

# FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

## *ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE*

Interviewee: **Leslie Armin “Buddy” Wheeler III**

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Interviewer: Karl Baumgartner

Transcriber: Sylvia Vacek

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30 Pages



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*Transcript*

BAUMGARTNER: What is your full legal name?

WHEELER: Leslie Armin Wheeler.

BAUMGARTNER: Is that a family name?

WHEELER: Yes, it is.

BAUMGARTNER: What is your date of birth?

WHEELER: November 25, 1941.

BAUMGARTNER: What were your mom and dad's names?

WHEELER: Maxine was my mother. My dad was Junior and I was the Third. My grandfather was the first Wheeler from Flatonia. He was a dentist there. I was just talking to Teresa Bailey who works at your front desk here. She told me she was a patient of my Uncle William in Alice, Texas. My dad's other brother, John, was a dentist in Cuero.

BAUMGARTNER: So Teresa went to see your dad's brother in her hometown of Alice? That is a pretty good coincidence. When did your dad come to Sugar Land?

WHEELER: 1939. He was born in 1917.

BAUMGARTNER: So he was twenty two when he came to Sugar Land. Why did he come here?

WHEELER: Dad was going to the University of Texas Dental School in Houston. They hired two MDs in Sugar Land, Carlos Slaughter and Dr. Kuykendall. They were asked to call up the dental school and see if they could find a dentist to come to Sugar Land. Dr. Slaughter called dad to come down to Sugar Land for an interview him and he never left.

BAUMGARTNER: But was your dad from Flatonia? Did he grow up there?

WHEELER: Yes. My grandfather went to school at Emory University in Atlanta; he was a dentist and he came to Flatonia; why I can't remember. I have one aunt who could answer that but I doubt that she can talk. She is the last from that generation; my dad's brother's wife just died three months ago.

BAUMGARTNER: So your dad is from Flatonia and your granddad, the first Leslie Armin Wheeler, moved to Flatonia. You were born a couple of years after your dad got to Sugar Land?

WHEELER: Dr. Slaughter delivered me in Sugar Land. My dad's two brothers all came and lived in Sugar Land and went to dental school in Houston. There are a lot of older ladies from those days in Sugar Land that tell stories you wouldn't believe. Those girls were going to secretarial school in Houston and they all rode together. They stopped at filling stations in Stafford, got them a pack of cigarettes for fifteen cents and they all had to pitch in for fuel. Jimmy Banahan's wife was one...

BAUMGARTNER: Oh, the foreman of the Cinco ranch, which was a 15,000 acre cattle ranch in those days before it became a subdivision. You had brothers and sisters?

WHEELER: Yes. Jonellen, my older sister, was born in Houston dad's senior year in dental school. Then me, Janie was the middle one and my brother, Jerry, was the youngest one of the bunch. Two boys and two girls.

#### GROWING UP IN A COMPANY TOWN

BAUMGARTNER: What was Sugar Land like back then?

WHEELER: It was still a company town – Imperial Sugar.

BAUMGARTNER: Growing up, do you know what the population was?

WHEELER: Eighteen hundred when I graduated from high school.

BAUMGARTNER: Where did you go to school?



*Buddy in his dad's arms with mom, Maxine, and older sister, Jonellen. Dad is Dr. Leslie Wheeler, Jr. ca. 1942*

WHEELER: Sugar Land High School. I think the whole bunch of us, Sugar Land, Richmond, and Rosenberg, were all linked together. It was Fort Bend. Rosenberg and Richmond had Lamar Consolidated, Sugar Land had Sugar Land High School, and then there was Missouri City, which was not part of it.

BAUMGARTNER: Where did you go to elementary school?

WHEELER: Sugar Land Elementary was part of high school. It was all one big school. It went all the way from first grade to twelfth grade. There were twelve buildings on Lakeview Drive in Sugar Land. There was a hospital across the street and a cafeteria across the street from that. It started in the first grade to the fifth; then sixth, seventh and eighth, and all the rest were in several buildings. When I was a senior the city built a new senior high school in a bigger building with the same teachers, same everything.

BAUMGARTNER: You had a teacher for each grade, like a first grade teacher and then a second grade teacher?

WHEELER: Yes. There were a couple of teachers in Sugar Land that they ran off. Imperial Sugar said, "Get on out of here."

BAUMGARTNER: How much did the corporation, Imperial Sugar, have to do with running the town, the schools, and the administration?

WHEELER: Everybody who lived there got paid by a special token that they made up, like dollar bills. It was mostly metal and they got paid with that. Imperial Sugar had everything. Hardware, they had horse and mule feed. They had one big metal building with all of the things, ladies clothes, men's clothes and residents had to use what they got paid with those coins. That was the only thing the shops would take.



*Metal token issued to employees of The Sugar Land Industries, Sugar Land, Texas, as partial or full salary. Use was restricted to the company store.*

*--courtesy Bill Little*

BAUMGARTNER: Really? That is called a captive market.

WHEELER: Yes, that it was. They finally got away from that and changed, I think when the Galveston guys [Kempner family] came in and bought out Imperial Sugar.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Company scrip is scrip (either paper or metal tokens, as a substitute for government-issued legal tender or currency) issued by a company to pay its employees. It can only be exchanged in company stores owned by the employers.

In the United States, mining and logging camps were typically created, owned and operated by a single company. These locations, some quite remote, were often cash poor; even in ones that were not, workers paid in scrip had little choice but to purchase goods at a company store, as exchange into currency, if even available, would exhaust some of the value via the exchange fee. With this economic monopoly, the employer could place large markups on goods, making workers dependent on the company, thus enforcing employee "loyalty". --Wikipedia

BAUMGARTNER: But their store was probably not a big profit center, was it? Was it mostly for the benefit of the employees, or was it a money maker?

WHEELER: I read in a magazine there were some really tight guys and I mean that they were down to the penny. I know a guy who has some of those coins. Robert Hill. He and two other guys started the whole telephone operation there. Those three guys put it together. When you picked up the phone, an operator would say, "Number, please?" and you gave them the number. Then you could call your friend and those three ladies were the biggest gossips in town. Everybody knew what was going on in town. They would listen in on you if they felt like it. If the fire whistle went off we called up and asked, "Where is the fire?" When we were kids, we wanted to know where the fire was so we could go see it.

BAUMGARTNER: Where was your house?

WHEELER: It was on Lakeview Drive. The doctors and the higher up group like Dr. Slaughter, and Dr. Kuykendall were down there. The guy who was the head honcho of the county was named Wirtz was from the Sugar Land area. He had a big place at the end of Lakeview. Curtis Hall, Kenneth Hall's daddy, was in charge of taking care...

