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Interview with

Mr. James H. Sorenson, Jr.

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Place of Interview: Rockport, Texas

Interviewer: Dr. A. Ray Stephens

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Oral History Collection

James H. Sorenson, Jr.

Interviewer: Dr. A. Ray Stephens

Place of Interview: Rockport, Texas

Date: July 3, 1972

Dr. Stephens: This is an interview with Mr. James H. Sorenson, Jr., Box 1015, Rockport, Texas 78382. The date is July 3, 1972.

Mr. Sorenson: I was born on July 14, 1918, at Oakshore, which is in Fulton townsite, Aransas County, Texas, and lived in this area for the first five or six years of my life at Oakshore and at Swan Lake Club, which was a hunting club established by my grandfather on Swan Lake. My first year in school was at Port Lavaca, Texas, where my mother's family owned land. I actually attended school in Rockport only in the third grade and again during my fifth year in school. I attended high school in Corpus Christi, what is now Miller High School--it was then Corpus Christi High School--at Alamo Heights High School in San Antonio, and back to Corpus Christi for graduation. I worked for a period of time between graduation from high school and the time I entered Saint Mary's University in San Antonio, at that time with Johnson Fish Company, which was a

wholesale seafood place here in Rockport. I might add that I can remember when shrimp sold for two cents a pound, and you consigned the shrimp to places like Chicago, St. Louis, in carload lots by rail and hoped that you might get paid for them when they got there, which is a far cry from the sum of \$2.75 a pound for the boat that we are receiving today. Between the time I left Saint Mary's University and joined the Air Force I had majored in accounting and set up the accounting system for Rice Brothers-Westergard Ship Builders. They were building sub chasers, a 110-foot wooden sub chaser for the Navy Department, and a great many of these vessels went to the Russian government when they were completed. I left there to join the Air Force in October of 1941, October 28, I believe. I think I was sworn into the Air Force on my mother's birthday. I received basic training at Keesler Field, Mississippi. It was a very new field at that time. We were one of the first groups there. I went from there to Officers' Candidate School at Miami Beach, Florida, in the first class of that school--1942 A. From there I was sent to the Adjutant General School at Fort Washington, Maryland, and back to the Third Air Force at Tampa, at which point I joined the Ninth

Fighter Command which was redesignated the Twelfth Fighter Command, and shipped from Trenton, New Jersey, to Fort Dix to England in August of 1942. I stayed with that command through the African invasion and returned to the States in December of 1943. I was reassigned to General Arnold's staff in Washington and stayed with that organization until I was released in 1945. I was released from the Air Force in July of 1945 and was spending my terminal leave here at Rockport when in August a hurricane came through, the duration of which I spent in Victoria, Texas, visiting. When I returned to Rockport, I found Mr. A. C. Glass waiting for me in the front yard. Mr. Glass was my predecessor in the First National Bank and my partner in the General Insurance business. However, at that time, he was looking for someone just to help him with the terrific volume of claims that were being presented to his insurance agency and asked if I would just please come help him, which I was happy to do. As a matter of fact, I went down to work still in uniform. And from that association, which lasted for at least sixty days, came my association with First National Bank. Mr. Glass approached me and said that he hoped to retire within the next three years and wanted to

know if I would be interested in becoming a banker. This was some twenty-seven years ago, and I've been here ever since. I started with the bank as a teller in October of 1945. At the end of that year I was made an assistant cashier and put on the board of directors. On Mr. Glass's retirement I was made cashier, then executive vice president, and now president and chairman of the board. This has been approximately five years.

Stephens: Mr. Sorenson, you've noticed the community develop a great deal during your residency here. Can you compare, let's say, the late 1930's, when you first became employed with the Rice-Westergard Company, then with 1972 and try to, say, explain what has happened through the years to make the community develop, economically speaking, so well?

Sorenson: Well, in the late 1930's Rockport and Fulton were . . . they were tourist places in a very modest way. They were also wholesale seafood points of some note, which they still are. I would say that the shrimping industry has had the greatest direct impact financially on the area consistently and through the years. It has come to share that eminence with tourism at this time. The place was really discovered, so to speak, by tourists

and visitors at the end of World War II and has steadily increased in that direction since then with the advent of some rather luxurious motels and secondary homes for a great many people throughout the Texas area.

Stephens: On that subject of secondary homes, who is it that comes to build a home? That is, are these people from Houston, San Antonio, and then what sort of occupations do they follow?

Sorenson: They are largely executives of various and sundry companies. They have to be people of some wealth in order to afford a secondary home. Key Allegro has been the most notable addition to the community in that direction.

Stephens: Little Bay Shores, now, is a residency, or subdivision for . . .

Sorenson: Little Bay Shores was an addition formed by several of us, a group of which I was the president at the time. However, it was largely for permanent residents. It was the first of the FHA approved subdivisions in the community and the first one to which city facilities were added. It was later brought into the city. And there are secondary homes in Little Bay Shores, but it was really not created for that specific purpose. Since Key Allegro have come other subdivisions, Canoe

Lake Corporation, which owns Harbor Oaks, being one.

Stephens: Are you associated with that?

