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Interview with  
BOB ARMSTRONG  
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Oral History Collection

Bob Armstrong

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Dr. Smallwood: This is an interview with Bob Armstrong, former Land Commissioner of the state of Texas, held in Austin, Texas, on February 18, 1983. The interview is being conducted by J. B. Smallwood.

We usually begin these interviews by asking you to tell us something about yourself--where you were born, what your educational background has been up through the college level. Would you like to do that?

Mr. Armstrong: I am a product of the city of Austin. I was born in the city in 1932. My mother was a professor at the University of Texas for some thirty-two years in home economics. My dad was a longtime Ford dealer. I was educated through the Austin public school system, and I went to the University of Texas. I started in Plan II, changed to government, and upon completion of the government degree, I became a naval officer. I served at the very tail-end of the Korean War, I went back from the Navy into law school and graduated from the University of Texas Law School in 1958,

Dr. Smallwood: I see, How did you become interested in politics? Can you

remember when you first became actively interested in, say, pursuing a political career as well as a legal career?

Armstrong: I'm not sure that there was a point in time when I made this decision. I can remember that,,well, I was a "campus politician," as that term is used,

Smallwood: Did you hold any campus offices?

Armstrong: I held a very obscure office. I was on the Student Court, which was elected, but I did participate actively in the campus organizations and the honoraries. I was president of the Cowboys; I was president of the Friars, which, I suppose, is objectively considered the highest honor that the university conferred. I worked in a lot of areas,like, with displaced persons, which was something not many people think about now; but we had a number who came in and came to the university, and we worked with them,

I suppose it was natural for a campus politician to have some interest. I remember going to precinct meetings early on and being highly embarrassed when I had to pick between my friends,,,between Lyndon Johnson and Alan Shivers at the first one I ever went to. I thought it was supposed to be a secret ballot, and it wasn't. You had to stand up and declare (laughter).

Smallwood: Are you willing to declare for the record?

Armstrong: I declared for Lyndon Johnson, though I lived in an area that was very heavily pro-Shivers, and as I recall, the vote was 201

to 200. It was quite a meeting (chuckle). That was when things were hot. Frankly, I don't remember whether we won or lost. But in any event, at some point, I guess the first thing that I ever did was, I was asked by a long-term politician here, Stewart Long, who was a writer and reporter and active politician--his wife was on the city council--if I would head up "Dollars for Democrats" for Travis County, which was relatively a thankless task. The county was so split between the Johnson and Shivers factions that they thought they would get someone who was new and unscarred. It took me a very short time to become new and scarred (chuckle). But I went ahead and undertook to do that.

Then, at some point, I worked in a great number of campaigns in addition to practicing law. I was working for the 1960 Democratic ticket in three congressional districts. I was asked by the Johnson forces to do this. I handled the eastern district, which was Congressional District One that,,no, I guess it was the Second Congressional District. Anyhow, it was Newton County, San Augustine, and down through Beaumont,

Smallwood: I see--the southeastern part of the state.

Armstrong: Yes. Then I circled down along the coast, which was the Ninth Congressional District. Then I handled the Tenth, which was my own--here. We won all of those districts in 1960 with Kennedy and Johnson.

At that point, Will Wilson asked me to come up and be an

assistant attorney general, although he was running for Lyndon Johnson's seat in the Senate. I soon transferred out and worked in that race as his scheduling person and then started traveling with him, and I introduced him all over the state, which subsequently became worth something because I was very young by statewide standards at that time, but I got to speak to every group he spoke to. It was very interesting to make a statewide campaign as a young lawyer. He had a very enviable record as a district attorney in Dallas--hard-charging--and as attorney general. He ran very poorly in the Senate race, actually, behind, I think, Jim Wright, John Tower, and Blakeley, I think he ran fourth.

But in any event, I came back, and my dad was running for the city council.

Smallwood: Let me ask you a few questions about those races.

Armstrong: Sure.

Smallwood: I think it is interesting that Kennedy and Johnson won in 1960 due,,how would you evaluate the reaction of the average Texas that you came into contact with about the candidacy of John Kennedy in 1960?

Armstrong: Well, of course, everybody was wrapped up over the country that I worked in--in East Texas--with the Baptist versus Catholic issue. I think that the Houston Ministerial Alliance meeting that he addressed was a watershed act in that particular race, I think, also, that people were ready to change, and they were

going to change, You just had to let them see the man to realize that, though he might sound a little different to a Texan, he was still on their side, which I think is what politics is all about. They make a perception that this person is either on my side or isn't on my side; and they vote accordingly, frequently. Sometimes they're talking about somebody that is on their side economically; sometimes they're talking about somebody maybe being on their side environmentally. But they make that kind of decision in their mind and vote their interest.

I think that we had a good organization because of the Johnson years, and we put that organization to use. When I started out, I had a trip book that told me exactly who to see, who the Kennedy man was in the primary--and there weren't very many--who the Johnson man had been. You know, we went through the counties very well-armed with workers who had principally been Johnson people. So we had the organization, and then they took care of the issues themselves as the campaign progressed. I think...who was it...it's hard to believe...Nixon and Lodge, I guess. You know, they didn't prosecute their case very well for most Texans.

