

CORNELIUS AUGUSTUS “NEAL” PICKETT

Interview 18a

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ABSTRACT: A native of Houston, Texas, Neal Pickett (1902-1990) served as mayor of that city in 1941-1942. He was married to Margaret Yarborough, sister of Ralph W. Yarborough, U.S. senator from Texas. Pickett headed the Houston district of the Federal Housing Administration from 1962 to 1967 and was instrumental in helping Diboll establish its housing authority. Pickett also helped establish the Deep East Texas Council of Governments (DETCOG) in 1967 and served as its first director. In this 1982 interview, Pickett tells mostly of his early experiences as head of the Mount Pleasant Chamber of Commerce in the late 1920s and as secretary of the Lumberman's Association of Texas and manager of an insurance exchange in Houston during the 1930s. Pickett talks mainly of politics, including the Great Depression of the 1930s and the roles of presidents Hoover and Roosevelt, Civil War Reconstruction during the 1860s, and of the early Reagan administration in the 1980s.

Becky Bailey: My name is Becky Bailey and I am interviewing Mr. C. A. Pickett at his home. His address is Route..., 809 South Meadows. Mr. Pickett, where were you born and when?

C. Pickett: In Houston, Texas, in 1902, December 22.

BB: You have a birthday right close then. What were your parents' names?

CP: Cornelius David and Margaret Moody Pickett.

BB: What part of the country were they from originally? Were they from Houston?

CP: Arkansas and Tennessee.

BB: Did you have brothers and sisters?

CP: Three sisters, one has passed on, and two brothers.

BB: Where do they live?

CP: In Houston, Brazoria County, and Beaumont, Texas.

BB: Okay, what type of work were you doing whenever the Depression started, like in 1929? Your first work experience?

CP: I finished the University of Texas in 1926 and in 1927 became the first full-time manager of the Mount Pleasant, Titus County, Chamber of Commerce.

BB: What was your job, you know your duties, what did you do for them?

CP: Responsibility of the manager of the Chamber of Commerce was to help in the development of the community from the stand point of industrial development, agricultural development, and trade for the stores in Mount Pleasant and anything that would contribute to the growth and the development of Mount Pleasant.

BB: Okay, at this time, in 1927, through this time, what was the main industry in Mount Pleasant? What was their main...?

CP: Mount Pleasant had no industry and that was my responsibility to help develop it.

BB: Was it all agriculture or...?

CP: It was mostly agriculture and we decided that dairying would be good for Mount Pleasant and Titus county and East Texas. And they sent me to Wisconsin. I went to Wisconsin and made a study of the dairy industry and upon my return to Mount Pleasant we organized the company and brought in several hundred, full-blooded; jersey heifers and we established what was known as "Bull Circles." We'd move a bull from one area to the other. Then we went to carnation milk company, and the carnation milk company agreed, if we got milk production up to a certain point, to build a powdered milk plant in Mount Pleasant. A powdered milk plant was built, and contributed greatly to the wealth of the people of Titus County and North East Texas.

BB: Uh-huh.

CP: We did not have natural gas at that time and one of the projects of the Chamber of Commerce was to interest the gas company in bringing natural gas to Mount Pleasant. We worked with the city council in getting the necessary right-of-ways and making it possible for the subscribers in downtown Mount Pleasant to have natural gas service.

BB: At this time when you decided to bring the, you know to try to bring in the dairy industry, was the agriculture already being depressed as far as poor markets and this sort of thing or was this just an effort to diversify?

CP: We were in a depression or recession at that time and money was very, very hard to get because the only cash crop was cotton and at the end of the year when the poor cotton farmer brought his cotton to town, and by the time he paid off what he owed the bank, he had very, very little to take home.

BB: I see. When did you leave Mount Pleasant?

CP: In 1930. The insurance exchange in Houston which was the trade association of the fire casualty decided to employ a full-time manager and I was the first full-time manager of the insurance exchange of Houston which is now the independent insurance agents of Houston. At that time we had about 80 members. Now they have something like 4000 members. My main responsibility was in educating the members of the organization, in the insurance business, and our legislative work consisted of going to Austin and working to get insurance agents licensing law passed. At that time, it was possible for an individual to just write to Austin and say, "I want to become an insurance agent. I am enclosing herewith on dollar." And by return mail, he received his license to engage in the insurance business. We did not feel that was sufficient educational qualifications to serve the public's insurance needs and we got the law passed, and I believe it was in about 1933.

BB: Uh-huh. What were conditions in Houston at this time whenever you moved there in 1930? Was it...?