Sorenson: I was one of the organizers and was president of it and still a stockholder in it, but I'm no longer actively directing it.

Stephens: Canoe Lake Corporation?

Sorenson: Right. Our West Terrace subdivision west of town on Market Street Road is another one that I organized with a group of my friends and developed, and it is predominately permanent residents.

Stephens: West Terrace. Is that a corporation too?

Sorenson: It was. It's been dissolved.

Stephens: Was it West Terrace Corporation?

Sorenson: Yes.

Stephens: You mean, after you developed it then you dissolved it?

Sorenson: Dissolved the corporation.

Stephens: All the land had been developed?

Sorenson: Right.

Stephens: But Canoe Lake, now, it still has some land?

Sorenson: It's still under development, yes.

Stephens: Now, is that little lake that you've dredged . . . excuse me, the lake that exists there, has that been dredged out or is that a natural--the Canoe Lake?

Sorenson: It was a small, very shallow lake, at times just a marshland. We dredged it to some nine-foot depth.

Stephens: In order to make it a lake?

Sorenson: To make it a navigable lake, yes.

Stephens: This was part of the . . .

Sorenson: . . . plan, yes, to create waterside lots.

Stephens: So that a person can take a boat right up to their . . .

Sorenson: . . . to their doorstep.

Stephens: . . . private dock.

Sorenson: Right.

Stephens: Well, that's nice. Now this, of course, is what attracts persons down in this part of the country.

Sorenson: Yes, it does--particularly the secondary home owner. Some of us that live here over the years prefer to be a little farther from the water, frankly. (Chuckle)

Stephens: Of course, that's why they have a secondary home--to be on the water.

Sorenson: That's right.

Stephens: Well, what would be the average price of those lots?

Sorenson: The average price of an all-water lot, the least expensive one that I can think of is \$5,500, and the most expensive one on water that I can think of at the present time was some \$22,500.

Stephens: That's on water. You mean like in the . . . harbor?

Sorenson: On the channel. There's a type of lot where you can dock your boat at the doorstep.

Stephens: So a person who spends \$22,500 for a place to put his home is going to put on the lot what general price home?

Sorenson: Generally, a home worth double the price of the lot, I should think.

Stephens: Yes. Or more.

Sorenson: Or thereabouts, yes.

Stephens: Now that greatly adds to the ad valorem tax rolls of the county.

Sorenson: Very definitely.

Stephens: So this is the sort of tourist you hope to attract. That is, have more second homes.

Sorenson: Right. And hopefully they later become permanent residents when they retire from whatever business they're in.

Stephens: Mr. Sorenson, your roots in this community go back to the nineteenth century, and your father and grandfather were quite knowledgeable of the people in the community and were leaders also. They mentioned to you about the tourists that've come in and the importance of the hotels and then, of course, getting to the present moment, you are aware of the prestigious hotels and motels here now. Would you try to recall some of those . . . what you've heard about the early-day places, and then, say, mention the names of the present-day motels and their influence on the community, as far

as tourism is concerned?

Sorenson: I will first mention the names of some of the early hotels that my father and grandfather have told me about and of the special trains that came in here during the season, bringing in groups of tourists. Those hotels, one of which was on the site where the bank stands now, was the old Del Mar Hotel, which was one of the largest wooden hotels in the state in its day. And immediately east of it and on the water was the LaPlaya Hotel, which was a brick hotel. And tourism was a factor at that time, a very large factor. It predated the shrimping industry, for that matter. One hotel, the LaPlaya, was badly damaged in the 1919 Storm and as I understand it never operated again. The Del Mar Hotel, the wooden one I mentioned, was burned early in the 1900's. I don't know the exact date. And the motels that have come into existence in the later years, the 50's, 60's, and 70's, the first of the luxury class ones, I suppose, would be the Sand Dollar Motel, Toddie Lee Wynn's Sea Gun, the Key Allegro Motel. But some of the intermediate motels that came in prior to these were Hunt's Court on South Beach, which has been and is still a very popular place, the Forest Park Cottages, Oakshore, Palm Village--all

of which were luxury motels in their . . . at the time they were created.

Stephens: Your grandfather served as a guide for duck hunters and also organized the Port Bay Hunting Club. Would you mention something about your early recollections of out-of-community, out-of-state hunters, who came to the Port Bay and something about its existence to the present time?

Sorenson: Yes, my grandfather was Captain Andrew Sorenson who came to this country from Denmark in the nineteenth century and actually hunted for market at one stage of his early life in this country. It seems that they killed ducks and shipped them to the cities. From that he organized his first privately owned hunting camp which he later made a corporation of and a private club--Port Bay Club. Some of the early members of that club were people like Mr. Cheesebrough of the Vaseline Company, Mr. Van Brinom of McCormick-Deering, Max Fleischmann, the yeast company man, Pierce of Pierce Arrow, Edwin Klapp, Klapp Shoe Company, and many others who were notable people, including one titled gentleman from London, England--Sir Robert B. In those days the season was several months long and these men would come and stay for weeks at a time. The club had 100 members and today it's still closed out at 100

members. Many of the memberships have come down through families from father to son to the present time. I was pleased to be asked to be president of that club on its 50th anniversary and was president of it for several years and still maintain a cottage there. It is perhaps the oldest hunting club on the Texas coast. My grandfather operated two other clubs after he had sold that one out, one at Swan Lake which I believe I mentioned earlier in this interview, and one at Oakshore which was a successor to the old Shell Hotel, I presume, and was also the place where I was born.