Smallwood: I think it's interesting that you weren't able to put that same organization to work in support of Wilson. How would you evaluate the poor showing that Wilson made and the fairly good showing that Kennedy and Johnson made in the state?

Armstrong: Well, I guess the first thing I would look at in that race in retrospect was that Will was not a good candidate. He was a poor speaker. In that particular race, Jim Wright was the speaking candidate who could ignite everyone. If you recall, at that time, in special elections for the United States Senate, if I'm not mistaken, it cost \$5 to file, There were some 412 candidates or something like that--just an enormous number of people running. The ballot was just impressive. It was a special election, and you rather predictably had... Blakeley had the most money, and in a race like that, that would help you. He had some name I.D. because Price Daniel had appointed him to the Senate, I think, before at one time. Then you had Wright, who was pretty well picking up what I'd call the "regular" Democrats, and then you had Tower, who was characterized as a fluke but who still did have whatever Republican organization there was. It was hard and fast, and they saw that as a real chance for the first time, and he was certainly financed. So, as history has proved to me through many different races, the people with the money, particularly in a crowded race, won. I don't think Will had as much money as he might have needed, and he just didn't have the charisma. There were a couple of other people who I don't remember right now but who pulled down. There were all kinds of other things that happened. They put two other people in that race named Will Wilson.



Smallwood: Is that right? I didn't realize that,

Armstrong: We had some legal problems with that. Of course, they had a right to run, but one of them had to be Will B. Wilson, and one of them had to be Will X. Wilson, and that sort of thing, to differentiate them on the ballot. It was a strange race,

Smallwood: Do you remember which candidate Johnson supported in the race?

Armstrong: He did not get in it.

Smallwood: He didn't get involved?

Armstrong: Yes.

Smallwood: Well, then tell me about your career after the Wilson race.

Armstrong: Well, I came back when Will did not make the runoff. My dad was embroiled in a city council race--awkwardly, as it turned out--against the wife of my friend, Stewart Long, who first got me into politics. We won that race by a very, very narrow margin. Looking back, I'm not sure, even if it had been my dad, I'd have worried about getting into that race. You know...I didn't think...well, no, I wouldn't have, either; I would have helped him, anyway. But it was an awkward situation. In any event, Stewart Long came up after that race and said he always knew why he should have supported Wilson and got him in the runoff, but he didn't realize why until the election night of the city council race (chuckle). We did win it,

Then I moved from that, with practicing law in the meanwhile and in between these, into a position of running a race for Tom Reavley, who was at that time running for Attorney General

against Waggoner Carr. Tom Reavley is now on the Fifth Circuit...had been on the Supreme Court of Texas. I managed Tom's campaign, and so I was getting a lot of miles on me through the years at a pretty early age in the managerial sense and in the vineyards.

I know, subsequently, there was a lot of thinking about the fact that I won the Land Commissioner's race against an old established candidate, and that I'd "come out of nowhere." I always felt that I came out of ten years of political work at the statewide level for various candidates. A lot of the people who supported me were people that I had opposed, but they still liked me either because of the way I'd operated or... so I had a lot of friends, even though some of them may have been for the other candidates when I was running their campaign.

But in any event, I then made a race, after the Reavley race for the House, and won in a very combative and crowded race. It was again a race to fill an unexpired term. At that time, we didn't have runoffs in the unexpired terms. We had, as I recall, either twelve or thirteen Democrats and one Republican. I was able to barely nose out the Republican by about 460-some-odd votes in order to be elected to the House. I then served in the House for seven years without an opponent. That was a happy time in my life. It was hard work but, I think, exciting work. I enjoyed doing it. Well, then it was at that point that I began to channel some of my interest in the

environmental area.

Samllwood: Would you like to comment on that more specifically--about what particular things did you become interested in at that point that would be environmentally oriented?

Armstrong: Well, this period of time started in 1963 and ran to 1970, The environmental movement--so-called--was just beginning to happen, principally under the leadership of Senator "Babe" Schwartz and also helped along by Senator Don Kennard and with people in the House like Neil Caldwell from Angleton. We started the environmental work in Texas on the beaches, which probably was where we needed to start. There were a lot of other fights in the water area with Dr. \_\_\_\_\_ down in Houston, fighting to keep the ship channel clean and wanting local control because the state people were so benign in their efforts.

Basically, there was a package of what we called and referred to as "Beach Bills." Some of them were relatively innocuous, like, not removing sand from the dunes without a permit from the country commissioners. I remember we had a bill about what you could sell on the beach as far as stands and stores that you would open up. But others were fairly significant, involving ownership and the open beaches. Then we had a beach cleaning bill. We called that the "Beach Package."

