

**Transcript of an Oral History Interview in the collection of the
BREVARD COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION
308 Forrest Ave., Cocoa, FL 32922**

Speaker 1: Name of interviewee, Joe Wickham. Name of interviewer, Georgiana Kjerulff. Name of cameraman, Lauritz Kjerulff. Copyright the Brevard County Historical Commission, Brevard County, Florida, 2000.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Joe, Let's begin with your own personal history. Last time I interviewed was a very long time, you were telling me that you came back from the SeaBees and got [00:00:30] off the train. And then, the idea was what do you do next? And somebody found an appointment for you?

Joe Wickham: In those early days, when I came back at the end of the war, you know, I thought that I just come back from the end of the world. I spent three years in the South Pacific. And it was an experience. I went in at the [00:01:00] Guadalcanal, in that area in the Solomons and went all the way through in New Guinea and ended up in the Philippine Islands, you know.

I think one of the things I remember most vividly about that time was that the Chief Boatswain's Mate on the ship that we were on, it was a very rough sea and I was officer of the deck. And he became sea sick. And you had big troughs that were developed [00:01:30] along instead of, you know, for water just boiling out all the time. And he started to ... I had vomit, you know, and heave up. He was sea sick. He ran over there. And when he did, he blew his false teeth out into the trough and he ran over to the side of the ship. It took us over a year to get him a set of false teeth down there. And he had to gum all of his food but [00:02:00] it was a great experience for us. That's the way we began to start, thanks to the South Pacific.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Was it to the county commission?

Joe Wickham: Oh, no. I was on the city council in the beginning.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Well, let's start with that. Tell me about your first appointment.

Joe Wickham: Well, when I came back, I found myself on the city council at Eau Gallie. [00:02:30] And we were very progressive, young group in the city of Eau Gallie. And I decided that maybe I ought to run for county commissioner. And this I did. I have to laugh. There were 20,000 people in all of Brevard County roughly figured. And there was about 600 people paid all the taxes.

And so when [00:03:00] I began to realize that, that we had to have some schools and that sort of thing in our community. So, I went to the county commissioner and asked them to give us an assessment of 65% of the true value of your home because before that, everybody had house assessed at \$4,995.95 [00:03:30] or something, just under \$5,000 homestead exemption. And this really eliminated practically everybody from paying taxes. And before that, you could have 10 children and send them to school and didn't have to pay a dime.

So I got your house assessed, including mine, at 65% of its true value. And we drew all these people into the tax bracket. [00:04:00] And it made all the difference in the world. From that time on and when I ran the next time, I thought, "Well, that eliminates me from my political career," because I thought everybody would be angry with me. And do you know that I didn't even have any opposition because they knew I had done what had to be done at the beginning?

Georgiana Kjerulff: Well, tell me, at this time, [00:04:30] right after the war, there was a lot of readjustment in Brevard County. You had three major bases here. Out on Banana River and Melbourne and up north, there was a Marine base. And how did the town begin to readjust?

Joe Wickham: When I first got on the commission, it was quite interesting because every little town [00:05:00] was arresting all of the boys that was in the service, you know, because they were rowdy and creating a problem. And they would go running around, everything in the community. And the base commander came to me and said, "We've got to do something with this."

And what we really did is we, we finally came to the conclusion, the board of county commissioners, came to the conclusion that if the Air Force or [00:05:30] the Navy, it was Navy in the beginning, they would take care of their personnel. And we would take care of the civilian personnel. We didn't start trying to arrest all the enlisted men and everything else. And that is the way we formed the present civilian military council that you see so active in our community today. And it's one of the greatest things that ever happened to it [00:06:00] because we got together for the first time in history. When they didn't have any access to go to Patrick from the south ...Well, it was not Patrick at that time but it was a naval base. And when Patrick finally come in, they couldn't get electricity up there. They came to me. And I said, "One of these days, we're going to build a road up there and you can have access for a power line at [00:06:30] that time."

That is why I put in South Patrick Drive. Just as fast as I'd put up a right of way clearance, they set another telephone pole, you know. It was quite interesting but we got electricity up to the cape, to Patrick Air Force Base and all that like it is today. And it's been a wonderful program since then.

Georgiana Kjerulff: How did Brevard County readjust?

Joe Wickham: [00:07:00] We--They did great there because we began to ... With this new program we had, we began to work with each other. Before that, we were at odds and ends against each other. And then, we decided, if they had a parade or had something going on up there, we all participated in. When we wanted little community program going, they had to bring [00:07:30] the band down. And they would be a part of the growth of our community. Paid dividends many, many times.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Tell me about Melbourne Naval Air Base, you know, when they left and they gave all the land to the city.

Joe Wickham: Well, I was in the beginning with the naval air base, I was one of the superintendents on that base. And it was the greatest [00:08:00] development in our community because from pastureland, we developed quite an airport, you know. The Gleasons owned a lot of that property in the beginning. And this is the way they got their property.

