

NORTH TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
NUMBER 34

Interview with
Henry Patton
May 28, 1969

Place of Interview: Aransas Pass, Texas

Interviewer: Dr. A. Ray Stephens

Terms of Use: _____

Approved: _____

Date: _____

AS
Henry Patton
5/28/69

Oral History Collection

Henry Patton

Interviewer: Dr. A. Ray Stephens

Place of Interview: Aransas Pass, Texas

Date: May 28, 1969

Dr. Stephens: This is an interview with Mr. Henry Patton in the First State Bank of Aransas Pass, Texas, May 28, 1969.

Mr. Patton: My experience and develop . . . and work here . . . I came to this town in July of 1930. And I came down here in, not a part, but I was going to be employed with the Gail Borden Munsel Interest when they had started a development over at Port Aransas, you see.

Mrs. Sparks: Oh, well, tell us about that.

Mr. Patton: And a portion of that development was . . . they had purchased the Aransas Harbor Terminal Railroad and the Aransas Dock and Channel Company. And then they could . . . the idea had been formulated for some several years by a Mr. Scrivner to construct a road out to Port Aransas, that is, out to the ferry landing at Port Aransas. And it . . . the idea was to utilize the railroad bed which we did along and started about, well, the latter part of 1930 because it was completed in May, 1931. We had our first traffic on the road on May 30, 1931. Anyway, we opened . . . had a toll road. And to start with it was just a one way road. We had what we called turn-outs, that was a wide place where you could pass cars. And we also

operated a train at the same time when we had traffic. Traffic was . . . wasn't . . . it wasn't a regular daily run. It was just whenever we had any movement of freight which in those days . . . in those days, well, the oil was shipped into these pipelines which were already established on Harbor Island before I came here--the Atlantic pipeline and the Harbor and the Humble pipeline. And then the causeway, of course, grew from year to year, although it was rather slow in growth until after World War II. And shortly after World War II--well, it was in 1946--the railroad itself was abandoned, and we junked it, you might say. Well, they picked up the rails and sold them to the junk dealer because they had been down for a number of years. They were not fit for re-laying. And the locomotives . . . we had two locomotives which . . . they went to the junk yard, too. The Dock and Channel Company, of course, in the meantime they had built an oil dock at Harbor Island. And the Atlantic Refining Company had . . . well, the pipeline it was, had utilized it and loaded ships over it for years and later that was sold to them in 195 . . . I guess it must've been '51 when they bought that. I'm not positive about the year. And that about wound up the operations of those two because the causeway was sold to the Nueces County in '51.

Mrs. Sparks: What was originally carried over those . . . on those trains? I can remember riding that train. When I was a little girl, I came down here to go over . . . to go across.

Mr. Patton: Well, that was when we carried automobiles.

Mrs. Sparks: Well . . .

Mr. Patton: Oh, you mean . . .

Mrs. Sparks: Even before that. Came down here by train and rode on that train and then took a boat across to Port Aransas.

Mr. Patton: Well, there was never anything real terrific out there except oil. And I . . . well, I don't know, oil . . . there was a few things that . . . supplies and things that came in for dredge boats and and the pipeline companies out there. But there wasn't nothing to speak of. Now back in early . . . now this is hearsay with me because I . . . but back in 19 . . . around 1917 during World War I there was a shipyard out there, and they built two concrete ships. And there was . . . they used the railroad at that time then for . . . they not only carried passengers, these workmen that commuted out there each day. See, they couldn't live out there because there were no facilities. And then, of course, there was a large amount of freight that came in and went into these two ships. One of them was sunk out here off the end of the jetty, and the other sunk in the Galveston Harbor. They were concrete, and they were not too successful. Although one of them did make a few trips, the other one . . . I think it was probably . . . well, I think it sunk on its maiden voyage.

Mrs. Sparks: Well, tell us . . . I . . . you know, I have always been fascinated by this Gail Borden Munsel.

Mr. Patton: Gail Borden Munsel?

Mrs. Sparks: Yes. I've . . . and there're still remnants of his . . . tell us about that because I think this would be an interesting . . . I think it'd be fascinating.