At some point, I determined that we didn't have any coordination as between the agencies on environmental matters, so I passed a piece of legislation which set up the Inter-Agency

Council on Natural Resources and the Environment. It was called ICNRE. That was subsequently, under Clements, molded into or melded into what is now TENRC--Texas Energy and Natural Resources Council,

The other thing that I passed that was somewhat significant was a bill which set up the Texas Conservation Foundation, which was designed to accept gifts of money and land which would subsequently be left to the parks people, if it needed a place to go. People didn't have much faith in the then land commissioner as an environmentalist. They didn't have too much faith in what was going on at Parks and Wildlife. I felt that we needed a neutral or hopefully, a positive recipient area where people could leave land for parks, and it could sit there until such a time as Parks and Wildlife needed it--very parallel to what Nature Conservancy does now in terms of buying it while it's available and then let the park people come along and take it later,

In that period of time, I worked on that area, and I also became interested in the Land Office because I could see that if you wanted to make the Land Office a positive environmental force, it could be one. This is not so much because of the land it owned, which is relatively minuscule, although it has an aura of owning more than it does, really. Too much of what they own is under the ocean or under a river bottom or mineral interests. We actually own only 800,000 acres, and most of that

is west in kind of "doggie" land. But in any event, that legislative period of time was where I got interested in the environmental area, and I decided to run for Land Office.

Smallwood: What made you,, I guess what I'm trying to say is, why did you get oriented toward environmental issues at that time?

Armstrong: I think principally because it just needed to be done, and it was something I was interested in. I spent all my free time outdoors, if that is a good reason, I had always been a backpacker and a camper, I spent an awful lot of my early years growing up in the mountains of New Mexico and west, and so that was just sort of where my orientation was. The other thing,, it didn't have to do with any great philosophical decision. My friends were Schwartz and Kennard and the people that liked to run the rivers and canoe. That's what I did recreationally, and that's what I did to some degree legislatively.

Smallwood: So you were sort of attracted to this and drawn into it by your associates and by your love of the outdoors.

Armstrong: That's right. It was just sort of a normal area to get into.

Smallwood: You said you decided to run for Land Commissioner as you became more aware of how important this office could be to the environmental development of Texas. Would you be a little more specific about your decision to run for Land Commissioner?

Armstrong: Well, I think everybody either sets out to do something,, or they might run for another reason which might seem as laudable, but

it's a fact of life in politics that they run because they don't like the way it's being run who's there. Jerry Sadler, who's had many commendable facets to him, also had some facets to them that I didn't like. He fought the Padre Island Seashore, for example; he fought against the Guadalupe Mountain National Park. He was very provincial. I felt like he ought to at least be cooperative. One of the interesting ironies is that, at the same time, I also fought to get Matagorda Island, in the last stages of my office, back from the "Feds." Maybe that's something that develops while you're in the office--you get provincial (chuckle).

Smallwood: Why did you want it back?

Armstrong: Well, I just felt that the chances of managing that area properly were greater if the state did it with the cooperative effort of the "Feds" than if you'd just put it in the refuge system. Then when there were cutbacks in funding, the easiest thing to do was just put up a sign, "No Trespassing." People could then use it in the time when the birds were gone. There was no reason why you couldn't enjoy and use that island, which is magnificent. It has a people orientation use for it. I think you ought to be able to go on that island, and you can do so in an environmental context--when the birds are in Canada--for fishing, for beachcombing, for summer recreation. I felt like we could do it better in cooperation with them than they could do it if they just had it. That was the two alternatives,

Smallwood: I take it, from what you say, then, that you're what might be

called a "multiple use" conservationist,

Armstrong: Oh, yes, I am a "multiple use" person, although I recognize that there may be some areas that ought not have multiple use, or at least very, very carefully approached multiple uses. There are compatible uses, and I think it's wrong to be all out one way or the other,

Smallwood: You would say, then, that you would advocate use so long as it can be done in an environmentally sound way?

Armstrong: Well, that's the way I've approached everything I've ever done,

Smallwood: Let's get a little more specific here, One of the things that Representative Agnich said in his interview was that the state of Texas needed a land management program, but he seriously doubted that the independent-minded Texans would ever accept such a program, I guess my question here is, do you think Texas needs a land management law, say, similar to the kind that exists in New York State?

Armstrong: Well, first of all, I'd say that we have it, That's something that is not very well-known. It was a very subtle process, I was a participant in the Coastal Management Program as the director of that program, Many people feel that it failed, I'm not completely sure that it was not without merit, It certainly didn't result in any coastal management capabilities such as California has, where you would have coastal districts and somebody would make decisions about what you could do in them, On the other hand, while we were dragging our feet, the air and water quality people

were establishing a very firm presence in the permitting area. So we're not totally without land planning; and, of course, we do have planning in the cities. There are a lot of misconceptions that because you don't have zoning in Houston, Houston is unplanned. There are two hundred people who work in the planning department in Houston, but they do it another way. They do it with deed restrictions, and they do certain planning functions by where you put your public facilities. This is something that is often overlooked. Highways, schools, stadia, dams--all of these things go into the land planning area.

So we're not without planning, but in terms of the traditional 1970's, Harvard-oriented, comprehensive land use planning--that is the term used--Texas has never bought that as a statewide measure. It was killed as a political matter principally by the realtors and the Farm Bureau. It was never a concept that was acceptable to the governors who existed at that time-- Governor Briscoe, principally, and Governor Connally before him. So, consequently, the time that Texas might have done comprehensive land use planning and management sort of came and went.

Smallwood: Then you don't see it as a possibility in the near future?