At the end, I tried to get them to take it back but no one wanted it but the Melbourne decided [00:08:30] that they would be a part of their little air station. And by developing it as it is and it grew up. And the county and I was on the county commission, we cleared the land, we put in the runways, and everything else and put on all the big runways that you see today basically. The county furnished all the marl and everything else for [00:09:00] this whole airport property down there. And it's been a great thing for our community. And I don't know what we'd have done without it. And we got it on basically what it was at the end of the war, you know. Of course, we expanded it. It turned out to be such a great big asset to our community.

Georgiana Kjerulff: One [00:09:30] part of the history that has never been discussed was the German prisoner of war camp here.

Joe Wickham: Oh they had--That is where they cleared a great deal of it. In those early days, they had the prisoner of war camp.

Georgiana Kjerulff: They did the work on the airport?

Joe Wickham: Well they did cleanups and all that sort of stuff. No, we built the darn thing. And we used all [00:10:00] the basically local help, too, in the beginning with it. And I was a superintendent on the job. And it ended up with a very good program.

And of course, we had all this beach program where we had all these towers sitting out along the ocean shore all [00:10:30] about every 8 to 10 miles and between them, you could control the activity of that whole area but we utilized the prisoners in the cleanups and all that sort of stuff.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Tell me. What did Brevard hope to become after the war? Was it headed for a retirement community or a resort as Kouwen-Hoven wanted?

Joe Wickham: Kouwen-Hoven, all he wanted [00:11:00] was a bridge across. He was quite a guy. You had to give him credit. He had all that land on the beach, you know. He wanted to develop it. And he got the first bridge across here at Melbourne. And of course, it burned down like a lot of other things. And of course, it was put back but he was a great [00:11:30] guy. And he was one of these real type people that was a go-getter in those days and not the kind who just like doing but everybody that basically came to us in our community were here in land development and

concepts, you know. Because of that, that's when we begin to develop our golf courses and all that sort of thing, you know. They [00:12:00] used to bus people into our community to look the land over and buy it.

Where my father had gained way, he came here. My dad, he was in 1904, '05, he was in college at Iowa State College in Ames, Iowa. And he bought land speculation. Had never seen it but he bought 80 acres of land [00:12:30] down here. So after the war and many years later, he came down here to see where his 80 acres was. When he got here, it was all underwater and there was in the area [inaudible 00:12:46] was at. Now, down in Malabar.

And another engineer and Jim Hunter, they became the engineers for the development of the [00:13:00] entire area of development of South Brevard from about U.S. 192 all the way back down to the south end of the county. They laid out the entire area, all the roads and the drainage and that sort of thing. Then, we came down. And we came there in 1920, I think it was.

Georgiana Kjerulff: [00:13:30] What brought the electronics industry here? Was it the activity up at the Cape?

Joe Wickham: When we begin to develop the Cape, we appointed a committee who went to all the property owners up there because they were trying to get them to sell the land. And during [00:14:00] that time, some people were reluctant but we talked the people into making us a deal. We would get them to sell the land to the government. And then, they would contract back to the people that they could utilize it until they needed it, this give them an opportunity all those people in ... Even today, I think there are still lot [00:14:30] of the old orange groves and grapefruit groves that were up there in the beginning. And this is a way they were able to get control of the land because they leased it back to the people who they bought it from in the beginning, which was very unique. And it was quite an experience.

And I think the nicest thing about it was that people began to suddenly realize that if they helped with this kind of a program [00:15:00] and the progress from the governmental agencies that is going to make them financially better off, you know. Instead of having to go through big hassles of condemnation, they all want to cooperate with you.

Because, as an example, we come down on a road just today. [00:15:30] And in the beginning, Lansing Gleason went to the county wanted to develop a piece of land. They said, "Oh, where is this piece of land?" He says, "It's out there on that land, that road that Joe Wickham was building out there in the country." So they put Wickham's Road on there. And it didn't even have a name to it. And that's the way we began to develop that road. And I just [00:16:00] came down a few minutes ago, like to scared me to death. It's loaded with people.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Well we were just talking about the golf course that Kouwen-Hoven developed right opposite his private home. That's now the Florida Air Academy. That was Kouwen-Hoven's home in Magnolia Manor.

Joe Wickham: I remember that-- how they got all excited with that. It all started getting underwater. I [00:16:30] had to send the county equipment down there to bail that whole area and dig the ditches in it. That's where I got into the drainage business for Brevard County.

In the end of the progress, I got them to lay out a program that we reserve 50 feet on each side of every section line and in the state or in the county for a future road. All the roads [00:17:00] that you ride on today all came from that proposed layout. And we didn't have to buy any of the right of ways because you couldn't develop your land without giving the right of way for the roads. You see the roads that you ride on today, they're nice, straight, big, long pieces of highway. All because we reserved them for roads in the future.

