

JOE WYATT: STRAIGHT

It wasn't as if I hadn't been warned. Friends had talked to me about it. My parents expressed their concern. There had even been newspaper stories about it.

But I had refused to accept the painful truth. Until I had no real choice.

The people I cared about most were being hurt. Everything in my life that mattered to me was turning to ashes.

I'd lost control of my life to alcohol.

A lot of people don't understand alcoholism. They don't have any problem limiting their drinking, and they don't see why anyone else — if they'd just try hard enough — can't limit their drinking, too. But that's not reality.

Why some people become alcoholics while others don't is a medical mystery. But alcoholism is a disease which progressively gets worse.

It wasn't until I was a student at the University of Texas at Austin that I started really drinking. As I got older, the drinking increased.

Serving In The Texas Legislature

When I ran for the Legislature, a friend suggested that I might have a drinking problem. After all, I never drank when I was alone, and that to me meant I did not have a drinking problem. That I might be an alcoholic never even crossed my mind.

During the eight years in the Legislature, I worked hard and I drank hard. It was routine for me that, when the day's work was done, I'd head for one of the bars where other lawmakers and lobbyists hung out.

I'd find somebody to talk to. And I'd drink. What appealed to me, what I enjoyed, was not so much the drinking as the conversation. Giving information, getting information, talking politics, and solving the problems of the world.

When I couldn't drink any more, I went home. In 1976, I was arrested for driving while intoxicated. I was humiliated beyond measure. The toughest thing I ever had to do was to tell my parents about it. I had disappointed them. I had disappointed myself. I felt I had embarrassed the people in my district, the people I represented.

Still, I resisted the idea that alcohol was taking over my life.

Running For Congress

When I was thinking about running for Congress, three friends came to see me. They told me they thought I should run, and that they would support me, but I had to do something about my drinking. And for a time, I did cut down.



But after winning the primary in 1978, I fell back into my old drinking habits.

Whether I was in Austin, or home in Victoria, when I was out drinking and engrossed in conversation about how to solve the problems of the world, sometimes the bar would close before I was ready to call it an evening. So, I'd invite whoever was around to come back to my place for more conversation and more drinks. Usually, somebody would take me up on the offer.

Like my father, I never met a stranger. I like people. So when I went to Washington, I saw no reason to give up my practice of inviting people to my place for another drink and more talk when the bar closed too early to suit me. That led to the crisis of my life.

The Crisis of My Life

I don't know where I ran into John Connor. I was too drunk to know — or care — about the name of the bar. When the bar closed, I invited him back to my place for just one more drink, and he accepted. Connor fell asleep in a chair in my living room, and the next morning I

dropped him off at a subway station. And that was that. I thought I learned later John Connor had quite a background. He'd been in jail on a variety of charges, including larceny and bad checks. He'd escaped from jail in West Virginia, and claimed to have links to underworld figures.

He's sort of a con man. He was always trying to work some scam," said Sheriff Harold Will. Connor filed a complaint with the Washington, D.C., police saying that he had been the victim of a homosexual attack by someone fitting my description and living at my address.

When the U.S. attorney called to tell me about it, I was shocked. The allegation was ridiculous. No change ever was filed. But that didn't stop Connor from trying to get money from me — even sending his wife and daughter to see me — a demand I dismissed without a second thought.

I was disturbed by the Connor episode, not because of anything I had done, but because of the implied threat to my career. There's nothing some elements of the press enjoy more than a scandal. Never mind that there's no basis in reality for it. Never mind that the story grows from the claims of a convicted felon with a history of dreaming up scams.

My drinking increased to the point that even I was getting concerned. I started talking to friends about the possibility of getting some help.

In January of 1980, I learned that a radical right-wing scandal sheet was about to publish a story based on Connor's complaint eight months earlier. I was offended, and deeply hurt. By the story, I was outraged by that paper's attempt to link me to some sort of spy scandal.

I flew home to the district to tell my parents and friends what was coming. They were very supportive. They also insisted I do

FROM THE START



"My first campaign was in high school."

Growing up in rural Texas was fun. But it was practical, too.

My folks didn't have the money to give me everything I might want, but they gave me what I needed. I learned the value of hard work and self-reliance. I learned that people should live within their means. There wasn't anything unique about the way I was raised.

People around here are hard-working and independent. People care about their neighbors. And they tend to be conservative.



