Tom Brokaw, the famous TV newscaster that wrote a book *The Greatest Generation*?

WLECZYK: Yes I've heard of it.

BAUMGARTNER: His belief was that the people pretty much from your era, some maybe a little earlier who served in World War II; he described them as "the greatest generation." Basically they weren't out to become super rich and they weren't out to get super power. They did what they thought was the right thing to do. That seems to me to describe your era.

WLECZYK: Let me say one other thing that my wife and I feel grateful for is that our children are laying the same groundwork for our grandchildren to follow. So that makes us feel good that we did something right. We have eleven grand kids and they are doing the right thing.



The Wleczyk Family

BAUMGARTNER: Yes sir. Benny, I've enjoyed it.

WLECZYK: I have, too.

End of interview