EDITOR'S NOTE: Curtis Hall was the Constable. See Kenneth Hall's interview on the FBC Historical Commission website at <http://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/modules/showdocument.aspx?documentid=40325>

BAUMGARTNER: Kenneth Hall, the All American football player?

WHEELER: Yes. When his dad came there he worked for 11 cents an hour. After he was there a year they gave him more money.

BAUMGARTNER: Were the houses provided by Imperial Sugar?

WHEELER: Yes. They would not let anybody build any houses. They did not want to turn any ground away, so you rented. Our house rented for \$25 dollars a month. It stayed that way until I was a junior in high school. Then they sold everybody the houses. If their rent was \$25 a month, they sold them the house for \$2,500. That is what my mother and dad paid for their house before I graduated from dental school.

BAUMGARTNER: How big was the yard? Was it big enough to have a garden?

WHEELER: Yeah, we had two. My dad had three milk cows and my mother made butter and cheeses and all kinds of German stuff. One garden was where he kept his cattle, and he had one on Oyster Creek. They would pump water out of there. I would say there were eight or ten people who had a garden in that particular area, right there on Bayview Drive. They had two or three tractors. For the guys that did not have tractors, they would till it up for them and do all kinds of stuff. It was a year round deal because there was always something growing. They did greens, corn, potatoes. Everybody shared the work.

Dad had Brahma cows that you could show at the Houston Livestock Show. He tucked his pants in his boots and he was a cowboy. He liked to call square dances because he liked the rhyme of the square dances. He and my mother and some people from Sugar Land and two couples from Houston won third place in the State of Texas in square dancing. My dad called all of that.

He was the president of the school board. I think the school had twelve people on the board and he was in there the whole time I was in school. I got a whipping twice and he found out before the day was over [both laughing].

BAUMGARTNER: Did your momma work?

WHEELER: She did right after they left Houston. She was a nurse at the Laura Eldridge Memorial Hospital in Sugar Land for Dr. Slaughter and Dr. Kuykendall. Guess what? Twelve rooms.

BAUMGARTNER: Twelve room hospital!

WHEELER: I can remember when Jerry was born we were playing baseball out there in the summer. Jerry was born on June 30 and we were getting ready to go back to school. Jonellen and three of her friends came over there and the coach said, "Buddy somebody is waving at you over there." I looked and Jonellen said, "Momma had a little boy."

BAUMGARTNER: Jonellen is older than you?

WHEELER: I am 75 and she is 77. She was born in Houston the summer mom got out of nursing school and dad was out of dental school and they moved to Sugar Land.

BAUMGARTNER: What was your momma like?

WHEELER: After a while she got tired of being a nurse, so she knew how to sew and she started making wedding dresses. I can tell you I had about twenty or thirty ladies that came to me as a dentist who told me that my mother made their wedding dresses. She had all us kids, there were four of us, and she could at least do that at home. She did it because she liked it.

BAUMGARTNER: Your dad met her after he came to Houston?

WHEELER: No, he met her in Flatonia. His brothers, my two uncles, married Sugar Land girls. Her dad and Joe Gripe had their own grocery store there. They had two black guys working for them and started making sausage and stuff. When I was a kid we went out to the slaughter house and they let me shoot the pig and calf in the head with a 22 rifle. They cleaned them and start making sausage. They sold the whole thing in the grocery store.

It was like an old country store there in Flatonia where you could tie your horses and wagons up. People came out of the country and they bought their stuff and got their barbecue. Then they went to the back of the store where there were benches and they served it to you on paper have. Man, we went back there and ate.

BAUMGARTNER: What was Sugar Land like then? Were there any commercial stores or any other businesses?

WHEELER: No. Only the one big store. They had a drug store, they had a tobacco store, and they had a grocery store and everything you wanted.

BAUMGARTNER: And you paid for it with these tokens?

WHEELER: Yeah. That eventually stopped and then you could go in there with your coins and dollars and buy stuff. They got a Western Auto Store and then Sugar Land had something very unusual; it was like a mall and it was all in one strip. They had a grocery store, gun store, men's and women's clothing, bank, and a barber shop and down at the end was a place where you could eat. Past that was like a Walgreens. They had a cafeteria there for a while. There were two restaurants in Sugar Land, the Red Barn, Charlie White's. Later they got a Dairy Queen about the time Rosenberg did.

BAUMGARTNER: Dairy Queen wasn't owned by the company, was it?

WHEELER: No.

BAUMGARTNER: Was Highway 90A the Main Street through town?

WHEELER: Yes. Highway 90 went on to Stafford and on to Houston. As kids, we got on a bus in Sugar Land for a quarter. When you came back you had to give them another quarter. It stopped in Houston where Kaplans Restaurant was right by one of those bayous, which now is like a different city. All the different schools are in there.

BAUMGARTNER: What schools?

WHEELER: Dental and medical school. That was maybe fifteen miles from Sugar Land. Downtown was a little less than twenty miles from Sugar Land to Houston where the big buildings were then. The hot dog place was down there.

## BOYHOOD IN SUGAR LAND

BAUMGARTNER: What did you do growing up in Sugar Land?

WHEELER: I did a lot of fishing and hunting. Started early. Got my granddad's shotgun when he died.

BAUMGARTNER: I had a .22 that I grew up with when I was a boy about ten and I wish I still had it.

WHEELER: Jerry still has one, and I got a 12 gauge shotgun with a Winchester Pump, Model 12. I got a 410, a 22 rifle, and my dad would give me a little box of shorts. The guys over in Sugar Land pumped all their water which would go down into the Brazos. That thing was full of turtles, and I would sneak up on them and get so close, I knew I could hit them. When I got older, I started taking the long shots. I know that there were days that I killed fifty in a day.



BAUMGARTNER: "Long rifle" was the longer .22 shells that had more punch to them. To shoot rabbits I needed the longs and I don't think I could hit rabbits very good with the shorts.

WHEELER: How did you do that, you ran up and scared them?

BAUMGARTNER: I had a little dog. I'd get off the school bus, we'd head for the pasture looking for rabbits and my dog kicked them up and started chasing them. They always ran in circles, come into sight and I'd get them with the .22. We ate them all the time; Momma put them in the frying pan like fried chicken.

WHEELER: That is right. That was the way I liked them.

There was a friend of Dad's named Don, he had a 410 shotgun and we went down to Port O'Conner and went duck hunting. He told me what it was like and I wanted to go. I went down there and shot that gun. I was so young that it kicked me and he made me get back up and quit crying.

