

Interview with

Ben Weseloh

April 2005

by John Daley

for the

Highway 101 Association

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**Interview with Ben Weseloh in April 2005 at his home in Oceanside, California.
Interviewer: John Daley. Transcriber: Kristi Hawthorne.**

John: Give me your full name.

Ben: Charles Bernard "Ben" Weseloh.

John: When and where were you born?

Ben: San Diego on August 7, 1924.

John: What were your parents' names?

Ben: My dad's name was Charles Bernard Weseloh and Helen Almeda Lea Weseloh.

John: How did your family come to Southern California?

Ben: My dad was born in San Diego about 1895 and my mother was born in Kansas about 1893. She was in a wagon train and her mother, my grandmother, had ten kids and the father died and she married another guy in the wagon train and they had three more kids. My mom was the middle one of the last three. The older brothers and sisters raised the family. In that family there were seven girls and six boys and the boys were all farmers. The girls, there were two lady doctors and five registered nurses. So that was a hell of a lot of lady doctors back in those days! The oldest daughter was told by a doctor that she should be a doctor instead of a nurse so he sponsored her to become a doctor and she sponsored the next sister and the two of them sponsored all of the girls to be nurses. They ended up going to Colorado and they wanted to charge them too much taxes so they decided to sell and take the train from Colorado to Portland, Oregon and they had a big house at the bottom of Mount Taber and that's where the family was raised at. My dad's family, I never saw either one of my grandfathers, but my grandfather on the Weseloh side left Germany when the Kaiser was in power and was running everybody out of Germany. He was 17 years old when he left Germany and settled in Missouri. Two of his friends saved their money and they decided to come to San Diego, California and buy three farms. They did that, bought the three farms and sent for the girlfriends back in Missouri and all they came to San Diego and got married and lived happily ever after. There were six kids in my dad's family.

John: What period of time did you live on or near the 101?

Ben: I came here in 1953 with my family.

John: You came to Oceanside?

Ben: Yes, I came to Oceanside from Escondido. I just got out of the Navy from Korea.

John: Well, how did you get to Escondido?

Ben: Well, I was born in San Diego, like I said. We were living up in Ramona. My dad and my

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mother got married in 1920 and my dad borrowed \$500 from his dad, who was in a butcher in San Diego at this time. My mom had saved \$500. She was in charge of the registered nurses at the Isolation Hospital in San Diego for contagious diseases. So they went to Ramona and at that time he was a night watchman. He was a parts man at El Cajon Ford in El Cajon. They needed a mechanic up there and he volunteered to go to Ramona because they needed a mechanic for cars and he knew a little bit about mechanics. He took the job because the guy wasn't paying the rent up there and he wasn't taking care of the customers. So he went up there and started business and he ended up with a Chevrolet franchise in Ramona, Escondido and Oceanside by 1940. When the 1940's came around, that's when he came to Oceanside.

John: What year do you think he got his first dealership?

Ben: About 1934. He built a showroom in Ramona and they shipped the cars up there to him from Chevrolet in San Diego.

John: There's no dealership in Ramona now, is there?

Ben: No, but there was for quite a few years.

John: Is the Escondido dealership still there?

Ben: He went there in 1936. Yes, my brother ran that dealership for a long time then he was killed in a helicopter accident. It's been about 25 years ago.

John: Does his wife own that now?

Ben: She did and then she sold it. She ran it for a while.

John: Was her name Karen?

Ben: Karen Weseloh.

John: So you ended up in Oceanside in 1953. Did you dad have a dealership before that?

Ben: He bought it in 1940. I joined the Navy in World War II and spent about 3 ½ years and graduated at USC with a commission. Went through the four year courses in about 2 years. Back then we took 18 to 20 units a semester, 3 semesters a year. I was called to active duty after I joined the Navy and was sent to USC after the first two semesters as a civilian. I applied for the Naval ROTC and we took the same courses there as Annapolis graduates, same books and same teachers—they were formal naval officers from the Naval Academy.

John: What year did you get out of the war?