Armstrong: I don't see it as a possibility simply because there are forces in effect, as I mentioned, between the air and water laws, and there are also more and more counties and cities paying attention because they have to. You're having strange pockets of authority that operate. For example, one of the things that, I think, has



slowed down down the compulsion to subdivide and grow is the tax advantage that farmers and ranchers now enjoy for productivity valuation as opposed to market valuation. That takes a lot of pressure off some people who might have otherwise sold. Plus, there is the fact that you do have a sort of a new awareness and the establishment of neighborhood groups and that kind of thing that work in the existing system and do what I guess I'd call "site-specific" opposition to certain things. This may be more awkward---it may be more expensive---but it does get somewhat the same result as maybe comprehensive planning would get.

Smallwood: I conclude, from what you're saying, that the approach is more diffuse in Texas rather than being centralized.

Armstrong: I think that's right. I used to make a whole lot of the same speech in which I talked about the fact that you ought to have your planning capability where your needs are. Your first need is the coast. You catch an awful lot of the coastal problems with 404 permitting by the Corps of Engineers (Open Beaches Act) and with your general water and air pollution standards. The next place that you ought to plan is probably on your rivers. It's surprising how much land planning ties to water pollution. Your third area is in your major metropolitan areas and which have the extra-territorial jurisdiction. We probably ought to have some kind of option from local, county, and home rule. For example, Travis County problems, you know, just don't pay any

attention to the county lines anymore. Austin is Travis County.

Smallwood: The same is true with the San Antonio Aquifer.

Armstrong: Yes, I don't think there's any question about it--San Antonio is another example. Austin is already pushing out beyond the Travis County line, and yet if you're in Austin and you call the sheriff's office and say, "There's a burglary here," he'll say, "Well, why don't you call the police?" (Chuckle) You know, it's that kind of thing.

It is awkward, but I guess the other thing that I always contended was that if you were in a community--and I think we do pay more and more attention to this--you ought to have sort of an idea about, like, not doing things like putting a feedlot on top of an aquifer. That's sensible land management, and yet it's really sensible water protection management, and it probably wouldn't happen, given the kinds of permits that are required.

So we do have more land planning than I think people think we do. There are fights all the time about where you put garbage dumps in Houston as it relates to their water system and natural water capabilities. You have some subsidence districts now in Houston. So while you don't have people who sit down and make master plans for the state of Texas, you do catch a lot of the problems that we thought needed to be caught. We've done it without a "California Coastal Commission" approach. I contended

in our efforts in the management of the state coastal zone that it ought to be a site-specific decision-making process because we had the laws we needed principally because of "Babe" Schwartz, who was way out "on the edge." If we had enforced those laws and coordinated them, then we'd be able to avoid some of the problems that other people had. But we didn't necessarily have to have somebody drawing lines on the maps and making decisions that "You wouldn't put this here," (gesture) or "You wouldn't put this here," (gesture) because you had drawn the lines on the map. One thing that was wrong with the coastal program nationally, I thought, was that, if you looked at the growth of that agency during the time I worked with them, it went from, like, fourteen people to 260. But the significant thing was that here was somebody that was supposed to look after the coast. I'm talking about the Office of Coastal Zone Management, which was a department of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration--NOA, as it was so called. Of those 260 people, there was not one biologist. Now, to me, you can't do any sensible planning of coastal resources without looking at maritime biology; I mean, that's why you're doing it, ostensibly, is to protect the reproductive capability of a very reproductive area. What you had was an interesting exercise, but I think it was wrongheaded in some ways. It was a great place to hire people who had degrees in land planning, but I'm not sure that those people were able to do

the things very well, because they didn't interface--which is a word I hate--with all the other disciplines that they really needed to work with. We did much of our work with biologists. As a matter of fact, when I left the office, we had a biologist as our chief of the land division. His background was in that area.

Generally speaking, I guess I would say that, while we don't have comprehensive land use planning, we are not unplanned, and we do not fail to handle some of the problems--maybe not as well as I'd like, but there is some planning, and good planning, done in Texas, and we have avoided a lot of the bureacratic objections that people have to land use planning in other states.

Smallwood: You mentioned these local environmentalist groups. What is your general attitude toward them as groups that tend to object, for example, to the Trinity Barge Canal or the Texas Water Plan or the Barton Springs pollution?

Armstrong: Well, I think they do two things. First of all, they have points that they need to make and that need to be made. It may be an awkward and perhaps costly way to do this; but the thing that they also do is that everytime an objection is made to a project, it seems to me that what you do is make a person who is going to have a project aware that there are going to be certain things that they need to do that will avoid this difficulty. They also make people do things right, if that's a good term, or

maybe move to another area, because they don't want to put up with all this they're going to have to catch from either the city council or the whatever commission level. I think that sometimes just the fact that they may kill or slow down or do something else to a project makes people have to think, "Well, let's do this properly within an environmental context, or we're going to have excessive delays." The plain fact is that delays cost money, and these people are trying to make money. Therefore, the environmental groups serve a useful purpose. Now I guess you could say, "Well, if you had a good zoning board, you could map your county and do this, and there wouldn't be any need for it." But it's obvious that politically we're not going to go that way, so I think they do serve a very useful purpose. I know that they get tired, and I know that is is costly, but I think--certainly in Austin--we have a lot of awareness about what we have brought about by people like the "Zilker Posse," the Barton Springs protection groups, and that sort of thing.

Smallwood: The "Zilker Posse?"

Armstrong: Yes. The area around Barton Springs is called Zilker Park, and they have a group known as the "Zilker Posse."

