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Place of Interview: Portland, Texas

Interviewer: Dr. A. Ray Stephens

Terms of Use: Open

Approved: Walter Sparks
Mrs. Walter Sparks

Date: July 25, 1970

Oral History Collection

Mr. and Mrs. Walter Sparks

Interviewer: Dr. A. Ray Stephens

Place of Interview: Portland, Texas Date: May 29, 1969

Dr. Stephens: This is an interview with Mr. Walter Sparks in Portland, Texas, May 29, 1969. Yes, you might start, Mr. Sparks, by saying when you first arrived in . . . in the Coastal Bend area and the reasons why you came.

Mr. Sparks: I came to this country before the turn of the century as a poor immigrant Polish boy, brought here by an uncle who was destined to become the chief horse thief of the country (chuckle). You just ready to start it?

Dr. Stephens: Yes.

Mr. Sparks: Hell, I mean it's already started (chuckle). I came to this area in the fall of 1911 from Olney. I was born in Dallas County in the town of Garland, moved for a short time to Jacksboro, from Jacksboro to Olney. And I lived there a short time, a year or two, and my father was in the banking business. And we came here, as I said, in 1911 in the fall of the year. My father was cashier of the Bank of Commerce which later turned into the Commercial State Bank. I was probably about six or seven years old at the time. I started in school here. The first schooling that I had

was here in Sinton. In fact I went through school in Sinton, clear through the eleventh grade. At that time we went to school with the Latin Americans just as . . . same as we are now. There was no discrimination whatsoever. We were all just part of the same school. The fact is, it was many years later before I knew what the word discrimination meant. We just had our good old friends, Mexican friends, and that was it. We lived . . . came to Sinton and lived in a very small two-room home some month or six weeks before we were able to get a house to rent. At that time it was a five-room house without any conveniences whatsoever. The water and the bathroom and everything else was out in the yard. If you wanted any water you brought it in in a bucket out of a cistern. The only well . . . the only other water we had besides rain water was shallow wells that produced sulfur water and it was a very strong sulfur, turning all the silverware black. And it was very distasteful. But after years . . . a few years of it, it became very . . . fairly enjoyable and liked the sulfur water very much.

Dr. Stephens: Okay. Then what sort of boyhood games do you remember playing?

Mr. Sparks: The boyhood games . . . the only games we had was marbles and spinning tops and playing baseball out on the vacant lots. And none of that . . . none of our baseball's given much encouragement even through my high school years. We had to buy our own baseballs and bats and suits if we had any. And just get at it the best way we could.

Dr. Stephens: Did the school sponsor any athletic events for you?

Mr. Sparks: They . . . in the latter years in high school, the last four years,

yes. They had an interscholastic league and a county meet--a track meet--each year, once in the spring. And the football, we just played whatever team we could get ahold of during the week. It didn't . . . other neighboring towns, high schools. Baseball much the same. Basketball came in. Basketball at that time was played out in the open on a dirt court. There was no inside basketball. We just played in the wind, rain, or whatever it was, and let it go at that.

Dr. Stephens: Yes. And how . . . how far did school go then? You had high school at the county seat. Did that . . . was that about the extent of education?

Mr. Sparks: Yes, we had two or three high schools way back there. Back at the early years they probably just had one high school and with that . . . top grade was the tenth grade I . . . was it, or the ninth . . . I think it was the tenth. The eleventh grade came on . . . as I progressed through school, much to my disgust, they had to add another year to it.

Dr. Stephens: (Chuckle) And I was wondering, now, you were a youngster when you first came and your dad in the banking business. Were you . . . did you just automatically went in the banking business, too?

Mrs. Sparks: Yes, I started in the bank . . . the first time I ever worked in the bank I think was in 1920 or '21, just as janitor and . . . just whatever there was to do that nobody else would do. I didn't have any choice.

Dr. Stephens: And then you . . . as . . . as a member of the banking . . . banking establishment of the community, you became aware of economic

conditions going on in the country. This was part of your job.

Mr. Sparks: I can remember well back in those years . . . in the early years, I was probably about ten or twelve years old and it was probably during the First World War of hearing . . . seeing them buy cotton on the streets of Sinton. The cotton buyers were just on the streets buying the cotton out of the wagons and paying four and five cents a pound for the cotton. And in my life down here I've seen it go from that four cents to forty cents. In fact I've raised cotton in the . . . sometime in the '50's I believe it was, and received as much as forty cents for a little of it. But for the most part cotton has been a very controversial crop throughout my life. I was raised on it, educated on it, and everything I've ever had came from cotton directly or indirectly. And the life of the cotton farmer all through these years was considered hard, that that was the last year he'd ever be able to make a living selling cotton. And I've been watching that now since . . . since 1910. That would be some 58 years or '9. And every year was the farmer's last year of selling cotton. He'd . . . he'd about had it but it always has come through. Frankly at this date, I think it's about to happen. I think cotton has about had it.

Dr. Stephens: In this country, now, what . . .

Mr. Sparks: In this country, I think that the polyester and nylon and the various other synthetics are fast pushing cotton aside and unless something is done to stimulate the market, well, the cotton farmer is going to have to look for something else. We are substituting grain to a big extent for it right now. A big part of our crops

at this . . . in the year 1960 . . . in the 1960's has been grain.

Dr. Stephens: What was it when you first became aware . . . well, like in the '20's? You said that was when you first became aware of agricultural industry. What was the main crop?

Mr. Sparks: At that time . . . at that time the main crop was cotton and it was the big end of it. The only other crop that was planted was feed for the mules. A farmer planted kafir corn and a poor grade of corn and a little cane and fed his mules on that, and his money crop was cotton. As it came down through the years, why we got on to plant . . . got started planting vegetables. And we did quite well with vegetables, onions and cabbage and carrots and tomatoes and any number of vegetable crops were planted in this area and in this county. And we've made lots of money out of it. But, as time went on, the irrigated sections around Laredo and the Winter Garden District and Pecos and Uvalde and Big Wells and throughout that area, the irrigated sections put us out of business because they could plant their crops anytime they wanted to. They planted them earlier than we did and got the crop off. We had to wait till the fall rains came along and get moisture. And then plant our crops in October. And finally the irrigated sections put us completely out of the vegetable business. None of that is going on . . . we have very little vegetables growing here, a few onions but where it is irrigated at present. There is some sections of this county that have irrigation, all by wells I believe--deep wells. But vegetables have had it. About 1930 . . . in the latter part of the 1930's this country . . . oh, let's go back farther than that. We

used to plant hegri which was an off-spring from kafir corn and it was a row crop, had one head on the stalk, and when the grain was ripe they simply hired field hands to go out there. And they received a very small fee. Worked all day and with long knives, machetes, cut the heads off the grain and threw them in the middle. And the heads were supposed to lie there . . . lay there for . . .

Mrs. Sparks: Lie there.

Mr. Sparks: Lie there, for three days to dry out, hoping it wouldn't rain, and it never failed to rain, resulting in the fact that sometimes we had to even resort to taking pitchforks and picking this grain up and throwing it up on the stalks or in the row to let it dry out. Then we picked the grain up, with hands, hand labor, put it in a wagon, or a truck rather, and hauled it in and threw it in a box car. And my remembrances . . . when I first started farming about 1939, I think that we got probably about fifty cents for the grain, in the heads, and did all the work and made a little. About that time the new maize came in. The maize with the long . . . with the . . . the short maize, not high. It didn't grow high, short. And the heads stuck up so that the combine could go through it and clip the heads off. We started in with a combine with a sacker on it. One man on the tractor and two, I believe, on the combine sacking it, throwing the sacks off. The sacks always burst, the grain ran out, and then we had a truck go through before night to pick up all these sacks of grain and get them in in the event of a rain. And in a year or two, though, we started in with tanks on the combines and the tanks filled up and would pump it into a truck.

The truck went straight on into the elevator and helped out that situation to the extent that now grain is one of our major crops right in this county. In fact in the whole Coastal Bend.

Dr. Stephens: Are you claiming to do that . . . you have the system of dryland farming here don't you?

Mr. Sparks: Dryland farming for the major part. In this county there is some irrigation up around west of Sinton and around Mathis and that area from deep wells. But it's a very small portion of the amount of acreage that's in cultivation in the county.

Dr. Stephens: But in 1929 farming was the main way?

Mr. Sparks: Yes.

Dr. Stephens: And what is . . . what is the particular technique that we employ here in the Coastal Bend that is known as dryland farming?

Mr. Sparks: How do . . .

Dr. Stephens: Is there any . . . you might say something about the industry that was in the Coastal Bend country when you . . . when you first came and while you've lived here. What kind of industry did you have . . . the Taft Ranch had the packing house and the mill, cotton mill . . .

Mr. Sparks: Cotton seed oil . . .

Dr. Stephens: Cotton seed mill . . .

Mr. Sparks: Cotton seed mill. Crushing cotton seed and making oil and cake out of it.

Dr. Stephens: And did . . . is that all the industry that . . . that was away from Corpus Christi? That is, as far as Sinton or Mathis, Robstown is concerned?

Mr. Sparks: As far as my memory serves me, that was about all the industry we had. We depended entirely on agriculture. There was some ranching around. The Welder Ranch was a tremendous big ranch and there was some ranching in parts of the county. But, by and large, our entire income for this area was from agriculture and cotton was it. Cotton was our only crop, only money crop.

Dr. Stephens: How did you get it to market, by wagon from the fields to the cotton gin?

Mr. Sparks: Back . . . you mean back in the early years, 1910, '11, back in there?

Dr. Stephens: Yes.

Mr. Sparks: Yes, there was nothing but horse-drawn vehicles, small wagons at that. Two-horse or two-mule wagons, rather, and that was the only way that you could get . . . get anything done. That was it.

Dr. Stephens: Well, then once it got to the gin it would go to a compress in Sinton. Is that correct?

Mr. Sparks: The farmer hauled . . . put his cotton into a wagon, a two-mule wagon, and hauled it into the gin and they ginned it. He backed his wagon up to the back end of the gin at the . . . to where the press was. And when the bale was baled out through the press with the bagging and ties on it, it was kicked out on the back platform and thrown over into the farmer's wagon. And at that time he would drive down Main Street . . . the gins at that time, too, were all in town. We didn't have any country gins or outlying gins. And he would drive down Main Street and stop in front of one of the banks or wherever the cotton buyers were congregated. And they would

come out with long knives and cut the bale down to several . . . many pounds for samples . . . each one kept what he cut off of it and kept the samples. And finally one man made the highest offer. The farmer sold it to him. However, he got the gin weight for it. And then the cotton was hauled on to the compress. In some few cases it was hauled to the press and samples were cut there and buyers bought it. But in the early days, it was bought off of wagons. Even buyers used to stay on the gin lots and buy cotton on the gin lots to some extent.

Dr. Stephens: And then where would the buyers send the cotton?

Mr. Sparks: Well, they sent it to the compress. And the compress pressed it in the low density at that time which wasn't too much compression. And from there it was shipped by rail. Probably most of it to Galveston because we didn't have port facilities in Corpus Christi at that time. And most of it was sent to Galveston and maybe some to Houston. Well, I don't believe at that time the Houston port was open.

Dr. Stephens: Now, after the Corpus Christi port came in in the later '20's, did this take care of most of the cotton transportation? Did you send it by ship rather than by rail?

Mr. Sparks: Yes. Since the port was opened in the latter 1920's--'26, '27, or '28--why cotton is hauled . . . carried now from the gin by the gin to the cotton compress. And the farmer is issued a warehouse receipt --a bonded warehouse receipt. In the gin a sample is cut and sent to the United States Government Cotton Classers in Corpus who place the grade and staple on the cotton, mail the card back. And you

have what is known generally as a green card showing the staple . . . length and staple. And the big part of the cotton in these last few years has been bought from this green ticket. However, a sample comes back with the green ticket and the buyer still goes through that sample, pulling the staple to see what they think of it. But I think a big part of it, it seems to me like, is bought off the green tickets.

Dr. Stephens: Mr. Sparks, would you comment then on the relationship between the oldtimers--that is those who were already in control of the community --versus the people just coming in. That is, the oldtimers versus the newcomers struggle.

Mr. Sparks: Well, down . . .

Dr. Stephens: The struggle for power, that is.

Mr. Sparks: Well, down through the ages, to me, at my age now that I look back, people have always inclined to get into a rut. And the people who were here first, they were in their rut and they were satisfied and were doing well, and didn't want to change. Much the same as I am today. I see changes come in and inviting and imploring industry to settle in our county. And I know it's good. I've got sense enough to know that that's the best and that's what you've got to do. You can't stifle progress. But nevertheless, there seems to be an inherent desire in everybody to want to stifle progress and to stay with what they've got. I think the long and short of it is they . . . they're happy with what they've got and they're afraid they might make it worse. Back in the early days here people who were here and in control naturally went right on

with their program. And new people coming in from the North and East and coming in on the homeseeker trains had been raised in a different atmosphere and in a different environment. And back to the in a rut, they wanted to kind of get it in a rut that they were used to, whether it was progressive or not. They thought it was progressive, but the people who were here and in charge and running it, thought they were progressive. It's controversial as to who had the jump on it. But it's just the same old struggle and the same old thing that's going on right today. We see it in our government, national, state, and even down into the smaller towns to where they want to keep on with what they've got. People just don't want to change. There's just something about change, which is inevitable, but we can't seem to accustom ourselves to it.

Dr. Stephens: You know this is . . .

Mr. Sparks: I can't understand that to save my life why it is, but I see it in myself. I have investments here and interested in banking and insurance and land and various things. And industry can't do anything but help it, but I still like it like it was.

Dr. Stephens: Because you're familiar with that.

Mr. Sparks: I'm familiar with that, and it's less change and it takes . . . I hate to say so but it . . . I think we're . . . we're just being in a rut is kind of a little on the lazy side. If you don't want to expend too much energy and effort and thinking. We can . . . going along like we are, why work on it?

Dr. Stephens: Now you've noticed the introduction of new ideas in this community or in this Coastal Bend area because so many newcomers came in, the

homeseekers and . . . for farming. And also newcomers who got engaged in business. Now can you . . . can you mention something about the uniqueness of this community where you had the introduction of new ideas and the part they played. That is, the newcomers did become involved in local affairs as . . . as you mentioned. And then with the new ideas they brought in, can you see any particular changes of this community--I say community, I mean the Coastal Bend or particular local area that you were associated with--that might not have come otherwise? Did you have more democracy or more divergent industries or can you tell any difference?

Mr. Sparks: Well, undoubtedly without any question there's been progress. It's all been progress whether we've liked it or not. And it continues to be progressive on that same score. It's . . . I don't know why it is that people don't object so much to change. But it's an inherent, or rather it is inherent it seems like for people to be that way. And particularly the older they get then the longer they're in some line of business or they're . . . some line of progress or the way that the economic situation and the public relations between people were working. Oh, it's been for the best, there's no question about that.

Dr. Stephens: Now if you were asked to deliver an address to a Jaycee unit, what . . . what would be your advice for them as far as this subject of change, how to equip themselves for the future, would be?