He had rabbit dogs, and after that he let me go, I shot at the rabbits coming back. That is why I knew about the rabbits running in circles. These dogs were like rabbit dogs, and that is the first time I ever fired a shotgun. I had a BB gun. I have that gun, and after he died, Don's daughters knew that I knew him and hunted with him. So, they came and had a shotgun, a 410, and a 22 for me.

BAUMGARTNER: You must have been small if a 410 gave you a kick.

WHEELER: Yeah, I was; I think I was maybe four years old. Uncle William, from Alice, came down, and they would go to Port O'Connor. They would just walk across the Intracoastal canal and throw some decoys out. There were so many ducks and geese, Canadian geese coming in. I saw my dad kill three of them at one time-- boom, boom, boom, one, two, three.

C. D. Court, who had the Western Auto store in Stafford, helped him. We went to Blue Ridge in the wintertime and ate lunch. These were Italian guys and they rested up with a little bit of Old Crow. They went out there in that marsh and snuck up on the ducks and shot them and you talked about rabbits...that place had swamp rabbits. They were too big to eat unless you made dumplings with them. That is what my mother liked to do.

BAUMGARTNER: Now where was Blue Ridge?

WHEELER: East of Stafford, Missouri City. That marsh went all the way to Highway 6. They finally drained all that water out of there. Now that is where those towers are that you can see.

BAUMGARTNER: Was it rice country or just natural marshes?

WHEELER: They had a prison farm out there and it was for trustees. It was a salt dome and oil wells were there also. These guys went out there and sneaked up on the ducks. There was a place they called the Round Pond; that is where they were feeding. One of the Scanlin's in Stafford had a big rice field out there and there were thousands of ducks. No one back then seemed to want to fool with them.

BAUMGARTNER: They didn't want to hunt them?

WHEELER: They didn't want to clean them and we went home with a couple of sacks full. My dad had a couple of black guys he knew in Sugar Land and he would call them up. They came over there and got behind the garage. I remember seeing the ditch behind our garage. It was no bigger than a few feet and they killed seventy two one time.

The rice farmer guy wanted the ducks shot because the farmers would stack the rice up. The ducks and geese came over there and knocked those stacks over so they could eat that rice. Mr. Scanlin wanted somebody to shoot them and he was glad to see us.

BAUMGARTNER: The rabbits weren't too good to eat, not as good as cottontails.

WHEELER: The only thing you can do with them is make chili out of them. Makes me want to go out now! That is the way it was in Sugar Land. There were quite a few Mexican guys that worked for the company and they put us on to that. Of course, we just took the rabbits over there and I remember once or twice a lady that worked for us, she knew how to cook that chili.

I knew a guy, DelaCruz, who fished and hunted squirrels. When we were kids we ate squirrels a lot. There was a pecan orchard in Sugar Land and one day I was talking to him. I had no idea that he and two other guys had a 40-acre pecan orchard and they paid you to get over there to get those squirrels because there were so many of them. We just rode a bicycle around and shot them out of the trees.

## CHINQUAPIN AND THE GULF COAST

BAUMGARTNER: Your dad must have been quite an outdoors-man.

WHEELER: He liked to hunt and fish everything. We went crappie fishing; we went catfish fishing; we went to the Coast, Port O'Conner, Chinquapin, and Matagorda.

Before Dad acquired our place in Chinquapin we got started going to Sargent. We went there and he had a big old tent that he bought and he had some pipes that you could screw together and put that tent over that. Some guy in Sugar Land made the frame for him. We went down there and stayed a week.

BAUMGARTNER: On the beach?

WHEELER: Yes, the whole family stayed on the beach. We didn't start going to Chinquapin until later. My mother and dad had a friend that had a bus down there. It was an old bus out of Houston. We stayed with a guy named Gene and some friends. My mother got mad because somebody else came down and they would not clean it up. So daddy said, "Hell let's just buy one."

It was raining. We were pulling a little trailer in the back, and we were driving in water on that road, about that deep. There was only one way down in there, a narrow little dirt road. Dad told me there was a little place where there was a river that went across the road, and it kind of raised up. He didn't know how deep it was and to get out to check it out. We were going along, and it got about that high and mother said, "Get in this car boy." So, we fooled around there for a while and Mother said, "We've got to get a place. We are not going to stay in the bus." Mosquitoes would get in there, and these guys from Houston would get in there.

BAUMGARTNER: They were using the bus as a camp house?

WHEELER: Yes. There was more than one. There were probably six or eight of them.

BAUMGARTNER: What, old school buses?

WHEELER: Yeah. The thing about Chinquapin was that it did not take long to get there from Sugar Land. The Talaseks were down there with the triplets, their three sons and their little brother. They had a place that they had built. There was a Greenwald family from here and there was Henry Hejl who had an airplane that he left there.

One of the Greenwald's had a place there, and somebody told my dad there was one place for sale down at the end and dad said, "I'll take it."

BAUMGARTNER: How many people were down there then? This must have been around 1950?

WHEELER: I was born in 1941, I was ten in 1951. There were houses in two areas. There was one right where the road came in and a second where you detour down to the canal. There were about twenty houses there, and there was a guy there that had fresh bait for the fish, a bait camp. It was across the creek that came out from Lake Austin and went into East Matagorda Bay.

BAUMGARTNER: So you bought a house for a place to stay?

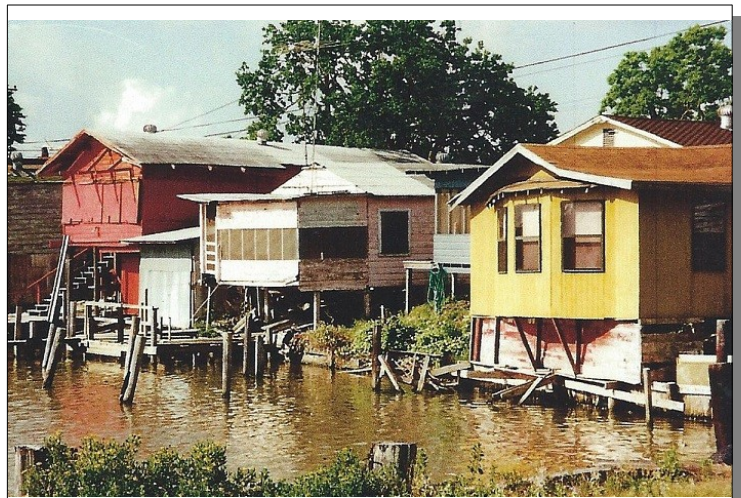
WHEELER: Yep. What the deal was that the people that owned the land would give you a ten year lease. But we bought ours from Greenwald; he did not go down there very much and we got to buy it. Howard Raska and I went down there and daddy had a guy dig a hole and he got Howard to go down there with me and he fixed up the commodes and it went into that and then it went into that creek.