Smallwood: It really avoids the problem of bureaucratization that you were talking about. I know that in Stewart Henry's interview, for example, he, having worked both for public agencies and, of course, being a lobbyist for several of these citizens groups,

contends that they are very necessary to prevent the planning agencies and so forth from hiding things from the public that the public might need to know.

Armstrong: I think that's right. The last big fight I was in was dumping spoil into the bay in Corpus Christi. Were it not for the various "environmental groups" and their efforts, I'm convinced that we'd fill up Corpus Christi with that spoil. It took a long time. I stayed hitched through some real serious criticism and sometimes when I felt like I didn't have very many friends, but the ultimate result is that I think we reached the right decision, and they will now dump that dredge spoil up on the beach--"beach" being a generic term--onto the land--as opposed to in the productive part of the bay itself.

Again, like many of these things, it was an economic fight. Had they been able to dump into the bay, they would have created ultimately about two thousand acres of fast land that would have sold for fantastic prices by the square foot. But we also would have substantially diminished the fishery and the shrimpery. There was substantial economic detriment as a result of that diminution. Those are the kinds of things where I think they filled or served a very useful purpose.

Smallwood: So many of these environmental issues do come down to economic trade-offs?

Armstrong: Well, there's just no question about it.

Smallwood: You talked a lot about the coastal zone management, which is a very important development here in the state of Texas. I noticed that one of the articles in the Dallas Times Herald mentioned that this was considered one of your major defeats. Would you like to comment on that?

Armstrong: Well, I worked for five years and spent probably an average of a million dollars a year of federal money, and some state money but not much--most of it in time and personnel--to try to put together a plan that would be sent forward to the Office of Coastal Zone Management. We had certain guidelines. We adopted, as I have alluded to, a different approach. The Office of Coastal Zone Management wanted us to set up a coastal zone planning capability, somewhat similar to the California Coastal Commission, with a board, a group of citizens who would tell you what you could and couldn't do with the coast. We adopted an approach through the state permitting capability, which was in existence and in place, to catch 95 percent of the problem.

It's very difficult to sell the people in Washington on the fact that Texas had handled a lot of its problems principally because of the work Senator Schwartz had done and to some degree that I had done when I was in the House, and that we didn't need to start over. So the ultimate result was that, after all this work and after passing some legislation we thought we needed, the final decision rested with Governor Briscoe as to whether or not to send the plan forward. In fact, Governor Briscoe

relied rather heavily on a gentleman whose name was Hugh Yantis, who was a former and somewhat deposed member of the Water Board. Mr. Yantis had sort of been my adversary for years.

Smallwood: Why was he your adversary?

Armstrong: Well, he was the kind of person who, through these tough times, kept making statements like: "Polluters have rights, too." I suppose this is accurate, but it is not a very popular stand to make (chuckle). He had always been very industry-oriented. He'd been very much against change. Hugh had a strange philosophy which was that the strength of Texas government was not in the elected officials but in the boards and commissions, which, in effect, were strong because they were answerable to no one. Consequently, he wouldn't react to the Sierra Club, and he wouldn't react...although, unfortunately, they would react to Exxon, and they would react to industry, generically. We just had a different take-off point when you dealt with either water or land or air. While we remained friendly, we fought awfully hard all the way through these years; and the irony was that ultimately, when we came down to the final point of whether the governor, as the law required, would send up the coastal program or not, Dolph Briscoe opted not to send it up, largely on the advice of Mr. Yantis.

Smallwood: Speaking of Yantis and doing research on the San Antonio Aquifer controversy, the environmentalists, of course, considered



him the major culprit in trying to promote construction over that aquifer and saw him as primarily protecting the interests of business rather than the interests of the environment. So this goes along somewhat with what you were saying his philosophy was,

Armstrong: Yes, and I think Hugh would tell you this. He thought that resources were there to be used. Probably the greatest book on this kind of conflict is John McFee's book, Encounters with an Arch-Druid, which ought to be recommended reading if you want to understand how all that works. He took three people, one a miner-engineer who incidentally was an unbelievably good birder and naturalist, and put him with David Brower. They went into the area of the Cascades where they were suggesting a new mine. He then took Brower, who was then chairman of the Sierra Club, and went down to a Florida island, Cumberland, I guess, with the leading developer who had just done Hiltonhead, again in a very strong environmental context. They went camping on Cumberland, and he talked to him. That man's name was...I can't remember...I've been on panels with him. Then he took him to the Colorado and ran the lower canyons of Colorado with the head of the Corps of Engineers, the greatest dam builder in the country. All of these people, I suppose, you would characterize as being in the Yantis mold. They were all people who felt that resources should be harnessed and used and made productive. The difference, I suppose, between some of these individuals and Yantis is that

he was not quite as subtle as sometimes they were, or maybe not as broad as they were. There are still people who think that the strength of this country is tied to resources and that one of the reasons we're in trouble right now is we're not developing them as we should and that we need to start. There is a countervailing viewpoint,

Smallwood: Very definitely. What are the other charges that appeared in the press concerning your tenure as Land Commissioner? Was the accusation of some environmentalists that you were not as active as you could have been in pursuing environmental developments,,,how do you feel about that? Do you feel that you did as much as you could that was politically feasible in the Texas climate to promote wise environmental policies?