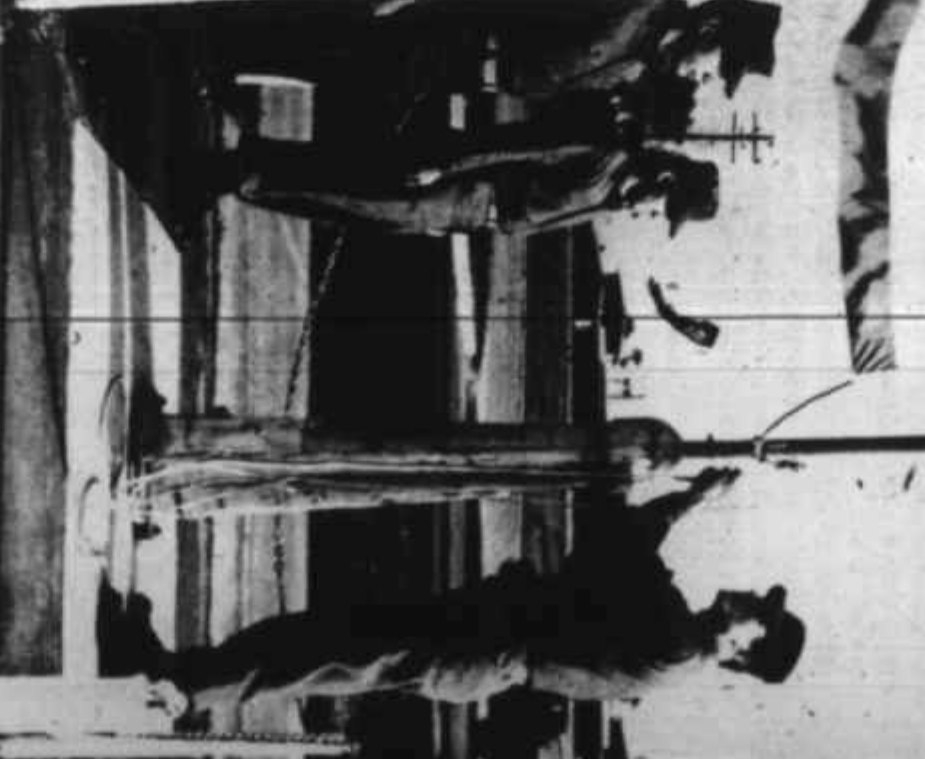
"Basketball was one of my favorite sports."



"The high school prom was the social event in Bloomington."



"Relating it or not — at 155 pounds, I was the biggest guy on the team."



"The Marines mocked my ideas about defense."

JOE WYATT: RIGHT

Anyone who grew up in rural Texas has special memories they carry with them all their lives. I know I do.

Summer days at my grandparents' farm. Picnics on the coast. Dad playing baseball. My best friend in Placedo, Juan Gonzales.

Dad worked in the oil fields, first as a roughneck for Sunray and later as a pumper for Sunoil. Mother taught school.



"When Dad had work to do, he'd take me along."

Dad made me part of his life right from the start. Sometimes, he'd even take me along to his job. He took pride in working hard. That was a lesson I took to heart.

I was seven when I got my first job in the cotton fields. I'd put in six hours and might earn \$1.75.

Dad never met a stranger. He's a very open, honest man. He taught me that a man's word is his bond. That's a lesson I took to heart, too.

From mother, I learned that if something is worth doing, it's worth doing right.

Dad played baseball with the Victoria Rosebuds. We'd head off to Riverside Park in Victoria, or to Yoakum, or wherever the game was. I had my own uniform because I was the bat boy. I loved it. Mother was there to cheer us on, and she'd pack along some fried chicken and potato salad so we could have a family picnic after the game.

Sunday was always family day. First, we'd go to St. Mary's Catholic Church in Victoria. Then off we'd go to my grandparents' farm near Nueces. My grandmother would fix a big dinner, and the house would be filled with aunts, uncles, and cousins.

That's really why I liked Christmas so much. It wasn't the presents I might get. What made Christmas so special was that the whole family would be together, with everyone talking, laughing, and enjoying the excitement of the holiday.

Every summer, I'd spend a couple weeks with my grandparents and have a wonderful time milking cows, chasing chickens, and even churning butter. My grandmother would fix my favorite foods, especially chocolate cake. Anyone who questioned the indulgence was cheerily dismissed with, "I fixed it for him, now let him eat it." She was the perfect grandmother. She died in 1982, the day after Christmas. I still miss her.