CP: Conditions were very, very poor in Houston in 1930, '31, and '32. In 1932, for example, I was a president of the junior Chamber of Commerce in 1932,... '32 and '33 and the great need of the poor in Houston at that time was fuel. And we made arrangements with the oil companies out on the ship channel to provide us with all of the coke that we needed and we distributed something like 30000 tons of coke. So at least, we kept the poor and needy warm in Houston during that terrible '32-'33 winter.

BB: Were there soup lines and this sort of thing just like there were up north?

CP: There were soup lines and the Salvation Army, the Community Chest, and they and a number of churches had soup kitchens and provided food. However, it is true that the real depression didn't hit Houston until about '35 or '36 because we were pretty well cushioned and the winters weren't too severe.

BB: where were most of the jobs then, in the oil industries at that time?

CP: The oil industry hadn't developed to the extent that it has since that period and the jobs were in the stores and in construction work and wholesale stores, resale stores. We had some manufacturers there in Houston. We had the old Houston Packing Company and we had a number of rice milling firms in Houston at that time. The ship channel provided some jobs, but the ship channel was just coming into its own during the depression.

BB: So the real crunch came in '35 and '36?

CP: Really, really later in the years, yes ma'am.

BB: Okay. Do you remember what your hours and pay were at this time?

CP: In Mount Pleasant our hours were from eight to five, five days a week and I was supposed to work one-half a day on Saturday, but I usually ended up working a full day. My salary was a hundred and twenty-five dollars a month, but we were paying fifteen dollars rent for a small apartment. The man had just built a small apartment house with several little apartments in it and we had one of the apartments and rent was fifteen dollars a month and I think our lights was about a dollar and a half a month, and gas was some.... When we got gas, it was something two dollars a month.

BB: Uh-huh. Were you and Margaret married by this time?

CP: Yeah. We were married in 1927.

BB: Okay. Here comes the part that you're going to like. What did you think about Hoover in that election in 19 and whenever? (laugh)

CP: The election of 1928 pitted Herbert Hoover and Governor Al Smith of New York. It was certainly true at that time that we understood that Mr. Hoover's...one of Mr. Hoover's greatest friends was Andrew Mellon. And Andrew Mellon's philosophy was, and I am quoting him: "The prosperity of the middle classes depends on the good fortune and light taxes of the rich." That is the end of the quote. I was a... I am a Democrat. I was a Democrat then, and I voted for Al Smith because he had a big heart for people and it is true that in 1932 when the Democrats ran Franklin Delano Roosevelt for the office of President, we were saying that President Hoover had a... was a great engineer, but that he had ditched and drained the United States in just four years.

BB: Didn't Mellon end up as part of his cabinet, of Hoover's cabinet?

CP: You are correct. Mr. Mellon served as secretary of the Treasury for Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover.

BB: I thought I'd remembered reading that. Do you remember any programs that Hoover came up with whenever the Depression hit to try to get the country out of ... or did people think that Hoover could do anything, or whether it was just one of those things?

CP: I think Mr. Hoover was a very good engineer and he was a good man, but he could not understand the complexity of the Depression. Mr. Hoover, when he was making his race for the office, promised us that he was gonna have a car in every garage and two chickens in every pot. He did not.... He was not an innovator. He did not have the capacity that FDR had, and I don't recall that there were any measures at all that were undertaken by the federal government because he was wedded to the idea that private enterprise could solve all problems if you just left it alone. Didn't ask it make any accounting or to assume any responsibility for the welfare of the public generally, but just let free enterprise run wild and that, well, it's just like Andrew Mellon said.

BB: Like taxes for the rich and good luck for the middle class.

CP: Good luck for the middle class, yes.

BB: Were you as active in politics then as you are now?

CP: Well, in 1927, '28, I had four counties in North East Texas. Titus, Camp, (pause) Margaret, what county was Dangerfield in?

BB: I don't think she's in here.

CP: I had four counties and all four of them went for Al Smith and then when I returned to Houston it wasn't politics at that time, but I became president of the Junior Chamber of Commerce, president of the Ex-Students Association University of Texas and was very active in all of the elections that took place. At least, I always had somebody I thought was best for the city or the county, or the state, or the government. I always supported the Democratic nominees in national races.

BB: Did you work for FDR then? Or did you...?

CP: I worked for FDR and then I worked for President Truman, then I worked for President Kennedy, and I worked for President Johnson.

BB: Just right up the ladder.

CP: And President Carter.

BB: What were some... why did you think that Roosevelt could turn things around? What were some of his ideas that you felt were proper for this time?

