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Representative Fred Agnich
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Interviewer: Dr. J.B. Smallwood
Dr. Ronald E. Marcello
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Oral History Collection

Fred Agnich

Interviewers: Dr. J.B. Smallwood and Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

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Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello and J.B. Smallwood interviewing Representative Fred Agnich for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place in Dallas, Texas, on November 14, 1977. We're interviewing Mr. Agnich in order to obtain his views concerning the development of water resources in Texas.

Dr. Smallwood: I guess what I'd like to start off with . . . you know, in reading the Dallas Morning News and the Times-Herald, the press has tended to describe you as an environmentalist. I wanted to know if you could give me a general idea of your philosophy of environmentalism.

Mr. Agnich: Yes, I think I could do it rather shortly. I'm an environmentalist that believes that all problems concerning the environment or ecology, if I can use that term, are economic ones and that you should always approach them from an economic point of view. If you do, from my experience, you generally arrive at that workable middle ground. In my position, the environmental area

has sort of been that of a go-between between the two vastly opposing sides in an attempt to find some common ground that makes sense. Well, it's simply this. If you are trying to embark on a program of, say, building industrial plants of any kind anywhere, then down the road the cost to you in the relocation and everything would be so severe that you couldn't stand it. In, on the other hand, you were to say, "We're not going to build any new plants," as some people advocate, then the economic consequences would also be disastrous. That's why I say that I think the problems are always economic ones in the final analysis.

Smallwood: Could you give me . . . you use the words "plant location"
. . .

Agnich: . . . industrial plants, yes.

Smallwood: Industrial plants. Could you give me another example that you've worked with, where you see the environment question entering in?

Agnich: Well, I think we've had some here in Dallas particularly with some of creeks that run through town, such as Bachman Creek.

Smallwood: And you're particularly interested in it?

Agnich: Yes. And I think that, you know, the question there is of preventing flooding, and you have balance off the damage that might be done by flooding against the damage you might

do to the environment. I don't think Bachman Creek was done right. I think that's got too much concrete.

Smallwood: Would you mind elaborating on that? Why do you think it has too much concrete?

Agnich: Well, I think that experience has shown that when you put in a lot of concrete, and particularly when you straighten out the channels and do that, you're not really accomplishing anything, because your flood waters go through so much more rapidly and you tend to have trouble somewhere down the road. I'm concerned about that, and, also, quite frankly, I don't think it looks very good.

Smallwood: Well, this brings up the question of flood plain management as opposed to the idea of structural flood control. Do you have any ideas on that?

Agnich: Yes. I think you would have to, of course, look at every project separately, because they're all different. But generally speaking, I think the correct approach is to restrict development of flood plain areas rather than attempt to control the waters by a series of massive dams. Also, my position is generally, in this area, contrary to the Corps of Engineers. I don't believe in canalization or drainage ditches, for instance. I don't believe in great big reservoirs. I think that if you're going to do good flood control work, you need to have a whole series of

smaller ones rather than a tremendously big body of water, which is extremely barren and non-productive when it comes to the environment. Once you get away from the shore a little bit, why, it's, you know, mostly dead water so far as the life chain is concerned. That's generally my general approach.

Smallwood: It's interesting. One of the arguments against flood plain management is that it's so expensive. Particularly those who favor structural flood control say it costs so much money to buy up these flood plains. Are you suggesting that we do this through zoning and not purchase primarily?

Agnich: Zoning. Yes, obviously, if you're going to build a big reservoir or something, you've got to buy the land, because you're taking away from somebody. I would think that zoning would be the correct procedure, and I don't think you ought to . . . I think you ought to zone against building in those areas. Now I recognize that this causes problems. Take Farmers Branch, for instance. Man, they're going to fight you all the way down the line (chuckle), because so much of their tax money is to come from the building of that industrial section along the . . . damn, I can't remember what creek it is there.

Smallwood: Elm Fork.

Agnich: All right, Elm Fork. Now understand, I sympathize with them,

but I think they do more damage in the long-run than the short-run.

Smallwood: In other words, getting back to your economic consequences here, yes, this is a perfect example in the sense that if that's made into park area, that will exclude the industrial development. Yet, from the point of view of environmentalism, it's the perfect solution. This brings up a question: how do you feel about the Tennessee Colony project, then? You say you are opposed to large dams.

Agnich: I think that the only justification you can make for that project would be if you could show that that water supply is desperately needed for feeding those municipalities with water.

Smallwood: In other words, for water supply but not necessarily for flood control.

