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Interview with  
James Ruhmann  
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Place of Interview: Corpus Christi, Texas  
Interviewer: Dr. A. Ray Stephens  
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Oral History Collection

James Ruhmann

Interviewer: Dr. A. Ray Stephens

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Dr. Stephens: This is an interview with Mr. James Ruhmann in Corpus Christi, Texas, May 28, 1969. Mr. Ruhmann, we're particularly interested in when your family first came to South Texas and your remembrances on the development of South Texas.

Mr. Ruhmann: My father came to . . . my father came to Kenedy in Karnes County in about 19 . . . 1898, and I imagine this was because it was customary to be going west at the time. And my father . . . mother came to Karnes County on a visit in about 1908. . . 1909 or '10 from North Carolina and later married my father.

Dr. Stephens: Where did your father come from you say?

Mr. Ruhmann: From Schulenburg.

Dr. Stephens: From Schulenburg.

Mr. Ruhmann: My father came from Schulenburg in Fayette County.

Dr. Stephens: Is this . . . your name is German, isn't it?

Mr. Ruhmann: Yes, it would be German.

Stephens: Was he born in Texas?

Ruhmann: Yes, he was born in Frelsburg, Texas, near Schulenburg. My mother was from Lincoln County in North Carolina and came to Kenedy to visit a sister whose husband was a Methodist minister-- out here for his health--later went back and became presiding elder at the church there at Asheville.

Stephens: He came to Texas for his health?

Ruhmann: Yes, and then later . . .

Stephens: What was his problem? This is one of the . . . this is one of those health-seekers.

Ruhmann: One of those . . . I guess back then it was just that he was weak . . . was weakly and they thought this arid climate would help it so he came out here and preached a couple of years.

Stephens: And it did help.

Ruhmann: Yes, it did help. He's still living.

Stephens: Oh, it really helped (chuckle)!

Ruhmann: He's outlived one or two of his children.

Ms Sparks: Well, tell us about this factory that your family used to have that you told us about. I think that would be interesting.

Ruhmann: That is the Ruhmann Manufacturing Company over at Schulenburg which wasn't . . . it was the Ruhmann

family, an uncle of my father. That's where these boys got their training in the arts, tinwork, and, of course, later went into the mercantile business and banking business. But the original . . . the tanners trained in those days were apprentices under the real tanners.

Stephens: Where was your market?

Ruhmann: Our . . . the market for . . .

Stephens: Bring it back from Colorado?

Ruhmann: Well, that concern is still operating and operating pretty much over the whole country. And for a long time they were very active in some of the South American countries.

Stephens: Oh. Well, I didn't know if it was starting in just for a . . . to fill a local need and then developed into a state and national outside of that.

Ruhmann: It started out as a hobby. Uncle Gus made a . . . one of those round things that you put a . . . that you wash clothes in one of those iron tubs. He built that out of tin and put the tub in it. Put a little door so they could build a fire in it. And those were popular, and he started making them for people. And then they finally ended up

with this factory, and the main product, of course, now or for years was the fire water buckets.

That's buckets with a point on them, you know, like a cone. Compresses kept them around. You remember those things?

Stephens: Yes.

Ruhmann: They had the point so they'd dip easy. Then went into cotton hoes. At one time, I've been told, he was the only person south of the Mason-Dixon line that made cotton hoes--chopping cotton hoes.

Stephens: Is that right (chuckle)?

Ruhmann: I'm sure that's not the case now, though. And probably the second most popular product that we put out was another compress item which are the wire baskets you see around these compresses. They put cotton samples and things in them. They don't use them anymore.

Ms. Sparks: Do you think the railroads coming through that part of the country had anything to do with the development of that?

Ruhmann: Oh, I don't think there's any doubt because some of our most prosperous communities in that area faltered as soon as the railroad missed them, which was run in Texas in charcoal, showed . . .

John Kenedy--Captain Kenedy they called him--put the town site of Kenedy on. And when the railroad came through there, he . . . and apparently--I'm guessing at this--they must've spaced those towns intentionally. There's San Antonio to Floresville 30 miles, Floresville to Kenedy is 30 miles, Kenedy to Beeville 30 miles, and Beeville to Sinton is 30 miles. So those townsites might've been put on to . . . with those distances to get an area in that part, a town, but I never been able to get anybody to verify that.

Stephens: We have the same thing in our part of the country. I believe this . . . this had a large part to play with the establishment counties . . . carving out of counties in the past so the county seat would be based right from the farthest point in the county.

Ruhmann: Well, I've always . . . I've figured that maybe . . .