CP: President Roosevelt had a wonderful personality, and I recall that the day he took the oath of office as President of the United States he made a speech and it was broadcast on radio. We didn't have television, broadcast on radio that night and I was touched that when I went to bed that night I got down on my knees and prayed that the Almighty would assist President Roosevelt in his most difficult job of getting us out of the Depression. And President Roosevelt was able to get us out of the Depression because he took the position that everybody had a responsibility. Even the rich, even the moderately rich, and even the poor. He maintained that everybody should work, everybody should give, and everybody should contribute in proportion to his ability to give. Now that didn't please the rich very much when they felt that they had to give more money than the fellow digging the ditch out here for two and a half or three dollars a day, but President Roosevelt took the position that this was a great country, we were great people, and that there was no problem beyond our ability to solve and he made us think. He gave us courage, his voice carried such an amount of faith in it that we all got to feeling that "By golly we can lick this Depression and we can do something if we will all do our part and expect less."

BB: In the early, let's see this would be before the election, whenever you first went to Houston; was there any union or socialist activity going on at that time in Houston?

CP: Very little. The unions were just coming into their own. Becky, at that particular time and they were not encouraged. The unions were just more or less tolerated. Everybody felt it was a nice thing for the unions to be and that it was alright for men to belong to the union, but it was not expected that they would get into thinking about better wages, better hours, health benefits, and all of those things, and of course...

BB: Okay to belong just don't rock the boat. (laugh)

CP: Yes, it is alright for you to belong but don't take yourself or the union too seriously and don't expect us to do any more than we are doing.

BB: So all, though all, that was taking place in the East it wasn't down here?

CP: It hadn't started down here, but it didn't take long before the unions started electing different managers, different directors, and then they commenced to realize that there was something more than just a pay check. There was consideration, there was health benefits, there was time off, and there was annuities, pensions, and in those days very little thought was given to the matter of pensions. And it came; really, the desire for pensions came from the unions and from the employees of the Federal Government in Washington.

BB: Do you think this is where the idea for the Social Security System came from, then, as a result of some of these ideas or was it strictly a brainchild of FDR or...?

CP: FDR first said something to the effect at that he felt that provisions should be made for individual who, when they reach the age of 65, and in those years, in those days, the life expectancy was about 50 some odd. Now it's 70, but he said that when people reached old age they should be able to retire and live in dignity with enough financial support to maintain that dignity. He said that he felt that after a person had served 40 years 35, 40 years, he was entitled to live in some comfort and in peace and in dignity. He kept mentioning the word "Dignity" and that struck us. That being important.

BB: I understand you did a lot of campaigning or speaking out for the Social Security System?

CP: I have. The first talk I ever made on the Social Security System was in 1936.

BB: What sort of organizations would you talk to?

CP: Talk to nearly anybody... at that time it was to the lumbermen. I was manager of the Lumberman's Association of Texas. At that time, I was making a talk in Fort Worth. In 1936, I pointed out that the company's contribution and the individual's contribution was one percent and I thought it was highly desirable.

BB: Was there any opposition as such? A lot of the people I've talked to here, none of them minded giving the one percent, for most of them it didn't amount to just a whole lot, was there any opposition?

CP: No. I think we were so convinced by President Roosevelt that that was what we should do and industry or the business community felt that that might be a better way for them to handle their problems of retirement rather than trying to set up their own individual pension fund.

BB: That nation-wide, it would work better?

CP: Yes. That nation-wide it would, and that the nation owed people who had contributed something to its growth and its development something, when their days of autumn arrived.

BB: Okay. You said that things really started getting hard in Houston in '35 and '36, when did things generally seem to start getting better? You were still in Houston at this time?

CP: Yes. I was manager of the Lumberman's Association of Texas and along toward the 1937, '38, '39 home building increased. And home building has always been a good barometer of healthy growth, not only in Houston but the State of Texas and as far as that's concerned, national-wise. And home building picked up and small industries started coming into Houston at the time, petro-chemical industries and then, of course, there was a feeling that maybe America was going to become involved in the war about that time. And they needed some high octane gasoline made and along ship channel in about '38, '39, the companies started making a high octane gasoline and 80 percent which was used in airplanes, 80 percent of all the high octane gasoline was made along the ship channel. And, of course, that brought a number of other small businesses into Houston, demand for homes, more banking facilities, buying more insurance, buying more food and clothing.

BB: Speaking of banking, you brought it up. Were there any banks that failed in either of these places that you were aware of like in Mount Pleasant during this time?

CP: We did not have a bank failure in Mount Pleasant. We did not have a bank failure in Houston.

BB: Really!

CP: And I must give credit to Mr. Jesse Jones. Because, it would be denied because there are no one, very few people alive who will remember it. But we had rumors in Houston that if a bank got in a bad way, the assets of another bank would be transferred over there at night so that when bank examiners came around the next day, the bank had enough money on hand. But you know, it was fool-hardy really to let a bank fail. If a

bank failed everybody-the city, the community, everybody lost-and I don't think Mr. Jones and his co-horts ever did anything that was wrong except fooled some nit picking bank examiner. So I was all for it. I remember when the banks closed there one time, closed their doors and I believe you could draw out ten dollars at a time, or something like that. It lasted for about 48 hours or 72 hours and Houston, during that terrible depression, did not have one bank failure and it may be that our leaders did something that was not exactly proper but in the long run it benefited everybody-the nation, our community, banks and individuals.