Mr. Sparks: Well, I'd tell them to get with it, that the only future for anybody is progress. You . . . there's no . . . there's just one answer . . . one to it. There's just . . . there's just nothing there but

progress because if you're not progressing you're staying on the same level. And if you're on the same level you're losing ground.

Dr. Stephens: Would you say then that they should develop a . . . a mental attitude to accept change and make the most of it, it's coming anyway.

Mr. Sparks: I would . . . I would say they would. They've got to. They've just got to change their line of thinking. And I have seen more change in the line of thinking and in those things in the last ten years than I have seen in the preceding forty-five or forty-six years I've been here.

Dr. Stephens: Would you say that the Coastal Bend area has progressed from . . . or has benefited from this change or . . . no, let's see. Has benefited from your new ideas of change or would you say that they haven't adjusted to change and progress as they should have and therefore have been held back.

Mr. Sparks: Unquestionably they have prospered by it. There's no question about it. They've gone farther with it and are going forward faster in the coming years than it has in the past. Because of the influx of people into the country with different ideas and modern ideas of education, T.V., radio, press, and the various things in traveling particularly. People in this day and time have gone traveling around the world and all over the country and they see what the other sections are doing.

Dr. Stephens: Well, now, you've . . . you and your family have traveled quite a bit in your life to Virginia, North Carolina, then other parts of Texas in the Houston area and Austin area. These places you are well acquainted with because of constant travel there. Do you think

that the . . . well, how do you think that the Coastal Bend area has measured up? Do you think this area with its new introduction of people and ideas has . . . has gained thereby and is ahead of the other areas that you are acquainted with, or is it about the same, or behind?

Mr. Sparks: Well, of course, I'm prejudiced but I think it is outgained . . . as far as speaking from agriculture, I think it is outgaining any other place I have been except probably the Middle West, Iowa and Indiana and through that area . . . area that I think they have made a tremendous progress and they . . . but they're farming on a different field from the way we do. They farm, generally speaking, on a much smaller scale but on a more businesslike and a more . . . not a more businesslike, but they're trying to make more out of it. They make more off of an acre than we make off of it. In other words, they just work harder. We've been raised up in this area down here to where we kind of felt like we could make a living with these farms and without too much actual work. I've farmed myself some twenty-five years. Started on a smaller scale and advancing up to farming around 900 acres of land. And I quit some five or six years ago, sold out. And the reason I quit farming was because I could see that the 900 acre-man was becoming a small farmer. You can't make a living on it. Back in the early days, why a farmer could take eighty acres of and, and and he did all the work. And after school was out the children came home and helped him with the chores and chopped the cotton. And they'd make a living and pay for their land and educate the family. But I would say it's

impossible today. And I think today that a man farming less than 640 acres of land is a small farmer because he can't farm 640 all by himself. His family is not accustomed to that kind of work or living on the farm and he can't hire labor at the highest price to do it. The cost is just . . . he just can't make it with what he has to pay out. So it's getting on now just like all the business. Every business, whether it's farming or what it is, is getting on the volume basis. And farming has gone to the volume basis. We have farmers around here that any number of them farm about 2,000 on up to as high probably as 7,000 acres. And it is a volume basis, volume business, and we . . . I'm trying to help them in the insurance and in the banks and everything I'm connected with. I'm telling you it's got that the small operator has got a hard row to hoe because he can't tender the expenses.

Dr. Stephens: Well, what about the labor problems? How . . . from your experience how have you seen this change? As hiring a Mexican laborer for--what did you pay him, fifty cents or a dollar a day--and then how much does it cost now to keep good laborers?

Mr. Sparks: Well, my remembrance was, and my memory is good on it, too, back in 1910 and 1911 the Mexican people were clearing this land with axes and grubbing hoes and making fifty cents a day and working from daylight to dark. That scale has gone on up to where now I hear them talking about paying cotton choppers and laborers . . . kind of hard to say exactly, but a dollar to a dollar and twenty-five cents to a dollar and thirty cents even an hour which has raised their standard of living.

Dr. Stephens: Well, this volume business now on agriculture can the farmer afford to pay this dollar and thirty an hour because he has these $3,000 and $5,000 tractors or more? And what does he have to pay for a tractor driver? And you have herbicides now so you don't need cotton choppers, you cut down on labor. Can you therefore afford to pay a higher price for . . . for the local operators?

Mr. Sparks: I think so because when I came here, why we were plowing a lot of this land with three mules and sometimes even one-row of equipment and lots of them even two-row equipment. And now they're running these power . . . powerful tractors and they can cultivate six and eight rows . . . that have six and eight-row equipment on them or twelve or sixteen rows to the round. And you're paying the man more but your expenses have gone up along with it.

Dr. Stephens: How much does the driver . . . operator get?

Mr. Sparks: I don't know. But I think they make around a dollar or a dollar and a quarter an hour, probably.

Dr. Stephens: So, therefore, a minimum wage won't hurt farmers as much as farm organizations say they will.

Mr. Sparks: Well, I don't know. I don't know the answer. It's just become very . . . it's just a hard problem to see through, just offhand to say what it's going to do. But nevertheless that's what it's going to do. It doesn't make any difference whether we like it or not; the farms are going to get larger; they are continuing to get larger and larger. And have fewer farmers farming more land. And even corporations taking over the farming industry.

Dr. Stephens: What was the . . . from the banker's point of view now, from your

father's and your own, until you got this, what was your attitude towart mortgages. That is, a homeseeker would buy land. How much did he have to pay down? How long did he have to pay it out? And then how quick . . . how quick were the banks to foreclose if you got behind?

Mr. Sparks: I can't answer that. The banks didn't make farm loans. They weren't . . . they weren't equipped to it. And later the Farm Land Bank came in and made the loans in the . . . different organizations are making them and they make them at a very reasonable rate and doing a fine job of financing. Banks don't ordinarily take on that kind of paper to where they finance the land. But that goes over a period of years. And the Federal Land Banks have a wonderful program--I think probably one of the better programs--and make these long loans to farmers which they're able to pay out. The main trouble with having a farm is every expense has gone up. The tractors have gone up, the cars the man . . . trucks he's got to use have gone up, the labor's gone up, the seeds' gone up, poison's gone up. Everything in price has gone up, but his product has gone down. Cotton is selling now at a low. And I've seen it sold from four to forty cents a pound and have sold lots of cotton in the thirty cents . . . in . . . well, thirty to forty cents. Cotton, now, I think I . . . we sold some last year, I think, in the neighborhood of sixteen cents and eighteen and twenty. And grain has gone off. And the farmer is just not getting the price, but he's having to pay all of the increase and everything else. And I . . . I frankly don't see how long . . . how much further that can go.

Dr. Stephens: Now the farmer gets certificate pay on top of that sixteen, eighteen cents, doesn't he?

Mr. Sparks: Yes.

Dr. Stephens: So that keeps it up above, say, twenty-six to thirty cents . . .

Mr. Sparks: Yes, keeps it up . . . I . . . I wouldn't . . .

Dr. Stephens: . . . average?

Mr. Sparks: I wouldn't know what the average . . . or what that would be. I think it's a very unsatisfactory way, but it seems to be the only answer to the problem. I think, frankly, the law of supply and demand is the only basic way of working it out. But if you put it on that right now, I think it might break everybody before it got adjusted.

Dr. Stephens: How strong have farm organizations been in the Coastal Bend, say?

Mr. Sparks: I think they've been doing a fair job.

Dr. Stephens: What . . . what are some of those organizations?

Mr. Sparks: Well, the Farm Bureau and the Coastal Bend has some kind of an organization, I believe. But I don't know whether they're making any progress or not. It's not a question I'm trying to evade, it's just a question that there just isn't any answer to it right now. Everybody is in the same frame of mind. The farmers are upset. They're not trying to get it on a dole system but it . . . it's self-protection. And I think it's a protection that we're going to . . . that is . . . well, work it, because we can't stop our farms. Whenever we stop our agriculture, why, we in . . . getting in mighty bad shape then. Get a war on and not anything, then we're in worse shape. And I think, frankly, that the government has done

a very good job with it. I used all the government facilities when I was farming, reclamation of the land and all the various programs that they had. And I found all the programs to be very good. Thought the government did a good job, particularly when you think of how big the government is.

Dr. Stephens: Can you compare agriculture in the 1920's versus the 1930's after . . . after the government entered into the economy on the side of the farmers?

Mr. Sparks: No, I can't. I wasn't familiar enough with farming to know. I started farming in 1939 and up to that time I never paid too much attention to it. I just really don't know. But in 1939, why, we had the farm programs and . . . in fact we had to have them or we couldn't have made it, I don't believe.

Mrs. Sparks: Think you might call a halt to eat?

Dr. Stephens: Mr. Sparks, in an interview with Dan Moore today we asked him about the use of mules and the change eventually to tractor farming. Would you comment on . . . on that?

Mr. Sparks: Well, that problem I think was one of the big problems that confronted agriculture was when they changed from mules to the . . . to tractors. I can well remember back in those days in about 1925 or '26 my father and president of the First State Bank in Taft and his partner, J. B. Cage, executive vice-president. My father lived in Sinton and J. B. Cage ran the bank. And I well remember a conversation between Mr. Cage and my father when Mr. Cage said, "Walter, what is going to be your attitude towards the farmer that is going to buy a tractor?" And my father told him at the time, he said, "I'm very

opposed to it because," he said, "I never saw a tractor that was half as good a security on a mortgage as a mule sixteen hands high. And if we're going to finance these farmers," he said, "I want some mules on there and a bunch of mules and their equipment." And he said, "I don't want any of these gasoline tractors out there." And, of course, they weren't looking at the other side of it. You had to raise so much feed to feed . . . to feed a mule. And the money crop was cotton. You got into the tractor, why, you didn't have to raise its feed. You put in more land in cotton and you got a bigger cash dividend from your farm that year. But it was very controversial and many said it wouldn't work and said it was absolute foolishness a man trying to farm with it. And, of course, the big thought was that everybody was overlooking or didn't pay much attention to was the tractor just uses gasoline the day it worked. That mule stood up there sometimes two months and it rained and he couldn't work that he had to be fed. And, as I look back on it, it actually looks ridiculous. At this day and time when you look on it, it is . . . it was ridiculous. But that is just getting back to what I said in the early part of the interview. We were in a rut. We were in the mule rut, and the oldtimers and the old bankers they were going to stay in that. They wanted mules for security. They didn't want a gasoline-driven machine that they didn't know where they were going to sell it. And, of course, today you couldn't find a mule outside of a Barnum and Bailey Circus. They don't have them anymore anywhere else.

Dr. Stephens: While you're talking about the banking industry there, you . . .

tell something about your father's activity as a banker in South Texas.

Mr. Sparks: My father was active vice-president of the Commercial State Bank in Sinton. And he and J. B. Cage organized the First State Bank in Taft with my father as president in 1923. And as the years progressed, my father was then an officer and vice-president . . . bought an interest in the First State Bank of Aransas Pass and helped organize the First National Bank of Robstown and was a director in the City National Bank of Corpus. And, incidentally, along at that time, personally, I started in with the First State Bank in 1923. And continuously since that date till now--some forty-six years--I've either been an officer or a director in that bank. And I have been connected with that bank longer than anybody living or dead, anybody connected with it. I started in as janitor and bookkeeper and have served in every official capacity of the bank except as president. At the time I could have been president I didn't feel like I wanted the responsibility. Well, now I'm Chairman of the Board of this bank.

Dr. Stephens: What services did the bank perform for the community in the 1920's and 1930's, when you were old enough to be aware of its work?

Mr. Sparks: In those early years the bank performed . . . they kept the people's money in there safely, they loaned money, they'd advance to the farmers and they rarely . . . whatever was . . . people needed money for. And at that time was generally the consultant for the people of the community. The people of the community usually looked up to the banker and sought his advice and . . . in any move they

made. I don't know whether that's good or not to be frank about it. I sometimes wonder but I was raised up in it and that was all I knew. But the bank tried to take care of the people, particularly the small town bank, country bank, he . . . banker, he just did his best to take care of the family and the widows and the orphans. And did everything he could do, and extended himself many times much more than he was supposed to. He just wasn't supposed to get out on a limb as far as he did, but he knew the people. And he'd handled the family accounts for two and three generations and he didn't see anything to do but go ahead with it good or bad.

Dr. Stephens: How much collateral did they recommend? Did they have a rule of thumb for that before they'd . . .

Mr. Sparks: They had a rule of . . .

Dr. Stephens: . . . grant these loans?

Mr. Sparks: They had a rule of thumb, but it didn't amount to much. They just did the best they could and you didn't have to loan a farmer so much money your first year. And on so many head of mules and so much equipment and various things. And he invariably used the amount that that was worth. And then he comes along and he has a crop failure. Well, what are you going to do with old Joe. He's been a customer here for the last . . . oh, ever since we've been here and a good account and a good man and a good family--an honorable citizen. So there wasn't anything to do but just go ahead another year or two, and another year and hope he made it that year. And if he didn't why we'd try it again. There wasn't but . . . we didn't have any trouble with foreclosures. They didn't

. . . wasn't trying to foreclose on them. I mean the run-of-the-mill weren't, the average. They were just trying to help the community, those old bankers were. They got themselves out on a limb and a lot of them broke their bank doing it, too.

Dr. Stephens: No particular percentage of collateral required on a loan?

Mr. Sparks: No, they just took everything . . . put everything you had on there to brace up everything you were going to get. And then when that ran out, just kept on as long as they could until the banking partners know that they are going to have to take the paper out or stop the man.

Dr. Stephens: Did they have to be pretty hard-nosed at times?

Mr. Sparks: Yes. There's always an element of people that you . . . that are not reasonable or honest or doing their best. There's just some people that can't stand good treatment, just like a world of us can't stand prosperity today. And you just . . . just the law of averages. I think that that . . . those number of people, though, are fairly well limited. We didn't have any great amount of that. Most of them are honest and honorable and did the best they could do. And we did the best we could do. And that about had it.

Dr. Stephens: Speaking as a banker, how would you . . . how did you size up a man asking for a large loan?

Mr. Sparks: Well, he . . . look at his background and how much he had. Spent a lot of time thinking about how hard he'd work. I found that the security don't amount or the collateral on a loan doesn't amount to anything compared to the ability of a man. A man that will work and a man that won't quit when adversity hits him, why, I'd rather

back him than to help somebody with a lot of security--collateral--because he was trying to get that collateral away from him and break even there. Give me a man that will work. Give me a man that's got initiative, and I'd rather have it than collateral. But you've got to have collateral to satisfy the banking partners.

Dr. Stephens: Well, how do you, as a banker and an insurance man, size up a person?

Mr. Sparks: I just don't really know the answer to that, other than just to say that just dealing with people, we'd see the people every day. We're not dealing in a country town bank with strangers. We're dealing for the most part, practically 100 per cent, most part with people we know. There's a few who drop in to start a business and we try to line up what they have done before, and find out what we can find out and where they came from. But actually most of our dealings is with the local people and they've known them some . . . some of them three and four generations and know about what they can do. Sometimes we missed out on what they can do, but that's just part of the game.