Agnich: Yes. No, I don't think that's . . . I'm not, you know, confident in the Tennessee Colony thing, because I haven't looked at it this closely, but generally speaking, I have serious doubts that that's a viable way to control flooding--I really do.

Smallwood: Of course, your environmentalists argue that for water supply, the Richland-Tehuacana arms would be much purer and that the midstream thing would be so polluted that it wouldn't be good.

Agnich: That's right. Well, you could use it, but you'd have some rather severe costs in purifying the water. Also, there's

one other point. There is a great deal of merit to flooding. You get an awful lot of benefits out of flooding. The classic example in the world is the Aswan Dam and what they're doing to the economy of Egypt, you know. That was a horrible blunder! They're not going to be able to manufacture enough fertilizer to keep that place going without that flooding.

Smallwood: And nature had been providing it for 2,000 years (chuckle).

Agnich: That's right . . . and for free, yes.

Smallwood: But it's hard to tell the people who want to develop the lower Trinity that, you know.

Agnich: Well, the Trinity Canal . . . I never was real active publicly against it. I probably was instrumental in getting Alan Steelman. He wanted an issue, and I said, "Well, here is one for you," you know. It's a classic example; I think it's a boondoggle. Nobody's ever been able to show me the economic justification, and here I'm even discounting any environmental damage--not counting it. I'm simply looking at it from an economic point of view. There is no way, in my estimation, it can ever pay off. No one has ever shown me figures that convince me that it would.

Smallwood: Do you know Henry Fulcher?

Agnich: I know Henry. Not well, but, yes, I know him.

Smallwood: Were you ever connected with that COST group in anyway, either

directly or indirectly?

Agnich: No.

Smallwood: I just wondered if you had . . . I know Steelman did.

Agnich: Yes, Alan had, but I had not. I had told some of the people who were most actively pushing the Trinity Canal concept and who wanted me to come out and endorse it, I said, "Well, you know, I don't think I can, but you'd go a long way if you could show me an economic justification." I asked for it six times. I never have received it, so I just don't believe it's there.

Smallwood: Well, as I say, Fulcher, I think, is one of the larger lumbermen here, and he has argued that there's no way it would benefit him. Of course, that would be the shipment of bulk goods primarily.

Marcello: If we can back up here a minute, I'm very much interested in the political aspects of the Trinity River development. You mentioned that Alan Steelman was, in effect, a candidate looking for an issue.

Agnich: Well, all candidates look for issues. I'm not saying that's the only thing. I don't know how many candidates come by to see me and say they're going to run in a certain district and they want my advice. Usually, they want me to tell them that I think they're making a wise decision, and I rarely do that. But at any rate, Alan did come to me and asked me

about . . . we went over issues. In the course of the conversation, I suggested to Alan, "Here's one that I think in your district is going to have a lot of appeal." I said, "It's going to have a lot of appeal with Republicans, in particular, simply because they don't like boondoggles when they have them."

Smallwood: Could you elaborate on why you felt that would be such an appealing issue in his district . . . sort of in terms of the district he represents?

Agnich: Yes. Because his district was a district that you would call, I suppose, more a middle class district. There were some of the Park Cities area in it, but it was White Rock-- that area over there--that is generally the, oh, middle class group of people. It had in it a large segment of Republican voters, and it had a large segment of Democrats who, I felt, would be the kind that would respond to this particular kind of an issue . . . economic one.

Smallwood: Do you think they responded primarily on the basis of the taxation thing or the quality of life idea?

Agnich: I think probably evenly so at the time. Because at the time, the environmental thing was exploding and frankly went too far. But it was a cause; most of the people, I think, that were making most of the noises about it didn't really know what they were talking about. But at any rate, it was a

popular thing. But I think that the overriding issue, probably even then, was taxation. You remember the election was held up and down the river, and beyond any question it was taxes that swung that election.

Smallwood: I think it's interesting that in this recent bond election those same districts seem to have gone for the bonds. So obviously, when these people are convinced that it'd be useful to them, that taxes isn't the controlling factor.

Agnich: Well, I think that's different, though, because part of the argument in the recent bond election was that if the bonds were not approved that the tax consequences would be immediate and very severe. Because it has to build that jail no matter what, and that would have then, of course, meant by itself a very appreciable and dramatic increase in taxes.

I don't happen to agree with that philosophy. My experience in government has been that the greater the indebtedness the higher the taxes--always. People try to compare it to buying a home; instead of putting out a bunch of money at one time, you can spread it out over twenty, thirty, forty years and not have that dramatic impact. Well, the point is, usually you'll buy only one home, you know, and you don't come back every two or three years and buy another home. When you start floating bond issues, why, it gets to be a habit.