Stephens: Mr. Sorenson, one of the things that people associate with the name of Aransas County or Rockport is the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge which occupies Blackjack Peninsula and beyond. You have been here when the . . . you were here when the federal government made its initial purchase in the 1930's and then attempted again in just the recent past to expand its holdings? Would you comment please on the subject of the National Wildlife Refuge?

Sorenson: I think the National Wildlife Refuge is a great thing for the area. I think it is wonderful to have this sort of installation. However, I am also of the opinion that we're prone to go overboard in some of

these matters of preservation. For instance, when these lands were taken off of the tax rolls, I was rather openly opposed to the way in which it was done. It takes the land off of the rolls for school taxes and other forms of taxes, and it's true enough that the federal government supplements this loss by paying certain sums into the school districts. However, I do not feel that it offsets, and I personally am much more interested in educating young Americans than I am in preserving a few whooping cranes that are probably destined to become extinct sometime anyway. I've laughingly remarked a number of times at the condition we'd be in if somebody had preserved all the dinosaurs for us. (Chuckle)

Stephens: Well, I understand a few years ago the federal government acquired as a gift some additional land from the Tatton Ranch in Refugio. There was an attempt at that time, I believe, to purchase even more land. Do you recall the circumstances of that?

Sorenson: Yes, I recall meeting at the local courthouse with some gentlemen from the Department of Commerce, and at that time I was opposed to the acquisition of such a large amount of land for this purpose. Don't misunderstand me. I don't want to do away with the whooping cranes. I just don't want to give Aransas County to them. (Chuckle)

Stephens: Well, did this evolve out of a tax dispute, school tax dispute?

Sorenson: It's possible. That's the view of a number of people. The tax values had been adjusted and Mr. Tatton had taken exception to the values placed on his ranch land. I don't necessarily blame Mr. Tatton for this. I've been in a similar position myself in other counties. But placing land in game refuges to avoid taxes is not really my cup of tea.

Stephens: I understand that he was going to build a barbed-wire fence on the county line. That's what I've heard. Is that . . . you've heard that too?

Sorenson: Well, I've heard that. I don't know whether to give any credence or not.

Stephens: But was it the community's ability to forestall federal action or the lack of the desire of the federal government to take over that much land that caused the plan to fail, or . . .

Sorenson: I should say probably some of both.

Stephens: I see. Were you involved in the local organization, informal organization, to influence Congress not to approve the extension of the wildlife refuge?

Sorenson: Yes, I was. Right.

Stephens: And what sort of organization did you put together for that?

Sorenson: It was very informal, just a group of interested citizens here in the county.

Stephens: Mostly the community leaders though?

Sorenson: Right.

Stephens: And that is so you can use your name as well as your title when you're writing?

Sorenson: Right.

Stephens: So they wouldn't know you, but they'd recognize the title and the position. So it'd be the mayor, the judge, the banker, and who else?

Sorenson: Other community leaders. I don't recall right now how active Mr. Spencer was in this connection, but I think reasonably active.

Stephens: And you all wrote letters, and phone calls, and telegrams?

Sorenson: This is correct.

Stephens: And did you go to Washington?

Sorenson: No, we did not send anyone to Washington as I recall.

Stephens: Did you work through your congressman?

Sorenson: Yes.

Stephens: Is that John Young?

Sorenson: John Young, yes.

Stephens: How long has John Young been your congressman?

Sorenson: John Young's been our congressman for a number of years and is a very able man and has done a great deal for this community.

Stephens: He was of like mind with you on that project?

Sorenson: I'm of that opinion, yes.

Stephens: Now, did he have any direct influence on stopping the extension?

Sorenson: I'm sure he did.

Stephens: But you don't know . . . definitely.

Sorenson: I don't know to what extent.

Stephens: Being right here on the bay, you are aware of how much the bay means to the community. We talked about the shrimping industry awhile ago, the seafood industry. And as ships have gotten larger and larger, they had need for deeper channels, with the changing economic structure, we needed then bigger ships and then deeper channels and then bigger ships. You remember probably when shrimp boats would have to come in every evening.

Sorenson: Very definitely.

Stephens: And then what has been the evolution of shrimp boat sizes since then?

Sorenson: There has been a gradual increase from the beginning from very small craft . . .

Stephens: About what size in length, or is that how you measure boats?

Sorenson: In length and beam and draft. From boats, say, thirty feet long, to boats 105 feet long.

Stephens: They're 105 now?

Sorenson: Yes. The most popular class here at the present time is about a 72-foot boat with a draft of some six or seven feet. Now when these boats are fully loaded, of course, they draw more than the six or seven feet, and we're in process of trying to deepen our channels at the present time. The Aransas County Navigation District, through federal agencies, is assured of a grant from the federal government provided we provide matching funds through local bond issues. This plan has been in the mill for months and months at the present time. There are a number of objections to the plan at the moment from various ecological bodies, and I don't know exactly what the outcome will be. I presume sooner or later we'll have the deeper channels.