When I was in fourth grade, we moved from Placedo to an oil camp house between Bloomington and Placedo. I liked living in the country and, of course, wanted a horse. Beauty arrived on my 12th birthday. I'll never forget the surge of joy I felt when I first laid eyes on that horse. Or the determination I felt the first few times Beauty threw me.



"Books were a favorite present."



"Growing up in Texas was a happy time."



"Beauty was my pride and joy."

FROM THE HEART.

something permanent about my drinking. I made arrangements to be admitted to Bethesda Naval Hospital's Alcoholism Treatment Center and entered on January 9, 1980.

But my ordeal wasn't over. I had spent the early evening of December 16, 1979, with a friend at my Washington apartment watching the Dallas Cowboys — Washington Redskins game. I'm a football fanatic.

At the same time, across the city, a middle-aged man with a mustache attempted to molest two young boys at a ballet performance.

Because of Connor's earlier complaint, and "anonymous tips" the police added my name to the suspect list in mid-January.

Never mind the fact that I

had never in my life attended a ballet. Never mind the fact that I had a witness as to my whereabouts when the incident occurred. Never mind the fact that a prominent

Washington attorney had contacted the police on behalf of an unnamed client who admitted guilt in this case. Never mind that the same attorney signed a statement declaring he'd never heard of me and that I wasn't his client.

That the whole thing was baseless, that there was not a trace of fairness in the way the whole thing was handled, none of that stopped another wave of rumors, and calls from the press. A reporter told a member of my staff, "someone is out to get your boss." Once again, I was being associated with a horrible, contemptible crime.

I could not escape feeling despair. But I had confidence that the people back home, the people who knew me best, would know that the whole thing was ridiculous.

But when my doctors stated that I was "not responding to treatment," I knew another major decision had to be made. During this time of anguish I knew I could not go through a reelection campaign, be a Congressman, and whip my alcoholism at the same time.

I returned to Texas, again consulted with my family and friends, held a press conference, and announced I would not be a candidate for reelection.

Getting Back To Work

When I was finally discharged from Bethesda, I went back to work in Congress. I'll always treasure the memory of the warm welcome I received from my fellow congressmen.

As a member of the Armed Services Committee, my responsibilities included attending top secret briefings on national security matters. I went to Europe to confer with government leaders there about mutual security and defense issues affecting NATO.

When hurricane Allen struck the coast, I went to one of the shelters and took on the task of helping distribute food. Then I went back to Washington and secured an emergency



appropriation of \$10 million to make repairs at the Naval Air Station in Corpus Christi and Chase Field at Beeville. I was proud to be able to secure passage of legislation, signed by the president, which allowed Master Sergeant Roy Beavertide of Ft. Camp to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor he had earned serving with the Army in Laos. And I was honored to have Roy with me at my campaign kickoff with Vice President Bush.

After I led the fight to delay plans by the Army Corps of Engineers to create a dredge spoil dump in one of the counties I represented, I deeply appreciated the award I received from the San Patricio Soil and Water Conservation Association.

And I was proud of my staff. They were hard

working and their first loyalty was, as it should have been, to the people in the district. They worked right up to my final day in office. There were poignant moments. After it was announced that I was going into the hospital, I received hundreds of heart-warming letters from people in the district expressing their appreciation for what I had done for them and their hopes for my recovery.

The hardest moments came when people in the district said, "You never should have quit, Joe." I know what they meant, but I certainly hadn't quit. One thing was clear to me. I had gone to Congress as a Texas Democrat with conservative principles. I had seen the national Democratic leadership, and their liberal principles, up close. I knew that I could not come back to Congress and support Tip O'Neill.

I didn't vote in the Democratic Primary in 1980. I knew that if I ever went back to Congress, my conservative principles would require me to go as a Republican.

Some people have assumed that my drinking resulted from the pressure of public life. That isn't the case at all. When the pressure was the greatest, when I was working the hardest, either in Austin or in Washington, those were the times my drinking tapered off.

My drinking was motivated by the fact that drinking is a social convention. The problem was that I am an alcoholic, and alcoholics cannot be social drinkers.

I haven't had a drink since the day I entered Bethesda. I've had two years to sort out my life, to consider my mistakes, to come to terms with myself, and to restore my self respect.

The mark of maturity is accepting yourself as you are, and accepting your limitations as a human being. I've done that. I've solved my personal problem with alcohol.

Now I'm ready to do what I do best. And that's working to solve the people's problems in Washington. To make things better. For the people.