BAUMGARTNER: Ho many places were there then, houses, buses or cabins?

WHEELER: There were probably fifty, total. Pretty soon most of the stuff turned into houses.

BAUMGARTNER: How old were the Talasek triplets then, Marvin, Marion, and Melvin?

WHEELER: When I was ten years old, they were fifteen or sixteen, somewhere along there. Their big brother Bill went down there then. I had built two boats and I had the first water scooter there. It was just like a flat shingle. Bob Brister, the outdoor guy at the Houston Chronicle, had gone way down to South Texas and wrote about some guys who made those little boats and put some ten-horse motors on them. It was the older guys and they would just drift fish because they didn't want a wave. I saw the picture in the paper and I wanted to build one. So my dad said call him up.



*Old Matagorda river houses similar to what Buddy's family bought and spent a lot of time fishing and socializing with neighbors, May 1996.*

I called Mr. Brister up and told him who I was. I told him I saw those pictures, and could he tell me how they made them. He said, "I have seen them making them. Come over here and I will draw one out for you." So about two o'clock that afternoon I went to my dad's office and I had it all there on a piece of paper. It was real simple. One by twelves, plywood on top and you used some type of glue.

BAUMGARTNER: Did they have a motor? How did they work?

WHEELER: Yes. When you dropped your motor you had two pontoon's coming out of the back so it would not go like that when you took off so you would go straight forward.

BAUMGARTNER: Little outboard motors?

WHEELER: We had an eighteen horse motor and my mother named it the "Hopping Oar." It had a paddle on it.

BAUMGARTNER: Did you fish with it or what could you do with it?

WHEELER: Oh, yeah. Fish with it and go up into Lake Austin, it was shallow up there.

BAUMGARTNER: How did people fish in those days? Did they have boats just like today?

WHEELER: What it was, Henry Hejl would lease a boat to you for one day, three bucks. It was a twelve or fourteen foot aluminum boat and in the middle seat he had a place for your bait to keep it alive. Most people would go down to the Intracoastal Canal and go into East Bay and some would go up to Lake Austin. It was about three or four miles to Lake Austin. A lot of redfish and we fished with trout lines, too.



*Buddy never saw a fish he didn't like. Shown here with a catch so big he needed a wheelbarrow after a successful day on the water.*

The Talaseks, I got to liking those guys because they would take me fishing and they taught me how to fish. Jerry married Sammie Talasek, Bill's daughter. My dad and I started doing more fishing and we would go all the way down to Matagorda on the Intracoastal.

BAUMGARTNER: Down to the old draw bridge?

WHEELER: Yes. We fished there and down on the east end of the Matagorda peninsula there is Brown Cedar Cut and it went into the Gulf of Mexico at the end of East Bay.

BAUMGARTNER: What was Brown Cedar Cut?

WHEELER: It was a cut, a little channel cutting across the beach from the bay going into the Gulf. I think they dug it out; it would dry out and they would come back and dredge it. They didn't have any jetties or anything.

One time when I was in my seaplane that landed on water, it ran out of fuel and I had to land on the beach and when the airplane stopped I looked over to the right, there was Brown Cedar Cut and it had filled in. Jesus knew where to put that place [both laughing]. He put it there for me before the earth was made.

BAUMGARTNER: Did people fish then the same way they do now? I mean rod and reel, popping corks, lures; or did you just bait fish?

WHEELER: I didn't start using artificials until I was just about fifteen.

BAUMGARTNER: Before that it was live bait. Shrimp. Did you use mullet and stuff like that?

WHEELER: To go for redfish, you use mullet.

BAUMGARTNER: So the fishing in a way hasn't changed that much. People still go out there and use live bait, or plugs or whatever?

WHEELER: They are still doing that and it looks the same way it did a long time ago. I haven't been down there in a while. I remember Henry Hejl had a guy that ran a shrimp boat for him, a black guy. One day when we were down there Henry called daddy and told him this guy had a real bad toothache. Daddy said, "Do you have any whiskey? Let him drink a cup full and then I will come down there and take a look at him."

It was the tooth itself but it got loose where his bite was, so daddy got a pair of pliers and just twisted it and it came out and he kind of jumped a little bit when daddy got it out of there. He got on the boat and took off. Daddy said he put a piece of cloth or something, a little pad to put over that hole and he told him to keep that on there and it won't bleed.

BAUMGARTNER: What was his name?

WHEELER: Squire was his name. He ran the shrimp boat. Back then they didn't have any crab traps or anything like that. He caught so many he would bring them back with him. They had those boxes there that were made out of wood and you could put them down and roll them up and they would put those shrimp in there and everybody would get them from him.

BAUMGARTNER: There were a lot more shrimp in those days?

WHEELER: Yes.

BAUMGARTNER: What about crabs?

WHEELER: They were everywhere. Ed Drake and a couple of guys from Sugar Land came down and we went and stuck those flounders.

BAUMGARTNER: Gig flounders at night, like spearing them.

WHEELER: We did that all the time and on the way down here the roads were so old, at night time they had those round black oil pots about this big around and they would light them to keep you from hitting a hole. If we saw it we blew it out real hard or put some water on it. We got us a couple of them and we left one on the north side of the East Bay where we had gone and we went on the south side.

BAUMGARTNER: They were markers?

WHEELER: Yes. At night, so you could get back home. That was fun; just imagine a fifteen year old kid doing something like that.

BAUMGARTNER: You would go all the way across the bay?

WHEELER: There was an island there. They drug equipment all the way across and had the first oil well there.

BAUMGARTNER: So these pots were lit up or you had to light them up on the way?

WHEELER: Back in those days we used those big old kitchen matches.

BAUMGARTNER: You lit an oil pot? That was your way of directions?

WHEELER: Yeah, light it up. They had kerosene inside of them.

BAUMGARTNER: In all of your fishing, did you ever have any close calls with motor problems or whatever?

WHEELER: Ed Drake and I went across East Bay on that water scooter one night gigging flounder. About midnight we were getting ready to head back and all of a sudden, the wind switched; it went right to the north and we couldn't go against it.

BAUMGARTNER: Oh yes, a norther blew in.

WHEELER: It was cold to the tune of we do not know exactly, to this day. Northers are blasts of arctic air. The next day it was about ten o'clock and I was sure that I was going to be in trouble. Ed Drake was a single child and his dad knew where we went and they figured the best thing for them to do is get Henry's shrimp boat and come look for us.