Mr. Patton: Well, I wasn't here when they first started that thing, but I heard a good deal about it. There was quite a . . . he had . . . Gail had quite a retinue of people that worked with him and you might say he supported them just between me and you. But he had . . . had bought a lot of that property in Port Aransas, and he was trying to sell it all over the country and had who . . . they travelled by bus, as I understood it, and went out all over the country. And they sold property here and there--a dollar down and catch you for the rest of the money, you know. But then they did sell quite a bit of it then. And, of course, his idea was to develop the whole deal down here. He was a grandson of the old man Gail Borden. That's where he got his name, Gail Borden Munsel, and he was . . . had had quite a bit . . . good deal of money. But he . . . oh, these people that hung around . . . hangers on, they stripped the boy.

Dr. Stephens: What was he selling now?

Mr. Patton: Gail?

Dr. Stephens: Yes.

Mr. Patton: Well, he was a grandson of . . .

Dr. Stephens: No, what was he selling for a dollar down and . . .

Mr. Patton: Oh, lots over on Mustang Island, building sites, and . . .

Mrs. Sparks: He was a little too early . . . little too early in his . . .

Mr. Patton: Well, yes, and, of course, that was before they had a causeway over there. The only transpor . . . only connection they had between over here and there to start with was this little train. And I thought you remembered they drove automobiles up on these

little flat cars, and we'd haul six of them at a time out there. Had a motor truck which had been changed to where it would ride on the rails, see. It had regular wheels that were flanges like a locomotive uses. And it was an International truck, and it pulled these little three cars out there. Then they would unload and drive it down to where we had this one ferry there. And they would drive down on it, and they'd be taken across the ship channel to Port Aransas and Mustang Island. And that was where the idea came then to . . . Scrivner was to build this road out there and create more traffic, you see, which was done in '31. And the traffic didn't materially build up there till they . . . the drive out there. And we had these . . . well, I think we built the first big ferry, we called it, in '35. That was about four years that we serviced the whole deal with these . . . this one small ferry.

Dr. Stephens: Now is this what you did when you first came?

Mr. Patton: When I came I went into building the causeway. Yes, that was my first operation down here.

Dr. Stephens: And where did you come from when you came?

Mr. Patton: Well, I came from East Texas--Lufkin.

Dr. Stephens: Lufkin.

Mr. Patton: Yes. I'd been in the sawmill business prior to that. But I came down due to the fact one of Munsel's men was an old friend of mine. He got me to come. I'd met him in Houston, and he was telling me about this. And he persuaded me to come down here and go to work for them.

Mrs. Sparks: This is some of your land development.

Dr. Stephens: Yes.

Mr. Patton: Do what?

Mrs. Sparks: Well, what all did . . . I've heard, but I'm sure you know more about it than I . . . about all the things that young Munsel built out on Port . . . at Port Aransas there.

Mr. Patton: Well, he . . . he was . . . he did some . . . he built some houses and then he built . . . started a . . . no, he bought those. There was two big concrete buildings out . . . not block . . . they were hollow tile buildings. They were built up there about . . . are you familiar with Port Aransas?

Mrs. Sparks: Yes.

Mr. Patton: You know where the telephone office is over there? Well, right in that area there he built those buildings. And they tried to move the town from the flood area but there never . . . they weren't ever successful. I know they . . . they never had any tenants up in this place to speak of. They'd be somebody try. And then, of course, he had his boat house over there. And Gail was a playboy then, you know.

Dr. Stephens: Is he still living?

Mrs. Sparks: No.

Mr. Patton: No, he's dead. He didn't live very long.

Mrs. Sparks: He died of T.B.

Mr. Patton: He died when he's about 35.

Mrs. Sparks: Didn't he die of T.B. or something like that or cancer?

Mr. Patton: I don't remember. I never saw him after he left here. His wife

. . . she married Tom McNamara, and Tom died here just recently. Billie still lives in San Antonio. And her sister lives over at Port Aransas.

Mrs. Sparks: You mean his wife is still living?