And then, we did something else, [00:17:30] we wanted recreation facilities. And we developed a park and we put in most of the bicycle paths and everything else that you see as part of our development because in those days, the only access you had, you could either go under the area, which was controlled by the county and the city. Every time we put in a new road, basically one of the cities [00:18:00] would take it into their corporation but it paid dividends many, many times. And that's the way our cities were formed.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Tell me. What do you see is the future of Brevard County?

Joe Wickham: I think we're just beginning. We've gone through the cycle and then we've gone through a recession area in which [00:18:30] we've changed our whole concept but now, we've got something that a lot of them haven't got. We've got a great big area where we can develop all types of good facilities. They're not bogged down with a bunch of other type of equipment and new corporations have come to us, people like Harris and everyone. And we've started our colleges and everything [00:19:00] else. And they formed a wonderful program in our community. We're just beginning to see development for the future. We who are here and the younger people who are here are going to see great growth in this community for the next many, many years because they're going to be part of the development of this whole section of the state of Florida and the federal government down there because the federal government is going to be investing a lot [00:19:30] of money in this missile program here for the future.

We're just beginning. Nothing compared to what it's going to be in the future because it's going to be something to see.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Tell me, what industry do you suppose we'd be in the lead in? Would it be the missile or electronics or a combination?

Joe Wickham: I think that we're in the missile business and electronics and research. The things [00:20:00] that are going to develop through the programs here in this section of Brevard County and this East Coast are going to be the most outstanding things of the future. They're going to know everything that goes on. And they're already trying to figure out system for protection and everything else. And we're just beginning. It's going to be the groundwork for the future of our [00:20:30] community.

Georgiana Kjerulff: You seem to be bringing in a lot of retirement people.

Joe Wickham: Well there's a lot of retirement people but they're just a small portion of what's going to happen in the future because they're going to be moving into certain areas but we're going to be developing all of these facilities for the future and they're going to want to be a part of that, too but they can live in retirement, [00:21:00] lots of them, in these developments that you see like these smaller communities that we have today.

Georgiana Kjerulff: How about South Brevard? That has not developed as fast as North Brevard.

Joe Wickham: They will be in the future. And that's what I'm saying, that when I look at the old Melbourne-Tillman drainage district with my father and Jim Hunter, and another engineer, [00:21:30] did so much work on, Lock Davidson in his early days and all that sort of thing.

We're just beginning. We've got great areas for future development. And this is where that big area for development is going to be because they've got the land to do it on. And I think that you're going to find in the future, the young people of Brevard County are going to see that many [00:22:00] of the schools in this area and it's all going to be because of recreation and electronics and new concepts of defense, as they tried to tell you.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Well then, we should be a combination of both resort community and industry.

Joe Wickham: We've got so many nice places for people to come, people who want to play golf and who want to sit down and do nothing. [00:22:30] They got all those kind of programs. And we're just beginning. We're just beginning.

In fact, the person who wants to come down there and think he's going to hibernate, he's got a shock coming because they're not going to let him hibernate. They're going to make you be a part of the growth of our community and what is going to develop into in the future. It's going to be a great place in which to [00:23:00] live.

And well, as an example, we will come a long way. When I first started on the county commission, land was settling where you could find a customer for about \$28 an acre. Can you imagine buying some land today for \$28 an acre on one of these big, nice highways that you ride on? And that's what's going to happen in

the future. It's going to be really-- Land values are going to skyrocket out of sight [00:23:30] but we're going to have the facilities to serve people.

And the little guy who--I grubbed, as an example where you know where U.S. 1 is over out here, I grubbed palmettos for \$10 a day for a \$1 a day script on the grocery store for groceries for my little brothers and sisters because I was sole support. [00:24:00] And today, they're wanting 8 and \$10 an hour just as a common laborer. That tells you things. And that's just beginning. And they want all these other services that you see today. And it's going to be more demanding all the time.

Georgiana Kjerulff: We were talking about the value of the land. In the earliest days when Platt bought his land it was under a dollar [00:24:30] an acre.

Joe Wickham: What he did, the Platts and you had to give him credit. They paid about a dollar for the land because it was real grazing thing land. And that's the way they got it. If you didn't look out, they'd buy your land along with everybody else's but they were great people, great pioneers in our community. [00:25:00] And the big cattle program that they've had was the basis of our success for what we are today because they laid the groundwork for the whole community.

Georgiana Kjerulff: You think that's going to vanish, the cattle industry here?

Joe Wickham: Oh I do, yes. What happened in the beginning, he raised all of these cattle out around Arcadia and all for food [00:25:30] during the Civil War and everything else. It's come a long way from Civil War to the missile programs and the things of the future that you see here today because our whole program is more modernistic in its concept than the great number of the places in the world. If you live here, you're living in an area ...

As an example, Harris and all of its affiliations [00:26:00] and there are things of the future in development. That's where we're going to do more and more things in the coming years.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Are we also losing our agriculture?