Dr. Stephens: Would you say, then, that the local banker has to be something of an amateur psychologist?

Mr. Sparks: Well, he thinks he is, anyway. The local banker usually thinks he's at the top of the ladder (chuckle).

Dr. Stephens: While ago we were talking about the Mexican-Americans in as far as farm labor was concerned. In your experiences in South Texas you've become acquainted with kinds of adversity in feelings. Early in your experience in South Texas the . . . the two groups . . . the two ethnic groups, the Mexican-American and Anglo-American, had

some . . . some hard feelings toward each other, particularly after the San Diego Plan was uncovered and the Pancho Villa trouble came about. Could you address yourself to some remarks on the . . . the border troubles of . . . preceding the First World War? What do you remember about those hard times?

Mr. Sparks: I don't remember much about it. I can remember away back there, probably about 1916, '17, and '14, '15, somewhere in there, General Pershing in San Antonio. I can't remember whether he was a general then or not. I think he was a captain, maybe higher. But they sent troops down into the border country to get things straightened out. But I think that . . . I don't think . . . I don't attach any significance to that at all. I think the Mexican people are a very honorable, high-type class of people. I always have thought so, the mill of the run or the run of the mill. You've always got a certain element of people that are not consistent even today. And I think that that's all we were running into is the border bandits, probably, or something on that order--nothing serious. I've known Mexican people all my life and I think they're as honorable as American or anybody else. I've always liked them. I've got lots of good Mexican customers and Mexican friends and I'd . . . I'd take their word just as fast as I'd take anybody in the world. They're Americans. They're not Latin-Americans; actually they're Americans. They're born here, and I don't know. But I have a high regard for them, very high regard for them. Some of them are misled but, heavens, a whole lot of the rest of us are misled, too. And I don't think that the percentage is any greater with them than it

is with the rest of us.

Dr. Stephens: What is your definition of a social conscience?

Mr. Sparks: What do you mean social conscience (chuckle)?

Dr. Stephens: Well, I . . . once before I . . .

Mr. Sparks: The word social is quite a word (chuckle).

Dr. Stephens: Once before I heard you mention something about when you were mayor of Taft, and your desire to do something, in particular paving the streets, for those people that lived west of the tracks. And I regard that as a desire to help the helpless and help those of a socially deprived nature as a social conscience. And what . . . what has been the attitude of the Anglo-Americans in . . . in the power structure, that is, in the South Texas towns of your acquaintance concerning this ethnic group, this Mexican-American group?

Mr. Sparks: I think that they wanted to help the people. We wanted to help them, but we were confronted with a problem on it. They . . . their little homes and their property, as meager as it was, didn't bring in enough taxes to justify paving the street and putting the sidewalks in. Although we wanted to, we simply didn't have the money to do it. And we started in where we were getting the most money from taxes and tried to work that out and to help these people as best we could, we put shell on their streets, but it just was one of those things. We . . . we . . . it wasn't a dislike of the people it was just a lack of money. Actually I think there is a . . . at least that's the way it was with me. But we couldn't do it. We couldn't spend something we didn't have.

Dr. Stephens: Well, when you were mayor of Taft you had mentioned once before a

story about your . . . your desire to help them and you couldn't get the rest of the city council to go along with that. Would you repeat that here?

Mr. Sparks: Well, that . . . that is just what I said there a minute ago. The rest of the council was looing at it from an economic standpoint that it wasn't . . . that they couldn't . . . they didn't . . . weren't getting enough money from . . . from the taxation to pay the burden, and they were trying to divide it proportionately or evenly on . . . as to those that were paying and those that had meagre amounts and try to keep it kind of in line. I'd like to have given them every consideration we had, but I knew I, to the best I know, couldn't do it. Back then, the long and short of it was we weren't doing a bunch for the people paying taxes. It looks like it was pretty slim to me there.

Dr. Stephens: Well, . . .

(Tape pause)

Dr. Stephens: Would you tell us about the hurricanes that have affected this Coastal Bend area, particularly the hurricane of 1919?

Mr. Sparks: Well, my first hurricane that I ever remember was in 1916 and it wasn't too bad a hurricane. And the next one was in 1919 and it . . . it sure was a bad one. We were living in Sinton at the time and I was about fifteen years old. I was out in the yard that morning milking the cows. And the wind about nine o'clock . . . Sunday morning the wind started blowing sheet iron off the barn, so I just turned the cow out and left and went to the house. The wind blew all day and blew all night . . . terrifically at night,

much worse at night than it was in the daytime. It washed the north beach in Corpus away. And many of the people . . . all of the people that were on the beach there were caught on that tidal wave and washed across. And a tremendous loss of life. I don't know what . . . I heard all kinds of estimates of it. The estimates I think seem a little light to me for what it was. My father was mayor of Sinton at the time. They'd bring people in there--those bodies in there--that were mutilated and covered with oil to where they couldn't tell what race, color, or creed they were or anything else about them. If there was any mark of identification on them such as even a gold tooth or a ring or anything, why they'd put it in a little sack and put a number on the sack, and then bury the body and put a number on the grave. And, as I said, my father was mayor and then people would come over from Corpus and if they could identify the . . . if there was identification why they'd claim the bodies. But I don't remember . . . I have no recollection . . . I've got recollection but no idea of how many there were. But it was a tremendous number of people that were washed across from the in 1919. The next storm I saw . . . hurricane was 1921 in Palacios. It caught over there and there wasn't any way to get out. It was just there, nothing but mud roads and that was it. And the next storm I have any recollection . . that I remember off-hand was 1933. It washed the causeway out again over here at . . . between Portland and Corpus. And one I believe in 1934. And then I . . . we probably had one maybe in the rest of the '30's. The next one was about 1943. And after that they quit calling out the years.

I don't remember storms by years. It was 19 . . .

Mrs. Sparks: There was one in 1945. That was just before the end . . .

Mr. Sparks: Yes, there was one in 1945, that's correct--'43 and '45. And from then on, they quit calling them by the year number and started calling them after women. They had . . . the last two were Beulah and . . .

Mrs. Sparks: Carla.

Mr. Sparks: . . . Carla. And I don't remember any . . . in the last seven or eight years, they were . . . Carla, particularly, was a pretty rough storm. As I've been through here . . . from the outside . . . if you weren't in an area where the water would inundate your home or you'd drown or if it wasn't . . . if you didn't have a water hazard, why, it didn't amount to a whole lot. The wind blew pretty strong, but we rather enjoyed them. The excitement and the quiet and the calm and people boarding up their house. And everybody sympathizing with one another.

Dr. Stephens: Did you . . . did you board up your house when you lived in Sinton for those hurricanes?

Mr. Sparks: No. Back in those days . . . back in 1919 and those early dates we didn't have enough warning of the storm. We didn't have any television or radio and it just . . . all the news we got was as it came in over the telegraph down to the depot . . .

Mrs. Sparks: Well, in the papers, too.

Mr. Sparks: Or in the newspapers. And they . . . by the time the storm got to blowing a newspaper couldn't get there and we didn't have much . . . any warning, hardly any. There just wasn't any way of letting

people know about it.

Dr. Stephens: Looking at the social history of this area, suppose you . . . suppose you tell the outstanding features of your boyhood experiences and then your young adult experiences as far as, well, entertainment and amusement would be concerned.

Mr. Sparks: Well, as I was growing up they didn't have any amusements. There wasn't any. You went to a few parties around town. And somebody would have one and there wasn't much there. Lyra said they'd play drop-the-handkerchief and wink-em and a few things like that. And the main object was to get to kiss a girl and that's all you went for anyway, didn't go for what the party . . . (chuckle).

Mrs. Sparks: Well, that's the difference between you and me, I wouldn't know about that.

Mr. Sparks: yes . . . I bet you knew a lot about it. But that's about all there was. There was just . . . not as much to do . . . you know there just wasn't anything. You didn't have . . .

Mrs. Sparks: Well, we used to go to bathing parties.

Mr. Sparks: Well, I went to a few bathing parties, but . . .

Dr. Stephens: What is a bathing party?

Mr. Sparks: Well, you just try to get a car and everybody . . . as many get in it as could and go down to the beach . . . to the north beach and bath house, and carried sandwiches. It offered poor entertainment to today's standards (chuckle).

Mr. Sparks: The girls all wore long stockings then.

Mr. Sparks: Yes.

Dr. Stephens: Oh, yes. Describe the bathing suits of that day.

Mr. Sparks: Well, the women . . . you practically couldn't tell they had on one. They just dressed from top to bottom, just . . .

Mrs. Sparks: Looked sort of like . . .

Mr. Sparks: . . . head to toe, rather (chuckle).

Mrs. Sparks: It looked sort of like a present day mini . . . mini-skirt, isn't that right? Or it was even more than that. They used to . . .

Mr. Sparks: No, mini-skirt my foot. The mini-skirt today ain't got nothing on --much.

Mrs. Sparks: . . . sort of . . . they . . . some of them had bloomers. I remember that . . . of course, they . . . that was way back in the early '16 . . . over here in Sinton.

Mr. Sparks: Bathing suits in those days didn't even resemble a mini-skirt. They looked more like a wedding gown as long as they were. They come clear down below their knees and their stockings come up to there and shoes were on the bottom of them, and on the bottom of their feet, with long sleeves.

Mrs. Sparks: I thought that . . .

Dr. Stephens: Of course . . .

Mr. Sparks: Horrible sight.

Dr. Stephens: Took the shoes (chuckle) . . . took the shoes off then when they got ready to go in the water?

Mr. Sparks: No, they kept them on.

Dr. Stephens: The shoes on?

Mr. Sparks: Yes. They weren't regular shoes. They were bathing shoes.

Dr. Stephens: Canvas . . .

Mr. Sparks: Canvas shoes, yes.

Dr. Stephens: Didn't want to expose their feet to the public?

Mr. Sparks: No, they didn't want to get their foot cut. They'd wade in with everything on. Men's bathing suits were down about to their knees, those three piece suits, the top, the bottom, and the spread over them. And they got down to where they were probably a little below the knees. Looked kind of like a haunted house character.

Dr. Stephens: (Chuckle) What about these ice cream parlors that we were talking about a while ago?

Mr. Sparks: Well, they were the same caliber of disappointment. There wasn't much went on in them. About all you did was eat ice cream and pop some of the girls' garters, and that was it. (Chuckle)

Mrs. Sparks: (Chuckle)

Dr. Stephens: (Chuckle) Did you haunt those?

Mr. Sparks: Well, as often as I could stir up fifteen cents.

Mrs. Sparks: What did you want that for? It was just a nickel.

Mr. Sparks: It was a nickel for each one. Somebody else was liable to come in (chuckle).

Dr. Stephens: (Chuckle)

Mrs. Sparks: (Chuckle)

Mr. Sparks: You didn't want to look like a poor sport. You at least wanted to take care of that other woman that would come along. Might be the only one you get next time.

Mrs. Sparks: How about . . . how about the saloon?

Dr. Stephens: Yes, what about the saloons?

Mr. Sparks: I didn't get a chance to go in them. I was too young. But I do remember I'd gather up beer bottles around alleys and places and

carry them down and sell them at the back door of the saloon. We could knock on the . . . if you were under age . . . if you were under sixteen you could knock on the door and they'd come back and redeem the beer bottles for a cent a piece, sometimes get a dime--gather up eight or ten of them. And get the money. But at that time . . . when the saloons were here the first time I was too young to get in them. I didn't get mixed with saloons until they came back in 1934. Had a wonderful time with them since then though.

Dr. Stephens: (Chuckle)

Mrs. Sparks: Well, didn't you used to take all those empty beer bottles down and collect . . . exchange them?

Mr. Sparks: I told him about that while you were out talking on the phone.

Mrs. Sparks: Oh, I'm sorry.

Dr. Stephens: Well, what kind of entertainment did you have in the ice cream parlors besides eating ice cream.

Mr. Sparks: Popping the girls' garters under the table (chuckle). No, there wasn't any entertainment. You'd just go down. You'd stirred up . . . seriously, if you'd stirred . . . been able to stir up a dime, why, take the old girl down and buy her a little ice cream. And after you ate that, why you had had it then, she didn't expect any more and you went on home. Had a little necking party on the way home if you got a chance. That was about it.

Dr. Stephens: What . . . what were general amusements before movies?

Mrs. Sparks: Well, you used to have a donkey you could ride and . . . and all . . . all of the privileged children had. I didn't have one.

Mr. Sparks: We . . . we rode horses back in those days. But it wasn't like

the people riding horses now. They ride them for pleasure now. And back in those days we were riding them because we had to.

Mrs. Sparks: Yes, but you had a donkey.

Mr. Sparks: Well?

Mrs. Sparks: And that was . . .

Mr. Sparks: What about him?

Mrs. Sparks: Well, (chuckle) I didn't have a donkey.

Mr. Sparks: That was . . .

Mrs. Sparks: I thought that you were privileged and I wasn't.

Mr. Sparks: That's besides the subject. The donkey didn't amount to a hill of . . . to any business. He just didn't amount to anything.

Dr. Stephens: (Chuckle)

Mr. Sparks: But horses . . . I can remember . . . I see people in this day and time go wild over a horse. I had to ride a horse to school part of the time one winter four miles out in the country. And I was raised up on a horse. I had a horse and buggy before we had cars and I got tired of those things. A horse doesn't interest me at all, not even a race horse. I wouldn't give a dime to see the Belmont deal go off or any other race track. I just don't care anything about horses because I've had to mess with them and clean them up and curry them and brush them and saddle them and hook them up to a buggy in my day and time. And they lost . . . I lost my enthusiasm for a horse.

Dr. Stephens: Why did you have to ride a horse four miles to the country? Didn't you have a school in Sinton?

Mr. Sparks: Yes, but my mother was sick one winter and we stayed in Corpus so

she could go to a doctor. And I stayed out on a farm with my aunt. And I rode in every morning and back every night four miles.

Dr. Stephens: Well, what did you do for entertainment?

Mr. Sparks: There wasn't any.

Dr. Stephens: No dances, funerals, weddings?

Mr. Sparks: Well, if a funeral could be called . . . classed as entertainment, we had one of those fairly regular (chuckle). But I never did . . .

Dr. Stephens: Well, that was sort of a sad occasion, wasn't it?

Mr. Sparks: Yes.

Dr. Stephens: You had no real choice to go.

Mr. Sparks: One of those things you had to go to. Didn't want to, but that was the way it was.

Dr. Stephens: Did they have wakes?

Mr. Sparks: Not over at . . . they may have had wakes but I never did know anything about it if they did.

Dr. Stephens: Well, what about . . .

Mr. Sparks: Well, one of the main things they had . . . it wasn't amusement, it was kind of . . . oh, I don't know what you'd call it . . . a necessity . . . there wasn't anything you could do about it, were those revival meetings.

Mrs. Sparks: Oh, yes.

Mr. Sparks: Some church had a revival meeting going on every month. And they nearly drove us nuts with those things.