Mr. Patton: Gail Borden's wife, Billie. Peoples was her maiden name.

Dr. Stephens: She still lives in Port Aransas?

Mr. Patton: No, she lives in San Antonio.

Dr. Stephens: Oh, I wonder if she would have any of his business books of that development project.

Mr. Patton: I don't know. I doubt it because she . . . see, Gail died years ago. Then she met Tom McNamara. Has two sons, two grown sons.

Mrs. Sparks: By Tom McNamara?

Mr. Patton: Ma'am?

Mrs. Sparks: By Tom McNamara?

Mr. Patton: By Tom, yes, ma'am. There wasn't any children by she and Gail.

Mrs. Sparks: Well, didn't he also build an ice plant over there on Port Aransas?

Mr. Patton: Oh, yes. And then . . . they built the ice plant and they had built the telephone system and the electric power, built that. That was bought, of course, later by C. P. and L. And the telephone hadn't been . . . well, yes, it's been owned by somebody else now for several years. Those things it's . . . time gets away from you. I think Boone Walker was Billie's sister's husband, and he operated those things over there for a number of years. But he died. Mrs. Walker still lives over there.

Dr. Stephens: Well, let's see, they operated the . . . had lot sales, operated a railroad over to there and had the utilities over there.

Mr. Patton: Well, you see now, Gail bought the railroad on a contract. He had a contract of the sale. And he put up a more or less a bonus or a cash . . . what do you call it, not escrow, but anyway he made a deal to get control of the railroad. It was . . . he made a deal with the people in Baltimore, Alec Brown and Sons who were the people that had built the railroad. But he . . . he never did go . . . he never could comply with the terms, you see.

Dr. Stephens: How long did he stay in business? Until he died?

Mr. Patton: Well . . .

Dr. Stephens: Or did he . . .

Mr. Patton: . . . when he and . . . when the railroad deal fell through, well, he still operated those properties on Port Aransas. He owned that. He . . . that's where most of his money went to. Why, he spent a good deal of money over there.

Dr. Stephens: Now, do you think the reason for the failure was the depression or was it something else?

Mr. Patton: Well, I think poor management was the biggest reason.

Dr. Stephens: More than the depression?

Mr. Patton: I mean, you can't run a business and be trying to drink up all the liquor in the country.

Dr. Stephens: Yes (chuckle). Let's see. Well, then from the time that you've known the Port Aransas area or Aransas Pass area since 1931, could you give us a brief description of the economic changes that have taken place?

Mr. Patton: Well, of course, and I can remember Aransas Pass as a town of less than 2,500. And the city limits were about, oh, probably a mile

and a half across here from down the main street. The main part of the town there's . . . hadn't been too much change in the business section of the town since I've been here. Of course, there's been some buildings . . . few buildings been built, but it's very much what it was when I came here. On each side of the main street there's been quite a few changes. Now we're up to around 7,000, maybe more. That's our 1960 census was 6,900 and something. Of course, the economy of the town has changed materially due to the fact of the enhanced value of the shrimp catch. We had . . . when I came here, the shrimp industry was just a little bit of an operation down here Mr. Rice was operating, and he canned the shrimp. That was the only way . . . we didn't have quick freeze then, you know.

Dr. Stephens: And he canned it on the same island.

Mr. Patton: No, out here at Aransas Pass.

Dr. Stephens: Aransas Pass.

Mr. Patton: Yes. This is Aransas Pass, you see. And then the boats were small, and they used gasoline engines, and they just operated days. They'd go out early of a morning and come back in the afternoon, and they couldn't go very far. They had to work right around the jetties out there, but there were lots of shrimp there those days, and they caught lots of shrimp. But like I say, he canned them, and he couldn't . . . he couldn't pro . . . take care of all the catch at certain times so they'd . . . he'd just have to shut the boats down from catching shrimp until he could catch up, you know. Then, of course, in a few years after that, well,

then, when this quick freeze came in or refrigeration, as we know it now, well, then it changed the shrimp industry completely. They don't can any shrimp at all now, you know. They freeze them and store them and just keep them frozen, and they haul them all over the United States. I remember they used to talk about shrimp price. When they got to three or four cents, it was a good price, and now they're \$1.36, I think, for the select sizes down here.