I once ran a survey of all the states in the Union;

there was a dramatic comparison. The states that had high indebtedness had the highest taxes; the states with the lowest indebtedness had the lowest taxes. There wasn't any question about it. So (chuckle) I don't think the people are very wise in that thing, but I'd rather take my licking now and get it done with. On the other hand, I suppose, though, that's probably fallacious, because, you know, they'd raise the taxes, you know, whether they needed the money or not. I don't think they'd reduce them. They'd find something else to spend it on (chuckle).

Smallwood: So in terms of the socioeconomic characteristics of your district . . .

Agnich: Well, not mine . . . Alan's. My district's different.

Smallwood: How about your district?

Agnich: Oh, my district is probably, I suppose, one of the most affluent districts in the entire United States. I don't know what the median income is, but it is high. The average home in my district, including the parts that are middle class, probably sell for nowadays \$200,000 or more. Now that's a really affluent district, entirely different type of district.

Smallwood: Well, since you are known sort of as favoring environmental things, do you get much response from your constituents on this question?

Agnich: Yes, and most of it I've read is favorable. The reason is that I always approach it from an economic point of view. They understand economics. And I'm not Ned Fritz. Ned and I are good friends, but, you know, I don't go around (chuckle) just raising hell about everything.

Smallwood: Is he in your district?

Agnich: Oh, yes, Ned's in my district. As a matter of fact, he always campaigns for me. I'm the only Republican he ever did that for, I think (chuckle).

Smallwood: (Chuckle) Do you think the constituents respond, as opposed to the environmentalist position--what I call the quality of life position--particularly on this Trinity Canal project, that they don't want the atmosphere and environment they live in "messed up," so to speak?

Agnich: Well, I don't think it's so much that. I think it's the economic picture that affects them more than anything else, again. That district . . . the environment's pretty nice out there. They're pretty good-sized lots out there; most of them are at least a half-acre, an acre. You know, they don't feel, really, the impact of environmental damage as much. They're away from downtown, so you don't get smog as bad.

Smallwood: Do you think the fact that the canal might have brought heavy industry that could have affected the whole area had any impact in that 1973 bond election?

Agnich: Now which is that?

Smallwood: That was the one where they turned down, basically, the Trinity Canal proposal.

Agnich: All right, the one I spoke of earlier. I couldn't remember what year it is; years are meaningless to me. Well, I'm sure that affected some people, but again I think it probably was taxation.

Smallwood: It couldn't be justified economically.

Agnich: That's right. I don't think they ever made a case on the economic side of it, I really don't.

Marcello: They always like to compare it with the development of the Arkansas River, do they not?

Agnich: Yes, the one up through Oklahoma? Well, one of the things that happened at the time, though, I remember, which was funny in a way, was that they pointed to the tonnage being sent up that thing as greater than they predicted, even though it wasn't completed. Well, we checked in on it, and most of that tonnage was materials going up there to build the damn thing. I mean, this was . . . (chuckle).

Smallwood: One of the things I read most recently is that a fourth of the tonnage is maintenance vessels, which they wouldn't have needed if they hadn't built it (laughter).

Agnich: That's right (laughter) . . . if they hadn't built it.

Smallwood: Let's get back to Ned. I did have a question here, in fact,

about Ned. You say that you are friends and that he does campaign for you.

Agnich: Oh, yes. We've worked together on an awful lot of projects.

Smallwood: What do you see as the things you have in common here?

Agnich: Well, I'm a geologist by profession, and I guess geologists were really the first environmentalists in a sense. They probably have a better understanding of ecology than almost any other single group. I became concerned, in fact, years before all this stuff started. My concern at the time--and still is my overriding concern--is the population problem. I just think this planet already has far too many people--already. We'd be better off with a fourth of what we have. As population increases, you inevitably are going to run into some very serious problems, and you would inevitably come into a conflict, whether it would be a conflict between what goes in the voters' stomach on one side and wildlife on the other side. Wildlife is going to lose, because anytime you put that kind of confrontation in the ballot box, why, the voter is going to vote for what's in his stomach and his pocketbook and to hell with the wildlife. So in that sense, I had a lot in common with Ned.

Ned is a very . . . oh, outspoken individual. He doesn't attempt to smoothe any feathers. I love to tell a story about him. I'm the author of, and succeeded in passing, the Texas

Endangered Species Act, which is model legislation actually-- in one of the states where you would not think it could pass. Ned worked with me on that. The Department of Interior did most of the drafting, but he worked very closely. I remember it came down to the week of the committee hearing and everything, and he said, "What can I do to help you?" I said, "Stay away from the capitol for a week (chuckle)." I said, "That's the best help." He said, "All right," and started laughing. But he and I have worked together on a number of projects. Now we disagree on a lot of things.