Mrs. Sparks: Billy Sunday was down in Corpus one time, the famous Billy Sunday. And then was a meeting with Ham and Ramsey and everybody went over there. I mean this was quite the thing to do, go hear Billy Sunday

or Ham and Ramsey. I went to one of them. Boy, it was very dramatic, you know, and all. They got up and threw chairs around, these people did. I mean these revivalists. And they really cut up.

Dr. Stephens: What sort of preacher was Billy Sunday?

Mrs. Sparks: Well, I'll tell you. I was . . . I just . . . I was too young, really to absorb much of it. I just went.

Mr. Sparks: Well, I thought Billy Sunday was a sensation. I mean, was a sensational preacher. I couldn't even, as a small boy, oh, probably fourteen years old--fourteen or fifteen--I . . . I didn't care for it at all. He broke one chair over the lectern and stomped and raved around. And I don't give much credence to that kind of religion. In fact, I don't give much to it. But we had those revival services. And they'd start in to go a week and then everybody would get hot and ready, and they'd hold them on to two weeks. And those of us that weren't so well taken up with it were afraid of it going on for three weeks. Sometimes it did. (Chuckle) Then they had, as Lyra said, the Chautauquas and lyceum courses. And another thing that they had for entertainment, I was about to overlook, was the . . . the folks in the town that wanted to be actors. And there was always for the benefit of the P.T.A. or the benefit of something, anything, they didn't care what it benefited. Just so they could get up and be in a play. And they had these home town plays. Not that they were good, but there wasn't anything else to go to. Didn't have television or radio, and had these old time phonographs and the records were all cracked.

Dr. Stephens: So you had a good turn out at these plays?

Mr. Sparks: Yes, they had a good turn out because that was the social center of the town in a small town.

Dr. Stephens: How much did they charge for admission?

Mr. Sparks: Probably fifteen or twenty-five cents--fifteen cents for children and twenty-five cents, probably. I'm guessing, but they couldn't have charged much. It wasn't worth much.

Mrs. Sparks: Oh, one of the things they used . . .

Mr. Sparks: What you saw wasn't worth more than twenty-five cents.

Mrs. Sparks: One of the things they used to go in for in a big way would be womanless weddings and Tom Thumb weddings.

Mr. Sparks: Yes, an old Tom Thumb wedding, that was a regular affair. Tom Thumb, they married him off till they wore everybody out.

Mrs. Sparks: And a womanless weddings . . . most of our father performed in those. And then they had another thing that they called "The Old District School." They had them all . . . all these men dressed up as kids and doing all these funny corny things. I wasn't there for that because I was away at school at the time. But that went on.

Mr. Sparks: Of course, all the men said they didn't want to take part in it. They didn't want to have to fool with it. But you couldn't have kept them out of it. You couldn't have tied them out of it. They had more fun putting it on than the people had listening to it.

Dr. Stephens: Why . . . this was a womanless thing.

Mr. Sparks: Any of it. It didn't make any . . . in a country town, comedy, it didn't make any difference what it was. One is about as sorry as the other. They didn't plan for them to be elevating. They were just doing the best to kind of take up the time. And then another

thing that they had back in those days. Every town had a town band. They weren't paid. They just . . . all the boys that could play an instrument or could go one. Most of them couldn't play one but they could get in it, why, all joined the town band. And they had band concerts during the summer time at night. And nights were well infested with mosquitoes and flies and humming buzz of July insects in the air. And too hot to stay home and too hot to stay down there. And it was very tiring. I belonged to one of those, though (chuckle), and took that in. And entertainment, there was the Fourth of July. Country towns all had a . . . a parade . . .

Mrs. Sparks: Barbeque.

Mr. Sparks: . . . barbeque and a rodeo in the hot of the day. And the barbeque, the beef that was cooked was tough and the chicken it was raw. And you went out and ate till you got sick. And watched them out in the hot sun afterwards, the horses in the rodeo or the ballgame . . . a cheap ballgame--free ballgame. Cheap, too, the terms are synonomous.

Dr. Stephens: You mentioned the Fourth of July. What other holidays did you have?

Mr. Sparks: Well, we didn't get up to Armistice Day until 1918 and then it took several years . . . until after the war, though . . . it took several years after that. The Fourth of July and . . . they made no mention, then, in the South, or in South Texas to say the least of it, about Memorial Day. They didn't pay any attention to it. I didn't know anything about that until I was grown and married. The other holidays were Christmas, Thanksgiving Day, January the First, and we didn't pay much attention to Labor Day. They didn't

have these long weekends. The main reason we didn't have them, we didn't have any way of getting . . . to get where we were going. The only way to get out of Sinton was on a train. They didn't have a paved road through San Patricio County until 1922. And that was the first pavement between San Antonio and Corpus. San Patricio County was the first county to pave the roads through it between Bexar County, San Antonio, and Corpus Christi. And that was in 1922. And it was all muddy roads, mud and heavy mud and hard pulling when it rained. And there wasn't an . . . all-weather road in this county until then either. That was the first one.

Dr. Stephens: Now was this the King's Highway Movement?

Mrs. Sparks: Yes.

Dr. Stephens: Was that what that was?

Mrs. Sparks: The King's Trail.

Dr. Stephens: The King's Trail.

Mr. Sparks: That was one of the first marked roads. They now go by numbers, Highway 181 and Highway 35 and so forth. But in the beginning they had a Spanish Trail and the marking was a "S" and a "T" painted on a telephone pole or a fence post every, oh, five or ten miles. And then the King's Trail was "KT" and it was a yellow mark . . . probably about a foot high painted yellow clear around the pole. And in the front of it was "KT" and that was King's Trail. And that was probably about the best mark. But as I said you could go eight and ten miles before you'd see a "KT" marker. And getting through a town. Way back in the early days, why, you just stopped and asked somebody how to get to it. You didn't go that way often

and no one else did. And they stopped and told you how to get to town.

Dr. Stephens: What sort of road maps or guides did you have?

Mr. Sparks: They didn't have any road maps or guides or anything. Just got in the car and headed in that direction.

Dr. Stephens: Just followed the turn rows of a field?

Mr. Sparks: If we started to Victoria is a good example. If we started for Victoria we'd start out of Sinton and go through on a cattle trail through the Welder Ranch. Wind around through it and cross the Aransas River and then another cattle trail on to Woodsboro. And when you go in to Woodsboro, you asked them how to get to Refugio and you took out on another trail. And when got to Refugio then you asked them how to get to Victoria. And they told you, well, you go through such and such a ranch. And you just follow the dirt . . . not a road, it was just a trail where the wagons went through and the cars. Just two trails . . . two imprints there. And in those days why you just drove a car from . . . if you were going from Refugio to Victoria, why, you kind of watched the windmills because cars used lots of water and they got hot and heated and you'd drive to the next windmill and fill up with water and fool around and rest a while and maybe fix a tire and then go to the next one.

Dr. Stephens: So it took a long time to go from here to Victoria?

Mr. Sparks: And there was . . . and I can remember when it was an all day trip from Sinton to San Antonio. It was all dirt roads. And you always had to fix one or two spare tires. And if it rained anywhere on

the road, you'd probably be stuck and have to be towed out. Fixing a flat tire in those days wasn't taking a wheel off and putting a . . . tire off and putting a spare on. You didn't carry a spare tire. You just prised that tire off, took the tube out and fixed it with a cold patch. Put it back in and pumped it up. And you were there about an hour, if you were lucky.

Dr. Stephens: Hard work then.

Mr. Sparks: Yes, it was. We didn't think so though because it was so much faster than the horse and buggy. You couldn't have made it . . . the horse and buggy . . . couldn't have lasted long enough to get to San Antonio in a horse and buggy. The only other way we could go was by train. That's the way everybody went. Very few went in cars over those dirt roads. They went by train.

Dr. Stephens: Did you have much in the way of amusement by just automobile riding? Did you ever take a girl or a bunch of boys together out and just go riding?

Mr. Sparks: We . . . we used to do a little riding around in cars. But it was a very limited amount. It wasn't . . . back when I was that age there wasn't many cars. Along about 1917 and '18 why there wasn't very many cars and there wasn't any roads to drive them on, and you didn't . . . just didn't use them much.

Mrs. Sparks: How about that Ford Model T you used?

Mr. Sparks: But we had . . . we did have cars and we did use them some.

Dr. Stephens: What about the Ford Model T?

Mr. Sparks: I don't know. You know the story.

Mrs. Sparks: Well, you were talking . . . I was talking about that . . . out . . .

outside _____, well, you had a real . . . you had a real good looking . . . your father had a real good looking car and you used to . . . I didn't know you so well then, but you really used to get it to go around every now and then. There was real . . . there was something that went on the outside. I've forgotten what you call it, radiator or something. You know what I'm talking about. You know that.

Mr. Sparks: Well, it just had three cylinder exhaust pipes come out of the engine, one for each two cylinders. And it would just roar like a P-49 does now (chuckle). And I used to work out the roads and the girls, too, with it to some extent (chuckle) wherever I could find a road or a girl. It didn't make any difference which. But we didn't have much traffic in cars in those days. It was mighty slow. In fact, the first car my father owned, why, they had numbers for the whole county and you just bought a number and you didn't change it every year. You kept the same number all the time. My father . . . the first car we bought was number 227. That meant there were just 226 cars in the county when you bought that car.

Mrs. Sparks: Ours was 223.

Mr. Sparks: Well, Lyra's was 223, so there wasn't many cars and no more cars than there were, they just didn't use them. They just didn't give them to teenagers to get out and carouse around, you know.

Mrs. Sparks: My father bought a . . . his first car was an Overland and he was so proud of it and he got checked out on driving it and he brought it home and put it in the garage which was the barn remodeled. We turned loose the old grey horse, Dexter. So then it rained. And

he couldn't get out of the barn, or the garage rather, for three days on account of the rain. All the roads were muddy. And when he did get out, he had to . . . he . . . he couldn't remember exactly how to drive it. It was quite an experience to ride with him. It always was an experience to ride with my father. He was a character.

Mr. Sparks: Along that line I well remember the first closed car that I ever saw. And a doctor bought it next to us. He lived next door to us. It was a two seat . . . two door kind of a closed seated . . . crazy seated car. You could get about four people in it if you push them in right tight. But it had all glass. It was enclosed, glass, first one I ever saw. And I . . . the whole point of bringing it up was the reaction that the people in town had to it. Everybody said, "He ought to have known better than to buy something like that. Turn it over and it could cut everybody all to pieces." It was the idea of a doctor doing that. But they weren't . . . they were pretty slow accepting the enclosed cars. Up to that time you just kept the rain out by hanging side curtains up.

Mrs. Sparks: Isinglass.

Mr. Sparks: Isinglass in them and if it started to rain, by the time you got out and got wet, soggy, and by the time you got everything fixed up the rain would probably be over. If it wasn't over there wasn't any use to get it up because you were already wet. And there it was. And you did use these curtains in wintertime to kind of keep a little cold air out, cold night, and you were driving, but a poor substitute. But that was right interesting was watching people try to get used . . . try to get out of the rut I've been talking about

and accept a closed car, a glass . . . glass . . . enclosed in glass around it. I think probably one thing people didn't like about it, the only thing they'd ever seen closed in in glass prior to that was a hearse. Some resemblance to a hearse on closed cars. Actually there was.

Dr. Stephens: What about educational facilities in this area? You mentioned a while ago about a tenth grade high school. How many . . . you had one in San Patricio County at Sinton. Is that correct?

Mr. Sparks: I don't know. They might have had one at Aransas Pass. I don't recall whether they . . . what others they had there. Sinton was about the leading town, it and Aransas Pass, probably. And I don't much about the lower education.

Dr. Stephens: Do . . . do you remember Bayview College?

Mr. Sparks: Yes.

Dr. Stephens: What sort of college was that?

Mr. Sparks: Well, it was just a small college in Portland. I probably . . . I . . . I imagine just . . . well, just guessing is all. But I imagine it probably had an enrollment of fifty or sixty or something like that. Was it large than that?

Mrs. Sparks: I don't know.

Mr. Sparks: I don't really know. It had gotten . . . it was the next best thing in the county and it had filled a need. It did the best it could.

Dr. Stephens: What about Pres-Mex?

Mr. Sparks: Well, Pres-Mex didn't . . . wasn't originated until after 1923, along about '23. It was built there. And doctor . . . Mr. Green,

Joseph F. Green, gave the land I think. A couple of hundred . . . 200 acres, and helped finance it. Dr. Skinner, I believe his name was, was running it. It was for . . . just for Mexican girls and very moderately priced . . . not moderately it was just practically free then, but it filled a great need in the community. It helped a lot of those girls get an education and did a lot for a lot of people, too.

Dr. Stephens: Do you know any of the people nowadays who went to school there?

Mr. Sparks: I can't because my memory is just not where I can remember. But there are plenty of them around.

Mrs. Sparks: When I was teaching high school English the girls came in in their junior and senior years and took their English and other subjects and graduated from Taft High School from Pres-Mex. This was an agreement of Pres-Mex with the school district. And I had some outstanding pupils from there. One . . . and several of them came up from Mexico. And one of my most outstanding English students of all time was an Inez Ortegas. She later married a Presbyterian minister and has done very well I understand, and that several of them have gone on and have really been outstanding in the fields of education. They've gone on to college and made something of themselves. But some of these girls that came up from Mexico are really quite interesting, quite outstanding, and excellent students.

Dr. Stephens: Were most of them from the local area?

Mrs. Sparks: I'd say half and half. Or maybe more than half were from away from there. Some of them were from other parts of Texas. But they did try to bring out the potentials for a good life.

Mr. Sparks: Didn't they teach the students more skills, wasn't it harping more on home economics?

Mrs. Sparks: All of it was. They were trying to train them to be good homemakers, to be good citizens, to develop themselves as . . . as potential women and . . . the influences of and . . . taught them cleanliness and neatness and, oh, a whole lot of things like that.

Dr. Stephens: How long did the school last?

Mrs. Sparks: It was started in the 1920's and then they moved it over to Kingsville and combined it with Tex-Mex which was for boys and called it the Pan-American School for Latin Americans although at the present they don't really segregate. They have some Anglos there too because . . . with the modern trend of . . .

Dr. Stephens: Is it still in Kingsville?

Mrs. Sparks: Oh, yes, it's out of Kingsville.

Dr. Stephens: And it's called Tex-Mex or what's the official name?

Mrs. Sparks: Oh, yes. It's called . . . it's called Pan American . . .

Dr. Stephens: Pan-American.

Mrs. Sparks: . . . still. And they send their students to A and I, the college students to A and I.

Dr. Stephens: Oh. Well, what about Pan-American College in Edinburgh?

Mrs. Sparks: Well, this . . . it's a different thing. This is Pan-American School.

Dr. Stephens: Pan-American School?

Mrs. Sparks: Yes.