Mrs. Sparks: More than that. I think . . .

Mr. Patton: I'm talking about what they paid the boats.

Mrs. Sparks: Oh, I see.

Mr. Patton: Yes.

Mrs. Sparks: Well, it . . . the shrimping industry now, as I understand it, is the biggest industry in San Patricio County.

Mr. Patton: Oh, they do . . .

Dr. Stephens: You mean in the world?

Mrs. Sparks: Yes.

Mr. Patton: Well, I don't know about that.

Mrs. Sparks: I've heard this. I don't . . .

Mr. Patton: It could be . . . you could be . . .

Mrs. Sparks: . . . I don't know.

Mr. Patton: Well, you can take at this one. They harvest here from three to five million pounds of shrimp a year. They bring them right up . . . that's what comes right in here in Aransas Pass.

Dr. Stephens: Is this the biggest port this side of Galveston for shrimp?

Mr. Patton: Oh, yes. And this is the biggest . . . the only port that exceeds this place for shrimp is Port Isabel. They're still or usually

are a little ahead, but last year it was right nip and tuck.

Dr. Stephens: You mean, even Aransas Pass is larger than Galveston now.

Mr. Patton: For shrimp?

Dr. Stephens: For shrimp.

Mr. Patton: Yes. That's right.

Mrs. Sparks: They call it the shrimp capital of the world.

Dr. Stephens: I hadn't heard that.

Mrs. Sparks: Mr. Patton, am I right or have you run into other . . . there was somebody at this office in the early days that a lot of the titles of lots, and so forth, Aransas Pass are clouded because of several developing booms that came in or do you know anything about that?

Mr. Patton: Well, there is some difficulty here in title but it's simply because these old owners, they died and their heirs can't be located or there's a lot of it. And then, of course, there's another thing that clouded titles is that people didn't pay their taxes, and they've had to come back and have sheriff's sales. And that always produces a hard means of setting up a good title to the land, you see, because Texas has some kind of law . . . some law that they can have so many years to come back and . . . the original owner can and pay for the improvements and claim it. So it . . . there is some title conflict here, but it isn't bad. Makes it hard to . . . makes it hard to get a good size block of land together here, although, on account of the scattered ownership. This stuff was sold all over the United States.

Mrs. Sparks: Well, this is kind of due to the fact that there were so many

developers at just this time.

Mr. Patton: Oh, yes. This little pamphlet here that's what it was gotten out for what it tried to sell lots here, you know, sell land and . . .

Dr. Stephens: Is that still going on?

Mr. Patton: No, oh, no. No. I knew Mr. Burton. He was quite an old man before I knew him, but then Burton and Danforth they put on their original townsite.

Mrs. Sparks: Yes.

Dr. Stephens: What was his point of view toward all this?

Mr. Patton: Oh, well, he . . .

Dr. Stephens: Talk to him about the development?

Mr. Patton: No, I . . . we played bridge together quite often . . . quite a bit--he and I and Mr. Kleberger. That was Mary's father. He . . . he was a character, Mr. Burton was. Danforth must've been more from what I've heard. He . . . I never did know him, never saw . . . I think he died before I came here.

Dr. Stephens: What do you remember about Mr. Burton?

Mr. Patton: Oh, he was just a nice old gentleman, but then, of course, he'd . . . he was old when I knew him, and he wasn't active in any kind of business.

Dr. Stephens: Did he tell you about any of his sales . . . selling tactics?

Mr. Patton: Well, no, I don't know if we ever went into that because I just . . . the other people knew him better than I did, you know, and he didn't . . . he didn't reminisce a great deal. He was killed in San Antonio. A car hit him as a pedestrian, and he never did get over it. I think he . . . I don't know . . . don't recall and

I don't know why, but he was living in San Antonio. He was quite old. He must've been in his 80's. But we played bridge . . . he didn't . . . he was very active up till . . . he was a sharp old bridge player, loved to play.