Ben: I got out of the war in late 1945. The war was over. I got out about January or February.

John: Did you go back to Ramona?

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Ben: Actually we were in Escondido by that time, my dad was. He lived in Escondido.

John: Did your dad do the same thing you did to your kids? Did he make you work in the different departments of your business?

Ben: Oh yes. That's right. Sure did. It was a good experience and he taught us the things that are the most important in life to be happy and to have a happy family and these are not the things you learn at school, these are the things to be happy. I'm thankful for my dad and mother because they taught me right from wrong and treat the other person the way you'd like to be treated and tell the truth. These are things that are probably the most important thing that I ever learned. I learned more from my dad and mom than I did from anybody else, especially my dad. We had a happy life. I was a boy scout and learned those laws, pretty good tools and laws. I'm really proud that I was a Scout.

John: So you came to Oceanside in 1953 and your dad had the dealership here and you started working at the dealership?

Ben: Yes. He came here in 1940.

John: So when you came to Oceanside, where did you live?

Ben: We lived in four houses and we rented before we finally built a house in 1952.

John: Is that the house up by the Baptist Church?

Ben: No, it's the one at 1520 Hunsaker. Peter lives at 1015 Eucalyptus.

John: I thought you lived behind the Baptist Church up there.

Ben: That was Joe Weseloh, a cousin of mine. He worked here at the dealership for a while as a bookkeeper. His father was a bookkeeper.

John: I can't keep my Weseloh's straight. Do you remember the first time you ever drove on the old Highway?

Ben: We came here to the beach, just like everybody did from Escondido. Mostly it was the South Oceanside. Relatives came from San Diego like my mom two sisters and their families and we'd meet and go to the beach. We have pictures like that somewhere.

John: Do you remember the first time you rode along the 101?

Ben: Well, we were all pretty small. It would have been when the families got together like that. We were still living in Ramona maybe, instead of Escondido. I remember mostly going to the beach when I was older from Escondido.

John: Hopefully you were driving a Chevrolet.

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Ben: Oh yes. No doubt about that because my dad had the Chevrolet franchises for years.

John: Do you remember any of the businesses in the early days when you were down there?

Ben: Well, sure. Bessie's Café was one of the places that everybody knew. The Ford dealer was Ron Dixon's dad. He was down another block and a half.

John: You had your used car lots around in different places.

Ben: 920 and 515 South Hill, right next to a big grocery store that was there. That was a big grocery store and they had a great meat market in there.

John: Then you had the one from Willie West?

Ben: Yes. I sold that lot to Willie. There were two lots and that's before he went into business as a Toyota dealer.

John: Do you remember any of the dealerships down there when you first came into that area? As an example, was there a Studebaker dealership?

Ben: No, it was in Escondido when I was over there. There was a Hudson dealer, but I don't remember his name. There was another guy that was a Plymouth dealer. Gene Geil was the Dodge dealer. He was there before the Plymouth dealer. I can't remember the Plymouth dealer now but he was a good, honest, ethical guy. Tommy Thomas worked for us and when they came out with the Ford Edsel, they sent this thing to me in the mail and I gave it to Tommy, he was the sales manager, he decided he'd go for that and Tommy got the Edsel dealership and the factory closed later on and bought him out. So then he bought the guy that had the Plymouth dealership.

John: Where was the Edsel dealership?

Ben: He had it on Oceanside Boulevard and Hill Street.

John: Is it where the Goodyear Tire Shop is now?

Ben: Yes.

John: I didn't realize that Edsel was a dealership. I thought they just sold them on Ford lots.

Ben: No, he was an Edsel dealer. Then Tommy got the Plymouth dealership after he had the Edsel and then he finally decided – John Freed was the sales manager when Tommy left and so he told me that maybe we can get Tommy to come back and to work at Weselohs. He said, "I'll be the salesman and he can be manager." So he went down and talked to Tommy and Tommy said he would do that. So he finished selling the last of his cars before he came down to work for us. He was a good friend of mine. We learned the business through the parts department and other departments together at the same time, so he was a very good friend of mine and I was happy he was coming back. He and Maxey Witman were taking some cars to auction and I guess he sold some up there but they were bringing two cars back and they stopped for dinner

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somewhere in San Clemente and when they drove out Tommy was in accident and was killed. That was the end of the deal. We were happy he was coming back but there was a tragic accident. It was north of San Clemente along the beach and there was a restaurant up there north of town. He pulled out on the 101 and I don't know what happened.