Mr. Sparks: It had a connection with the Pres-Mex School. It was headed by Miss Berta Murray. And I think she lives in San Antonio now. But there are two of the old teachers that used to be there. One,

Miss Ruth Blankmier, assistant cashier presently in the First National Bank, and Miss Margaret Ruppers, retired. But those ladies taught back there . . . all the teachers that taught in there were more or less dedicated I'd say because they were drawing a very poor salary. They were just putting in their time to try to do what they could do for humanity. And they did a very nice job I thought, a nice job, for those girls. And the girls all seemed to be very appreciative of it, too.

Mrs. Sparks: One of the things . . . one of the things Miss Berta Murray harped on was she insisted that the girls pay a little something for everything they got. For instance, there was a box of things came in for Pres-Mex, you know, clothes and things like that from maybe some of the rich Presbyterians. She insisted that they pay just a little bit for them rather than have . . . have them given because she wanted them to have pride and not to . . . I mean I think Latin Americans do have a certain amount of pride, but she didn't want them to develop any gimme-gimme ideas, if you know what I mean. And I thought this was interesting. Said if . . . if they just paid ten cents for something, they had still paid for it and that would have . . . it wasn't for free. And that was her philosophy which I . . . I think is rather interesting.

Dr. Stephens: You were involved in community activities for a while. What about your involvement in the Taft activities after you moved there and your services there? First of all from your boyhood home in Sinton and the time you married and moved to Corpus, what prompted you to move back to Taft and then what prompted you to become involved in

civic activities?

Mr. Sparks: The depression moved us back. It was just . . .

Mrs. Sparks: Moved us up . . . moved us to Corpus.

Mr. Sparks: Moved us to Corpus and the depression kept getting worse. And we owned our home in Taft so we moved back there. And upon returning, why, trying to throw in with the town and trying to amount to something around there, I was . . . at one time was mayor, Superintendent of the Presbyterian Sunday School, county war bond drive . . .

Mrs. Sparks: President of the Rotary.

Mr. Sparks: . . . president of the Rotary Club, and head of civilian defense, trying to farm--or was farming--insurance business, pushing the Chamber of Commerce, a director in it, and just various civic organizations. We didn't have very . . . the population . . . a small population and they needed everybody they could get to do everything that could be done. There wasn't many to do anything as it was. A very small town.

Dr. Stephens: What about your service as mayor?

Mr. Sparks: I served as mayor there five years I think it was. Up until I got in a plane crash and had to get out. But it was quite an experience to say the least. I learned a lot from it and it was very interesting. Of course, it was a free job. There wasn't any remuneration, not even an expense account. There wasn't anything. It was just free time. And it was . . . it was very remunerative you might say in experiences that I gained from it. Some of it wasn't so good experience. As a whole most of it was just about like run-of-the-mill, same thing they have today. Actually no different just on

an accelerated scale today compared with what it was then.

Dr. Stephens: You were mayor and head of the city council?

Mr. Sparks: Yes.

Mrs. Sparks: And civilian defense.

Mr. Sparks: Civilian defense.

Dr. Stephens: This is a city organization?

Mr. Sparks: No, that was during the war. They had a civilian defense so that in the event of an attack on this country why we would organize the nurses and doctors and police and fire and bomb shelters and . . . anything that would upset the community from the war effort, why, it was combined in civilian defense. Something like eight or, oh, around ten or twelve of the leading citizens of the town took on various posts such as Chief of Police and Chief of the Fire Department and Chief of the Red Cross and Chief of the First Aid and anything that was needed. Civilian defense could act also, to a certain extent, during a storm or hurricane. However, there was very little done then. There wasn't much to be done in our town.

Dr. Stephens: Did you have difficulty with your Anglo-American compatriots on doing something for the total community?

Mr. Sparks: No, we had . . . we didn't have any trouble with them.

Dr. Stephens: Everybody was cooperative then?

Mr. Sparks: They were very cooperative and very nice and they . . . no one expected much and . . . during the war years. And everybody was patriotic feeling and everybody just did the best he could do and get by on what he had and trying to help. We had . . . we didn't have any trouble from any class or bunch of people.

Dr. Stephens: When you wanted to go to town, where would you go?

Mr. Sparks: Do you mean to another town or if we're going down town in Taft?

Dr. Stephens: To a city to gain the type services that anybody would want if they were looking for scarce items.

Mr. Sparks: Corpus Christi.

Dr. Stephens: Corpus? Not San Antonio then.

Mrs. Sparks: Well, some . . .

Mr. Sparks: In the early years we went to San Antonio for a doctor. Anybody that had a serious operation went to San Antonio. And then as the times progressed and they had better doctors and better hospitals in Corpus Christi, why people went to Corpus Christi for an operation and its hospitals. Now we have an excellent hospital in Taft, Sinton, and all these towns. And for fairly minor things, not too serious, why you can go to those hospitals and they're very nicely equipped hospitals, too.

Mrs. Sparks: In the very early days if someone got sick, you had appendicitis, they'd load him on a baggage car on a stretcher and take him to San Antonio for an operation on a . . . in several instances they did this. You remember that.

Mr. Sparks: But it was nothing in those days though for a country town physician to operate on someone in his own home. Children were born in their homes and lots of operations were performed right in the home. They didn't have any choice. If someone had an acute attack of appendicitis or an acute attack of something and he was going to die before you got there, you better take a chance on stretching him out in the kitchen and going to work on him whether it was sanitary or

not. It was the best they could do and I think they did a pretty fair job with it.

Dr. Stephens: What about the help of the Taft Hospital . . .

Mr. Sparks: Well, they had a . . .

Dr. Stephens: . . . ranch hospital?

Mr. Sparks: The Taft Ranch Hospital, I thought, was excellent for the time and era that it was there. It was a frame hospital, just three frame cottages kind of connected together. And if you were in there very sick you just hoped to goodness they didn't catch on fire, and hoped that they could find the doctor. It was either that or worse. The alternative was worse, so it was very good.

Mrs. Sparks: I would also say that in . . . my mother, I think I said something or related this at one time, but one of these homeseekers that came down from Indiana lived next door to us. And there was no phone service in that part of town, so she was expecting a baby. And my mother had told her that she would go to stay with her while her husband went for the doctor. And this she did. And it turns out that my mother had to be the one that delivered the baby. And she was very proud of herself because she did all the things you're supposed to do and . . . and she did it and the baby was fine. And the doctor said she did a good job. But there are midwives today. I heard . . . heard somebody tell me . . . somebody told me today that a midwife lived next door to her.

Dr. Stephens: Now, weren't your two children born in the . . .

Mrs. Sparks: In San Antonio.

Dr. Stephens: Oh, in San Antonio, not Taft.

Mrs. Sparks: No, my little brother was born in Taft. My mother went down there on the train and . . . about the time he was due. And she stayed there and waited for him to be born. It seems like she had a very difficult time with his delivery. And then when he was born, my mother . . . my father had a telephone line into Taft because of his connections with the Taft Ranch. So she called on that telephone . . . I mean the nurse called to tell my father about it. I was sick that day and I was out of school, so he took me and he asked one of his friends . . . you see we didn't have a . . . an automobile then. When we went to see Mother we drove down in a horse and buggy. But when he . . . he found out that my little brother was born he asked this gentleman to drive us down. It was an open car and I bounced around the back seat just happy as a June bug. Perhaps one of the interesting things, too, I can remember so well when we hitched up the horse and buggy and came down to Taft to hear President Taft speak at the school house. And my big peeve was that my little friend that was just ahead of me that President Taft picked her up and . . . and kissed her and he just shook hands with me. And I thought, well, now maybe she . . . she's a blond so I decided that blonds had more than brunettes on the ball. But he . . . I was frightened with . . . by his big teeth. He had so many big teeth and a lot of them were gold.

Mr. Sparks: You asked a minute ago and while I think of it, about entertainment in towns . . . in small towns. Besides the church festivities and the lyceum course and Chautauquas, well, the main things that seem to . . . as I think back on it, were lodges, the Masonic Lodge and

the Odd Fellows and the Woodmen of the World and the Elks. And they had a bunch of lodges. And those lodges met once a week and that gave some activity to the men. And they usually had some kind of auxiliary for the women. So they got into it. And a joint meeting every so often. And that added a lot to the flavor of what went on. It didn't . . . and then they'd have one of these cake walks. And they had at that time lots of entertainments at the school. Besides school plays, why just get together at the school for something, mainly for entertainment is what it's for, you know. No object, there wasn't anything accomplished but they had a good time. That passed the time away. Then there was always a pool hall in every town. Those that could get away from the church, get outside of in sight of the minister and get down there and play pool.

Dr. Stephens: What about May Day celebrations? When did those start?

Mr. Sparks: I never did hear of any of those myself in this country.

Mrs. Sparks: I don't believe I ever did either.

Mr. Sparks: But as far as . . . I don't ever recall hearing.

Mrs. Sparks: When I went back to Indiana to school they had May Day celebrations, but not down here.

Dr. Stephens: How about library facilities?

Mr. Sparks: We had a library in . . . I think the only library was in the schools. They weren't public libraries. They were for the students. There probably wasn't enough books gathered there to do anybody any good if they could have gotten in there.

Mrs. Sparks: They were very poor.

Mr. Sparks: Just a few books around in there and there wasn't any checking them

out. You went in and got it, and when you got tired of reading it, well, you took it back. Most people were tired of reading before they started, so it wasn't used very much.

Dr. Stephens: And when did you start the library in Taft?

Mrs. Sparks: 1926.

Dr. Stephens: 1926. Who started it?

Mrs. Sparks: The Woman's Club.

Dr. Stephens: What prompted them?

Mrs. Sparks: Well, they had . . . they just organized . . . Mrs. Taft organized the Women's Club and . . .

Dr. Stephens: Mrs. Edward Taft?

Mrs. Sparks: Yes. And got them together. And the purpose of the club was to establish a library.

Dr. Stephens: What . . . what made her have this idea?

Mrs. Sparks: Well, I think she was from Missouri and she was very well educated and she felt that any town needed a library. Same thing a study club in Sinton started there. And this is true. The field representative from Texas, the University of Texas, said that all the libraries in Texas were started originally by a Woman's Club. Now the one in Portland was started by the Chat-work Club about the same time. And, of course, its, in fact to be specific I've read that they . . . they had a shower in which they received 250 books plus $50 to buy some more. And that was the way they started the library, I believe it was in Portland.

Dr. Stephens: Well . . . in Portland. This Chat-Work, was it a woman's sewing club or something?

Mrs. Sparks: Well . . . well, I don't know why they called it that, the Chat-Work Club. Because they wanted to chat and work, I guess. But actually it was a study club at that time. Sort of a corny name. But it's the oldest . . . second oldest women's organization in the county. The oldest one is in Sinton. And this is . . . just . . . of course, now all the members . . . all the old members have gone . . . have gone to the Grandmother's Club. All the . . . all the old . . . and . . . but I . . . all those old members except me and I'm still young.

Dr. Stephens: What was the significance of civic clubs for you as a business man?

Mr. Sparks: What was what?

Dr. Stephens: The significance of civic clubs?

Mr. Sparks: You mean clubs like the Rotary Club?

Dr. Stephens: Yes.

Mr. Sparks: We didn't have them.

Dr. Stephens: Oh, you didn't?

Mr. Sparks: Not back in those early days. The first civic club I can remember was about 1929. And they had a Kiwanis Club at Sinton started about 1929. And that was the only one I know of in the county back in those early days.

Mrs. Sparks: I . . . I thought . . .

Mr. Sparks: First Rotary Club wasn't organized in Taft until 1938 I believe it was. And there wasn't any other civic clubs there then. That was the first one there.

Mrs. Sparks: The first . . . I remember talking to some organization my dad belonged to while I was still at the University. But . . . but I

think it was the Chamber of Commerce and they called it the Commercial Club. Wasn't that right? They didn't call it the Chamber of Commerce, they called it the Commercial Club. And they used to have a visitor's day. My daddy got all worked up over those. They'd get in the car . . . when they first were able to drive . . . to have cars along about that time. And they'd get in the cars and ride all over the county and tell all the towns in the county what a good town Sinton was, for instance. And then Visitor's Clubs in Houston would come down and tell them what a good town Houston was and Corpus . . . and I mean larger towns would come around and then we'd . . . the smaller towns mostly went around the county to tell them what a good town they had and invite them in on trades day and all that sort of thing and try to promote business.

Mr. Sparks: To be more explicit, they'd charter a train, some eight or ten cars. The larger the city, the more cars. And they'd pull into these towns and . . . advance notice they'd already given the Chamber of Commerce or Commercial Club, whatever it was called, advance notice that they'd be there, such and such a time on such and such a day. And it would be put in the little weekly paper. So everybody was there to expect them. And they'd stop the train. And the band . . . they'd have a band with them. And the band would get out and all of them that came from whatever city they came from would get out behind the band and march up and down the streets. And these men gave away gifts. They didn't amount to anything but they were free. And advertisements for the various products that they were selling. And it was quite interesting. They'd be probably in a town thirty

minutes to an hour and would go in the stores. And march down the streets, then come back going in the stores and shaking hands with people. And the country people said, "Look at them with all them city clothes on." And that's about the reason the country people came out was to see the city clothes and to get what they were going to give away. Didn't much care about what the idea of it was. (Chuckle)

Mrs. Sparks: You talked about the trains. It made me think when you were asking about the troubles with the border. But one of the great thrills with . . . I was about . . . I suppose . . . well, I was . . . I wasn't even a teenager when the trains began taking Pershing's troops down to the border. And a big thrill used to be to go down to the train and see all the soldier boys, although I was so young and still had my hair in pigtails that it was . . . I thought it was real exciting. You know, my father went . . . even my father would go down to the train to talk to the boys and come home very excited because he'd met some fellows from Indiana and this was great stuff for him, you know. They were going down to fight the Villistas, as Mary called them, down on the border. But Walter's mother--and maybe Walter can tell . . . can remember this better--when they had the scare out about the uprising, Walter's mother . . . I believe Walter said . . . didn't you say they had the Home Guard?

Mr. Sparks: Well, they had a Home Guard or I don't know what it was. But it kind of patrolled the streets for a night or two. But I don't think . . . it was just . . .oh, what they were thinking about. There wasn't any trouble with our country, or, I mean, with our

town at all. They didn't have any trouble.

Dr. Stephens: Do you remember the so-called San Diego Plan?

Mr. Sparks: I . . . I have . . .

Mrs. Sparks: That's what we're talking about.

Mr. Sparks: That is the area we're talking about, but I didn't know anything about it until just a few years back. I read about it. I didn't know about it at that time. I didn't know what the score was. They just told us around there that old Villa was going to come up and get them. (Chuckle) Mostly just imagination. I think it was imagination. They never had any reason for anything like that at all.

Dr. Stephens: What . . . who were the most progressive governors of Texas that you knew of from your vantage point in South Texas, or does state politics interest people much down here?

Mr. Sparks: Yes, they interested people but they didn't interest me very much.

Dr. Stephens: You didn't catch . . .

Mr. Sparks: I remember when Jim Ferguson was elected and his wife was elected, Mrs. Ferguson, and Ross Sterling during the Depression and all. But I've never gone in for politics much and I . . . I just . . . and none of them impressed me overly. I just didn't know enough about it. There wasn't anything wrong with the men, I just didn't know enough about them . . . about politics.