Joe Wickham: Oh, I think our agriculture is going to be darn near a thing of the past because we're going to be loading our community up with people and programs on development for a different [00:26:30] type of concept. They'll keep agriculture out in the back country but as an example, when I came down there yesterday, I came down the beach area. That area, which was all open and they had pineapples on them when I was a kid. It's now nothing but a great mass of hotels. And they're so tight, the only access you see to [00:27:00] the ocean is where I got them to give right of way in the beginning, many, many years ago to access to the ocean. That's the only entrances to be. The rest of it's all built up solid with the buildings and motels and hotels, 10 or 15 stories high.

Georgiana Kjerulff: What would happen if we have a good hurricane again? We've had several in the past 1928, 1930 something.

Joe Wickham: [00:27:30] Well, yes. I tell you. Many of the people, they don't realize that sometime, that water may come over there. And when it does, you better be ready to evacuate because it flooded in the past. And it's cut itself through in several places and over a period of many years. And it's going to do that again. And the people who [00:28:00] think they live on this side of the Indian River and the Banana River, that they won't have any problem. I've seen much of that when the wind blows in a certain direction, covered with water. And it'll do that again unless you get it properly drained.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Are we working on those plans in the future?

Joe Wickham: Well, I think if the great number of people who are so [00:28:30] involved today, they appoint a committee. And they don't think of those things. Had we not started in the beginning ...

I remember when I talked over the EPV into becoming a part of our planning program where we laid out all land development and everything else, they thought we was way out mentally, way out in left wing some place but that was the thing of the future. [00:29:00] And these people-- The responsibility of the people is to worry about the drainage, worry about the things of the future and the land development as it's got to be because somehow or another, I think they've forgot the responsibilities because when you start doing something that is against nature, [00:29:30] she rebels. And you've got to do something to make nature do wonderful thing.

I've often told them that the area in which I live up on in the old Eau Gallie section is one of the nicest spots. It's on Highland Avenue and everybody else will be underwater before we are. That is because of the way the land is. You know that when I look back and you realize, [00:30:00] in 100 years that most of this is all that has come to happen. And it's just beginning.

I got one thing that worries me. There's not going to be any flat lands with nothing on it in this country in the future if we're not careful we're going to reserve areas for groves and we got to reserve areas for land development or we're not be doing [00:30:30] what the Lord wants us to do and what must be done to preserve the area for the future. You can't cover it lock, stock, and barrel like they're doing on the oceanfront. You got to have a lot of recreation, you got to have a lot of airspace.

And when I think of the park up there for instance, I remember, I got Bobby Conner to go out there [00:31:00] with me. We dug the park up there. We put two lakes in Wickham Park up there. And then, they put in all those bike paths and everything else because many of the children in our community couldn't go to the ocean. They're too far away. So, what did we do? We began to develop

access to our community facilities and make facilities for all of the young people in our area and bike [00:31:30] paths and everything else, so they can ride a bicycle there.

They don't think about that today. They're too selfish because they want to make more money. All they want to do is that. And times have got to change. And the people who are responsible for our community can't appoint a committee and do things like that. They've got to appoint a committee of themselves to [00:32:00] lead in the battle to protect the rights of the people and for future development of our community in the proper way, you got to worry about drainage. You got to worry about recreation. You got to worry about taxes, all those other things that are so important to you, to the success of our community.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Do you find anybody in the community now who takes the same point of view that you have looking to the [00:32:30] future in development?

Joe Wickham: Well I think that we've got to encourage those that are in positions of leadership to quit appointing committees and so that they appoint ... They like to appoint their committees for a new raise, I guess, but I think what they really need to do is to appoint committee if they're going to have them and to look out for the development of the future.

Drainage as [00:33:00] an example. Had they had an old rascal like me there, I'm the guy that did all the worrying about the drainage and everything else. I took great delight in that because I can see what's going to happen to us in the future and all the land that their people are enjoying now is dry, we got roads where they need to be and everything else. And it [00:33:30] didn't accidentally happen. It was a lot of foresight there and I was a champion of the people. I was looking out for places for the children, for recreation and think for their future like that. It's paid dividends many, many times.

Georgiana Kjerulff: You wanted to mention some things about your personal ... With the Masons.

Joe Wickham: Oh, yes. I've been very active. I've [00:34:00] been a potentate of two Shrine Temples. I've been very active in the Masonic lodge and the Scottish Rite. And I've been in most of them over 50 years. You know, most people don't live that long but I've been there over 50 years. And it's been a great, great ... well to me, it's been like an after-dinner [00:34:30] mint. I've enjoyed life every moment. And it's been good for me and it's been good for our community. And it's part of the development of our community because with us has come all these nice people who are a part of that very type of program. And without it, I often think that we would not have the success in our community, had we not had those kind of people here in our community.

Georgiana Kjerulff: [00:35:00] You think that the Masonic lodge has helped a lot in the development and support?

Joe Wickham: They done fine. It's the facilities. The church programs and this is where we've ... When I was so active in, I helped every church. The Catholic church, I helped them many, many times [00:35:30] and we cooperated. We're good friends. And the two or three of the fathers out there were real personal friends of mine. And we made things work because we helped each other. And whether we like it or not, that's a way to be successful. If we're going to be successful in the future, we're going to have to do the same thing and don't isolate ourselves from each other because we got [00:36:00] a lot of programs to develop it and people to serve in the community. Each of us has a place of responsibility in the community.