Stephens: It was the same in Oklahoma.

Ruhmann: . . . that it might be due to . . . you can just about cover it--30 days in a wagon, and they might want to space them that way with the county seat. It didn't hold true for Karnes City because it's only six miles from Kenedy. There the county seat was originally Helena, and the railroad missed

Helena. When the courthouse burned, they moved it to . . . to Karnes City.

Stephens: When did you come to the Corpus Christi area?

Ruhmann: We came down to Portland in 19 . . . the first of 1916.

Stephens: But you grew up in . . . in . . .

Ruhmann: In Kenedy.

Stephens: . . . Kenedy in . . .

Ruhmann: In Karnes County.

Stephens: . . . Karnes County. What about the economic development of Karnes County as far as you can remember--the earlier . . . the early development at least in the early part of the 20th century?

Ruhmann: It was largely . . . originally it was cattle. The original settlers were largely cattle raisers. Then it became agriculture and has been basically agriculture until the oil interest came along in the 30's. And we have . . . of course, now we're producing uranium and some sulphur and oil, but it's . . . it would be basically agricultural still, I'm sure.

Stephens: Do you remember what sort of amusements that you had for children as well as adults when you were growing up? What about the children now? What did you do for entertainment?



Ruhmann: There weren't very much (chuckle). Picture show . . . old time picture show and a shortage of money which kept us from doing too much anyway.

Stephens: Did you get out . . .

Ruhmann: San Antonio was where we usually . . .

Stephens: Did you get out and play . . .

Ruhmann: Oh, yes.

Stephens: . . . with neighborhood children? Is that about the main entertainment you had?

Ruhmann: That would be it. Hunted a whole lot back in those days. I don't recall that there was too many activities even in school--maybe just ordinary sports--but we didn't have the socials that we have now. If we did, I missed out on them.

Ms. Sparks: In your . . . was baseball popular then?

Ruhmann: Yes. I believe that would be the most popular sport. That was during the baseball era when the towns had to have their own teams. It wasn't a school situation, more of a city situation. I don't recall that my father was ever a ball player, but a great many of the people did play ball then.

Stephens: Now, you were . . . you were too young to be aware of . . . I was just reading the papers about the other parts of South and Southwest Texas being developed, I suppose, other than your own area.

Do you remember very much about the development of Coastal Bend as far as reading the paper or what impression you got from . . . from this area in Karnes County or the development of the Lower Valley? Was there much about this sort of thing?

Ruhmann: No. That was . . . that was sort of before I was interested in those . . .

Ms. Sparks: You used to come to Portland, though, you said, every summer.

Ruhmann: Yes. We . . . we had a . . . my mother had a summer place in Portland then.

Stephens: Oh.

Ruhmann: It was built in, I guess, 1923. Of course, it was just a settlement then.

Stephens: When did you first start coming to them to the summer . . . in summers to Portland?

Ruhmann: About 1923 or 4.

Stephens: Can you then give us an appraisal just from looking at it first from summer to summer how the community developed?

Ruhmann: Well, the summers I . . . we kept this place until about the time of World War II--that would be '40 . . . what '41 or 2? And up until that time Portland just stood there. I think there was only about

4 or 500 people in Portland.

Stephens: What sort of businesses did they have when you first started coming to Portland?

Ruhmann: I think they had a doctor's office and a post office and grocery store. I believe they might had a cafe, maybe a restaurant. That'd be about all there was.

Stephens: Did you come down on the train?

Ruhmann: No. We came by car. We had paved roads.

Stephens: Came through Taft.

Ruhmann: Taft and . . . Sinton and Taft. That way.

Ms. Sparks: It wasn't paved all the way. Oh, yes, it was.

Ruhmann: I believe it . . .

Ms. Sparks: It was Wilson County that wasn't paved.

Ruhmann: . . . Wilson was still dirt roads to San Antonio.

Stephens: What was your impression of the . . . of the Taft Ranch then from what you saw of it during the early years?

Ruhmann: Well, I probably wasn't too observant of that. But I recall my grandfather feeling sorry for those farmers back in '26 or 7. We had a dry year--I don't know whether you remember that or not . . .

Ms. Sparks: Yes.

Ruhmann: . . . we had . . . we made Bumblebee cotton about that high. And he wrote later and asked my father how the farmers faired that year. My father checked around and turned out they'd made a quarter of a bale an acre. And my grandfather just couldn't understand that how that Bumblebee cotton could make because they were . . . of course, North Carolina they're used to this four and five foot tall cotton where you can stand up and pick it.

Stephens: (Chuckle).

Ms. Sparks: Well . . .