Dr. Stephens: Well, how long have you been in the insurance business in Taft?

Mr. Sparks: Oh, since 1936 . . . '36, that'd be thirty-three years.

Dr. Stephens: Have you noticed any trends among the local citizens as far as your business is concerned? Do they buy more in good times than in bad

times?

Mr. Sparks: They're buying more all time because of the excessive law suits and the excessive awards given by our courts. And it makes them buy more liability insurance. They're buying more property insurance because there's so much more property there than there was and because their homes and the property and buildings cost so much more. And it is just a natural increase that it costs so much. Where thirty-five or forty years ago a house didn't cost a man over $2,000 or $3,000 he did . . . of course, it's proportional to say that he wasn't worrying about it so much as he is now losing $25,000 or $30,000. Let's see, that's affected it a lot. And the next thing is, when I started in the insurance business every family had one car . . . I mean most families had one car. Now every family has from one to five which has increased the coverage tremendously. And just the general cost of everything has gone up to where the, as I said, the values are so much higher that it has accelerated the insurance business. But it's like every other business. You do three times as much business but you don't make much more money because of the details and expense of operation. The wage and hour law and . . . and what it costs to operate is . . . hasn't offset it all, but it . . . it has helped offset lots of it.

Dr. Stephens: Can you see any relationship to the coverage of insurance then with the . . . oh, the economic development of Taft. That is with . . . with better times in this area you say you had more coverage. But do you have any way of knowing what the coverage might be or what the business might be in other parts of the state less prosperous

than Taft?

Mr. Sparks: No, I think that the terms that I used are pretty general throughout the state.

Dr. Stephens: I see.

Mr. Sparks: In fact, pretty general throughout the United States.

Dr. Stephens: Do you have any particular reminiscences about your life as a businessman in a small Texas community?

Mr. Sparks: Well, in what regard?

Dr. Stephens: Well, as . . .

Mr. Sparks: I've got a lot of reminiscences. (Chuckle) Some of them . . . not all of them are good, too.

Dr. Stephens: Has it been most rewarding as far as your contact with people are concerned or . . . or do you feel that the people you've met, say in North Carolina where you've visited or in West Columbia or in San Antonio, would be more pleasant to deal with?

Mr. Sparks: I don't think they would be. I don't think there'd be any difference in any of them.

Dr. Stephens: You think there's nothing distinctive about this part of the country, then?

Mr. Sparks: I don't think so. I think that the . . . the thing . . . the thing that drives all that is that the people in North Carolina are . . . come up under a different standard and a different way of doing business. And the people in Chicago have come up under a different plan altogether. But all the people that are there are used to that standard and are well pleased with it, and the ones in the other section wouldn't be. I couldn't go to North Carolina, let's say,

or to Chicago or Salt Lake City because I'm not used to their methods, their standards. And there's nothing wrong with any of them. I think that one's just as good as another one. It just happens to be what the people need and their wants are and how they're taken care of.

Dr. Stephens: Have you learned how to beat the yellow-page salesman in an argument yet?

Mr. Sparks: No, I can't beat him. I believe he's got . . . there's one man I . . . when I advertise, I think for sure I can't beat the yellow pages (chuckle). Every year I swear I'll never get into it again and every year go right back. And I think it's a poor . . . poor advertisement for a country town, wonderful for a city. But I don't . . . I don't get it in a small town but I . . . I guess I don't get it but I guess it do get it, too, because I go ahead and buy it every year.

Mrs. Sparks: Well . . . entertainment . . . I . . . it . . . you asked about the entertainment of the early part of the century, and I remember several things. One: that there was a club of young women, unmarried, called the San Souci and they were quite active. They had all kinds of celebrations. And one time they were going to have a party. And my mother was very original in her ideas of games and so forth. So she helped them decorate. There was a vacant house next door and they wound different colors of string . . . you know, different strings from one end of the house to the other. And the girls stayed at one end and the boys at the other and they had to unwind those strings. It was a lot of trouble they went to, you know, but that's

the way they found their partners for the evening. And, of course, also, they had box suppers and they had picnics by down by the old dam. And then my mother belonged to an organization called the Embroidery Club. And she loved the Embroidery Club. They were a very unusual group of women, I think, from thinking back and then I met them later. Some of them were from Alabama, some of them were native Texans, others were like my mother from Indiana and from Iowa and so forth. They really were very nice people and they loved to sit around and embroidery. And when the Embroidery Club met at our house it was a big event in my childhood because my mother let me help serve the refreshments. And those women were really quite unusual. One of them that belonged to the club, I remember, was a victim of some sort of illness where she had to be taken to San Antonio in a box car and operated and died. And this was a terrible shock to all the other women. And this sort of illustrates the point of the fact that we had to go to San Antonio if something real serious was wrong with us. You also asked back there something about the Klan. And I think it is rather interesting my brother reports that he heard my father talking to a woman who was on the opposite side of the political picture. My father said that he was interested in this movement because he felt that maybe it would make a two-party system in Texas. You see, he was an avid Republican and believed in the two-party system and at that time Texas, well, was . . . was Democratic all the way. And, so, he sort of encouraged the movement hoping this. But he told her that he was disappointed later and felt that it had been his . . . that he had made a mistake.

Talking about his being a Republican, he . . . I'll never forget the night that Hoover was elected, and Texas went Republican. He told me that this was a very happy night for him because he had felt, you see, people looking down their noses at him because he proclaimed his Republican status. And we always laughed through our tears and said--because he died right after that--that he died happy knowing Texas had gone Republican which I thought was rather interesting.

Mr. Sparks: You can ask your question. What . . .

Dr. Stephens: Okay, Mr. Sparks, do you remember the medicine shows of your youth?

Mr. Sparks: I well remember the medicine shows. We had them at regular intervals. And usually they came in the fall of the year when the cotton crop was coming in and everybody had money. And they would pitch their tent--they lived in their tent there on the premises, a vacant lot where they were having the show--and put up a . . . oh, a . . . a little stage and a little tent of a thing over it. And they had a pick-a-banjo player, and a violin player, and maybe a singer, and some comedians, and maybe a magician, and they put on a nice show. The best show we had there was a medicine show. And about fifteen or twenty minutes of that would go on and then they'd stop and pass out the medicine throughout the crowd, selling it for a dollar a bottle. And they did well. I can remember when the most prominent one was a medicine they called J. H. G., three initials. I can't remember the . . . what the J. H. G. stood for but I knew the man in later years. I met the man and talked to him after he quit the medicine show business and his product was still on sale

in the drugstore in Taft in the latter 1920's. And it was quite a show for the people. It was free. That was why they liked it so much. And the medicine, I don't know anything about whether that did any good or not, but at least everybody had a good time at it. And it gave us some excitement. It was astounding the crowds that would congregate every night in front of this medicine show deal. You just drove your car up or stood up--there wasn't any seats--you just stood there or sat in your car or your horse and buggy or whatever you came in. It was back in the early days when they had horse and buggies and everybody enjoyed the medicine show, good stuff (chuckle).

Dr. Stephens: Was it liniment or was it a cure-all one had to take?

Mr. Sparks: They had all kinds. It didn't make any difference, just whatever you wanted cured, whatever you could . . . whatever they could peddle. They didn't care what it was.

Dr. Stephens: Well, everything was a common price, a dollar a bottle?

Mr. Sparks: No, they had various prices. They'd have two or three products to sell. But usually they had one main leader like this J. H. G. product. And I've heard people swear by it and how good it was. And it was still selling long after the medicine show closed. I wish I could think of old J. H. G.'s name. He was rather a prominent character.

Dr. Stephens: Oh, this was the man in the show?

Mr. Sparks: Yes. The man that . . . he is the man that owned the show and ran it and made the medicine and sold it.

Dr. Stephens: I see.

Mr. Sparks: He was a mighty nice personality and he did well.

Dr. Stephens: Did they have any shows they charged admission for, such as a ventriloquist act or a drama?

Mr. Sparks: No, they didn't charge anything. No admission was charged. That . . . the idea was to get the people there and to hear the program and then sell the medicine and then they'd have another few minutes of program and then they'd sell more medicine. That went on up to eleven o'clock at night just off and on. And that kept the crowd there because they were waiting to hear what was next. And they got worked up over the cures that they were talking about and bought more of the medicine.

Dr. Stephens: Did they sell anything to the children such as cracker jacks or toys of any kind?

Mr. Sparks: I don't remember whether the medicine shows did or not. But I can tell you the picture shows in Fort Worth and San Antonio and Dallas where in between shows or in between reels they'd show . . . a show probably had six or eight reels. And they'd run off two reels and then would stop the picture and announce that they were going to sell such and such a confection or candy and that there was an article of value in each and every package. I can remember how well those people put on that performance because I put it on in later years about an article of value in each and every package. Come and get yours. And they passed this around through the audience and sold a good batch of it probably, or they wouldn't be doing it. I can remember a show definitely in Fort Worth as late as 1921 that I went to a picture show where they sold this confection as they

called it, which probably didn't amount to anything, and was just . . . but they sold it anyway.

Dr. Stephens: What about known . . . know any stage productions that you . . . or tent shows came through town?

Mr. Sparks: Yes, we had all kinds of tent shows. And at that time, why, of course, we were a small town and the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey, and those large shows, Sels Floto(?) and those shows never did get in there much. But smaller circuses came in and stayed a week or two weeks. And they had a very nice entertainment, that the higher class of people didn't think was too good and the rest of us thought was fine. And had motor domes where motorcycles rode around these domes and rode up the edges and side walls of it. And they always had a boxer. He challenged anybody in the community for $10. If he got whipped, they got $10. And I never heard of him getting whipped. I never heard of a local man ever winning anything. But they had a Ferris Wheel and a Merry-Go-Round and all the various games of chance and pitching washers and balls in the holes and throwing baseballs. And it was just the same story it is today. Everybody claimed that they were carrying all the money out of town. Maybe they claimed it but they all went anyway.

Dr. Stephens: Now this type of show always attracted attention.

Mr. Sparks: Always. It always . . . the shows couldn't have existed if they didn't attract attention. If they weren't doing well they couldn't have existed year in and year out, and they were very . . . there were many of those shows. They were very small carnivals they called them, circuses. And everybody always wondered why the city let them

in and all those that didn't wonder why they let them in would have condemned the city if they hadn't have let them in. So, in they came.

Dr. Stephens: Did you have any circuses with wild animals?

Mr. Sparks: They had a few wild animals with them. They always brought a few bears and a few lions, and probably their teeth were about gone but they had a good time with them anyway. It was a good show. It was worth it.

Dr. Stephens: Was this a particular attraction to the younger people when . . . in the days before television before they knew about wild tigers and lions and such?

Mr. Sparks: I wouldn't say just to the younger people. I think they covered the whole scope. People were there from all ages.

Dr. Stephens: Did you have any wild west shows come through the area?

Mr. Sparks: Yes, we always . . . each one of these carnivals would have a wild west show in connection with it. Often the main show probably would be a wild west show.

Dr. Stephens: And what would they do?

Mr. Sparks: It was riding horses and just a modification of today's rodeo or maybe it was an Indian fight. And they shot all the Indians up and got them before the night was over and that made everybody happy.

Dr. Stephens: Did they stop once in a while to give the peanuts and popcorn salesmen a chance?

Mr. Sparks: They didn't stop to do it. They kept it going on all the time. They never let that stop. There was . . . the boys were passing through the crowd selling various kinds of confections, as they

called it, and candy, and popcorn, and soda water. It was soda water in those days. I don't think Coca Cola then was very well known as well as I remember. It was . . . it certainly wasn't as popular in our little community and country town. But it was on the road with them.

Dr. Stephens: They didn't sell any hard drinks?

Mr. Sparks: No, they didn't sell anything like that.

Dr. Stephens: What was the effect of Prohibition on South Texas?

Mr. Sparks: Well . . . I . . . I'm too young to know. I don't know what it particularly meant. I remember the saloons--the open saloons--several of them on the main streets and in all the little towns before the Prohibition liquor was voted out, and the effect it had on it after they were voted out I really don't know. I was too young to know.

Dr. Stephens: Well, during the 1920's, what about Prohibition then?

Mr. Sparks: During the 1920's, that's 1920 to 1930. Well, it was bootleg altogether. And there was lots of it everywhere as bootlegging whiskey anywhere. I don't think anybody ever lacked getting a drink if he wanted it, cities or small towns either.

Mrs. Sparks: One . . . one of the cutest things I think about this is that he used to go down to Inglside and that's when they were raising grapes. And they'd sell them so much grapes, see, just . . . you know, and show them how it could be fermented. And my father bought a gallon and put up in the attic and he used to take his friends up there and siphon it off. And all of a sudden he looked up and it was coming through the ceiling. He'd forgotten to take the siphon out.

I think that's a cute story.

Mr. Sparks: I didn't think it happened that way. I thought what happened was he had a big airdale dog and the airdale dog got into the liquor and it killed him. (Chuckle)

Mrs. Sparks: (Chuckle)

Mr. Sparks: The last I heard of it (chuckle). But seriously, though, back in those days there was lots of home brew. And either home brew or beer that they made in their homes in vats or wine that they made from grapes, I think for the most part. The bootlegger he was thriving. He was doing well. And, of course, the drugstores were . . . finally got down to where the doctor could issue a prescription if you were in bad shape for a pint of liquor. And the doctor would issue the prescription. He got $2 I think it was, probably, or a dollar for the call. I guess about a dollar for the office visit. He gave you the prescription. And you took the prescription and went to the drugstore that could sell bottled whiskey--bottled in bond under government supervision--and you got that bottle of whiskey, a pint. And you could only get so many every month; your health was supposed to be . . . it didn't . . . you just required so much. And of course, your friends got ill and they had to have a bottle and they went down and got themselves worked up for it.

Dr. Stephens: What about Juan Garcia? Did he got a lot of it?

Mr. Sparks: The boys that they couldn't find, they did lots of it. They went to town, John Smith or anybody that they just . . . I imagine, I don't know. I remember lots of it, and still I don't either. It was just like everything else. Everybody was having lots of fun

and it was going good.

Dr. Stephens: So the National Prohibition Movement didn't really prohibit too much in this area?

Mr. Sparks: I don't think it did. I don't think it prohibited too much in any area. As for what I had read of the North and the East that Chicago and New York and our eastern cities, it was much worse there than it was in our country. In our country it was just a bunch of honest people trying to make a little money and they weren't hurting anything or hurting anybody. They were just taking care of the trade.

Dr. Stephens: What about those people of influence . . . people who did not have influence who would not get their physician to write them a prescription for a pint?

Mr. Sparks: Well, they just went out and bought it from bootleggers.

Dr. Stephens: Oh.