BAUMGARTNER: Was this at night?

WHEELER: This was the next day and it was still blowing. We got tired of waiting in the water. It wasn't terrible, but I mean we could have died if we'd have been in a boat. Water came over those fourteen foot boats. With that water scooter, the water just washed right over it. We went all the way across the bay and we got to Old Gulf and there were two guys up there that were just watching things. When we got there we were wet and they put us where we could get dry. They had a telephone. I called my dad and he wasn't there because they were in Henry's shrimp boat and they were over there looking for us. To this day when I say something about it, I am just thinking about how terrible it must have been for them. Back in those days I can remember that you could do anything you wanted.

BAUMGARTNER: So you guys were gigging flounder?

WHEELER: It blew in after we had been floundering quite a while. We got in one of those coves when the wind was blowing because the water was right where we were. We had some canvas to protect us.

BAUMGARTNER: How old were you then?

WHEELER: Fifteen.



BAUMGARTNER: That is a good age. When you are fifteen you can do anything.

WHEELER: Yeah, you are not joking. We took that water scooter and I always had someone come along with me or they came and asked me. Mom and dad had an Oldsmobile that they got over here in Rosenberg and everybody there knew everybody in Chinquapin. It was that small, and I mean you could walk up to their house and start talking. Everybody, the adults, went to somebody's house and cooked some fish, crabs, or barbecue and, boy, it was a lot of fun. Most of those people had kids.

### BOY SCOUT CAMPING

BAUMGARTNER: Did you do much duck hunting at Chinquapin?

WHEELER: In later years during duck hunting season, we hunted all the time. We started at Chinquapin and walked. Back then, in those days, if you spooked the ducks up you would see where they went down and you crawled, rattlesnakes and all. We went in the afternoon and we knew where they came to spend the night there. We went there to different places and, boy, we were having some fun. We started probably a good mile away. The guys that were with me were going to school with me in Kingsville.

BAUMGARTNER: When you were fishing in those days did they have limits on how many you could catch or any size or anything?

WHEELER: Nothing. It was nothing to catch fifty fish in a day. It was after Mr. Keller was my Boy Scout leader; his son and I are best friends, Jimmy Keller, and I almost married his sister.

BAUMGARTNER: You were in Boy Scouts?

WHEELER: Yes.

WHEELER AND BAUMGARTNER (in unison): "Trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, cheerful, obedient, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent".

EDITOR'S NOTE: Official Boy Scouts of America "Scout Oath"

BAUMGARTNER: How far did you go? You got your Life badge?

WHEELER: First there is the Scouts, and you have...?

BAUMGARTNER: Eagles, Explorers.

WHEELER: Explorers that is what we were. It was probably twelve of us that wanted to get the goal.

BAUMGARTNER: Did you guys go to scout camp?

WHEELER: We went up north and I did not like it; it was just too much. Mr. Keller was looking for a place for us to have a camp; so sure enough he found a place and leased it and I would say about five or six years we went there. It was so thick we had to cut our way in nearly, along the river. It never had happened before but the second or third time that we went we started seeing copperheads. We killed twenty-seven snakes.

BAUMGARTNER: Copperheads. Were you camping on the San Bernard River?

WHEELER: Yes.

BAUMGARTNER: So he leased some property so you guys could go camp out? Now was this regular Boy Scouts, you start out as a Tenderfoot, you are First Class and stuff like that?

WHEELER: Yeah, we did all that but Mr. Keller wasn't into that. Back then he was into the camping. He still has scouts. Then Jimmy and I found some of those old rubber pontoon boats.

Back then you could buy that kind of stuff after World War II. They had some army surplus places in Houston and now you go in there and it is just a bunch of junk. So we saw this old hull and we went and told Mr. Keller about it. He said, "So what do y'all want to do?" We said, "We want to go in at the Brazos and go all the way to Freeport." He said, "All right, that sounds good."

BAUMGARTNER: The Brazos or the San Bernard?



*12-foot alligator pulled out of Oyster Creek near DeWalt by (l-r) Buddy Wheeler, Ralph Senior, and Robert Johnson on July 18, 1963.*

WHEELER: The Brazos. Four or five days, we took shotguns and .22 rifles. We shot rabbits, squirrels, and some pigeons. He bought these bags that were about that thick and these were for soldiers and you had to put it in water and boil it and that is what we ate mostly.

BAUMGARTNER: What the squirrels, rabbits and stuff?

WHEELER: Yeah.

BAUMGARTNER: Where did you start out?

WHEELER: In Richmond. There was another guy that helped Mr. Keller.

BAUMGARTNER: You went from Richmond to Freeport? On rafts, not on a boat?

WHEELER: It was on that raft.

BAUGARTNER: Huckleberry Finn.

WHEELER: No doubt. One thing about Mr. Keller, he wasn't a thinker like that. When we got to East Columbia we saw the bridge so we climbed up and everybody wanted to go home. It was time to go home; we didn't have any toilet paper, we just wiped with leaves. Pretty soon we were drinking water out of the Brazos; we would boil it.

BAUMGARTNER: It was time to go home.

## OFF TO COLLEGE

BAUMGARTNER: What year did you graduated from high school?

WHEELER: Sugar Land High School in 1959. I was the last guy to go across the stage at the school. The next year they finished building the new high school. There was a girl whose name started with a "Y" – Patsy Yarborough was the last name in the alphabet.

So my dad said, "Patsy if you don't mind will you go ahead and let Buddy be the last," and she said yes. I didn't know what my dad was up to. He said he wanted me to be the last one to graduate from Sugar Land High School. The next year it became Dulles, which took in Missouri City, Sugar Land and Stafford.

BAUMGARTNER: So for college what did you do?

WHEELER: I went to Texas A&I down in Kingsville, and University of Houston and Wharton Junior College in the summers. I went there because my dad's cousin was the head of pathology of the dental school. He had a talk with me and asked me where was I going to school? I said the University of Texas, where a couple friends of mind had gotten football scholarships. Somebody got in his ear and he said, "You need to talk to the ladies up at the registrar's office." So I got up there and they asked what I liked to do and if I liked to go out dancing and all this stuff. They said, "When you go to dental school you are not going to be able to do that. You are going to have to study a lot and you are going to have a lot of competition at the University of Texas. There is probably going to be twelve guys going to school there and down in Kingsville it is probably going to be three or four." I said, "Oh-oh-oh" [both laughing]. Uncle William and Uncle John were within an hour and half from Kingsville.

