

Start Time: 1:44

Yazmin Soto

Stephanie Montalvo

Jessica Tanguma

Location: Hidalgo County Irrigation District 1

1904 N. Expressway 281, Edinburg, Tx

Mr. George Carpenter transcript

With Rusty McDaniel and Mrs. Estella

Stephanie: Now uh since we're on the topic of parties and gathering with the Fikes, do you remember more or less where they would take y'all to have like these gatherings with their family? Is it on their property that they own today?

Mr. Carpenter: Do what now?

Stephanie: The party place where y'all said they cleared out,

Mr. Carpenter: Oh yeah they owned it

Stephanie: Is it where they currently live?

Mr. Carpenter: It's not where their house is, no. It's another piece of property they have north of San Carlos.

Stephanie: North of San Carlos,

Mr. Carpenter: I forget what road it's on. (Clears throat)

Stephanie: Okay. Now um, first and foremost, since we're here with the Irrigation District, we would like to know what exactly you do for the region.

Mr. Carpenter: For the Region?

Stephanie: Yes, like uh mission statement or description.

Mr. Carpenter: If it wasn't for the irrigation district you wouldn't have anything down here.

Stephanie: Okay.

Mr. Carpenter: Virtually because this was just brush country before the irrigation districts came in. Of course, I was (clears throat) not quite born yet but I just remember my mother- my grandparents came down here in 1915 in North McAllen at Daffodil was still in brush country. I remember them telling me that my grandad could step off the back steps and shoot a deer out the back – off the back porch of his property, or ducks in a pond back there. That's at Daffodil and 23rd Street.

Stephanie: Oh!

Jessica: That's where my sister lives.

(Laughter)

Stella: I think the main priority of the irrigation district is to work with the farmers, to help the farmers, let them irrigate. Now it is mostly municipalities because it is so urbanized.

Mr. Carpenter: Yeah it used to be, you know...

Stella: It was strictly farmers.

Mr. Carpenter: The economy used to be primarily based on agriculture down here, way back. That's what got it all going. Now I think it's primarily retail.

Stephanie: Okay, and has that transition from retail um, like to retail-commercial, has that affected the, I guess, work that you all do?

Mr. Carpenter: Well, sure because we have much less farm land. The city is gradually taking over the farm land, and uh and so that means there is less farming, less agriculture (clears throat) when after college a few years away, and I came back in 1960..62 to start farming on my own, all up and down business 83 there were fresh vegetable packing sheds just one after another, after another, after another (clears throat), and uh that's whose marketing everything too: tomatoes, carrots and cabbage and everything and uh that continued, and uh I guess they still have quite a bit but it has all moved out north now. There is still quite a bit on the river.

Rusty: You can see them on the river out north, yeah.

Mr. Carpenter: But even that is being pushed farther east because of the Pharr international bridge and all of the development down there, tremendous development down that way and so all that used to be farmland I used to farm property way down on the river myself, (clears throat) and uh all the way up here but yeah it has changed tremendously, and it affects the water district because the water district income comes from pumping and delivering water. We don't sell the water, the water belongs to the district, but it is allocated to the landowners, and uh they're not, they're going to pay the district. We speak of it as buying water, but it is not buying physical water, they're buying the service that we provide.

Stella: It's the delivery charge.

Stephanie: Yes, so um, how were the districts zoned and managed over the years?

Mr. Carpenter: Well I don't know about zones um best that I know most of the districts had their initial beginning with the land developer. Someone like John Shary out in Sharyland would come down. He'd buy 20, 30 thousand acres of land. They would clear the land, he would put in irrigation system and then sell the land. Hopefully for a profit after putting in all the irrigation. Cause it was irrigation that made the land valuable. Because without the irrigation, it's just native grass and that's it. (Clears throat) And uh, I think the west part of this district was developed that way and now all of this part I don't know how all that came about but um, I don't think it was that way. I think that some farmers got together and formed the district I guess. I'm not, don't quote me on that because I really don't know but we are. We are a, don't we come under the statutes of, not a municipality but like a town, that comes out of the municipality statutes of the state of Texas. And we're governed by that very closely; we have a whole set of books down there just all the rules we have to go by.

Rusty: Yeah, we're a government entity just like the county, but we're a separate. A lot of people think we're a part of the county but we're not. We have our own board, and we do our own assessments and things.

Mr. Carpenter: But the board is elected by the land owners of the district (cough)

Stephanie: Good to know.

Mr. Carpenter: (Coughs) we have elections, what, every year?

Stella: Every two years.

Mr. Carpenter: Every two years, then.

Stephanie: And the board is still elected by the land owners? Still.

Stella: Mm-hm.

Mr. Carpenter: Sure is, and then one of your questions had to do with how Mr. Fike president for whatever. Well the landowners elected him to the board. Then the board elects the officers of the board. Whether its president, Vice president, secretary, treasurer or whatever.

Stephanie: Okay, thank you. How uh, how much land does the Irrigation District Board service in terms of acreage?

Mr. Carpenter: Now when you say service, let's qualify some things. As an Irrigation District, originally as my understanding was about thirty-two thousand, thirty-three thousand maybe. Stella was thinking it might have been a little bit more.

Stella: We started with thirty-four thousand.

Mr. Carpenter: But that's the outside boundaries. Now, originally it was all irrigation but then (inaudible) the cities need water. Like Edinburg, Edinburg does not have pumping facilities down on the Rio Grande River. Originally, this district was the one that serviced the whole city of Edinburg with water from the Rio Grande river so that became Municipal Water then north Alamo Water comes along and serves a lot of the, a lot of the countryside folks with potable water and they needed water, so we provided water for them. Then Sharyland water supply comes along and the same story, so when you talk about how much territory you service, we think in terms of irrigation, see? But yet you're servicing potable to goodness gracious no telling what, I think doesn't North Alamo still have a straight line going clear to the gulf?