Stephens: I see. And at the present time they're how much? Or how deep are the channels?

Sorenson: The depth of the channels.

Stephens: The lateral channels in the county.

Sorenson: The lateral channels, I believe, are cut to some ten or twelve feet, but there's silt in the bottom. In other words, the boats stir up mud when they come in now.

Stephens: I see.

Sorenson: And when they go the 105-foot class of boats, we'll have to have deeper channels,

Stephens: Well then, most of the shrimping boats used here are made here.

Sorenson: Made here, yes.

Stephens: So this has been a double blessing to the community.

Sorenson: Right. The ship building industry, or shrimp boat building industry had become one of our major industries, the Rockport Yacht and Supply Company.

Stephens: That's just in the past decade too, I understand?

Sorenson: Right. We've always built shrimp boats here, but prior to the advent of Rockport Yacht and Supply, they'd been the smaller wooden vessels.

Stephens: Oh, who built those?

Sorenson: Just craftsmen and artisans that knew how.

Stephens: Oh, no big companies. Somebody would contract to build one.

Sorenson: Right.

Stephens: Made out of wood.

Sorenson: Made out of wood. And they were really fine boats in their day. As a sidelight, Mr. A. C. Glass, who was my predecessor in the bank, as a hobby drew plans for a great many of those wooden vessels.

Stephens: Well! That were used? Plans that were used?

Sorenson: Yes! Very definitely!

- Stephens: Well, that's very good. What do you think that in order for these boats that go out now for what, two weeks . . .
- Sorenson: Yes or longer.
- Stephens: Or longer. And once they get used to staying out for two weeks they'll go for three weeks and so on and . . .
- Sorenson: True.
- Stephens: Because they'll have facilities to preserve the shrimp until they get back.
- Sorenson: Yes, the 105-foot class of boats that I mentioned has its own freezer aboard. They can process and hold shrimp indefinitely.
- Stephens: Oh, they process them there. The men will catch them and then spend part of the day processing them.
- Sorenson: Right.
- Stephens: So then they can just be . . . after they catch them, stay out.
- Sorenson: They can stay out almost indefinitely--as long as their fuel supply would last.
- Stephens: Yes. And bigger boats would have more capacity. Then, I suppose that's the economical thing then--while you're out there stay out there.
- Sorenson: True, true.
- Stephens: So then we're going to have larger boats. That means deeper channels here. What do you think that it will go to soon? Do you think that this grant, matching

grant you were talking about, will be given?

Sorenson: I don't think there's any question about the grant being given. It's the permit to do the dredging that's holding up.

Stephens: Oh. I see. What do you do with the spoils?

Sorenson: That's the \$64 question.

Stephens: Oh, that's what's holding it up?

Sorenson: Yes.

Stephens: I see. Because it'd cost barges somewhere to dump it.

Sorenson: Oh yes. If you have to move it any great distance, you magnify the cost tremendously.

Stephens: Yes. Yes, I see. And if you dump it right by the side of the channel, it will wash in.

Sorenson: That's right. It would be unsightly, and . . .

Stephens: Well, the next hurricane it will all slide back in the cut, I suppose.

Sorenson: It could. It could. Channels have to be maintained in any event.

Stephens: Yes. Particularly in this little area. How important do you think the Intracoastal Canal is to the economy of Aransas County and to South Texas in general?

Sorenson: Oh, the impact of the canal on South Texas' economy is tremendous. It's probably the greatest single thing that has happened to the coastal area.

Stephens: More so than railroads?

Sorenson: Certainly at this point in time more so because we have very little rail traffic, and most of our shipping is done through the Intracoastal Canal.

Stephens: From here. Now, they, of course, have railroads in other parts of South Texas.

Sorenson: Oh yes, yes.

Stephens: But most of the bulk material is shipped by water.

Sorenson: Is shipped by water, yes.

Stephens: Would this be oil or grain or what?

Sorenson: It'd be oil . . . then you have your aluminum plants here, you know, at Port Lavaca and at Ingleside that make great use of the canal. I really don't know whether any grain is shipped by barge or not. I rather doubt it. I think it's mostly shipped by motor trucks.

Stephens: I see. Now these lateral channels we were talking about awhile ago are just channels, lateral channels, to the Intracoastal Canal.

Sorenson: That's true. Simply connect the little ports at Fulton and Rockport and Cove Harbor with the Intracoastal Canal. Of course, the canal comes almost to the shore at Cove Harbor so there's no tremendous problem there.

Stephens: Yes. Do you see any economic benefit for the county in the immediate future over this boundary line settlement with Nueces County? Now, of course, this would be

in connection with the Intracoastal Canal topic because anything that develops on those offshore islands must probably be something that can be shipped on boats and is right on the Intracoastal Canal there.

Sorenson: I think, of course, we're dealing in futures there. If plants should be built or docking facilities or anything that's taxable, then it has an impact on the growth of the county. For right now, I see no great change.