Georgiana Kjerulff: One of the places that we need a lot of help in this community is in preservation of our history.

Joe Wickham: That is correct. And this is the reason I felt it was so important that we have the type of people [00:36:30] who want to preserve the history of our community and to bring back all the important things that made our community a success because they didn't accidentally happen. When you're thinking of all of the communities, all of the land development, all of the future development without some kind of orderly development. And you can't be selfish. [00:37:00] You got to be thinking of it, about the drainage and the welfare of the people there and that sort of thing to make it successful because we've got something to offer. We've got beautiful land. We've got lovely facilities. We don't have to worry about buying a lot of fuel oil when everybody else is trying to use it all up and everything [00:37:30] else. This is part of life down here. And we who come here and who've been here are the most successful people in the world. And we should cherish that and let people know that that's the way it is. We got to ...

Georgiana Kjerulff: That's one of the thing you're doing right now.

Joe Wickham: Well you got to give me credit. I'm only 88 years old now. I've had so much fun being [00:38:00] a part of the development of this great community. And we're just beginning it. That's the thing that I can see for the future because no community in the world has had more quality-type people come to us than we have been able to here in Brevard County because they come, we're better educated. All these people who come to us.

There was a time in the early [00:38:30] days when only thing you could do is raise cows but those days are gone. We've got people come to our community now who are better educated. Some of them already with degrees, college degrees and everything else. That's the way we're going to go. We're going to develop more and more in a new concept of life and things of the future. The people who come to us are going [00:39:00] to be a great part of that program.

Georgiana Kjerulff: What do you think that we need to offer them that we don't already have? More education?

Joe Wickham: I think that the education is a very important thing. And I don't think that it's necessary to give people their right to say what I just went to school. I think that they ought to be able to earn [00:39:30] their right to go to school. And I think that the young people that want an education need to have reading and writing and arithmetic, you know, and then salesmanship. They've got to learn how to read things. They got to be mathematically oriented and when they get through with all that development, they've got to be able to sell their product. Without that, regardless of how good you are, [00:40:00] if you can't sell your program to other people, then you've lost everything. It's quite interesting.

Georgiana Kjerulff: What kind of development do we have now to bring our story to the rest of the state, and to the rest of the ...

Joe Wickham: We're just now beginning to try to sell our product of not just land development because we've gone through the cycle of land speculation. And you think that that's the only thing [00:40:30] that's going to pay off but the things that we're going to put on that land to speculate with into the future are the things that are coming to us. And we've got a bunch of real bright young people who are coming up with new concepts for the future. And I have no business in it because I realize that I don't think exactly like they do but these young people who are coming up with [00:41:00] these concepts for the future are going to be here.

And in this community is one of the biggest opportunities in the entire world and because we've got people thinking like that already. And even though we think we're shooting missiles to the moon and everything else, we're just beginning, in the infancy of speculation of the things to develop for the future [00:41:30] with the missile program and radar and all these electronic things, you know. It makes you think.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Well, you certainly have given them a good background, a good start.

Joe Wickham: Well, they outdid me. I'll tell you that but I'll tell you this, that we have had more talented people come to this community [00:42:00] than any spot that I can think of in the entire United States. And we're just beginning because we are now drawing people everybody else is beginning to think in the future development as we see it today. And it's going to be a great thing for our community. We got a lot of talented young people who are coming up with things in the future. I wish they would quit using [00:42:30] so many big words that I don't quite understand them all and everything else but we're here for the future. And it's going to be a very impressive thing.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Well we certainly thank you for your time and your effort to coming out. You've explained a lot of our history in South Brevard.

Now, tell me something about your childhood here. You came at what time?

Joe Wickham: I came here in [00:43:00] 1920 and I grad-

Georgiana Kjerulff: This was Eau Gallie?

Joe Wickham: That's Eau Gallie. See, my dad came down and then started to work on the Melbourne-Tillman drainage district. In those days, there were nothing in that area but vacant land to the south. And they laid out all of the drainage and everything else from here [00:43:30] to the south end of the county. And the land speculators, and they were there in those days, these people all wanted just to develop it to make money.

And from that time on, then our schools began to grow up. And we had, in the beginning, [00:44:00] schools that were...terrific—the teaching personnel was great but they had no support. So we finally ended up with schools in the county system as you see it today where they all joined together and became so active.

And I remember [Aunt Susie Wright? 00:44:27] as an example, [00:44:30] came to me and I was on the county commission. We wanted a health program in Brevard County. So she and I got together. Before that, a health officer would come by here every two or three weeks, maybe a month, just to see if there was anything to look at. And he was a health officer. We decided that we would have a health program. And we [00:45:00] formed our own health program. We got a doctor in here to run the health program. We got them to—we formed a nursing program. And we took care of the health and welfare and child abuse and all that sort of stuff, all because we didn't have any of these thing. And we became a part of developing that program.

