

50th Anniversary of the John C. Stennis Space Center

An Oral History
with
Virginia Seal Wagner

**John C. Stennis Space Center
History Project**

Interviewer: Daphne Alford

June 2, 2011

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This is an Oral History interview with Virginia Seal Wagner, which is being conducted during Open House on June 2, 2011, in conjunction with the John C. Stennis Space Center's 50th anniversary celebration. The interviewer is Daphne Alford.

Daphne Alford: Will you state and spell your full name?

Virginia Wagner: Virginia Wagner V-I-R-G-I-N-I-A W-A-G-N-E-R.

Daphne Alford: Now where were you born and where do you live now?

Virginia Wagner: I was born in Bay St. Louis, Miss., and I live in Bay St. Louis, Miss.

Daphne Alford: Tell me a little about your educational background.

Virginia Wagner: Well, I'm a graduate of Ole Miss. All my family graduated from Mississippi State [University] -- my daddy, my brother and my son.

Daphne Alford: Tell me about your family and the connection to Stennis Space Center?

Virginia Wagner: Clay Wagner is our son. He's been very active out here on some of your committees. But that was my daddy, Leo Seal [Sr.]. Senator Stennis contacted my father and asked would he come to Logtown with him to tell these people that "we were going to take their land away." My dad and mother were born and raised in Logtown. So he had some connections there, and Senator Stennis thought that would be a friendly face.

Daphne Alford: What did your father do as a profession?

Virginia Wagner: A banker.

Daphne Alford: He was a banker. So this is Leo Seal Sr.?

Virginia Wagner: Yes.

Daphne Alford: Now you mentioned about your mom and dad being born in Logtown, but you never lived in Logtown?

Virginia Wagner: NO, no.

Daphne Alford: You live in Bay St. Louis. Now that speech was back in 1961 when Senator Stennis, how old were you then?

Virginia Wagner: Well, I'm 81.

Daphne Alford: Oh, you look well.

Virginia Wagner: So subtract that.

Daphne Alford: Do you remember when that happened?

Virginia Wagner: I remember, yes certainly, I do remember.

Daphne Alford: Were you there?

Virginia Wagner: I was not there. I do remember that happening, because there were a lot of unhappy people.

Daphne Alford: Your dad really supported the cause.

Virginia Wagner: Oh yes, he did. I think they were on a flat bed truck the first time they spoke. Then I remember going to the first big meeting at one of the school auditoriums when everybody could come and voice an opinion. So I do remember that.

Daphne Alford: Your dad had to be a well-respect man in the community.

Virginia Wagner: He was, very (respected man).

Daphne Alford: Did most people listen to his advice?

Virginia Wagner: I think he was well thought of. He kept the common touch. He went every morning to the small bank in Bay St. Louis and spent the morning and came home and ate lunch and spent every afternoon at the bank in Gulfport. At that time there were only three banks. I don't know how many there are now. They are across Louisiana, Texas, everywhere. But there were just the three. At that time, even when my brother went into banking, he knew everybody's name in Gulfport.

Daphne Alford: Was it always Hancock Bank?

Virginia Wagner: It was Hancock County [Bank]. Then they dropped that. It's now Hancock [Bank].

Daphne Alford: So, you taught tennis lessons here. How did that come about?

Virginia Wagner: Let me go back to tell you one other interesting thing. Fred and I were privileged to go up the Pearl [River] on the bank boat when they brought Dr. von Braun down

with his wife and her mother and father and a couple from the bank. They wanted to show him the river and where the barges would be coming down. That was before very much was out here. It was a nice tour and a lunch. Fred said, "Do you remember Dr. von Braun went upon the balcony and went to sleep? I didn't remember that.



Virginia Seal Wagner, fourth from right, talked about this excursion on the *Doris M.*, the Seal family boat, during her oral history interview. Pictured from left are, Mr. and Mrs. Donald Suter, Wernher von Braun's sister-in-law; Fred Wagner; Mr. and Mrs. Stanton (Dallas); Wernher von Braun's father, Magnus, from Germany; Wernher von Braun's wife, Maria; Wernher von Braun; Virginia Wagner; Jack Thompson (Gulfport); and Capt. and Mrs. William Fortune. This photo was taken Oct. 26, 1964, when Wernher von Braun and his family arrived by boat at the Mississippi Test Facility during a vacation to the Gulf Coast.

Anyway years' past. Jackson Balch was the head out here. We were crazy about him, very good personal friends. I said to Jack, my kids are in school and I'm looking for something to do. Can you find me a job on-site? He said, "What can you do?" Well, I majored in sociology. He said, "Well come on out and we'll find something for you to do? I went to work, a little back room at the library typing in library loans. I only type with two fingers, but I got very proficient. Then I was the Jack-of-all-Trades -- one time I worked back in the kitchen and ordered food. One time I worked at the reception desk, I just floated.