John: Other than Bessie's were there any other favorite restaurants along the 101?

Ben: Well, I'll tell you, that was one of the best ones in town. One time --?—Tyler and I were coming back from a hunting trip and we were hungry and we thought, "Well, it will take us about 45 minutes from Riverside to go all the way to Bessie's Café to get a hamburger." We decided it would be worth it! She had thousand island dressing on those hamburgers and lettuce and tomatoes, damn, I can still taste them because they were one of the best hamburgers I think we ever had! Even to this day I ask somebody for thousand island dressing and sometimes they have it, to go on the hamburgers.

John: Bessie's was one of my favorites too, as a kid. My "Grandma Cookie" worked right by it, Thelma Lawrence, and I would have lunch with her.

Ben: She had a shop next to it?

John: For a while she had a shop right next door.

Ben: What kind of shop?

John: She did hair. Marie Tico had the shop right next to Bessie's for years and my grandma worked for her. We called her "Grandma Cookie". Thelma Lawrence was her name, my mom's mom.

Ben: So they had the shop right next door.

John: Then later on, do you remember Nellie and Rick Recatta?

Ben: I remember Nellie.

John: He was a cop. Nellie had a shop on the other side of Vaughn's, Jack Vaughn's market.

Ben: Oh yes, Vaughn's.

John: Right on the other side of that was where Nel Rick's was and my grandma worked in there also. Do you remember any landmarks or buildings on the 101?

Ben: Well, the Bank of America was on the corner of Mission and Hill Street. We had a Standard Oil Station at First and Hill. Then there was a Shell across the street. Catty-corner across the other way was a Texaco Station. Down just the other side of Weseloh Chevrolet there was another Texaco Station and then catty-corner from our place we had a gas pump, too. It was a Union Oil Station and Don Sharp was the owner of that. We had that property until we moved to Car Country Carlsbad in 1976. Don became a car dealer and he had Volkswagen and later he

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even got Porsche Audi.

John: That was in South Oceanside.

Ben: Yes, but he had a Union Oil Station on the corner. Talk about a lot of service stations on one block. Just imagine!

John: Well, it's kind of interesting that the Texaco next to your place is a Mexican food place so you can still get gas there!

Ben: I guess so!

John: Is there a particular person associated with the road that comes to mind?

Ben: I'll tell you one of my favorite persons back in those days was Mayor Erwin Sklar and was the best mayor that Oceanside has ever had in all the years I've known. He was a customer. We had a Chevrolet and Oldsmobile in those days and he drove an Oldsmobile. He did a lot of things no other mayor. He was not a poor person. He was a wealthy man and he did a lot to help others. He went to Washington and was the father of the Harbor. If it wasn't for him we would never have the Harbor because he wined and dined one of the generals out at there at the base and got him on his side and then they went to Washington and got the thing built. Other people tried to do it because it was a natural harbor. My dad one time told me, "if they ever build a harbor over there, I'll buy a boat!" It didn't happen but I fulfilled that obligation. Some of those things, he didn't get them done but I knew he would have been proud that I did them. So that was one of them because every once in a while we'd have a fishing trip and we'd take the guys from Escondido and Oceanside and go out on the pier. The fishing boat would pick us up right at the end of the pier. Ray McCullah owned that.

John: Do you have any favorite trips or memories of the 101?

Ben: I think when they had the Oceanside Hotel near the pier. That was a special place and my mom and dad were married in San Diego and they spent their first night of their honeymoon at that hotel.

John: What year were they married?