Smallwood: Where would you say your main point of disagreement comes?

Agnich: Well, I think that Ned does not look at economic consequences enough. He wanted me to help get an appropriation of \$200,000,000 for buying, you know, areas of scientific interest, and I said, "No, Ned, my parsimony gets the better of my ecology (chuckle). I couldn't go with you." It was way too much money, totally unreasonable, and I wouldn't vote for it myself. There have been a number of other cases where we simply don't agree, but it has always been a friendly disagreement. Ned and I have never gotten into any violent arguments or anything else. As far as I'm concerned, he's been very reasonable and easy to work with. I recognize that a lot of people wouldn't agree with that--knowing Ned--but that's the truth.

Smallwood: Now the Corps of Engineers probably wouldn't agree with that

(chuckle).

Agnich: No, I don't think they would (chuckle). I agree.

Smallwood: Well, that's very good. We've talked about your opposition to most of these things. I'd kind of like to get an idea--since you seem to be opposed to the canal--in terms of your economic framework, of what would you envision for the Trinity. Or would you envision anything in terms of planning or development for the Trinity?

Agnich: Well, I really wouldn't for most of it. I think that you've got all sorts of reservoirs up and down the Trinity at the present time. I don't know how many--I've forgotten--but you've got a whole series of large reservoirs. I'm hard-pressed to really think of anywhere that we need anymore. The only thing I'd ever do, if anything at all, would be the continuation of the old program--I don't even know if it's in effect--of building the smaller dams in all the little creeks and everything.

Smallwood: Headwater control.

Agnich: Yes. I think you'd do a much better job that way, because . . .

Smallwood: You would recommend flood plain management as the primary means of controlling the flood problem.

Agnich: Right. I think we get . . . oh, we get a little panicky when we hear the word "flood," you know, and we fail to realize that

floods are very much a part of nature; that they do some good; and that you may well do more damage by totally preventing flooding than you do by letting some of it occur. My great concern, really, with the Trinity or any of our rivers is with the estuaries and the effect that you have from those estuaries, which are, after all, the source of all life on this planet. That's the critical area; the rest of it you, you know, could forget. Well, the reason you can't forget the rest of it is because it all affects the estuaries. You start cutting down dramatically on the fresh water that's coming down and flooding, and you've got very serious problems--no question about it.

Smallwood: It's interesting you should make that point. I've been convinced myself that that's the critical area.

Agnich: It is. To any geologist, you know, it's obvious.

Smallwood: That area that's half-water and half-land.

Agnich: That's right. The most fertile part of our planet.

Smallwood: So you would recommend, as I understand it, minimal development. Now, of course, one of the arguments we get is that as Fort Worth and Dallas grow and you get more non-point runoff and more concrete up here, this increases the severity of floods down river.

Agnich: Yes.

Smallwood: Do you see anything that could be done to compensate for that,

or do we just simply accept that?

Agnich: Well, you know, you could do something. The obvious thing to do would be not to do that much building in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. I recognize that that would be unpopular around here (chuckle). But, you know, I don't think that all growth is good, you know. If it was, cancer would be the greatest boon that mankind ever had. Somewhere or someplace you have to stop and think seriously about it. Many people around the country are beginning to feel that very thing. I personally feel that Dallas was a better place to live in when I first moved here in 1937 when I first started than it is today, despite the fact that, you know, I've prospered materially very well in Dallas and it's been a great city to me. But I wonder whether that quality of life is any better now. I doubt it.

Smallwood: You're anticipating my questions here (chuckle). But are you suggesting that the Dallas-Fort Worth area might have a conscious program of limiting growth?

Agnich: Well, you know, that's never going to work. (Chuckle) I'm just saying that's . . . really, if you're concerned about environmental damage, you've got to go a lot farther back than that. You've got to control or somehow limit the numbers of people in the whole planet. I mean, it's not a specific problem of Dallas. I think that's a hopeless fight. I think

we've lost it, and we're going to have it.

Smallwood: In other words, we can't . . .

Agnich: I don't think it would do us any good particularly just to limit the growth in Dallas unless this were a part of a . . . there's too many people. You know, look at Dallas, We're beginning to get the first of the inner-core problems, and we're going to have them just like any other big city. We're fortunate; we've got perhaps twenty-five years and are better off than most of the big cities, but it's coming. I think it's inevitable.