Armstrong: Well, you know, you serve a broad constituency, and it is a political system. One of my "Catch-22" situations was that I was also constitutionally charged with the responsibility of making as much money as I possibly could for the school fund. There was a time in history when that was the only test of success in the office. I tried to balance it, I've always tended to be a balancing person as opposed to a total, hard-charging activist; and once you are in office, I don't believe that I ever did anything in an effort to get votes or not lose votes, I really tried to call them like I saw them. Generally speaking, I think I came down on the side of pushing the environment more than I did the other side by probably a "70-30"

kind of thing. There would be people who would find fault with the fact that I didn't push that other "30," but I guess that's just the way I was. I would think you might get somebody who would be a "hundred-percenter," but I'm not sure they could get elected or stay elected. You know, on balance we made a lot of progress, but I guess you're always going to have people who thought that you should have done more.

Smallwood: Ken Kraemer said that you probably achieved more in your quiet way than you would have in a confrontive way. Would you agree with that?

Armstrong: I just don't know, I would hope that's true.

Smallwood: Anyway, that fits your philosophy?

Armstrong: Probably. You know, you have to recognize that the other people are there and that they're strong. I've always thought you could do better by reasoning with people, and to use the old phrase, "You can attract more flies with honey than you can with vinegar."

Smallwood: One of the issues that has been raised in the area of environmentalism today is the issue of growth versus no-growth. This is very important, I think, issue to the state of Texas because of the tremendous influx of population in the last few years. What is your position on that? What is your philosophy on the idea of growth or no-growth as a way of protecting our environment?

Armstrong: Well, my preference would be not only no-growth, but to roll it back. My role model and hero would probably be Jim Bridger. If I had to pick one, and I could go live the way I wanted to live,

I'd like to go be Jim Bridger at the time he was Jim Bridger,

But growth is an absolute fact of life, I don't think that we can control it, but I think that you might,,you know, I love Steve Fromholz's suggestion that what we do is build a four-foot high wall of jalapenos around the state, and only those who could eat their way through shall be allowed to come settle (chuckle), I think that I could share that sentiment. On the other hand, constitutionally, you're not going to be able to build a fence around the state, and so what you're going to have to do is determine not whether it's going to happen or not, but hopefully manage it to some degree. I don't like to come to that conclusion, but I just think that's there. It's a given. One of the things that I think you have to look at is that many of the people who come here come here because it is a nice place, if that's a good term. I'll use it, "Nice place" is all right.

Smallwood: Desirable, anyway.

Armstrong: Right. That's right, and certainly by comparison to perhaps where they had been. Climatically, it's nice. I just finished an interview with the Turner Broadcasting people in which they were trying to ascertain what was the aura of Texanism that,,you know,,what was the Texan, and what is the new Texas, and what's happening. We talked about a lot of varied things, but one thing was that people do come maybe

with a consciousness that was developed because of problems. Hence, not all the people who come in are coming in wanting to despoil. A lot of them are coming in because they want to work at Texas Instruments, but they're going to fight just as hard for Barton Springs as a local might. The only problem is, if so many people come in, Barton Springs is just that much more threatened, as are all the other springs around the state or other natural areas.

What you do is you buy these places; you try to be aware of their value and what causes that value to diminish; you try to make laws that protect them; you try to do things that maybe give you an escape capability, which I would characterize maybe as park land acquisition. I think that just about the time that we did some of the things that "Zero Population Growth" wanted to do in terms of smaller families,..you won that battle, and then all of a sudden you had the Sunbelt Theory arrive. Even though that maybe as a nation we've slowed down our population growth, as a state it didn't make any difference because they're all coming here as fast as they can. I think the test you're going to have to pass is how you manage it more than whether you stop it or,..I'd love to stop it, and I just don't think you can.

Smallwood: One of the areas that I'm most interested in, as far as environmental policies is concerned, is water resource development; and while I know that wasn't your particular area as Land Commissioner, I know that you undoubtedly had a great deal of

contact with the agencies, With this tremendous influx of population, of course, into Texas, water becomes an increasingly critical resource, What do you see as the future of water resource development in this state?

Armstrong: Basically, you're going to have to decide on some priorities that we haven't had to pick between in the past, We have been rather fortunate, The twenty-year drought cycle, which should have hit in 1973-76, has not come to pass, We've been very lucky, I don't know what is going to happen when we have the next one, and I keep thinking, you know, as a rancher, it's just right around the corner, But for some reason, it hasn't been occurring, That's going to awaken some people, and there are some people who still remember the 1950's and want to do something about it, because if we got to the same water capability that we had or didn't have in the 1950's today with this population, I think it could be very critical.

I am not convinced that the way to go is to try to artifically continue the production on the High Plains, I think they're going to have to learn to live with their water capabilities, I happen to know, for example, that El Paso is going to be out--unless they can borrow from New Mexico--probably in another twenty years, The Waco Bolsons are severely depleted, "Bolson" is a Spanish term for aquifer or pool, I guess, There's one to the west and north that would adequately take care of the problem, but it happens to be in New Mexico. As you know, maybe,

there has been a suit filed to set aside a New Mexico statute which says that you can't export water, and the Supreme Court will eventually decide that. My personal feeling is that you're not going to be able to take a non-populated area of one state that happens to have water and deny water to a million people who are only twenty miles away just because of a state line that was drawn as recently as seventy or eighty years ago. In any event, there are adequate warning signs.