Ben: That was in 1920. I always thought of that. I think the fishing trips were predominant because we always had a good time on those fishing trips. Ray McCullah, his fishing trips were something special. He took my dad and I clear to Catalina one time, just the three of us. We didn't catch a hell of a lot of fish but we had a good time. McCullah Brothers were really fine citizens. My dad, I followed his example, I tried to do things like he did. He was a volunteer fireman up in Ramona. He was the guy that got them to raise enough money to get a fire truck and he drove the fire truck. Then later he was on the original board of directors of the Palomar Memorial Hospital.

John: Do you remember any bad accidents along the 101?

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Ben: Sure. Harold Carpenter towed a few of them into our place, for sure. Another thing that happened back in those days was a lot of fender benders when they came through town. They'd be going too fast and they couldn't stop. So we had a lot of minor accidents but nobody was hurt but it would dent the front and the back end of these cars. We had a good body shop so it was good business for us.

John: When you came to 1953 that's when the bypass came in.

Ben: Actually in 1955 they opened up from Vista Way south.

John: In 1953 they opened it from the river in Oceanside to Vista Way. Then they started adding sections to it.

Ben: I know in 1955 the offramp in Vista Way was just opened. I took Dave Rorick and somebody else for a ride in 1955 Chevy V-8. That was the first year they had the V-8. We had coil suspension on all four wheels and so we could go around that corner real fast, so I took Dave for a ride in that 1955 Chevy V-8 going around on that offramp. That's one thing that happened. I think of Erwin Sklar a lot because he probably did more for Oceanside than any other group of people.

John: Did you ever get a ticket on the 101?

Ben: Sure did. I got one, I'll have to tell you this one ... we had a guy that wasn't paying his parts bill up at San Clemente so I thought, "well, one day I'll go up there" and I was in a '54 Chevy and that was the last 6 cylinder Chevy we had. I went up to San Clemente to talk to this guy about his account. I can't remember if I collected the bill or not, but anyhow, I was coming back during the noon hour and there wasn't too many cars on the freeway so I thought I could just see how fast this '54 Chevy would go because the policemen were complaining that it wouldn't go as fast as the Oldsmobile 88 with a V-8 engine. So they were complaining and we had the contract for the police department and were furnishing these '54 Chevys. So I decided I'd go and see how fast they'd go. I was rocking that thing along about 85 or 90 miles an hour coming south, slightly downhill and son of gun I saw some guys working along the roadway so I started to slow up when I got just at the edge of town, and son of gun, there comes the damn red light behind me. It was an 88 Oldsmobile and a highway patrolman. He pulled me over and he said, "if you hadn't slowed up I would have never caught you!" Anyhow, he gave me a ticket and I went to the judge and told him this story and he was kind of leaning on me, I remember. Instead of giving me the regular price for the ticket, he gave me a break on it because he liked my story.

John: Do you remember a particular parade where a celebrity stood out on the 101?

Ben: No, but I do remember in 1961, Erwin Sklar and Dean Howe from Howe's Hardware and myself were the committee for a \$100 plate dinner at Marty's Valley Inn. Ronald Reagan was going to be the speaker at this \$100 plate dinner and so he came down that afternoon and brought his wife and another couple from Hollywood. We had this rally out at the Oceanside High School and the women went to these different meeting where the women were working on the campaign because it was an election year. This was before he became governor. So it was a big

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honor for me to drive him in the parade. The parade ended up at the high school where we had the rally and then on to Marty's Valley Inn. Later, I went to a Rotary meeting in San Diego and he was the key speaker and that's why I went down there to Rotary. He gave a talk and I went up afterwards like all the others and congratulated him. I went by and shook hands with his wife and I said, "if this guy wants to start a revolution, hell, I'll be with him" and her mouth just opened like that. I'll always have that memory of him. The next time I saw him, Harold Carpenter and one of the highway patrolman and I went to San Diego and I took this picture with me and I wanted to get Harold go down and get our pictures taken but he didn't want to do it. But I would have loved to have a picture from him. I got one here just recently from the Reagan ranch. We donated to that and they sent us a picture of him but it isn't a picture with a signature.

John: I think he was a very great man. Okay, we're going to wrap this up. Thank you.