Smallwood: Well, if this growth continues, then, what would you suggest we do about providing water? See, we're already taking it out of the Sabine, and we've already gone outside the watersheds.

Agnich: But, you see, I think, you know, what's going to happen is that you're going to run out of water. In the future I can foresee the time where it's not going to be energy, maybe, that's going to be the dominant force in life (chuckle); it's going to be the water supply. You know, I can see where it's going to be accepted as a natural course of events that you don't wash your car if you have one and you take a bath on Saturday night but you don't take a bath some other time. I think down the road, if our population continues to increase, that's the kind of a thing we're going to face. I think it's

inevitable.

To get off-base here and talk about the political system we may have in the future, I'm utterly convinced that if the world population continues to grow, you know, at even a lesser rate than we now have, that you're eventually going to have one or a series of totally autocratic governments, because that's the one way you can keep the greatest possible number of people alive. Now they may not live very well, but you can keep them alive by totally regimenting what they can do. I think we spend too much time worrying about the quantity of people and not enough about the quality. The two are opposed; you can't have both.

Smallwood: Yes, but don't we get into sort of a dilemma here where we talk about a regimented life if we let this just sort of take its natural course. Yet, to do anything about it, don't we have to have planning, which to some extent creates control?

Agnich: Well, yes, always. The problem is that it doesn't matter what you do because how do you stabilize the population? Well, if you're going to do it anywhere short of subsistence level, then you have to do it by controls. See, you get controls either way.

Smallwood: One way would be the economic advantage for small families. Of course, but that's incentive, I guess--economic incentive.

Agnich: Yes, that's been talked about, but the trouble with the human

race is that at the appropriate moment the participants feel as though they can support the whole damn world (chuckle). I'm not entirely facetious either with that remark, you know, and I'm not sure . . . I don't know if there is an answer. I'm not very optimistic.

To go on a little further, now we're going to get in very serious problems, of course, with floods. Look at Houston. If we were to get another hurricane like the last one that went through--I forget the name of it--the loss of life and property would be just intolerable! The last estimate I saw--and it was the engineering part--was that something like 500,000 people would have to be evacuated--if you could evacuate them. Because you have so much of that land covered by concrete, and in addition you have subsidence. I think that one of the things that will happen, anyway, economics being what it is, that we're going to be building up rather than out.

Smallwood: You think we'll have to build up.

Agnich: Yes.

Smallwood: Why is that?

Agnich: Well, it's cheaper for one thing. Secondly, as the number of people increase, what we've been doing is that our suburbs have been occupying what was once by-and-large prime agricultural land. So you have more and more people to feed and less and less land on which to grow the foodstuffs.

Smallwood: Of course, this is one objection to large reservoirs like Tennessee Colony, also.

Agnich: That's right.

Smallwood: You really cover up your prime agricultural land.

Agnich: Prime agricultural lands, you cover them up. You know, there's a limit to productivity in agriculture, and we're beginning to just, you know, get into the fringes of it. You know, how much fertilizer should you use? I don't think you can win the pesticide fight, because nature's going to clobber you with that when all you're doing is developing mutants.

Smallwood: Stronger bugs.

Agnich: Well, sure, because you kill off all except that kind; they don't have any competition, so they explode. As fast as you develop a new pesticide, why, you can get a new strain of bug.

Smallwood: I want to go back to your statements about quality of life, because one of the arguments I run into in doing research here is that those who have "made it"--you know, have acquired their wealth and this sort of thing--by exploiting the environment are now trying to essentially deprive others of the opportunity to exploit the environment and make their stake. How do you respond to that argument?

Agnich: I don't know.

Smallwood: The labor unions particularly would have presented this argument to support projects like the Trinity Canal program, and your growth advocates.

Agnich: Well, there may be some justification in that. Certainly, as you acquire material goods, you tend to become more conservative; I don't think there's any question about that. You tend to be more concerned about protecting what you have rather than acquiring more. Now some people just want to keep acquiring, but I think the average person, once they've achieved a fairly comfortable existence, are more concerned about protecting it, really, than adding to it.

Smallwood: In my study of the conservation program, this has been a historic problem in the sense that everytime one group wants to conserve, then obviously they are hurting the opportunity of groups that come after them . . . or it seems that way.

Agnich: Well, no, you have to choose your words better than that. You may not be hurting them; you may be removing some of the opportunities for material things, but that may not really be hurting them, you know. Be careful about that.

Smallwood: They see it as being hurting . . .

Agnich: Well, yes, because that's the way the average person and the voter reacts, sure.