Stephens: I see. Just the potential there.

Sorenson: The potential, yes.

Stephens: You've lived here through several hurricanes and while you were in the service they had a couple of major ones. You weren't here in '45. When did you return?

Sorenson: I had returned in '45. I was . . .

Stephens: In time for that storm?

Sorenson: No. I was not here for the '42 storm. I was at Fort Dix, New Jersey, waiting to go to England.

Stephens: I see. Well you've . . . from '45 then, you've had several others. I suppose Hurricane Carla was the major one.

Sorenson: Yes, it was.

Stephens: And Beulah in '67 affected you, and then, of course, the major one in 1970, Celia.

Sorenson: Celia is the most memorable one to me.

Stephens: Good. Would you comment then on hurricanes and their effects on the community?

Sorenson: Well, let me comment in particular on Celia. Of course, Celia was a devastating hurricane. It probably did more property damage than any we'd had. I'm talking about in dollar volume. However, the impact on this community was peculiar in this way. The federal government through the Small Business Administration brought in a great deal of money as did the insurance companies and various and sundry other agencies, so that the aftermath of Celia was really an economic boom rather than something else. In fact, the economy is just now settling back from that Celia-fund impact to a more normal economy.

Stephens: I see. So actually it produced a blessing for you then because in the face of disaster your economy improved.

Sorenson: I guess you could call it a blessing. I hate to look at it that way, but if dollars are a blessing, then it was.

Stephens: Well, increased business is regarded . . . (chuckle) as such at times! But that, of course, stimulated the economy.

Sorenson: Right.

Stephens: And this is, I understand, a great change from the
past . . .

Sorenson: Very definitely.

Stephens: . . . where hurricanes usually meant a blight on a
community.

Sorenson: True.

Stephens: This is all a part of the planned economy we have
on the national scene.

Sorenson: That's true.

Stephens: In what way . . . in what ways were the money spent?

Sorenson: In reconstruction. Actually, some of the reconstruction
resulted in improved construction as well as just
replacement. The money came in to the shrimping
industry through replacement of destroyed vessels.
It came into the motel industry through rebuilding of
motels. But bear in mind this money was not a grant
now. There is a small grant in each of these SBA loans,
but they must be repaid. Now you're seeing the repayment
process come into being, and this accounts for the more
. . . well, shall we say normal economy at this time
than the upsurge that followed immediately after the
storm.

Stephens: Well, when people have to knuckle down to meet the
repayment schedule, does this mean that the local

economy suffers a little bit because it deprives that money from being spent here? It's being sent away.

Sorenson: That's right. The money leaves the community at that point. Now at the time we had all this tremendous help falling through here, the mayor of Biloxi visited this area to . . . in a measure warning us of what follows after the upswing.

Stephens: Oh, I see.

Sorenson: And his comments, I think, were very factual.

Stephens: And he told you that this would happen?

Sorenson: And he said to watch for two years hence.

Stephens: Oh, I see. Well then, after two years it starts leveling off,

Sorenson: It starts leveling off, and the flow of money is outward repaying these loans.

Stephens: I see,

Sorenson: Speaking in particular of the tourist industry, the reconstruction of motels and so forth.

Stephens: But with that reconstruction, though, you should . . . in fact, the motels are in better shape, so therefore word will get around that here are some nice, not run down, places, and people will come in then.

Sorenson: Oh, yes. That's right. Surely. Right. More good than harm comes of it. I'll put it that way.

Stephens: But it takes awhile.

Sorenson: But it takes awhile.

Stephens: Well what do you see as the development of this community now?

Sorenson: I see a general trend forward in the same pattern that we've followed for the past 20 - 25 years--a slow but sure growth pattern that I'm very optimistic about. I don't think it's going to be any overnight thing. In fact, it's better to have a gradual growth pattern than to . . .

Stephens: Yes, because it can be controlled then.

Sorenson: Right.

Stephens: Well, now you've had a controlled growth pattern in this county.

Sorenson: Right.

Stephens: Can you think of, just at the moment now . . . I didn't give you a chance to consider this much, but the growth trends, say, since the Second World War, can you think of when you had a little spurt, and specifically what was it?

Sorenson: Well, the most noticeable one was the advent of the oil industry. Our school systems in particular were strapped financially, and this was in the late '40's, I should say. The oil industry has really had, I suspect, the greatest impact on the area, and Mr. Emory Spencer was the father of the oil industry in

this area. He did a tremendous job with it. We have a very fine school system now due largely to the impact of oil tax money at that time. We were in danger of losing our affiliation for the school system prior to that, and the banks had been carrying the . . . I believe they called it script. In other words, your check wasn't good but we'd cash it anyway and held it as you would a note on the school district. And we'd reached a point where the banking authorities said we must cease and desist. So if oil hadn't come along at that time, we would have had a very short school year in Aransas County.

Stephens: Is that right! Well, I haven't heard that before now. Well now, you mean they weren't taxing themselves sufficiently?

Sorenson: There just wasn't enough taxable value here to suffice.

Stephens: Is that right! Well now, that was the time of the . . . you had housing . . . you had housing developments.

Sorenson: Well, your housing developments really came after the advent of oil.