The boy to girl ratio there was eighty percent guys and twenty percent girls. There were not many girls in that school. Then in my third year at A&I they built a new dormitory for five hundred females. I met some girls down there and had some better friends in Alice and Cuero. I had a lot of friends there. That is probably why I had more friends there than in Sugar Land. I did not want to go home to Sugar Land in the summertime.

BAUMGARTNER: Did you continue to go back to Chinquapin?

WHEELER: Hurricane Carla got it.

BAUMGARTNER: Where were you when Carla hit?

WHEELER: I was in Sugar Land, home for the weekend. Then I took off for Kingsville to get back to school. It was my sophomore year, so that was '61. When I got to El Campo, and you need to remember there was no Highway 59 then, I was going down the road and there were no cars. No car phones then. It was on television and they didn't tell you anything back then on TV. When I hit Highway 35 along the coast I looked way down the road and there was water on both sides of the road. I could see a cop car and I pulled up there and he said, "Son, where are you going?" I said, "I am going back to school; I've got to go here". He said, "You can't go this way; you have to go back there and go through Hallettsville on Highway 71. Go up there and take a left."

Carla just wiped everything clean. At Chinquapin there was nothing left but pilings. When you came over that hill at Chinquapin and looked down on both sides of the road, you could see two by fours by the thousands, refrigerators, boats, and everything. I went to find the "Hopping Oar". Dad told me there were rattlesnakes there and there were.

BAUMGARTNER: I remember people telling me in Matagorda that going down toward the mouth of the river, there were mostly shacks and old little houses on it. There was a school bus with a chain around it that somebody had chained to a tree for their weekend home. They said that Carla just wiped it clean. Every bit of the delta along the river, just as clean as a sand dune

WHEELER: I was able to finish at A & I in three years by taking summer school at Wharton Junior College and U of H. Then I got into school at the University of Texas Dental School in Houston. The same one my dad went to but just in a different location; it was in the Medical Center.

BAUMGARTNER: How long was dental school?

WHEELER: Four years. So I spent seven years in school.

BAUMGARTNER: Wow. Does it still take that long?

WHEELER: Yes. If you can make the grades they will let you by in six sometimes.

#### STARTING A CAREER

BAUMGARTNER: What did you do when you got out of dental school?

WHEELER: I was talking with my dad; he hadn't said anything about me staying in Sugar Land and there weren't many people here then. He was working with Dr. Slaughter and Dr. Kuykendall. I started looking for a place. I went down to Port Lavaca and Port O'Connor. Here I was a guy twenty two or twenty three who didn't have any references at all. I looked at Victoria, Cuero. Talked to my daddy's brother there and Uncle William down in Alice. I was looking for a town. I would drive around and find out how many dentists there were.

BAUMGARTNER: That is called market research.

WHEELER: That was it; that was the best thing I knew. So a guy had moved into Sugar Land about then, Bill Little. He is still alive, 85 years old. He said, "What are you going to do?" I had been working for my dad part time and he was paying me fifty or seventy dollars a month. So Bill said, "Buddy, come here. I want to show you something." He rolled out a map and spread it on the desk. I said, "What is all of that?" "That is the Southwest Freeway," he said. "They are going to get started and in about a year the highway should be done or maybe a little bit longer."

EDITOR'S NOTE: See William A. Little's interview on the FBC Historical Commission website at <https://www.fortbendcountytx.gov/home/showdocument?id=26334>

He showed me what was fixing to happen. He said, "If you stay here there are going to be more people than you could shake a stick at. Houston and Sugar Land are going to become one." We drove and looked around Sugar Land. I said, "How about some of this property here, right on Oyster Creek." I told daddy about it. I had to talk him into it because I was in there with him and I was seeing my friends and they were building buildings and Imperial was ready to sell the gardens. Daddy bought that property and building for \$40,000.

BAUMGARTNER: So did you end up going into business with your dad? You and he started together with the new office there?

WHEELER: Yeah, right there and it is still right there now. I built another one with an orthodontist back there and now he moved into that.

BAUMGARTNER: Were you like partners?

WHEELER: Yeah, we were at first. People were just coming in so fast we could not take care of them.

BAUGARTNER: Things could be worse, you know.

WHEELER: I was working five days a week, sometimes six. The *dinero* was coming in. I bought me a Pontiac. Dad was making up his stuff for this accountant who did his work on how much money he made and how much taxes he had to pay, and he said, "Come here. I want to show you something." He said, "In a year I made five times more money than I ever did in my whole life. We split up after about two months and my mother took over for him at the front desk and one of the girls that was in there before, Peggy Wright, started working for me.

BAUMGARTNER: So you and your dad, he had his practice and you had your practice?

WHEELER: Yeah. Daddy got him a big white Cadillac [both laughing]. He had an Oldsmobile and thought he could not afford a Cadillac. He pulled up in the driveway with it.

BAUMGARTNER: When did you get married?

WHEELER: Toni and I got married in 1964. I was out of college but I was in dental school; it was my junior year. Toni's real name is Anthoni Laverne. It has something to do with her mother or an aunt and her grandmother.

BAUMGARTNER: How many kids and grand-kids do you have?

WHEELER: I have two girls, Lindie and Lea Aden. They have five boys and two girls.

BAUMGARTNER: That's great! Seven grandchildren.

WHEELER: That's a picture of the girls. FFA and the County Fair was a big deal for us for years.

BAUMGARTNER: Your girls had a place at home where they could raise the chickens and lambs?

WHEELER: We had a barn. It was really too hot so I built a building inside that barn and put in an air conditioning window unit. Lindie won a national award at the Fair for record-keeping one year. She won it twice, back to back. The first year amounted to \$3,500; the other one was \$5,000, I think.

## INDUSTRY CHANGES

BAUMGARTNER: How has the dentist business changed since you or your dad started?

WHEELER: For one thing, the white male is only ten per cent in that graduating class of one hundred.

BAUMGARTNER: Wow. Who makes up the other ninety percent? Are they internationals, or minorities?

WHEELER: No, this is Houston. I had a doctor tell me that the other day. Females and internationals.