Then, we came along. And in those early [00:45:30] days, the mosquitoes would eat you alive. And I remember when you wanted to see how bad the mosquitoes were, you held your arm out like that. And you tried to count how many mosquitoes were on your arm so that you could estimate how many millions there would be in the area.

And then, I went to O. L. Burton, who was a member of the [00:46:00] legislature. And I asked O. L. Burton to give us some money to help get rid of the mosquitoes. So he asked us for, I think it was \$3 million from the state legislature. He got us that money to experiment with mosquito eradication. What did we do? We wrote a specification [00:46:30] and we bought two 10-inch dredges. Then we took these two 10-inch dredges and put one of them here in Eau Gallie and one up back at Cocoa and started pumping out on all the area over on the Banana River section up there. And for the first time in history, you could go to town without being eat up with mosquitoes during the day. And all the people in the state of Florida that laughed [00:47:00] about it in the beginning suddenly realized we were headed in the right direction. We were pumping in areas, impounding areas to get rid of the mosquitoes and that sort of thing.

And when we got all through, we were killing them off, the mosquitoes. And what happened? We were so successful in that two years, we ended up with the state [00:47:30] control of mosquito control for the first time. And now, that is the way that mosquito control became so prominent in the state of Florida. And as I've

said, we built our own little hospital group and with our doctor from the health program and everything else, we were just busy as a beaver, you know, started our first libraries. We made [00:48:00] a deal with all the municipalities of every community that if you would build a building, the county would put the libraries in. And that's the way we got the libraries as you see them today.

And how many far-reaching people today do you see like that, had we not done all those things? And it's not because they're not sharp in that type of [00:48:30] program but they got too many other things to think about. And we in the future have got to think about the things that are going to develop our community even greater than it is today because we need new schooling, we need new facilities and all the things that are so important to it. No point of a lot of committees and let them all sit there. Let's keep things flowing along with [00:49:00] real activity and things so that we got people leading our community and being a part of it instead of just sitting there.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Tell us how your dredges worked in the mosquito control?

Joe Wickham: Well, in the beginning, you know, we asked O. L. Burton to get this money for us. And we bought these two 10-inch dredges. [00:49:30] And we began to--We pointed one and put it in the area of the Banana River over just near Mathers Bridge. And the other one was up on the area northeast of Cocoa. And what we did with them, we began to impound area, filled in areas full of--we pumped either the fill-in to them [00:50:00] or we impounded the area, in which we put a big dike all the way around them.

Then, we began to eradicate 'em by putting in minnows. And the minnows would eat up the larvae and they would eliminated the mosquitoes. And we found out we were headed in the right direction with these programs. And today, you who live here, you don't realize what it was like in those days but they would just cover you. I've seen the time when it [00:50:30] looked like a cloud coming by, coming out of the farm up in the grove area like a cloud around the people. There was nothing but mosquitoes coming out.

And we'd wiped them out. We were living in an area now about as clean as we will find any place in the state of Florida.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Tell me what the housewife had to do to protect herself from the mosquitoes? [00:51:00] They had smudge pots?

Joe Wickham: Oh, we had those. Yes. Yeah. You had smudge pots and you had screens on everything, you know, and that sort of stuff but the housewife had a hard time keeping the door shut. You know, you didn't leave a door open or something like that or you had no air conditioning. You [00:51:30] had a screen door. You sat there with that screen door and you had to brush the whole thing off so that you knew you eliminate the mosquitoes so you could get inside.

It was an experience here because it was different but I'll say this. As a young kid growing up like I was, this was the greatest spot in the world as far as I was concerned. [00:52:00] The fishing. I could go fishing all the time wherever I wanted to. There were a million ducks in this area. I've seen them when they covered the river like a blanket out there, there's so many ducks on the river. And if you wanted to be a hunter, it was the greatest spot in the world. And you didn't have to be the best shot in the world either. You just had to [00:52:30] borrow somebody's old shotgun and go hunting but it was a great place which to live, except for the mosquito eradication.

We began to make real progress for our community. Had we not done that, we wouldn't have people like we have here today because they suddenly, we found out we were doing the right thing. And it paid dividends many, many times.

Georgiana Kjerulff: You didn't depend so much on the chemicals for mosquito eradication?

Joe Wickham: [00:53:00] Well, in those early days, we didn't have enough chemicals in the first place. The military were the ones who began to do most of the spraying with airplanes in the beginning. So we got into the airplane business, too, in a smaller way and started experimenting with insecticides and that sort of thing. And this is a way we determined [00:53:30] the amount of insecticides and the kinds that we needed to ... Malathion and all that sort of thing.

And then, we did one thing where we had several people that worked, that in the mosquito control program and people like Jack Salmela, who was head of the mosquito control, was probably the smartest thing we ever did because he studied that program and did an outstanding job because [00:54:00] he could tell you when they were going to hatch out and what you needed to do to kill them all. You know, we made it work because of people like Salmela. And we had several airplanes at that time but we all worked together and very successfully and it paid dividends many, many times.