Stephens: After that. So you had . . . well, was it an agricultural community?

Sorenson: No . . . well, not really. Agriculture is minimal here.

Stephens: What would be the mainstays of the community then?

Sorenson: At that time the seafood industry was the essence of it.

Stephens: That was it. And then just what was taxed? Just personal property that individuals had?

Sorenson: True.

Stephens: And it was withstanding all of the burden it could?

Sorenson: That's right.

Stephens: So then oil and gas was discovered in the late 1940's and saved the school.

Sorenson: Truly.

Stephens: Well now, the school district has prospered. There are a lot of fine buildings around. They have excellent services. I understand that they're reaching their crossroads again, that the oil and gas evaluations are going down . . .

Sorenson: Right.

Stephens: . . . and school expenditures are still quite high.

Sorenson: Oil and gas evaluations are going down, and in the meanwhile we've had the construction, and those property values are offsetting to a great extent the decrease in oil value.

Stephens: So therefore you won't have to trim down the services you offer--educational services you offer?

Sorenson: I think not.

Stephens: Because the ad valorem tax on personal property, then, is offsetting the loss of oil and gas revenue.

Sorenson: Yes.

Stephens: Well, that makes a more stable tax base, anyway, doesn't it?

Sorenson: I presume so. Although, I still like the oil and gas.
(Chuckle)

Stephens: Yes, well certainly! How has oil and gas helped the community other than save the school district?

Sorenson: Well, of course, those same values go into your various county tax funds, not just the school. Perhaps it has done the least for the city of Rockport. There doesn't happen to be any production in the city, although at the present time leases are being made on city property. So, perhaps here we go again.

Stephens: Maybe a new field will be discovered then. I see.
When will they start drilling?

Sorenson: I really don't know, but I understand that they have possibly enough leases to justify a well at the present time.

Stephens: How many people in the community have profited from oil and gas?

Sorenson: Directly, really very few people, but indirectly everyone has.

Stephens: Through taxes? Now, did the county get some revenue from this airport production?

Sorenson: True. Right.

Stephens: Is that the only way the county got any revenue?

Sorenson: Oh no, no. They have the general tax revenue off of oil property, and then the oil servicing industry has been based here during those development days. So there are many ways in which the oil industry helps.

Stephens: Does the county get some of the revenue from the state's wells with locations out in the bay? They're on state property. Does the county get any of that royalty?

Sorenson: Yes, I believe so. I don't recall just what it is.

Stephens: But no individuals would?

Sorenson: No, no individuals would.

Stephens: Because it's within the county.

Sorenson: Yes. But it's not just the production you're looking at. You're looking at the jobs created by the production.

Stephens: I see. People who are here and buy groceries and pay rent,

Sorenson: For instance, the Casberry-Wendell fleet of boats for servicing oil wells came about during those early days here, and now their operation is . . . well, I understand they have a fleet going to the North Sea in

the very near future . . . and one to Central America. So that company grew out of that early oil development right here.

Stephens: I see.

Sorenson: In other words, you can't pinpoint and say it did this and it did not do that. So many things happen by indirection.

Stephens: It did make the wealth for some persons . . . some persons, but not many though.

Sorenson: This is true. Relatively few.

Stephens: Only a handful of personal wealth.

Sorenson: Yes.

Sorenson: When I think of the oil industry in Aransas County, I think of Emory M. Spencer in particular.

Stephens: Now he's one. How many others besides him have had their wealth created by oil-and-gas discoveries?

Sorenson: Well . . . it helped any of the larger land owners who have through lease bonus money or oil production, but I would say that he was the most notable of the group.

Stephens: Who are the other large land owners in the county?

Sorenson: The Roquette family, the Bailey family, the Wendell family . . . of course, we've mentioned Mr. Tatton earlier. He's a nonresident owner, or rather his estate is at this point. Tatton is deceased. The O'Connor family . . .

Stephens: Do they own a lot of property in the county?

Sorenson: Some--not a great deal.

Stephens: I knew they had ranches up the country.

Sorenson: That's right. Some of them come inside this county.

Stephens: Oh, over around Copano Bay?

Sorenson: Right.

Stephens: That's the Shouse part of the O'Connor family?

Sorenson: Yes.

Stephens: Did the Wendells and the Roquettes have oil on their property?

Sorenson: Yes, they have some production.

Stephens: But the Tattons claim that oil and gas production is minimal.

Sorenson: Well, I think this is generally true.

Stephens: They have the Virginia Field and that's about it.

Sorenson: Yes.

Stephens: Well, one other topic--social activities. Those, of course, you'd like to tell on tape.

Sorenson: Really, social activities are minimal, I would say, in the county. Most of them are in the nature of private parties and various clubs that are available here. Dancing has always been one of the favorite forms of entertainment in this area.

Stephens: What about card games?

Sorenson: Oh, yes, there are a number of bridge clubs for the ladies.

Stephens: These have been going for some time?

Sorenson: Ever since I can remember. (Chuckle)

Stephens: And then domino games for men?

Sorenson: Yes.

Stephens: Dominoes used to be bigger than they are now.