Smallwood: Are you familiar with this term "Green Bigot" that's being used now?

Agnich: No, I've never heard it, I don't believe.

Smallwood: Well, it's a term that has come into popular use in the last year or so. It's used to refer to the middle and upper middle class groups that tend to support environmental and quality of life things that might retard this opportunity we're talking about. I just wondered if you'd run across that term.

Agnich: No, I haven't. I think that the position of the labor unions is one that is not tenable in the first place. Because if anyone has contributed to making it difficult for someone to achieve material gains, it's the labor unions--without any question about it. Look at their whole records of the things they want to do, and theirs is all socialistic. Well, that's the opposite of the private enterprise system where you can make your gains. Certainly, an awful large part of the blame for inflation these days comes from labor unions. There's not any question about it. You can't keep demanding more and more and more pay without a corresponding increase in productivity without having inflation. And the federal government is the other. I don't think the unions have a very strong point there, I really don't.

Smallwood: It's not just the unions, but it's also the growth advocates who argue this to some extent.

Agnich: Yes. Among the biggest ones that argue that is the young developer. There's the fellow that . . . he hasn't made it

yet, see (chuckle).

Smallwood: (Chuckle) That's exactly what I'm talking about.

Agnich: That's right. That's the one.

Smallwood: I'd like to ask you some fairly specific questions that you may have some information on or may not.

Agnich: All right.

Smallwood: First of all, did you know Senator Parkhouse?

Agnich: George? I knew him. Let me tell you a little story about George.

Smallwood: Okay (chuckle).

Agnich: One time . . . I wasn't elected to public office at that time; I think I was Dallas County Republican Chairman. I had taken off after George unmercifully in the press about something--I don't remember what it was--and it got some coverage. About a month later, I went to the annual gridiron show. My wife was off on a trip around the world or something, and I went by myself. As I opened the door, I happened to look back and here I could see the cane. I recognized it was George, so I waited there, and I held the door open for him. He started to walk through, and all the sudden he recognized me and said, "You son of a bitch!" and went on through (laughter). It was typical Parkhouse, you know (laughter). I loved the old boy.

Smallwood: Well, what seemed to be his interest in water resource develop-

ment? He was, you know, a big advocate of the Texas water plan and the Trinity Canal project.

Agnich: I don't really know what motivated George on that. The Texas water plan, in my estimation, has been primarily a political question more than anything else. Generally, in the state, a lot of the old line or so-called "Establishment Democrats" were pushing the Texas water plan for one reason or another--I'm not sure what--and I suspect George was part of that. But I don't know for sure.

Smallwood: Well, let me see how I could phrase this. Let's say other legislators who might share your economic philosophy and this sort of thing . . . do you know of any that would fall in this category who have either opposed or supported, say, the Texas water plan or the Trinity project . . . or people that might have associated themselves with you essentially on these questions?

Agnich: Well, yes, I think that most of the Republicans would oppose the Texas water plan and the Trinity Canal. That would be across the state--I'm talking now of office-holders--with the exception of any that lived in the Panhandle area or the Lubbock area or Amarillo and in through there simply because it would be political suicide in that area to oppose such a plan.

Smallwood: But I was wondering if any stand out as you and Steelman have.

Agnich: I wouldn't think . . . I don't even know off-hand, you know. I haven't stopped to think of it that much. My concern about the Texas water plan--I talked about that--is that, you know, I think it's a lost cause. The trouble goes back a long time, because in that that part of the state should never have had the sod broken in the first place. Well, once it started and they kept using water and it became a very prolific area producing foodstuffs . . . and, of course, they overdid it. There's no way you can take that much ground water out with the catchment basin that that area has.

Well, some people have been there for several generations now, and I can sympathize with them. They can see it all going down the drain, and, you know, their whole lives and their people before them all lived all tied up in there. Every year they faced deeper wells, bigger pumps, more problems. Beyond any question, the future of Amarillo is very dim indeed; I don't know how you'd ever save it. I can understand why they would look at any straw as an attempt to get bailed out, but I just don't think there's any way ever to economically come out. The rest of the state would be paying through the nose for the benefit of that one area. I think it's hopeless anyway; and secondly, nobody is going to tell me that you can, for instance, go to the people of Arkansas and, short of an invading army, get them to let you have that water (chuckle).

You know, I just think it's an academic question, anyway.

Smallwood: Right. Well, and, of course, the impact on the estuaries that you were talking about would cut almost every one of those rivers.

Agnich: Oh, yes, it would be horrible.