Mrs. Sparks: Well, I'll tell you an interesting story about . . . about it. My little brother got ill in San Antonio with pneumonia. And my father was quite upset because my brother had had pneumonia before. So the doctor said to get some whiskey for him because he was very low--unconscious--to bring him around. He was very, very sick that night. My father tried to get this whiskey at the drugstore and he . . . they wouldn't let him have it for my brother. They came up in an elevator--it was in a hotel--and two men were so drunk that they . . . my father said he saw red because these men had obviously gotten stuff they didn't need and, here he needed it for his son. I think he was ready to whip them although he was a Quaker.

Mr. Sparks: I'd always thought that a likely cure for that was to be sure to

keep a little on hand all time. (Chuckle) Such likely as a couple of gallons. Long about the time of Prohibition, back in that era, something that is of interest to me was the bath and shaving situation. Back in that day and time due to the shortage of water and due to the shortage of a lot of things, the average family or most of them just took a bath one day a week. We didn't have bathtubs and we'd bring a number three washtub in the kitchen and pour a tea kettle full of hot water in it and then go out to the pump and pump three or four buckets of water and come in and get the water down to about where you could take a bath in it and then take a bath in it. And, generally speaking is, people just took one bath a week. That was on Saturday and that was it whether they were going anywhere or not. And all barber shops at that time besides their regular tonsorial work had bathtubs in the back. There'd maybe be three or four for a country town, small barber shop, three or four bathtubs. And the workmen and the people would go down at that Saturday night and they'd line up to get in to take a bath. Probably charge them about twenty-five cents a bath and one towel. And in that connection was shaving. At this day and time everybody shaves every day. But I well remember when my father who was one of the leading bankers in the town, he just shaved once a week or twice a week at the most. People just didn't shave. It hurt their face to have to heat the water and shave with a straight razor . . . straight blade razor which had to be sharpened and honed and kept in shape. And they just didn't do it. And I well remember that--my father shaving once a week. And when it was called to my attention or I first noticed

it, we had a friend that was a traveling salesman out of San Antonio, and when he was selling pianos. And when he'd come through our country, he was a friend of my mother and father's, and he'd spend the night with us. And this gentleman always shaved every morning. And I can remember my father and mother's and neighbor's thoughts of how wasteful that was. He just shaved every morning. And people just didn't do it. They didn't know what it was. And that's interesting to me because in this day and time everybody shaves every day. And most all . . . everybody takes a bath every day. But we just didn't have the water and we didn't have the time and the various things. At that day and time by not saying we didn't have the time, the hot water heaters and bathtubs and shower baths and laundries to keep towels clean and to have fresh towels. They make it a lot easier than it was back in the day when you had to wash your towel and you didn't . . .had to bring the water in and pour it in a tub and all. It was a lot different.

Dr. Stephens: And how often did people get haircuts?

Mr. Sparks: Probably . . . I don't know. I can't . . . I couldn't tell you that. But I would say about once a month, or maybe every five or six weeks. It wasn't a regular habit. They didn't go and get a haircut every week. There wasn't any foolishness like that about a haircut. And I might in that connection say that the barber shops . . . everybody that patronized a certain barber shop kept a shaving mug. It was a mug about three times as large as the present day coffee cup. And in most cases it had his name written on it. And they had a battery of shelves, probably some eight or ten or twelve shelves.

And each shelf would hold probably hold six or eight or ten shaving mugs. And they thought for sanitary purposes they didn't want to be shaved out of the common mug. So each man when the . . . when the man came in--John Doe would come in--the barber would go and get John Doe's mug. And lather him up and shave him out of that. When he got through rinse the suds out of it--the soap stayed in the bottom all time. A bar of soap . . . there was a bar of soap in the bottom and a shaving brush. And I . . . incidentally, I still have my father's shaving mug that he used back there sixty years ago. Kept it in Ward's Barber Shop there in Sinton. We have the shaving mug today.

Dr. Stephens: Each person had to buy his own shaving mug to leave at the barber shop?

Mr. Sparks: That's right. Each person bought his own mug and went to a drugstore and bought a round bar of soap to about an inch thick and round to fit in the bottom of it. And there was a shaving brush that he bought that he got with the shaving mug. And that was very sanitary because he didn't have to be shaved with the regular mug.

Dr. Stephens: And how much did shaves cost then?

Mr. Sparks: I think if I can remember correctly about ten or fifteen cents. If I remember correctly back in those days a shave was fifteen cents and a haircut twenty-five. Now I might be off a nickel either way on each of them. Probably was. It probably got down as low as ten cents.

Mrs. Sparks: You know one thing they had back there was a racket store. I think they don't . . . I bet people today don't know what a racket store is.

Dr. Stephens: No.

Mr. Sparks: Well, a racket store is nothing in the world but a five and ten cent store. It was the Woolworth and Kress are just big racket stores according to back in that day and time. However they have much more merchandise probably. But every little town had a five and ten and fifteen cent store--nothing over fifteen cents--and they called it a racket store.

Dr. Stephens: How do you spell that?

Mr. Sparks: R-A-C-K-E-T, racket. And that's what they called it, a racket store. And that was a very prominent, popular name and to this day I still talk about going down to Kress's or Win's (?) stores, talking about going down to the racket store to get something, and everybody looks at me like they're wondering what I'm talking about.

Dr. Stephens: Do you know why it was called that?

Mr. Sparks: I don't have any idea. I just don't know other than it was just . . . a racket was a confusion of noises and this is just a confusion of merchandise is the only way I have ever . . . if I have ever kind of thought of it in that light. But every town had one. And they did fairly good business. Not enough that they didn't get rich on it. They didn't have the chains. In the cities they had chains, Kress and Woolworth were in the South and in the North Kress, Woolworth, and Kresges and some of the others.

Mrs. Sparks: But I don't think they started that far back, did they?

Mr. Sparks: I don't know whether they started that far back, but I'm sure that Kress and Woolworth were operating then. As large as they are now, they were bound to have been operating then. Along in connection

with the little racket stores all small towns even in the larger towns about the size of Corpus Christi and larger had millinery stores. The millinery stores didn't sell a thing in the world but just hats for women. Back in that day and age every woman wore a hat all time. They had a hat that they wore to church, a hat they wore to parties and . . .

Mrs. Sparks: Bonnets they wore.

Mr. Sparks: And everything they wore to everything else and when they were working. And around home and in the garden they had bonnets, you see. They didn't buy the bonnets from a millinery store, though, I don't think. I think they bought them in a dry goods store.

Mrs. Sparks: Made them.

Mr. Sparks: Or made them at home. But a millinery store was in every town and was very popular and did a very nice business. And usually they were run for a big part of the . . . most of them, or lots of them were run by a widow woman, or a woman . . . they were always run by some woman. And it was usually, by being a widow woman, it was some woman that had to make a living after her husband had died . . . passed away. Every town had a little jewelrey store. Of course, they still have jewelry stores but . . . they called them jewelry stores, but they had very little jewelry for sale. It was mostly watch repairing. They had very cheap watches, and they needed repairing quite often . . . and every town had a watch repair, and they called it just a jewelry store.

Dr. Stephens: Do you remember when William Howard . . . excuse me. Do you remember when William Jennings Bryan came through town?

Mr. Sparks: I don't. Lyra remembers it, but I . . . I never . . . that's . . . I wasn't at the age and temperament that William Jennings Bryan ever . . .

Mrs. Sparks: Oh, yes, I remember William Jennings Bryan's visit. My father was supposed to be . . . and I remember the night that he appeared at the court house in the room to speak. And, of course, I went. It was . . . my mother was quite conscious of history. And she and my aunt who was a very proper person--married my father's brother--almost had a falling out because my aunt insisted on wearing hat and gloves. And my mother said that was really out of place in a little frontier town and she would have no part of it. I think most of the women did go bare-headed to that event. But, boy, Aunt Harriet had hat, gloves, and I tell you she was really dressed.

Mr. Sparks: She was from Indiana?

Mrs. Sparks: No, she was from Michigan, from Niles Michigan. And she had gone to the University of Michigan. She would . . . she had her degree and she didn't let you forget it. You know what I mean. And she, of course, she had no . . . I mean she was absolutely out of place in a town like Sinton. Eventually they moved to Bloomington on this big speculation, and promotion and sort of . . . it didn't pan out so they went back North.

Mr. Sparks: Speaking of businesses back in those days, every country town had a livery stable and generally they weren't on Main Street, they'd be on a side street. But a livery stable was a very large barn that had stalls in it. And someone coming into town . . . that drove into town and was going to be there a day and a night or some . . .

took his horse and buggy into the livery stable and got a stall for his horse. And they fed and watered his horse while he was there. Now the livery stable is very much what you came over here today on. You rented a car from Hertz or a National Car or one of the car renting systems. Well, they rented horse and buggys or you could get a surrey. A surrey was comparable to today's sedan. In other words it had two seats in it, each held two people was all, four passengers. Or you could get a two-passenger buggy, and one-horse or two-horse. And you'd go in this livery stable and rent a horse and buggy and make the territory. You came in on the train. You came in here on an airplane and rented a National Car rental car and came over to Portland. Well, back in the early days what took place was that they came in on the train and if they wanted to work the outlying territory or the farm areas, some salesman, or around, then he'd go down to the livery stable and rent a horse and buggy. And he didn't pay by the mile because they didn't have any way of checking mileage, they paid by the day. And of course he came back in. And then the local citizens that didn't have a horse and buggy or any means of transportation like my mother and father, why, just every once in a while on Sundays we'd rent a horse and buggy and spend the day riding out in the woods and over to the river.

Mrs. Sparks: And down to the bay.

Mr. Sparks: And down to the bay. And it was quite interesting. The old livery stable came and went.

Mrs. Sparks: While we were talking about that, although my parents had an old

grey horse with a buggy they used, when they had their relatives come in from Indiana, as I've pointed out before, they often had visitors from the North, they'd rent a surrey, sometimes two of them, and then we'd drive them to the . . . to the farm and then to the bay. And speaking of the horse and buggy. Our horse was as wild as he could be. And one of the most vivid memories of my childhood was driving home with my mother and father in the buggy--and I always sat right down in the floor in the front. My dad had real good control of the horse but he was sort of relaxed. And there was a train standing very still on the track. And as they went across the railroad track, Dexter took one look at that train and he shied and he tore up the railroad crossing sign and he threw us all out, me and broke my mother's arm. And that was . . . that was quite an experience.

Mr. Sparks: An interesting thing on that, these people . . . young people today and people today don't understand, was that in the small areas, and they didn't have to be small because some of these towns were pretty fair size and didn't have any stock laws. And if a person had a horse that he used for a horse and buggy to pull his buggy or to ride and had a cow that he milked, why without any stock laws they were turned out on the streets at night. They milked the cow and fed the horse and opened the back gate. And the horse and cows all wandered over the town all night. And that went on until after the towns were incorporated and after they were incorporated even until they voted the stock laws. But that was a very common thing to go down there . . . I've gone down when I was a small boy on the streets

of Sinton and had to kick a cow or two or a horse off of the sidewalks so you could get by. Early every morning and no one would be first along and the first man along kicked them off. And they wandered around through the town and they ate grass and the ones of the people that didn't want them in their yards had fences . . . most people had fences around their property. And they wandered around and came back. They always came back because they remembered where they were eating, and they'd get that grub. You never did lose them.

Dr. Stephens: Everybody had their own milk cow?

Mr. Sparks: Most people did. Most of the people that were well-fixed enough to own a cow had their own cow and their own hog. Everybody'd have a hog or two and feed them the scraps and the slop and things like that. And would have a little patch of cane in the yard to feed them. And we were living very frugally. We were having a hard time, didn't have any money. And I well remember growing up as a boy. My family had a horse and buggy and a cow that we got the milk from and butter and raised a hog or two every year and butchered the hog and put him up for the sausage and lard. And we kept chickens all time so we had chickens to eat and eggs. And we always had a garden. And that wasn't just especially our family, it was everybody had that. They just didn't make much money. Seventy-five dollars was a big salary for a man with . . . even with four or five children or six or eight in his family. Lots of people made way less than $75 a month. Seventy-five dollars went a long ways, but $50-$75 don't go very long ways with big families. And in those

days people had big families for the most part. Anywhere from . . . it was nothing to have from six to twelve children. I can remember in Sinton there were several families that had ten and twelve children in the family. And it just took a lot to get by on. And it took lots of ingenuity and lots of work. All the children worked. Some of the children fed the chickens, and some of them milked the cow, and some of them slopped the hogs.

Mrs. Sparks: And brought in the wood.

Mr. Sparks: And brought in the wood. We had to chop our own wood. We didn't have any way of heating the house back in those days except with wood. Later on, we got some coal. Those . . . the fancy people got some coal, and finally got up to gas. But most of my time when I was a boy was spent chopping wood and chopping kindling and bringing the wood and kindling in every night to start the fire the next morning and carrying out the ashes. 'Cause we cooked on a cookstove, a wooden cookstove, and anybody that knows anything about a damn cookstove knows that you've got to cut the wood up to where it's not much bigger than a toothpick to get it in one of them. And then we had a fireplace and an iron heater. And the fireplace . . . you could cut an average stick of wood they'd bring in and saw half in two to put in the fireplace but for that cookstove and that heater it had to be cut down to size. And later on we got coal and coal grates, and as I said a minute ago then came gas. That was an innovation to a fourteen year old boy who was cutting the wood. Now that really meant something.

Mrs. Sparks: Speaking of gas, I think it is rather interesting--the two things

that occurred to me--in 1916 . . . 1916 was the big . . . was the year of the big drouth any my father took in two . . . I believe three cows for a debt that was owed him. And we fed the cow and milked it and even sold the milk in the neighborhood and churned butter. And then that particular year we . . . it was a short year cropwise and that also ended up with a storm. But my father didn't suffer too much because they'd started really active . . . active work in leasing. And he would even be standing on the street corner sometimes on a Sunday afternoon. And people would come through from Houston, I've heard my mother say, and want to lease land. And he, of course, looked as I think I've said before, he looked out after a lot of people's land. And so he'd lease it for them and then he'd get a commission for . . . for getting them. So, he did quite well to tide himself over the drouth that year.

Mr. Sparks: Speaking of entertainment--of course we've got this muddled up now to where we were burning up anything and speaking of entertainment a big thing that was of interest to people in a country town in those days was on Sunday going down to meet the trains that went through. The trains that were coming from Houston to Brownsville on the S.T.L.B. and M. and the trains that were going from San Antonio to Corpus on the San Antonio and Aransas Pass. And to go down to meet the trains and see who was leaving and who was coming in and who was going through. We often knew the people that were going through because everybody rode the train, maybe it was the next town to the next town and you would shake hands with them and have a big time, and buy a fresh newspaper. And they always had a butcher boy they

called him. They had a man that was selling a bunch of stuff, popcorn and candy and various kinds of confections and things like that, totally useless and hard to eat but nevertheless it was something new. And the butcher boy'd get off and he'd walk down the platform and have a good round in every town, and all the people down there. It was just a meeting place.

Mrs. Sparks: Often times . . .