Sorenson: Yes, dominoes used to be a lot bigger than it is now.

Stephens: But you don't have many "Forty-two" parties?

Sorenson: No.

Stephens: Mostly, if you do that, it's bridge.

Sorenson: I'm afraid our people are a little more sophisticated than the "Forty-two" era. (Chuckle)

Stephens: And then the other indoor activities . . . well, I suppose card playing would be about the main thing now for adults. For outdoor activities, you have some tennis courts, but they're limited here; so do many of the people play tennis?

Sorenson: Yes, a good many people are playing tennis, and more courts are being built constantly. The Rockport Racquette and Yacht Club is the newest development along that line. There are tennis courts at Key Allegro. There are tennis courts at churches, at the schools, and they are all in much demand.

Stephens: I see,

Sorenson: Golf is still a form of entertainment with the local country club, which was organized some twenty years ago.

Most of our social activity is really involved with the outdoors more than any other way.

Stephens: I see. Well, maybe you'd just list some of the other outdoor activities besides . . .

Sorenson: Well, of course, water skiing . . .

Stephens: Quite a bit of that.

Stephens: . . . is extensive, and water sports of various kinds--sailboating. I suppose it's been the influence of tourism that has brought many of these things about.

Stephens: So I see.

Sorenson: Of course, we've already talked about the hunting clubs during the hunting season.

Stephens: Yes. Do many people hunt nowadays?

Sorenson: Oh yes, a great many.

Stephens: I mean local residents.

Sorenson: Yes.

Stephens: Of course, they have it available here; there'd be no reason not to.

Sorenson: Well, you almost have to belong to a hunting club to have it very much available.

Stephens: Oh, on that hunting, didn't you tell me once before that you and your grandfather used to go over to St. Joseph Island to duck blinds?

Sorenson: No, Mr. Glass and I used to go over there.

Stephens: Mr. Glass--oh, you two.

Sorenson: After we'd close the bank in the afternoon, we'd jump aboard his cruiser and go across to the shore of St. Joe Island to hunt. And a good many people still do that, I think.

Stephens: I see. Do you have permission from the owners, or . . .

Sorenson: Well, you don't go on the island. You stay in the water. (Chuckle)

Stephens: What do you do with your boat?

Sorenson: Anchor it.

Stephens: Oh, won't the ducks see that and fly somewhere else?

Sorenson: Well no, you anchor it some distance away and go by skiff to your duck blind.

Stephens: Oh, I see.

Sorenson: Of course, every now and then we're fortunate and get an invitation to hunt on the island, and that is really a hunting paradise.

Stephens: Yes, I would imagine so. I've seen all the game they have there. Do they throw, speaking of the island, do they throw many parties--for locals, that is, hunting parties or just social get-togethers?

Sorenson: Hunting parties, yes. At least they have in the past usually invited groups of local people over to hunt during the season.

Stephens: Is this for public relation purposes?

Sorenson: I would like to think it's just because they like us. (Chuckle)

Stephens: They want to keep the taxes down! (Chuckle) You mentioned golf awhile ago. That's a big thing. How long have you had that country club there?

Sorenson: About twenty years.

Stephens: About twenty years. Now, did you have anything like that before?

Sorenson: No, no.

Stephens: So this has been a product of affluence and growing sophistication.

Sorenson: True.

Stephens: Now, what do you have there besides the bar and a golf course?

Sorenson: A swimming pool.

Stephens: Swimming pool. Which of the three would you regard as most important?

Sorenson: Golf. (Chuckle)

Stephens: Golf. Now, not you personally, I mean the general attitude.

Sorenson: No, I mean the general attitude is that.

Stephens: Are there outdoor activities?

Sorenson: We have the riding association that does a great deal of horseback riding. It goes on the trail drive to San Antonio every year.

Stephens: Rides all the way to San Antonio?

Sorenson: Yes.

Stephens: Who . . . who is in this--mostly young folks or all ages?

Sorenson: Mostly younger people, but really all ages.

Stephens: How long does it take them to get there?

Sorenson: I really don't know. I've never made that trip. (Chuckle)

Stephens: That's a long way. Do they put on their own rodeo?

Sorenson: Oh yes. Youth rodeos in particular. There's a rodeo arena at Fulton that's used quite a lot.

Stephens: Oh, I see. Isn't there one towards the carbon-black plant?

Sorenson: Yes, there is one between here and Aransas Pass.

Stephens: Is that the same club, or do you have different clubs?

Sorenson: No, that's a different group, I believe.

Stephens: A few minutes ago we were talking about the country club, and I got us off the subject, but I want to get back to that. What influence do you think that a country club has today? Now, I know that you're, at the same, you're combined with Aransas Pass and perhaps other communities for this.

Sorenson: Yes, this is true.

Stephens: How many--just the two communities?

Sorenson: No, I believe Ingleside is also a part of this group.

Stephens: Ingleside, Aransas Pass, and Rockport. Do you include Fulton also?

Sorenson: Oh yes. But when I say Rockport, I really mean Aransas County . . . which is Rockport, Fulton, and Lamar.

Stephens: And Lamar. So you have people from Lamar who are members of this Live Oak Country Club?