Georgiana Kjerulff: I think the mosquito control was really [00:54:30] the central thing in developing Brevard County. And you're given credit.

Joe Wickham: Oh, I think they were good. You had to be proud of them. And the thing that made it good was we didn't have to import a whole lot of talent from someplace else because some of these people were a part of our community, old fighter pilots and war pilots in World War II [00:55:00] and that sort of thing. We just had the people here capable. Well we had everybody that was affiliated in that bunch with mosquito control program were good. Even old Lee Wenner, who was a member of our county commission was an old pilot. And we made things work and you could talk to each other about how to [00:55:30] eradicate mosquitoes and everything else because you had support. You didn't have somebody trying to find fault with you all the time. And it paid dividends many, many times.

And as I said many times, I look back. All I can think of is this is one of the greatest spots in the world for a boy to grow up in because if you could walk over to the beach and go on the beaches [00:56:00] and you can hunt sea turtles, you could do all those things that no one else could do. And it was a great, great privilege I've thought many, many times about life.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Were you active in protecting the sea turtles?

Joe Wickham: Well, I made the mistake of ... I probably butchered more of them for people to eat, not just for fun but, I mean, they were [00:56:30] part of meat in those days. And without knowing how, you may not have had something to eat but we didn't just deliberately slaughter them and everything else. The only ones we ever did anything with was to have meat.

Georgiana Kjerulff: I was told in the early days, it took one turtle egg [00:57:00] was equivalent to two hen eggs.

Joe Wickham: Well you know, what you had to see, it was an experience to go watch the turtle lay their eggs. They'd get up into nice ... Get just above the high tide line. And that old turtle, she'd get up there and level it off and reach way down in there and start digging until she dug an area of about two feet deep. [00:57:30] And she would straddle that thing and lay up usually over 100 eggs. Then, she'd pat them back down again and all. And then, go back to the ocean again.

And they came back, basically, theoretically to the same area each year. And this is the way they been doing all these years because of all, this area from way south [00:58:00] of Sebastian Inlet down there, north up to the cape in that area, one of the greatest spots in the world for turtles to lay their eggs. And when you have that kind of place, they usually hatched out, about 100 at a time. I'm using that for round figures but it was basically like that.

And it was something to see. When they finally begin to hatch [00:58:30] out, they start scurrying outwards the ocean. And the biggest problems they had was seagulls and everything else trying to eat 'em but today, with all the vegetation over there and they're smart. They're trying to keep people from blocking the land so the sea turtles can come up there and lay their eggs and everything [00:59:00] else. It's still a great place. If you've never seen it done, you ought to go over there some time. It's worth going there.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Tell me more about your life as a young boy here. You went hunting and fishing and--?

Joe Wickham: There was all there was and Boy Scouting.

Georgiana Kjerulff: And Boy Scouting?

Joe Wickham: We formed--No. The Methodist preacher there in Eau Gallie [00:59:30] was quite a guy and he's in the Spanish-American War. And do you know that one day, they robbed the banks down in one section here in the homestead. And what'd he do? He ordered a group, [01:00:00] he got organized to go, fellows went out into the Everglades and captured the guys who robbed the bank, you know. He was quite a guy.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Was that the Ashley Gang?

Joe Wickham: Yeah. That's some of that section there from the Ashley Gang, you know, but old Reverend Nelson. We decided and there was a lot of kids getting into trouble in our community. [01:00:30] So we formed a drum and bugle corps. And we had those boys, this is Boy Scouts, kids in the Scout program, marching up and down these streets playing in that drum and bugle corps. And they were good but old Reverend Nelson would do something that was not ordinarily done. He would go to the judge, whoever it [01:01:00] was in control at the court, and asked him turn the boys over to him. And I'll tell you one thing. He did a great job, boy! He went them everywhere. To the game, football game and everything. And all those boys got to the stage where people didn't even lock the doors of their houses anymore because no one, [01:01:30] with all the scouting program, was so strong that no one thought a lot about breaking into somebody's house and stealing things.

It was a great place and I attribute much of it to old Reverend Nelson because he was a strong leader. And he was a champion of the young people that he dealt with.

Georgiana Kjerulff: You mentioned when you started the [01:02:00] hospital, the first hospital.

Joe Wickham: The first hospital we had in Brevard County was Dr. Hay came to us from St. Augustine, I think it was. And formed a little hospital in the south end of Melbourne. And bless his heart, he was good at it. Then, they begin to form [01:02:30] a hospital boards and built a first hospital, you know, the one that's down on highway. And I was on that board for a long, long time. Mrs. Pointer and several other. Everything was volunteer in those days. And this is the way the hospital board was formed. [01:03:00] And from that time on, they've grown to what they are today.

Georgiana Kjerulff: You had one hospital before that. It's now Miguel's Restaurant?