Mr. Sparks: And you know I see and find that there is a little inclination today, not among too many people but it still there's that thought, of going down to the airport and watching the planes come in. And when I do that once in a while--when we do it--I can't help but think of the days when I used to meet the trains. And I wonder back to the days then of those who used to meet the stagecoaches. And I've seen that in picture shows and have read about it about how people when the stagecoach was coming in and due at three o'clock and they were all down there. So people haven't changed any heck of a lot all this time. They'd meet the stagecoaches and meeting trains and now they're meeting airplanes. And it's the same old deal.

Mrs. Sparks: Walter, I think . . . tell them about . . . tell them . . . tell him about . . . tell him about splitting the fares because I think that's a real cute story and I bet not many people know about that.

Mr. Sparks: Well, splitting the fares back in the old days riding trains was usually . . . I didn't do it because I was too young so all I'm talking about, giving you, is hearsay and it was pretty good hearsay, too. But the conductors coming through made the same runs for long

periods of time. They'd run from one city to another back and forth every five days out of every six and off one day. And that was back in the days when they worked and be off one day and work six . . . seven days in a week, and they'd work six and off one. But anyway they were floating through there and they got to be well-known. And they were lodge brothers of all the boys in the town, every one of them. They were lodge brothers and they all belonged to the same lodge in one end of the line, and the conductors and people on the train. And they got to knowing the people. And John Doe would get on the train and he was going . . . the fare was $4. Well, there wasn't anybody going to know it but he and the conductor, and so the conductor split the fare with him. And he gave him $2 and the conductor put the $2 in his pocket. And he'd made $2 and the passenger had made $2. And that's what they called splitting the fare. As I say I can't prove that, I never did do that because I never did have that. But it was quite a saying that everybody enjoyed was that the man taking up the tickets would take the money and throw it up to the bell cord and all that stuck to the bell cord belonged to the railroad and all that came down he divided between him and the passenger. Speaking along the lines and it brings up something to date, you might say, are something to think about. Transportation has always been one of the most interesting things to the people of this country or any other country. Back to the days when the man rode the horse and carried the mail. And then along, as we said a while ago, came the stagecoach and the train and then the bus and the airplane. And it is still interesting to

people and we still see people that want to meet those various transportation facilities. I think the bus probably attracted less than any. I don't recall many people going down to ever watch a bus coming in. I don't remember that. I can durn sure remember meeting the train and I see them meeting airlines today.

Dr. Stephens: What about people who build their homes right near the side of the road and sit on the porch and watch the cars go by? The same sort of attraction, do you think? Everybody wants to be in on it from a distance I suppose, to be in on what's going on and the action.

Mr. Sparks: It probably did. And they started in wanting to be by the side of the road in the early days. They're getting to where now they're trying to get as far from it as they can, a little too much traffic. The problem now is what are we going to do with automobiles.

Mrs. Sparks: One thing that I failed to mention and I think it's rather interesting. As . . . talking about sitting out and watching transportation go by. As a little girl I used to sit out on our back steps and count the flatcars going by filled with rocks to build the jetties at Port Aransas. And that was really fascinating to me. I mean they were . . . they were carrying flatcar after flatcar loaded with these rocks. And I knew because my mother had told me that they were taking them down to build the jetties out at Port Aransas or Tarpon Island we called it then because that was the name at that time.

Dr. Stephens: What kind of rock?

Mrs. Sparks: Oh, they were . . . they were just big rocks, the ones that are down there on the jetties now. I've forgotten . . . what . . . what kind

. . . they were rock I think from around Marble Falls or . . . anyway . . .

Mr. Sparks: Granite rocks for the most part, red granite.

Dr. Stephens: Granite from Marble Falls . . . they brought them from there?

Mr. Sparks: Yes, granite rocks to make the jetties.

Dr. Stephens: The same rocks that went into the state capitol.

Mr. Sparks: I think they were the same rocks that the state capitol of Texas was built out of.

Mrs. Sparks: Sometimes one would fall off a flatcar and then some enterprising somebody would paint a sign on the rock. I remember that there was a real estate man named R. R. Redus and his Redus Land Company was on that rock for a long time on the side of the railroad where everybody could see it.

Dr. Stephens: Did anybody paint "Jesus Saves?"

Mrs. Sparks: No, not then.

Mr. Sparks: They weren't trying to get saved then (chuckle). But those rocks . . . the reason they didn't move the rocks was because they weighed two or three tons. And at that time they didn't have these derricks on these trains and flatcars to pick them up. And there was just . . . the just . . . the rock wasn't worth the trouble it would cause to pick it up, the labor that it would take to pick it up.

Mrs. Sparks: Snakes were quite a common denominator in our day. And one night we were eating supper and we heard this terrible hissing sound. Well, we didn't live too terribly far from the railroad and thought it was some big engine letting off steam because those were steam engines you know. So we listened and we couldn't figure and we

couldn't figure and finally we went out in the backyard, I don't know what made us do this, and under the house was a great big snake and there was a cat charming the snake. And it jumped from one side to the other and the snake was so upset and so confused that it was hissing. But it was . . . the snake . . . I mean the cat had practically hypnotized it so that it couldn't move. Now you can believe it or not but this is . . . this is the truth.

Dr. Stephens: Did you have many snakes bother you when the country was new?

Mrs. Sparks: Oh, yes. I think I've already said my father always carried a gun so he could shoot a snake if he saw it, you know, going across the road or around our house as he came in.

Dr. Stephens: Did you have any close calls?

Mrs. Sparks: Oh, no. I don't know why but I never did. Except one time I went out--and I think I've told this--I went out to feed the horses and chickens and there was a bunch of kafir corn in the feed bin and there was a snake out there, but I didn't really get that close to it.

Dr. Stephens: Did you know of any children who got bitten?

Mrs. Sparks: Yes, I did. There was a little girl out at White Point was out playing and got bitten. However, they saved her but the doctor had to do some quick first aid.

Mr. Sparks: The case she's talking about, the doctor . . . I heard the doctor tell my father, because the family were good friends of ours, that the snake was so large that . . . and he bit the little girl on her thigh (the large part of her leg) and as where the bottom fangs went in and the top fangs went in he measured by putting his thumb

on one and his fingers on the other, the snake was that large. And the girl . . . the girl had a terrific time getting over it. But there were worlds of snakes. The . . . my family would shoot them out in the yard and right in front of the door every once in a while, large rattlesnakes. That was back when we moved into Sinton. In 1911 Sinton was a small town. And at the same time, why, it might be of interest to say that the coyotes would come up in our yard sometimes at night and various kinds of wild animals went through there, just a wild area. I can remember shooting doves and snakes and various things where the present San Patricio County Courthouse in Sinton is located today right in the heart of the city. But that was a jungle in the wilds when we moved there. Very careful about going into it.

Dr. Stephens: Did you have any hunters from San Antonio to come down?

Mr. Sparks: I don't think so except for duck hunting. They came down for duck hunting and goose hunting. But as far as deer and quail and doves and those things were concerned, they could get them right closer to where they were, close to San Antonio. Of course, the ducks were coming down into the waters and the duck hunters came down. But outside of that was about the only hunters.

Dr. Stephens: You mentioned White . . . White's Point. What did you use for fuel before the gas was discovered there? And what revolutionary change came about for fuel purposes after the . . . was it White's . . .

Mrs. Sparks: White Point.

Dr. Stephens: . . . White Point.

Mr. Sparks: White's Point, you got it right. It was White's Point.

Dr. Stephens: White's Point.

Mr. Sparks: Not White Point, named after . . . you hear most the people talk today about White Point, but it was White's, a man's name, a Mr. White. And he called it White's Point. And . . .

Dr. Stephens: What was the revolutionary change in the fuel?

Mr. Sparks: Well, up till we got gas, why the . . . as I said a while ago, we just used wood, mesquite and oak wood--mostly mesquite. You cut that up. And outside of that we had coal oil heaters. And the first gas that came into Sinton, I think was about 1920, . . . in the early '20's, the very early '20's. And my father and Roy Jackson in connection with W. L. Moody, III, and Ottie Seagraves from Galveston. Mr. Moody and Mr. Seagraves were very wealthy people. And they came down and contacted my father and Roy Jackson in Sinton. And they formed the Sinton Gas Company and the Robstown Gas Company and piped gas in from White's Point and around in that area into each of these two towns. And they operated them for several years and then sold them to . . .

Mrs. Sparks: United Gas.

Mr. Sparks: No, I don't remember the name of who they first sold them to, but they changed hands a number of times and then finally ended up as United Gas. But they changed hands several times during that era.

Dr. Stephens: Did most people hook on to the gas lines?

Mr. Sparks: Yes, I think . . . in my recollection that everybody that had the money got on it because he was tired of chopping wood.

Mrs. Sparks: We used to worry . . . they used to worry about running out of wood. I remember hearing my mother say, "Wonder what they'll do when they

run out of wood." We used coal oil and gasoline. We had a gasoline cookstove which my mother preferred to wood but, boy, was it ever dangerous. I remember once or twice that it almost exploded and we carried some part of it out in the yard to keep the house from getting on fire. But it was . . . it was a nice cooking stove but it had its hazards even more than kerosene. Kerosene . . .

Mr. Sparks: Was it gasoline?

Mrs. Sparks: Yes, it was gasoline.

Mr. Sparks: Yes, there were a number of gasoline cookstoves. My mother had one. Everybody was . . . people used them to get away from the wood . . . having to cut wood and all the work that brought on. But it was always a kind of fearsome process to everybody, I think, waiting for one of them to blow up. And a few of them did, not too many. But carelessness would do it is all.

Mrs. Sparks: Oh, let me answer. One thing that I thought was real interesting and I don't . . . haven't heard of it in ages, but there was something that came out called a Fireless Cooker. Have you ever heard of that? And my mother was just simply carried away with this innovation. At night she would prepare, for instance, oatmeal and put it in her Fireless Cooker. She'd heat the bricks or heat the the round stone things and put it in the Fireless Cooker. It was well insulated. In the morning the oatmeal would be ready. And this was very . . . particularly good on a winter morning when it was very cold to get up and . . . and the oatmeal would be ready for breakfast without having to build up a fire. And she thought

this was just great stuff. In fact she was always out eager for something new to happen. She would have really thrived in this day and age.

Dr. Stephens: Was the Waters-Pierce Oil Company active in this part of the country?

Mrs. Sparks: What?

Dr. Stephens: For kerosene? The Waters-Pierce Oil Company? The one that . . . the one that Senator Joe Bailey was involved with?

Mrs. Sparks: I don't remember.

Mr. Sparks: I don't remember. I remember Joe Bailey running for office but I . . . for governor I believe it was but I don't remember about that. Ice was just practically unknown. It was an unknown quantity. We didn't have any ice. And the only ice we had was, early days back there, why, some . . . somebody would bring in a freight car load of ice in 300 pound cakes and sell it. Cut it up there at the car. You'd drive down there to the railroad car on the siding and buy the ice you wanted. Well, that car load of ice couldn't last very long. It was badly melted by the time it got there. They didn't have the good refrigerated cars they have today. So it didn't last many days. But while it was there everybody had ice cream and ice tea and they . . . all we lived on was something that was made out of ice. And it was a big time while the ice lasted. And then that car was used up. Why the enterprising citizen that promoted it would wait until the enthusiasm died down and everybody was getting ice hungry and then bring in another car. And they'd bring in two or three cars of that ice every summer and it was a great thing for the ice cream and sherbet and ice tea. They just went hog wild

over ice tea.

Mrs. Sparks: The first year we were there I heard my mother say there was . . . that she had no ice for that first year, from the fall of 1908 to the fall of 1909. I don't know really since she loved good food and comfortable food how she survived. But she made a big joke of it. We used to shoot rabbits off the front porch of the first place. We camped out for about five weeks out for about a mile from town that even the floor . . . I can remember it, too. Even the floor wasn't finished. And she'd . . . we'd sweep . . . she'd sweep the dirt over to the edge and there'd be cracks where the dirt would fall down. And we moved finally into a great big room at the back of the . . . one . . . a big room at the back of the Coleman-Fulton Pasture Company building and she used one little cubbyhole for a dressing room, the other one for a kitchen. And she had all kinds of company but she managed by screening the place off. And Mr. Joseph Green used to just laugh every time he'd come there about how ingenious she was. And he showed his new wife, at that time Mrs. May Green was, how clever mother had managed to arrange this. And when we had company, sometimes she'd put these office chairs together and put a mattress on it for the children to sleep if she had overnight guests. And . . . and as I say, she'd have screens all around it and little corners so that people would have a certain amount of privacy. We lived that way all that . . . all that winter and had scads of company, I don't know (chuckle) and as I say, she fried rabbits and cooked dove. We had lots of game and, of course, I don't remember that we had too much fresh

meat or fresh vegetables, but we managed to live and have a good time. It was real fun.

Mr. Sparks: I can sit . . .

Mrs. Sparks: No, I'll sit back here.

Mr. Sparks: I can't help but think that . . . why it is today that with the many conveniences we have in our home, this a completely electric home, complete throughout, washing machine, dry . . . dryers, disposals, air conditioning (your temperature is just like we want), intercom, music all over the house, electric doors to raise the garage . . . to open the garage doors and television and radios throughout the house and electric floor cleaners, vacuum cleaners and all those things; I wonder why we would have any complaint today. 'Cause Lyra and I were raised up in an era . . . what brings this on is what she was just saying. Where we . . . our mothers and fathers and ourselves, we weren't raised up with a single convenience. There wasn't any convenience. Water wasn't piped into the house even. Every drop of water we got in the house we had to go draw it out of the cistern or pump it out of a hand pump and bring it in in a bucket.

Mrs. Sparks: We had . . . we had it piped in in our house early. We had it piped in . . . in our house where we moved after a year and we had one of the first bathtubs in town. Mr. Green had built this house and he built a bathroom and my father . . . we were the proud possessers of a tin bathtub with claw hands, you know, one of those old fashioned things. Oh, we were so proud of that. Of course, that was all that was in there, just . . . just the bathtub. But we had it.

Mr. Sparks: You know you . . . before she butted in on this and wore me out of it, I didn't finish talking. There were just . . . there were . . . the hardships in those days were tremendous comparable as to what we have today and I'm doing more belly-aching about today than I did back in those times. I didn't mouth about it then. Actually, in those days we didn't have a telephone. If we wanted to get a doctor if somebody got bad sick why one of the family ran down to get the doctor. And actually there . . . there wasn't any convenience. As I said, the only water you got you carried in. There wasn't . . . if you swept the house out, you did it with a broom. And, actually, a . . . a screen on a window was something that very few people had. Very few people had screens . . . windows with screens on them. You just, when it got hot, raised the windows up and the insects and the squirrels and everything else came in. And when it got cold, you pulled them down. And today the way of living when you turn a button on the wall to get the kind of air . . . the temperature . . . the desired temperature and it's not right to the degree, why they get all worked up about it. And I . . . I don't know. As I look back on those early days with the things that the . . . privations and all we had and everybody was happy. They were just as happy then as they are now. There wasn't any difference. Of course, that goes on back to the Indians when they didn't have anything and they were just as happy. So I don't know what it's all about. I don't even know . . . don't know the answers, but it's to the point I don't know the questions any more (chuckle).