Now any comprehensive water plan will have to go beyond the state lines. It will be a national decision. There is only so much that you can do. At some point, the water plans that were originally envisioned to pump the water up the hill in the volumes that they talked about would have required an indebtedness that would have exceeded that of all the schools in the state of Texas. I don't think that we're ready to pay that price for water to West Texas. So whether you go, then, to dry land farming or whether you have an importation program that is modified, what you do is something that, I think, will have to be handled at the federal level. It involves some inter-state cooperation. You can't look at the Ogallala Aquifer simply as a West Texas phenomenon. It's a North Texas phenomenon; it's a Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma phenomenon. I don't know if phenomenon is the right word, but the fact that it's there,, and so you may see some of your productive capability moving up, or

you may see some diversion down to the South Texas area. I'm not sure that the transfer of water along the coast that would otherwise go into the ocean is not something that ought to be looked at. It would be cheaper. You know, you catch the Sabine and Trinity runoff, store it, and then move it laterally down into some very productive land, let's say, from Kingsville to south. You might be able to pick up the same productive capability with water there that you do on the High Plains now.

The question is still, "What do you do with the High Plains?" I know there's already a fair move to look at different products like growing grapes, which would take less water but still might be economically feasible. I am not a water expert, as you point out, but I do have some fairly good ideas about what we're going to have to do, and I think the governor perceives this perhaps better than some people have in the past.

Smallwood: You mean our current governor?

Armstrong: Yes. Hopefully, we'll get somewhere, but I also think its going to be something we're going to have to deal with as a nation. You have to recognize that this is a national resource.

Smallwood: So you're saying that the Texas Water Plan, as it was originally envisioned, to pump water out of the Mississippi or out of the rivers of East Texas to the High Plains is a dead issue,

Armstrong: I think it's a dead issue unless it surfaces as a national issue or if somebody decides that that productive land out there is so valuable in terms of things like the balance of payments



or whatever we do, you're going to spend the money to do it. But then the other thing you've got to look at is energy costs. Dollar costs do not always determine it. If you have all the money in the world but you can't buy the gas or oil to move that upstream or uphill, then the money doesn't make any difference.

Smallwood: Another controversy that is sort of continuing in this area of water policies is the Trinity Barge Canal. Do you see that as the issue whose time has come and gone, or do you think that's still a live issue of Texas politics.

Armstrong: My most candid answer is that I don't know. It's as though that's kind of not in my district. It never touched public land because we didn't have much out there. I've just sort of watched it. I've been amazed to learn,, and I don't know whether a lot of people know this, but they used to run paddle wheelers up to within twenty or thirty miles of Dallas.

Smallwood: Correct. Only at very high water level, however.

Armstrong: I guess that may be true, but it could be done. It just seems to me like you're just putting a tremendous burden on that watershed, and I don't know whether it can stand it or not. I guess you might be able to do it with a series of engineering locks and dams and devices, but it would seem to me that that was one I'd put at maybe the 20 percent level in terms of what might happen. I don't think it would fail for environmental reasons as much as I think it would fail just because of the

economics,

Smallwood: Well, I'd like to sort of skip around a little bit now and get your opinion on a few other things. One of the issues that seems to be emerging as far as Texas's environmental situation is concerned today is the question of strip mining, particularly the strip mining of coal for energy. There is some feeling that the state doesn't have really adequate laws to protect the environment if we go into an era of massive strip mining. What's your position on this?

Armstrong: I think we wrote a reasonably good strip mining law, principally because of the work of Max Sherman. Again, it depends on how you evaluate it. We clearly have passed the point where you mine it and leave it alone. You don't have to go any farther than, I guess, Marshall--there may be some other areas--to see what can happen when you lay waste to it and just go away. You compare that to the Fairfield operation, where you literally dig seventy feet, remove the overburden, take out the seam, replace the overburden, shape it, plant the coastal bermuda. Some farmers or ranchers will tell you that it's better than when they started. You still don't, with that procedure, answer the problem of what you're doing to the vegetation that is more substantial than the grasses that are then grown--hardwoods, that sort of thing. But I think you can do it right, and basically we make them do it right. The same is true of the uranium strip mining south,

You know, things change so much that was a much more major

issue before we hit the present oil glut. Gasoline use is declining. I never thought I would see that, if you had asked me; and yet it is. We have made substantial progress on high-mileage automobiles and to some degree in emission controls. So I think a lot of the problems with the strip mining of lignite will be controlled by the ability of the other hydrocarbons.

I guess I'd say that it's not a perfect law, but it's a lot better law than we'd expect Texas to have, in my judgement. We do look at what it does to recharge areas; we do look at flooding. And we do have the capability of doing it right. The good thing about lignite is that it's usually overburdened by very easy-to-work, sand-type soil--by definition--in that area of East Texas. So I have felt that, you know, we are just going to have to see what the needs for lignite are before we know too much more about whether our strip mining laws are adequate.

Smallwood: Very good. Now jumping over to the area of forestry, what do you see as the future of the forests in the state?