Smallwood: You would pretty much agree, then, with the conclusion that the Panhandle would pretty much have to revert to dry farming and ranching for an economic base.

Agnich: Yes. Eventually, of course, it's going to cause serious economic problems. You know, I've got a lot of friends out there and I feel for them, but I cannot conceive of any answer to the problem.

Smallwood: Well, now you've been known as sort of an advocate of land use planning. How do you see that affecting water resource development in the state?

Agnich: Well, I think I have to really clarify my position. I am horror struck when I think of anybody telling me what I can do with my land. I'm a Texan first, you know. I've got a ranch in East Texas, and I get out on my porch, and as far as I can see in any direction, I own it. Anybody who climbs one of those fences without my permission is going to get a rather abrupt (chuckle) and . . . you know, not a very favorable reception. This is typically Texan. But my concern has been that, you know, sooner or later we're going to have

land use and we're going to have controls. What I was really trying to do was to get the state in shape so that it could develop a plan on rather short order, or have a plan, so that we could implement it rather than the federal government; and we could get it as locally controlled as possible and thereby do hopefully the least amount of damage to the Texas ethic, if you want to call it that, or the Texas way of life.

Smallwood: That old frontier individualism.

Agnich: That's right. I'm a pretty rugged individualist myself, you know; I don't like people telling me things. I'd have made a great baron during the medieval period; I really would have. I really would; I'm really cut out for that. That's the reason I did that. In the plan that I advocated, it was not a land use plan at all. It was simply a total inventory of all the lands of Texas, utilizing all the information we have. We have a good deal using infrared photography from a satellite that you can do rather simply, and then simply say, "Here are the lands of Texas." Then I would have approached it by asking, "Now what would do the most economic good for the people of Texas?" That's the way I'd approach that, just simply saying, "Now we put our plants here; we raise food-stuffs here; we live here." Then over the next forty or fifty years, we'd be so many billions of dollars ahead. You know,

I really detest land use and land management things from the point of view of someone going to tell me what to do, and I think most Republicans feel that way, too.

Smallwood: But wouldn't we have to have some controls?

Agnich: You've got to have it, sure. As a matter of fact, the most vociferous opponents were by and large the rural areas who would have been affected the least. As a matter of fact, they would have been better off. I succeeded in getting the Texas Sheep and Goat Raisers Association to say, "Okay, your plan's all right," which was a remarkable achievement, but there were a lot of other things behind that. They would have, you know, by-and-large been far better off, because you would have solved once and for all the question of taxation of agricultural lands.

Smallwood: So do you think people will respond to these economic arguments if they are presented in an acceptable form and frequently enough?

Agnich: Yes, I think you could build a good, solid case. I think you could show the consequences; you could show the advantages, I think, which would be the best way to do. There is, however, one trouble with that, and it's the same sort of thing that bothers, oh, any governmental entity. I guess the best way to describe it is using something Lowell Thomas, I think, once said--that it's very difficult to interest a starving

farmer in a ten-year crop rotation program, you know (chuckle). They'll starve to death, although you could show beyond any doubt that this is the way he should go.

And when I look at our country--we're not much different than other people--I always see this reluctance to trade some of the things we have today for a better future. There's not any question, you know. Look at Social Security. We're living off our kids. We don't want to face up to the fact that that's not the way to do it, because we don't want our benefits reduced, irrespective of what trouble it causes in the future. It's like paying taxes; the thing to do is delay paying taxes as long as you can (chuckle), although down the road you may get hit an awful lick.

So, you know, I'm very dubious about the whole thing. I just don't know that the human race is basically intelligent enough or well-read enough to really grasp the long-range program. I just don't believe that you can sell that. At least I haven't seen anybody sell it.

Smallwood: Well, it would seem to me that if you could sell it at all, you could sell it on the economic impact.

Agnich: Yes. But if there is a way to sell it, then that would be it, yes. You'd simply say, "Look, you'll all be better off." And you would be better off. I think you would have to couple it with the plans and everything so . . . as much

as possible, being developed as local a level as you can with the understanding that, you know, a river basin is a river basin and you can't necessarily go by political boundaries. But to the extent that you could have local control, that's what you should do. Because, you know, any citizen feels better if he can complain to somebody personally about something. You know, even if it doesn't do him any good, he feels better about it; he came in and he told somebody about that. Whereas if you have Washington in control, who the hell's he going to tell about it?

Smallwood: I just have a couple more very specific questions. The first one is sort of to help me with my research (chuckle), if possible. Did the Legislature ever take a recorded vote, that you know of, on either the Texas water plan or the Trinity Canal project?