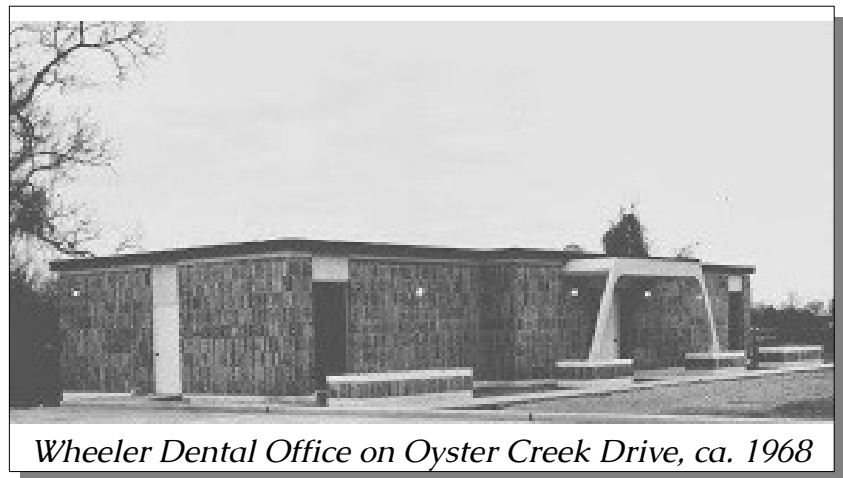
*Buddy and family represented the 4-H Club at the 1979 Fort Bend County Fair.*

BAUMGARTNER: You know Houston has a tremendous diversified population now. It really does. I play Texas Hold'em once a week and the guys that play, quite a few live around Sugar Land. They are from Pakistan, India, Singapore, Turkey...

WHEELER: Yeah. You go see all the new dentists in Sugar Land and most of them are Asian and a few Mexicans, and to set up a dental office is a million bucks. That is building your own building. I had a new building and I paid two hundred for it and it is worth a million.

BAUMGARTNER: My impression is maybe there are more dentists now than are needed. Is there an over population now, or not really?

WHEELER: Well, I really haven't looked at that but in Sugar Land we have at least eighty dentists and there used to be two. Sugar Land has right at about one hundred thousand people. That is the arithmetic, is what that is. A lot of young females, there are a bunch.



BAUMGARTNER: So what does that mean to somebody starting out and going into dentistry if they do not have a good tie in? Is it tougher to make it now?

WHEELER: Well, what they do is that they wind up in clinics and they work for other dentists that are doing that kind of practice. Those are doing the high cost deals and the guys just out of school are doing fillings, cleaning teeth and that kind of easy stuff. That is why there is only ten per cent because the rest are getting the word.

You see, I had dentistry in the family. They go and talk to a dentist and say what do you think? They find out, they are not dummies. They find out that they can make more money by doing engineering and whatever.

BAUMGARTNER: Okay, supply and demand is tilting towards too much supply. Is there anything you can say about the practice that has really changed a lot, like in technique, technology, computer developments?



WHEELER: It is the same thing just like medicine is. But the way you do it is different. You have to rehabilitate some people before you do dental work. I went to the number one dental school in Las Vegas. It is unbelievable, it is rehabilitation dentistry. I was lucky to have the chance to talk to Dr. Davey when he came through and I told him that if he was going to come here to Sugar Land and start working here with me, you are going to have to go to Las Vegas. There was a school that I told him about on our first talk and he said that sounds pretty good and I said it is. I spent eight years there, taking patients up there and practicing. I did that when I was about 58 and it took me eight years to go through all that.

#### COAST CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION (CCA)

BAUMGARTNER: I know you were involved with Gulf Coast Conservation Association from the beginning. "Gulf" was later dropped and it was shortened it to CCA. What was GCCA? What was it all about and what were they trying to do?

WHEELER: It was to protect the fishery along the Texas Gulf Coast. People were netting the redfish so heavy it was ruining the bays. "Save The Redfish" bumper stickers were everywhere. Walter Fondren started it. He got it going. Fondren and some other guys were upset about what the netters were doing to the redfish on the coast and called a meeting about it. Me and Sam McCullough were at the first meeting. Sam told me about it and said do you want to go to that? They are going to have sandwiches and beer. I said, "Hell, yeah, let's go."

BAUMGARTNER: Sam McCullough, your fishing buddy from Rosenberg. How many were there?

WHEELER: I think it was fourteen.

BAUMGARTNER: Fourteen. So you were one of the original fourteen at the first GCCA meeting. Do you remember when it started? It was in the seventies, wasn't it?

WHEELER: 1977 sounds about right. We didn't know what was going on, didn't have any idea at all, but Rudy Grigar had a fishing tackle store, Pro Tackle Shop, and Rudy was there and he drew a lot of people. He was known all over the United States.

BAUMGARTNER: Rudy Grigar. He was the one they called "The Plugger"?

WHEELER: Yes, that is what he called his artificial lures and they wrote a book about him and that's what he went by. He didn't fish with anything but artificials.

BAUMGARTNER: *The Plugger* was a popular well-known book, and Joe Doggett interviewed him all the time in Doggett's outdoor column in the *Houston Chronicle*. How did you meet him?

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The Plugger* described Rudy Grigar as "A pioneer, a legend in salt-water wade fishing, one of America's most notorious characters of saltwater fishing."

WHEELER: He had a meat market in Houston out on Old Spanish Trail and people went out there and got some barbecue and he told stories every minute. I saw him cutting up a piece of meat and talking. [both laughing] Only a Bohemian can do that.

BAUMGARTNER: Did you say you were part Bohemian on one side of your family?

WHEELER: My mother was Bohemian and German. The German side was from her mother, Brigman. Her daddy was Bohemian, Hodenak.

BAUMGARTNER: You used to fish with the Plugger?

WHEELER: Oh, yeah. Port O'Conner, Galveston, the Chandeleur Islands off New Orleans. He had a little cabin there, if you wanted to call it a cabin. It was on one of the islands. People came out and fished with him with boats, or he took people down and they flew out there.

He and another guy, with a wheelbarrow, made a place where they could land. If you could believe that, believe it because it was true. That was the first time I went down there in a plane.

BAUMGARTNER: Did you fly the plane?

WHEELER: No, there was a guy at Hull Field airport who invited me to go.

BAUMGARTNER: Did you say that Grigar built the cabin? What did he build it out of?

WHEELER: Wood that came up on the beach. There were islands and there was a bay right there. Some of the islands are one hundred yards wide. I think there were a total of seven and there were some further back. The one that he was on was on the ocean side.

We were sleeping one night and a high tide came in and we woke up with six inches of rising water in the cabin. I thought we were going out with the tide. They had a couple of oil wells in there and they were burning the gas off and those things worked at night. Can you imagine how many fish were around that at night?

BAUMGARTNER: Oh, the flares were bringing the fish in. Did you use artificial bait that Rudy designed? Did he make the plugs?

WHEELER: Artificial.

WHEELER: These were gold and silver spoons. The only bad thing about it was that the redfish were so big; probably the smallest one was fifteen pounds. There were so many of them and after you caught one or two, that was all that you could handle.