My most memorable experience was one Christmas. There was a lady that worked in the mailroom – Boosie. Boosie had been here since the doors opened, and she knew everybody. When the mail came it didn't matter if it had a building number or not she just stuck in the little slot. Well, Boosie went on vacation and left me. . . . the mail would come in sacks, six feet high, and I would be out in the hall asking people to help me, because it was just an overwhelming task. One day about 1 o'clock I was swamped, and I realized there was no way I used to have to get in the van and take the mail and deliver it all around the site. I went down to the desk and said, I want you to make a site-wide announcement that there will be no mail pick up today or no delivery. I have had a friend who worked for GE who said, "You can't do that. This is a common installation, you can't stop the mail. I said, Well, I just did. [laughs] I'm sure it was the only day the mail had been stop.

I would come out here in the morning, eat lunch, and work in the afternoon and go teach tennis. It was a court behind the Rouchon House. At that time in [Building] 1100 you kind of knew everybody. It wasn't like it is today.

Daphne Alford: Who were your students?

Virginia Wagner: People out here on the site who wanted to take lessons. I use to go there and teach lessons in the afternoon. It was an interesting time to be out here because it was a whole new world.

Daphne Alford: What was Jackson Balch like as a person?

Virginia Wagner: You either hated him or you loved him ... and we loved him. We were personal friends. So we saw a lot of them. She's still living. She lives in Huntsville. We keep up occasionally. We were crazy about Jack, and he took us on the first launch that went around the moon. He invited us to go. Jack [inaudible] was the head of GE, and we had a little private plane, flew out of Gulfport and had a red carpet when we got there. That was another wonderful experience, a plus from being friends with Jack.

Daphne Alford: Do you remember the years you were here?

Virginia Wagner: That must have been about 40 years ago. I think I was 40 at that time. There were buildings all over the site, but not anything like it is today.

Daphne Alford: What do you think about Stennis today?

Virginia Wagner: Well, I 'm very proud of it. Of course, my brother was instrumental in getting INFINITY started. That was his dream.

Daphne Alford: Leo Seal Jr.

Virginia Wagner: Leo Jr. One of the last things he said two days before he died was to "finish INFINITY." So I feel like we have a personal contact out here.

Daphne Alford: I think construction is going on at INFINITY. Have you seen it?

Virginia Wagner: Yes, you can now see it from the interstate. In fact, we were out there the day they planted the moon tree.

Daphne Alford: That was this [past] winter I think?

Virginia Wagner: The coldest day forever. No heat in the building. If you look at the pictures, everybody was bundled up with their coats their gloves and their scarves. It was about as cold as it is as hot today.

In Logtown, there was the original Hancock Bank. A very, very small building, and Capt. Fortune was here then. I remember we had a publicity shot there, and then they let us have the bank. It was in my side yard as my daughter's playhouse, the original bank.

Daphne Alford: That's cute. Did y'all refurbish it?

Viriginig Wagner: Oh no, it was just one room with a little porch on it. Back in those days, life was just so much simpler. People had morals and integrity, not saying they don't today, the culture has just changed so much. One of the things I remember, I went into the restroom to wash my hands, and left this ring, a very large diamond ring. I left it in there on the wash stand, and when I left the site that evening when I got to the gate, I looked down and I thought, I left my ring. The man at the gate looked at me and said, "Are you missing something?" I said, yes. "They found it. Someone turned it in."

Daphne Alford: An honest person.

Virginia Wagner: An honest person. I don't know whether that will hold today or what. I went and found that lady to thank her and never take my ring off to wash my hands.

Daphne Alford: How many siblings do you have?

Virginia Wagner: Just Leo.

Daphne Alford: Tell me about your children.

Virginia Wagner: We have two children. We have Lisa, who lives in Fairhope and is married to a doctor and has three children. And Clay, who works for economic development at the bank, has six children.

Daphne Alford: And your husband?

Virginia Wagner: A retired architect.

Daphne Alford: And his name is?

Virginia Wagner: Fred.

Daphne Alford: Anything else you would like to mention that you can think of?

Virginia Wagner: No. Thank you for having me.

Daphne Alford: You are more than welcome.

Virginia Wagner: We are proud to be part of Stennis. As I say my son has been very active out here; sort of following in his uncle's footsteps.

Daphne Alford: So, do you still play tennis?

Virginia Wagner: No. [Laughs] I played a lot of tennis.

Daphne Alford: That's good. Thanks for the interview.

Virginia Wagner: Well thank you.