BB: Do you think a depression such as 1929 can happen again?

CP: Becky, I think we're in a depression right now.

BB: Right now. (laugh)

CP: They are saying, they are calling it a recession and the president of the United States said the other day that we are going to charge a nickel more on gasoline, but we are gonna call it a user's fee. Which is so ridiculous it's a five...it's a nickel tax. And it seems to me that too many items at that are need for, just ordinary living, are being taxed entirely too much, and some items, luxury items are not, and of course, the president's program of making it possible for the terribly rich not to pay any taxes and for middle America to pay extraordinary taxes. Well, it's just like Andrew Mellon said, that philosophy is undoubtedly the philosophy of the man in the White House now. He feels that the rich get richer they're certainly, now they call it the trickle down. He feels that if the rich get richer, there will be enough to trickle down well. It didn't prove to be in the early '30s in the '30s. And I don't believe it's going to prove to be true in the '80s.

BB: That's true. Do you think...you know as many people as is unemployed number wise now as there were 1930. The 12 million is about...

CP: I think it's near 16 million. You see there's a million and a half. This 10.8 as I understand it means about 13 plus million people unemployed. But there is a million six hundred thousand people in addition to that who have given up all hope. They do not go by and tell the authorities that I am unemployed and I have that people in...we just didn't have that kind of a population. I don't know how many. We didn't have a record. Percentage wise....

BB: It may be different but number wise it probably...

CP: It's greater because we just didn't have that many people in the country at that time.

BB: Do you think eventually people will be as accepting now as they were then or will there be some changes do you think?

CP: What do you mean?

BB: Populate. Well, it seems like...well it.... Especially in the South people were just kind of accepting it, you know. There wasn't a whole lots of...there weren't any riots in the streets, that sort of thing in the South. Do you think eventually things will be any different now than they were then?

CP: Well, of course, we have got more Yankees in the South now than we had in 1865 and '67. And in 1965... 1865 to 1868, we had a Republican governor, Edmund J. Davis, and the present Republican governor is pretty much the counter part of Edmund J. Davis and situations were handled in those days of a local basis. If things got out of hand, men got together, organized and they set the record strait. Edmund J. Davis wasn't re-elected, couldn't have been re-elected. Then President Grant refused to send troops down here, he never would have been elected governor, when he was elected governor, armed federal troops were called to the voting polls and folks didn't vote and if they voted why, the votes were thrown away. But when we had a chance to vote we voted Edmund J. Davis out. Had Edmund J. Davis been re-elected there would have been riots in the streets. I don't think that we are going to have riots now because FDR, President Truman, President Johnson, President Kennedy, President Carter have stuck with Social Security. Social Security, I think is the...so long as the elderly people can maintain their equilibrium and their composure, I think that there will be no violence in the streets. And I think we can thank Social Security for contributing to the feeling that it will work out. Now we are not saying that the present administration is on the right track because we cannot believe that the billions and billions that are being spent for so called "Defense Purposes," we call it, "A war making capability," and that's what it is. Because folks of my age have learned, and I've read enough history to know if any nation becomes powerful, the army, the navies, and all of that, course they didn't have those areas in those days, but they had elephants and they had camels and they had spears and all. They went to war, I mean history says, if a nation gets powerful enough it goes to war. I think Russia is afraid of us and I want to be afraid of Russia, but I agree with, what was that great admiral? Rickover. Rickover was interviewed and he was asked, "How many nuclear submarines do we have?" He said "One Hundred" and the interviewer said, "What can they do?" He said, "Destroy the world" and the interviewer asked Admiral Rickover, "Who is the father of nuclear growth in America, he's done more than anybody, developing the nuclear submarines and all," he said, "Well we've got a hundred that can blow the world to pieces, what would we do with another hundred? Where would we keep them? Where would they be?" And I am very much opposed to the development of nuclear weapons and I think most church people are, opposed to it. Because we've got enough power right now to almost destroy Russia, and I guess Russia has enough to almost destroy us. Well, usually one will respect the other's strength and nothing will start.

BB: Hopefully.

CP: Hopefully, Hopefully, Hopefully, yes, Becky.

BB: The thing that has bothered me in doing this research is that almost every time after there's a deep recession or depression there is a war. Do think...?

CP: Well, some presidents and some leaders have felt that the only way they can go down in history as being great is that they were re-elected or that they were able to win a war and I am afraid the white man, in the White House is getting us nearer to war than any other time in our history.

BB: I think I agree with you.

END OF INTERVIEW