BAUMGARTNER: Why?

WHEELER: You had to pull them in. Your arms got tired. We went to Galveston Bay and we went in the dark, that's when he liked to fish. Rudy and his nephew, Irvin, would fish anywhere and at any time.

I met Rudy when I was in dental school and he was a butcher at the meat market. He told me all these stories and was bragging like Hell. He had a nephew there, Irvin. They sold sandwiches and chili.

I went in there and talked to that Bohemian and he was teaching me some stuff and he said we are going fishing this Saturday. I was so excited I couldn't sleep for two days. We went to Galveston Bay and we went in the dark, that's when he liked to fish.

Those two would fish anywhere, any time and a norther had blown in and it was probably below fifty degrees and he said, "Where are your waders, do you have any," and I said, "No." "He said, "Come here and I will give you some." They were a hundred dollars and I couldn't believe it. Because of him they carried them at that fishing place.

BAUMGARTNER: Wow. I read about him over the years but never met him.

WHEELER: You talk about a Bohemian now, we were going through Palacios. We had been down in Port O'Connor and we were coming back on a Sunday afternoon. Beep, beep, beep. This guy passed us and he turned around and he had a couple of guys in the car with him and he wanted to know if I had an anchor and I said, "Yeah." We pulled over. "Y'all don't have any Dr. Peppers?" "Rudy, what in the Hell do you want a Dr. Pepper for?" "Well, I got some scotch and I want to mix it up with something." [both laughing]. I swear that is Rudy Grigar there.

BAUMGARTNER: So Walter Fondren got GCCA started?

WHEELER: Walter Fondren, he is the man. He played football, end, for the University of Texas. What was happening, people with the nets were catching the fish, somebody else was selling the fish, and they were paying off to keep it legal. People were bitching a lot about it.

BAUMGARTNER: When you were down in Chinquapin were they still using gill nets then? What was that like?

WHEELER: We would go across the bay and put the net out, it was on a string and we made it about fifty feet wide. They had floats on them, weighted on the bottom. We just let salt water fill in those nets and let them go down so they were flat to the bottom. We had two big bamboo fishing poles and we waded off in that water. Sometimes you could see redfish, and we started whipping the water and the fish all started coming out of there. We even caught quite a few flounder.

BAUMGARTNER: You would be seining them?

WHEELER: No, the net wasn't moving, it was set and the fish would swim into it.

BAUMGARTNER: In a gill net, their heads would get stuck in the mesh.

WHEELER: Yeah. We had four or five redfish, three or four flounders. That was a good day, and that was enough to eat. We just enjoyed doing it. There were no regulations then. But the netters started going commercial.

BAUMGARTNER: So GCCA, said that the netters were starting to slaughter all the redfish in the bays.

WHEELER: At the first four or five meetings, Walter Fondren and those guys were out of our league. These guys had the money. They started organizing. They said we need to get some money and we need to get some guys. That got as many as they could get just by word of mouth. We didn't have any phones back then so there were only a few guys at first. Fondren knew that we were going to have to do something to get the guys in office. He told us we needed to get our friends and bring somebody with you; bring ten people with you. What we will do is get them there by having a banquet. We started making some money so we could have an office.

BAUMGARTNER: Oh, yeah, I remember the GCCA banquet out at the Fort Bend County fairgrounds. It was a major event every year. Rosenberg had a big group, real fishermen, like George and Jimmy Guest, Gerald Harper, Steve Onstead, Ren Davis, Bubba Young, Billy Davenport, your brother Jerry, Bubba Talasek, Don Schwartz, Roger Meyer, Eddie Kolojaco...

WHEELER: Yep, but for GCCA, the good old guys are gone. What there is left is that you win a boat at a banquet. That is not what GCCA is for. They were there to serve. We started going after the politicians to get something done. We invited them to come, some of them over in Sugar Land. When they found out there was over six hundred people at the banquet, they were calling me.

BAUMGARTNER: Did Fondren have connections?

WHEELER: Oh, yeah, he did. You know Fondren Street in downtown Houston?

BAUMGARTNER: So there were netters up and down the coast netting the redfish and selling them, and the legislators wouldn't stop them. Wasn't that the problem?

WHEELER: It is not so much just the netters; it is also the people that buy the fish. We started making connections with legislators and fund raising. It started up around Galveston and then it moved to Freeport and started going more toward Louisiana.

BAUMGARTNER: I remember there was a real conflict between the netters and the GCCA. It was reported that a GCCA guy said that for a long time in those days when they were getting after it with the netters, he would not go fishing without a pistol.

WHEELER: We (GCCA) cut their nets up. Down in New Orleans the GCCA said that any place that does redfish, don't go there. If people had redfish there, I wouldn't go.

BAUMGARTNER: You quit eating them at restaurants? Boycotting?

WHEELER: One of the things GCCA started was pulling up the abandoned crab traps out of the bay. They were real problem for the crabs, the fishery, and the fisherman. Some guys were trying to close the beach at Matagorda and build a hotel. GCCA fought it, and that deal didn't go. For the guys in Fort Bend County, Matagorda was where we fished. We didn't want it ruined, but the Houston guys did not want to participate. GCCA was responsible for getting saltwater hatcheries for redfish and speckled trout.

BAUMGARTNER: Buddy, it's been great talking to you. You were active with GCCA for a long time.

WHEELER: Me and two other guys were in charge of people having fun and that is what we liked to do and we all fished together. It took over ten years but finally the State made redfish and specks illegal to net in Texas.

BAUMGARTNER: That was a significant movement in activity and results that really changed the environment down there.

WHEELER: It is going to be the opposite thing now. Get the commercial fishermen out from fishing nine miles offshore. Snapper fishing's getting ruined.

BAUMGARTNER: I went offshore one time last year and I remember how it used to be. We'd go out to Texaco Rig 538, no GPS, no radio, beautiful blue water, and coming back the ice chests would be full and the bottom of our boat would be covered up with red snapper. Now you go out there for forty miles and you get to keep TWO FISH.

WHEELER: Commercial fishing is taking it out. Look around in the stores and you will see them. Things have changed. In Flatonia they have a picture in the store next door to my mother's and daddy's place, my grandfather's office where there was a feed store on the bottom of his office. They had pictures of some redfish they caught in Port O'Connor. They didn't fish with reels; they have these big Calcutta rods, bamboo like and some of them I would say fifteen feet.

BAUMGARTNER: I've sure enjoyed catching up. Isn't it amazing that we are still alive with all the stuff we used to do?

WHEELER: Oh, mercy.

Interview ends