Armstrong: Well, I know some very strange things about forestry. One thing that I will point out is that from the time I started until the time I ended my term as Land Commissioner, we saw our wood products money surpass our grazing and farming income, even though the wood products acreage was very small by comparison. Yet, I don't know the first thing about forestry! I rely very

heavily on the Texas Forest Service; I worked with A & M on it. We had relatively little acreage, but we did try to manage it properly. I do think we've lost a frightening amount of the Big Thicket-type hardwood bottom area, and I hope we'll be able to pass legislation that provides for a major area of that kind and type to be protected. At the same time, the companies who are working on revegetation forestry and that kind of thing seem to be doing better at it, and I would hope that we would farm trees in certain areas. That would be the way you'd do it rather than going to some of these other area, clear cut them, and then come back with the farms. Basically, I hope that we do something to make the so-called Big Thicket Wilderness Area happen before it is gone. I haven't talked to Pete Gunter about that in too long, about where we are that is. It's one area that I don't know much about, but it worries me.

Smallwood: I talked to Pete quite often, and he's still worried about it.

Armstrong: Well, obviously. That's the big problem, because the pressure is always there, whether it's Barton Springs, the forests, the water, or anything--from economic pressure to growth pressure. The people who fight it never finish--you hope that you pass laws that will always be there, but it's tough.

Smallwood: You're saying that you have to be eternally vigilant.

Armstrong: That's right. We've done a lot. This is something that I don't think that people realize. The passage of the Environmental Protection Act, the water laws, the air laws,

the Land and Water Conservation Development Fund, where you took off-shore revenues and bought parks--we've made tremendous amounts of progress from just the pure environmental point of view that we never dreamed that we would have, I think, when we started out in the 1960's. It is not a totally bleak picture. The fact that you can worry about what the Bureau of Land Management is doing on the wilderness bill...my environmentalist friends are just up in arms about the fact that they are taking these wilderness tracts and beginning to open them up for oil and gas development.

What I don't think they remember, which those of us who were working to get the act passed initially do remember, is that that was exactly what we intended. You would take every piece of land of 5,000 acres or above and make it wilderness until you could evaluate it and see whether it ought to be developed. It was entirely within the province of Interior, although we didn't dream it would be Jim Watt--you can say that--that you would develop some, but at least you'd know what you were doing when you did it, which has been my watch word. You ought to know the effect of what you do when you do it. There are going to be some things that are traded off, but at least as long as you know, that's all right. It's the "rape and ruin and run" type of thing, as C. Andrus used to say, that you wanted to avoid. I guess it goes back to the Sierra Club motto of not blind opposition to progress, but opposition to blind progress. It was contemplated

that certain of those areas ought to stay wilderness, and a certain number ought not to, but I think there was a misconception in the environmental community that once you designated them as wilderness, all of them would always be wilderness. That was never contemplated. It was to first inventory what you had, see what it was useful for, decide what you were going to do and what you weren't going to do.

The only problem is that when it's Watt that's doing all that deciding, it makes all of us uneasy. You know, at one time I was a candidate for Secretary of the Interior. I was asked to be the director of the Bureau of Land Management, and if Carter had been reelected, there's some chance I would have been doing exactly the same thing that Watt's doing, except I'd have done it more carefully and quietly and with input from the environments community. But it wasn't ever a question of that you wouldn't do it and leave it all wilderness. All of these things are interesting to watch if you've seen the whole thing evolve.

Smallwood: That brings up an interesting question, and that was your decision to support Jimmy Carter rather than Senator Bentsen in 1976. Would you like to comment on that? You were one of the earlier people in this state, were you not, to support Carter?

Armstrong: Well, I was the only one (chuckle). Part of that was...you know, so many of these things happened not by virtue of a lot of long thought and that sort of thing, but I happened to have been at

a Southern Growth Policy Board meeting in Charleston, South Carolina. The person with whom I worked closely was Jimmy Carter's natural resource director. He asked me to stop by Atlanta on my way home and talk to Jody Powell and Hamilton Jourdan about his candidacy and about helping him. I had not committed to Bentsen. Although I liked Lloyd, I felt that his candidacy at that time was inopportune, I guess, in light of maybe it was just too close to Lyndon Johnson's presidency and that most of the people who were for Bentsen were just the Johnson people who wanted to do it again. They were paying for the piano player to "Play it again, Lloyd," It just wasn't going to happen. I liked what Jimmy Carter said. I believed, although it never happened, that he was going to try to make America as good as its people were. I believed that he was going to be strong in the environmental area, which he was. I believed that we needed somebody who was real.

There was a flaw in him that I didn't perceive, but I guess nobody else did, either--that he would get so wrapped up in detail that he wouldn't make things happen, or maybe he just had bad luck with the Iranian situation or with the economy, you know, a lot of those things. I always felt like he was a very decent man and maybe one of the brightest men I've ever known. I've been privileged to sort of know Kennedy, to know Johnson quite well, and to know Carter; and I felt like that of the three, he certainly was not lacking in terms of intelligence and that

sort of thing. He couldn't transmit this for some reason.

You know, he just wasn't the right guy at the right time.

Smallwood: That completes my formal questions. Do you have anything you would like to add to this interview?

Armstrong: Oh, not really. I'll probably think of something later.