Dr. Stephens: Do you know who wrote this book on Aransas Pass put out by the Chamber of Commerce?

Mr. Patton: No, I don't, unless it was some in here giving . . .

Dr. Stephens: Would it be by Burton and Danforth?

Mr. Patton: Well, this is the time they were here.

Dr. Stephens: Yes, I know. But I didn't know if maybe you knew . . . if you knew who wrote it.

Mr. Patton: No. I just picked this up. Mary found this here somewhere. I had seen it all right. I just picked it up the other day and got to looking at it after she told me that you people were going to come down here. This is our old locomotive. You . . . this was the one spot and this was the two spot. It was an old . . . it was a . . . I think the thing was built with a . . . it was a long locomotive. And I kind of think it was built for . . . we had specification. I think it was built for the company.

Dr. Stephens: I see. For the Gail Borden . . .

Mr. Patton: No, no. For the Aransas Harbor Terminal Railway.

Dr. Stephens: Oh, oh, it was before you came.

Mr. Patton: Oh, yes. You see, Alec Brown . . . this thing was all started by Alec Brown at Baltimore, Maryland. That's . . . I don't know just how he got interested in it, but he . . . the thing that started . . . when they first started this jetty work right . . .

see, this is not . . . they put in two railroads here. The one used to go out here to the . . . near the lighthouse, and that was where they first started the jetty work from. They towed the rock from there on barges. It only ran out here about three miles out here to . . . but then somewhere along about 1912 when this other road was built out here over by the channel, Aransas . . . Aransas Channel and Dock Company dug . . . dredged the channel in here. And, of course, there was a lot of spoils thrown out, and that's what the A. H. & T. Railroad was built on.

Dr. Stephens: From the time that you've been here, Mr. Patton, could you . . . you've left out the economic development of Aransas Pass. Could you enlarge that now to the entire Coastal Bend area because the Port of Corpus Christi had just been finished before you moved here.

Mr. Patton: Yes. The Port of Corpus Christi was just very small.

Dr. Stephens: And . . . but you've seen the entire development of the area through this port changing.

Mr. Patton: Oh, yes.

Dr. Stephens: Could you tell us about that then?

Mr. Patton: Well, it's been staggering really, you know. But Corpus Christi itself didn't have any direct growth until after World War II. Of course, Corpus started growing really in 1940 when they started the Navy base over there. And it was . . . Corpus was a small town. It was only 30,000 when I came here, and now it's, I don't know, over 200,000. **And** each . . . all these area towns have grown. The only town around us suffered here is Ingleside over

here, and that was due to the fact that they had . . . Humble had a big refinery there, you know, and they closed the thing right after . . . oh, I think it was about '47 or 8 they shut it down and junked it. Well, they had a big refinery over there, and then they had a rubber deal that they built there during the war, during World War II. Of course, when I first came here, this whole country was dependent on agriculture, cotton, you know. That was their main money . . . main source of wealth here, well, was cotton then. Well, we don't raise much cotton anymore. You know that, of course. Grain is the thing that they raise profusely here. Of course, they still raise cotton, but it's limited by the government how much they . . . each one can grow.

Mrs. Sparks: When you came, were they still raising grapes at Ingleside?

Mr. Patton: They tried. There was quite a few orchards here, but there was no market for it. I don't think they ever were able to make a market for their grapes. That was the reason that they all . . . later on there was a number of vinyards here, though. And they were good, nice grapes. Of course, Rockport when I came here was just a small town. It was a beautiful place along Fulton there which is now heavily . . . densely populated, and that land is . . . the value has gone . . . well, it's just phenomenal what it's worth or what they're paying for it. I don't say it's worth that.

Dr. Stephens: Well, what about tourists in general? Now Port Aransas, Aransas Pass, Rockport, Fulton, Corpus have had an impression on this.

Mr. Patton: Well, of course, that has increased a thousand per cent probably.

I don't know.

Dr. Stephens: Was there much tourism, say, when you first came?