Joe Wickham: Yeah. That's the one I'm talking about in the beginning, you see.

Georgiana Kjerulff: That was the first?

Joe Wickham: Yeah.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Then, the second one was down on the highway?

Joe Wickham: That is correct.

Georgiana Kjerulff: And you were on the board?

Joe Wickham: I was on the board for quite some time, yeah, while I was on the county commission [01:03:30] but it was community oriented in those days you know. And we had some well-to-do people who always sponsors and helped us make a success out of the original hospital setup. It was great.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Can you tell me all of the positions that you've held here? Stop a minute [01:04:00] and think.

Joe Wickham: I helped form some of the Legion posts, first commanders of Legion post. Then, I worked on many other programs in the area. And I've been very active in ... Well, it's one thing after another because everything that was sponsored in the community, I was usually a ring leader in that. And that was just part of life for [01:04:30] me. To me, it was fun. I felt the challenge of there. And I didn't have any hours. Night and day, I kept myself involved in drainage. And when people had problems, I was out there seeing what made it happen, how we could solve the problem. And it was a very interesting time in which to grow [01:05:00] up. And I took great delight in helping people be a success. I felt that that was part of my job. And I was in the construction business, you know, but I got many, many jobs because of the way I helped a lot of the people of our community. And that's when I began realize what that people [01:05:30] that really were all about in Brevard County.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Well, we're fortunate you stayed local and didn't go up to the state and beyond.

Joe Wickham: Well, they tried to scout me into running for state legislature but I felt my place was right here in Brevard County because I knew everybody and I knew all of the problems in our community. And I was a great guy to be trying to solve it, you know.

[01:06:00] And when I think of all the parks that I was able to get and recreational facilities I was able to get for nothing and that would have cost millions of dollars today. And all I had to do was talk to someone about it. I could get them for nothing. And that's the way we made life in Brevard County to what it is today.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Now, tell me. We have the highway [01:06:30] Wickham Road named for you and the park. What else?

Joe Wickham: They'd say that, "Old Joe Wickham had lost his mind. He was building roads so far out in the country, no one would ever find them." And I'll tell you right now, you're riding them, practically every road that you ride on in our community, a through road, I was responsible for putting them in. And I thought that was part [01:07:00] of my job. I took great delight in doing that. And it's paid dividends millions of times.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Well we certainly thank you for your time, Joe. And have we covered everything? I think we've just about touched it because you've been so active over the past 50 years.

Joe Wickham: Well, I tell you, when I came home at the end of the war, I was going to do nothing but I [01:07:30] didn't last long at that program but I was the right guy for the right time because I was lucky. I devoted my time, in the beginning to developing recreation facilities and something for the young people who didn't have any place to go. And I thought that was part of a job that because I come from [01:08:00] a large family. Had we not been able to do things that didn't cost any money, we'd been in terrible shape. And I just felt how important it must be for that type of program. Because of that, you're enjoying many a park and a lot [01:08:30] of other facilities that you would not have been able to have, had I not been there.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Before we close, tell us more about your large family growing up here.

Joe Wickham: Well, what happened, my dad was an engineer, as I told you. And he went to Jacksonville at one time to get [01:09:00] with an engineering facility for the harbor in old Eau Gallie. They had a wreck up at the little town of Bayard just south of Jacksonville in which he was killed. And there I was sitting there with five little brothers and sisters. And it was quite an experience.

That's when I was telling you I was grubbing Palmettos for 10 hours a day [01:09:30] for a dollar a day script on the grocery store because we had to have something to eat, you know. Along with that, I began to learn how to do a lot of things. And that's the way I got into the construction business. And the community's been good to me. And I've been good for it because I wanted to pay back what they think they deserve for the community.

[01:10:00] And for the young people in those days, our school system, even though it was smaller, had some outstanding teachers in it. And they devoted their time to looking out for the student themselves. And they weren't trying to figure out how much money they could make but they'd spent a lot of their own money trying to support the young people in our [01:10:30] community. And children in those days were just lucky. And I realize that. And that's the way we began to develop our school system because we suddenly realized that our investment was in young people and people like me because I went through the cycle. And it paid dividends. And people, we didn't have all of the problems. We knew the good [01:11:00] people in the community. We knew the nasty boys and the nasty girls and everything else but we knew all of the good ones, too. And they were a credit to our community. And you were very proud of them.

The churches flourished. And I thought that that's the way life was all about. And when I got on the county commission, I thought my job was to [01:11:30] help all the churches. I didn't care whether they were Catholic or Protestant or who they were. They wanted to build a church, a county had some facilities they could help you with. And it paid dividends many, many times. And I think that's what life's

all about, being a part of the growing community which you live. Don't be an isolationist, but be a part [01:12:00] of the things and for the future.

Georgiana Kjerulff: Well, once again, Joe, we thank you for your time. You certainly have been Mr. Brevard County. You've had your finger in everything in the town.

Joe Wickham: Well, it was great experience and I loved it. And I wouldn't have missed it for anything in the world.