Sorenson: Oh yes. Live Oak Country Club.

Stephens: What . . . who are members in general--not names, but the types?

Sorenson: It's pretty much a cross section of the community. It originated really as just a golf club per se, and the country club was something that came after the golf course rather than before it.

Stephens: Oh, I see. Is this mostly the affluent of the community?

Sorenson: That brought it about?

Stephens: No, that are members throughout the years.

Sorenson: I suppose you could say that. It was organized by a group of us who were interested in golf, and . . . it is a corporation.

Stephens: What is the name of it?

Sorenson: Live Oak Golf and Country Club. They insisted on placing "golf" first in the corporate name. The ones of us that played golf were driving, oh, some distance

to play and decided it would be nice to have something nearby if we could.

Stephens: Is it a nice course?

Sorenson: Oh yes. A very nice nine-hole course.

Stephens: What is the membership?

Sorenson: Some 220, I believe--thereabout.

Stephens: And out of those, how many would be Aransas County?

Sorenson: I would say probably seventy or eighty.

Stephens: I see. Do you have your quotas for communities?

Sorenson: No, no.

Stephens: Do you have a quota for the total membership?

Sorenson: Not really.

Stephens: Or limited it in any way?

Sorenson: We haven't limited it, no.

Stephens: You haven't had this problem yet?

Sorenson: We haven't had to limit it, no.

Stephens: Now, what . . . in contrast to what you have mentioned about adult entertainment . . . entertainment for adult persons, what about the social activities and entertainment for young people, say, when you were high school age and coming down for the summer?

Sorenson: When I was in high school age, we certainly had a marvelous time. We never seemed to lack anything to do. We were either in the bay or dancing or picnicking or

something else. It's always an amazement to me when I hear about the young people today not having anything to do.

Stephens: Yes. You had a lot of young people here, and you all could get together for, what, boat rides? Did you have bicycle parties?

Sorenson: We had boat rides, bicycle parties, horseback parties. There was just something going on all the time.

Stephens: Now, you didn't have the good roads you have today, and you didn't have the automobiles that would go fast and get you to somewhere else as quickly as now, but . . .

Sorenson: Well, we thought they did. (Chuckle)

Stephens: But you didn't go distances like children nowadays.

Sorenson: Not the same distances, no. We'd go as far as Corpus Christi and spent a lot of time in Aransas Pass. There was a place to dance over there called "Ransom Island," which I'm sure our parents worried about it just as parents do today, but we went and we had a wonderful time doing it!

Stephens: Oh! But did you have any such places for children here, for young people here?

Sorenson: Yes, we did--one in particular called the "Triangle" I remember here. And then we made use of Goose Island State Park concession house, and the little Catholic

Parochial School was turned over to us every weekend for dancing. I wish I had a nickel for every time I've helped move the desks out and the jukebox in. (Chuckle) But a lot of our time was occupied in getting ready to have a good time.

Stephens: I see. So in the organization, you'd build up a little esprit de corps there.

Sorenson: Right.

Stephens: So the young people were quite imaginative then in creating something to do, group things to do?

Sorenson: Yes, true. And the parents were pretty active in helping us.

Stephens: Did you have a library available to you then?

Sorenson: No, there was a . . . not a public library. There was a small rental library downtown in Rockport operated by the Sorensons that used to . . .

Stephens: Your aunt?

Sorenson: No, they would be cousins of mine.

Stephens: Cousins, Oh, is that right? I hadn't heard about that! About what size of a library was it?

Sorenson: Oh, it was mostly fiction and located in one side of the Sorenson Grocery Store, but I remember we used to go down in the summer and draw out books and read them.

Stephens: And what was the cost?

Sorenson: Oh, it was minimal--very, very little. I don't recall just what it was.

Stephens: Well, and did they have a wide selection?

Sorenson: Oh, yes.

Stephens: Where did they get them--buy them or . . .

Sorenson: Bought them.

Stephens: Oh, they bought them to use for the rental library.

Sorenson: That's right.

Stephens: How long, do you remember the dates, the inclusive dates of that?

Sorenson: It was in the late 30's, as I recall.

Stephens: And how long did it last?

Sorenson: Oh, I think it probably lasted for fifteen to twenty years.

Stephens: Did it have any direct connection with the opening of the library here?

Sorenson: Not really.

Stephens: How influential do you think the Aransas County Library is now as far as the reading habits, influencing the reading habits of the young?

Sorenson: I think it . . . now wait, you threw me when you said "the young," I'm not quite sure.

Stephens: Well, I'll say high school age people. Do they use the library?

Sorenson: Yes, yes, I think so.

Stephens: Or is it mostly an adult library?

Sorenson: I think it's more an adult library.

Stephens: Oh, I see. So this is the sort of thing that the county should have been doing. Now these are the sort of services that cost, but it's good for the community isn't it?

Sorenson: True, very true.

Stephens: But the county has been blessed with a new library building . . . and that makes it look more attractive for people to come in . . . it will bring them in.

Sorenson: Oh yes. Incidentally, the Dennis O'Connor family has contributed a great deal of money to that library through the years for the purchase of books and supplies.