Mr. Patton: Well, this Port Aransas out here has always drawn a nice volume of traffic out of San Antonio, still does. But at that time we didn't . . . when I came here, drove down myself from Houston, and there wasn't but very little paving between Houston and here, you know. These paved roads have been built since then. There was some paving, but then it was . . . most of it was still dirt road. Same way into San Antonio. But, of course, after they got the highway system built the traffic started building up. But as a tourist center and a big volume of people, that's all happened since World War II.

Dr. Stephens: Well, were you selling lots to potential San Antonians for summer homes or for week-end homes?

Mr. Patton: Well, summer homes was the general idea. They would come down here and spend the summer.

Dr. Stephens: Not for a permanent residence but just for . . .

Mr. Patton: That's right.

Dr. Stephens: . . . a tenant.

Mr. Patton: That was the general appeal, sales appeal, that was used was to build them a summer home. And it went over. And even now there's a great number of people that own homes over in Port Aransas that are from San Antonio.

Dr. Stephens: Did you have any particular sales pitch that you used then? I'm sure you worked on a particular economic clientele, didn't you, so you had developed, I suppose, a sales pitch to a particular

group.

Mr. Patton: Well, I never did work in that particular end of the thing. I always worked in the operation end.

Dr. Stephens: But you noticed this going on, didn't you?

Mr. Patton: That's right. They had that all right. But that didn't play . . . about the time I came here Gail was going downhill, don't you see? And when Gail lost the control of the railroad, I came over here, and I've been with the railroad, the dock company, and the causeway company ever since. And I lost contact with those people completely. Then Gail's mother came down here, Mrs. Reidy, to try to straighten Gail out. And she stayed down here. In fact, we built a ferry called the Rufus R, which was named for her. But that ferry was sold to Standard Oil Company, and I think it . . . I've been told it's still working in . . . oh, this oil port down in Mexico, Tampico. You see, that was what started this thing here was that oil in Mexico. They brought it in out here for fuel oil. These . . . they were just beginning to convert from coal to oil on these locomotives. And the Southern Pacific was one of the first roads that converted. And this . . . they would bring this oil--they could buy it for practically nothing down in Mexico, you know, for five, ten cents a barrel--and they'd bring it in here and they would unload it out at Harbor Island. And we'd put it in tank cars and bring it in here, deliver it to Southern Pacific. I think the Santa Fe was actually the first railroad that went out a 100 per cent for conversion. But the Southern Pacific was along with them, too.

Mrs. Sparks: Yes, I read a whole newspaper once that said something about . . . wrote something about this. This was great. It was around 1906 or 7 when they first started. How old was this . . . how . . . why did they actually this highway terminal?

Mr. Patton: This thing says 1912.

Mrs. Sparks: Oh, I thought it was before that.

Mr. Patton: Well, now this is the one out here when they had the fort.

Mrs. Sparks: Yes.

Mr. Patton: Back over here it was away in the '90's.

Mrs. Sparks: Yes.

Mr. Patton: Yes, ma'am. And that was where the . . .

Mrs. Sparks: Oh.

Mr. Patton: No, where . . . no, no . . . the oil came . . . they never brought any oil in until this road was built. The other road was built, as I understood it, to work . . . to haul the rock out for the jetty, don't you see. At that time there was no channel in here. See, the Aransas Dock and Channel Company dug this channel in here. Is there . . . there was a law in the state of Texas that you could dig your channel five feet deep and fifty feet wide, and then you'll immediately acquire 700 feet of land on each . . . well, I think they charged you \$1 an acre for it. And that's the way the Aransas Dock and Channel Company acquired all this property around in this area here was by digging that channel in here. Then they passed what they called the Harbor Island Act and that's where the railroad company came in. That was 2,000 feet along the ship channel out there. And then that's the way Humble Oil

Company got their property out there. But that thing in the law . . . they repealed the . . . didn't repeal it, but they changed the law on the Dock and Channel Company where you can't acquire state land anymore about two or three years ago, I'm not sure just how long ago right now. And that stopped that, of course. Now they still'll issue the charters for a dock and channel company, and they have their right of eminent domain after they're formed.