Agnich: None on the Trinity Canal that I know of. No, I don't think they did. There were, if I recall, some votes that . . . if I remember now, I seem to recall some votes that were not ostensibly on the Trinity Canal but would have had a rather appreciable effect. I'm trying to remember, but I've forgotten now. Sorry. On the Texas water plan, I think there were some votes at least to the extent of letting the voters vote on it, so that much have come out of the Legislature. It was before my time, though; I was not there.

Smallwood: I'm looking for a division in terms of party alignment here.

Agnich: Not that I know of. I don't know of any specific case that you could say where there was.

Smallwood: The other one is a question about yourself, and that is what committees are you on that would affect natural resource planning, if any?

Agnich: None now. I'm on the Appropriations Committee, and that is . . .

Smallwood: That affects everything.

Agnich: And so it obviously affects everything. But the rules of the House--and this is new in this current term--say that if you serve on the Appropriations Committee, you may not serve on any other committee. Well, some problems are involved with that, so the speaker recently came up with a beautiful way of getting around that without admitting that that wasn't the right system. So now the members of the Appropriations Committee are each assigned to one other committee but as an ex officio voting member, so I am now back as an ex officio voting member of the Environmental Affairs Committee (chuckle). So you got it both ways; you can serve at the same time.

Smallwood: So you are an ex officio member of the Environmental Affairs Committee?

Agnich: Yes, but that's just brand new within the last two or three

weeks, and I have not participated. But even during this term, though, I worked very closely with that committee, because the chairman and I worked together very well for a long time.

Smallwood: Who is that, may I ask?

Agnich: Bill Sullivant from Gainesville. On most of those environmental areas where there were problems or something, he or some other member of the committee would come to me and sit and talk about the thing. So though I was not a member, I at least had some considerable input.

Smallwood: What committees have you been on that might affect environmental issues?

Agnich: Well, Environmental Affairs, and I was chairman of the Wildlife Preservation Subcommittee. Actually, most of my work in that area has been with wildlife of various kinds. You know, I'm not one of these people that think you ought to try to keep every species alive on this planet, because I'm a geologist and there have been billions of species that have disappeared. I think the money spent on the whooping crane is just totally stupid; there's no way you can win that fight. You ought to spend your money on species that are not yet endangered but are on the verge of becoming. You have a chance. For one that is really endangered, you know, there's not much hope. The alligator's a good example. We

got to that before they were really endangered, and, of course, you've got too many of them now.

Smallwood: You've got too many of them now (chuckle). Ron, that pretty much takes care of my questions, so I'll pass it on to you.

Marcello: Well, I just had one last question that I wanted to ask for myself. At the time the Trinity River issue became rather important, you were the Republican National Committeeman. Now how does it affect you as committeeman, so far as taking sides and things of this nature--a public stand, shall we say?

Agnich: Well, I never did really take much of a public stand on the issue; I really didn't. Most of my public stand was an utter refusal to support it, you know. But I never did really . . . I didn't get out and make speeches against it, if that's what you mean. Part of the reason, frankly, was because I was national committeeman. In that position, you know, you've got an obligation to your party and everything not to get embroiled in what is a totally controversial issue which is not clearly a partisan matter--and that wasn't.

Marcello: For example, you have Alan Steelman on one side and, I assume, Representative Jim Collins on the other side on this issue.

Agnich: Yes. Both of them good friends of mine.

Smallwood: The Dallas Morning News quoted you as saying that was the main reason you wouldn't take a stand. Was that essentially

accurate? I believe they quoted you as saying that you had two congressmen--one on one side and one on the other.

Agnich: I don't remember, but it was one of the reasons, yes. It wouldn't only be those two, though. There would be all sorts of people around the state. I was national committeeman in the whole state. Up in the Panhandle you've got lots of Republicans up there, and they tend to favor an issue like the Trinity Canal or the Texas water plan.

Smallwood: This brings up one other question. Senator Bentson was asked--all the representatives were--and he responded that this was a very touchy, touchy issue, very sticky, and I gather it was because it did cut across so many traditional political lines.

Agnich: Well, some of my friends were for it, some against it; and I agree with my friends, you know (chuckle).

Smallwood: It does place the representative in a rather awkward situation since it doesn't fall clearly.

Agnich: It doesn't fall clearly nor . . . you know, it cuts across economic lines to a certain extent.

Marcello: I've no further questions.

Smallwood: We really appreciate your taking your time to talk with us.

Marcello: We certainly do appreciate your candid comments, and, as usual, you've been most helpful to us.

Agnich: Well, thank you.