Rusty: Mm-hm.

(Inaudible)

Rusty: They're the biggest um water supply corporation in the state, I believe.

Mr. Carpenter: Yeah. But now

Rusty: Not volume but by size.

Mr. Carpenter: Now, the Hidalgo County irrigation district number two, I presume that they are supplying some of that. I don't know what we're doing now, I've been out of it too long.

Rusty: We still supply some to this plant over on Doolittle.

Mr. Carpenter: So that's what I mean, when you say service. Well, you know (inaudible) I guess you can say the charter, anyways. The purpose of the irrigation district originally was for the irrigation owner and they were allowed to take water, raw water not treated, put in in their systems and they would treat it themselves. And that's what I grew up on, all of us did. Just plain ole canal water... so anyway, that's what it was. Then Sharyland water, North Alamo water, the rural water supply corporation coming along and uh and they began to provide the potable water, treated water, city water, municipal water, anything you want to call it but anyway they put in their pipelines all over the countryside, clear out to McCook all over the place. And so, they had to have a source for that water. They don't have pumps on the river either, so one of our irrigation districts has to pump the water and they can receive it out of our canal system wherever it is. They're receiving raw river water and then they process it just like the city does. The cities do the same thing.

Stephanie: That's something I didn't know. Now, our next question is uh, who chartered the Irrigation District Board?

Mr. Carpenter: Who?

Stephanie: (louder) who chartered the Irrigation District board? Does anybody have alike a record?

Rusty: Commissioners court down at Hidalgo County around 1922 or 21.

Stella: 1921, yeah.

(Inaudible)

Rusty: Yeah, we had to look all of that up a while back.

Mr. Carpenter: All I know is I got stuck on it, and enjoyed every minute of it.

Rusty: Commissioners Court here formed the district uh at the request of the farmers or the developer in 1921.

Stephanie: Wow

Mr. Carpenter: Is that right?

Rusty: Yeah, we have the document, she (gestures to Stella) has it.

Stephanie: Now um, did Mr. Willard Fike have any kind of engineering experience?

Mr. Carpenter: Not that I'm aware of, but I tell ya, most farmers are pretty sharp engineers on their own right, whether they have a degree or not. I don't know what his educational background is at all. I have no idea.

Stephanie: Well that's fine.

Stephanie: Okay and another question I have for you is um: does the irrigation district board do any kind of community engagement work or has it in the past or present?

Stella: Community engagement?

Stephanie: Community engagement like uh, I guess fundraisers, charity events or anything like that

Rusty: Probably not

Mr. Carpenter: I was kidding with Stella before you got here. I said, sure we do, we're going to talk to these girls!"

(Laughter)

Jessica: So, we're the first.

Stephanie: Awesome.

Stella: Being a government entity, we're not allowed to do like fundraisers, charity and all that.

Stephanie: None of that, okay.

Yazmin: Ok what was your relationship with the Fike family and how did you meet them?

Mr. Carpenter: I think I met them through the board when I was asked to come on the board. I think Mr. Fike was on the board "inaudible" that's that's the way you know we were never really close going to parties out families together, but, occasions we'd go to one of their grandkids weddings something like that you know; in fact Mrs. Fike joined us with a banquet the other night and so did Sam

Yazmin: Umm can you tell me more about like the umm the parties you go to how were they big small anything in particular

Mr. Carpenter: They would invite quite a few people over there in their BBQ place we'd be I don't know

Yazmin: What kind of Food?

Mr. Carpenter: 30-40 people out there I'd say, something, like that seems to be like friends, family, whatever

Mr. McDaniel: The thing I eat their BBQ they do there they even do or do they still the BBQ for the Livestock Federation Associate for the kids you know

Mr. Carpenter: I don't know if they do or not

Mr. McDaniel: They were, one time, the BBQ's and that type of think thing that I always impressed me of the Fike family, you know

Mr. McDaniel: They had four boys

Mr. Carpenter: One of these boys passed the thing that always impressed me working through the board you know I made contact with them was what seemed to be "noise" Well Mr. Fike had control no doubt about it. And but well they worked so well together as a family farm they hired very few people outside of their own family their grandkids got out there and irrigated and rode tractors and they did all of these and umm I don't know how farmers really divided up but I think each of the farmers owned different tracks of land and then they farm it all together I think that's

how I remember. That always impressed me you find so many times difficult for families to get along that really well.

Mr. McDaniel: They still do all their work

Mr. Carpenter: I'm sorry

Mr. McDaniel: I think they still do all their own work

Mr. Carpenter: I think so I think so

Mrs. Estella: Yeah, all their grandkids are in there now, uh huh what impressed me so much about them is far as the family is when one year when the son was going to get married but he was not married yet and they turned around and gave the future daughter in law I think it was 5 or 10 acres in her name and I was like Wow what families to that you know have ever done that before they were married

Yazmin: Very generous

Mrs. Estella: very generous I thought I was really impressed by that

Yazmin: Umm tell me more about the BBQ's how was the food do you remember do you know? What would they make? "Repeated the question twice"

Mr. Carpenter: I'm sorry

Yazmin: What would they make? "Repeated the question twice"

Yazmin: Umm tell me more about the BBQ's how was the food do you remember do you know? What would they make? "Repeated the question twice"

Mr. Carpenter: I'm sorry

Yazmin: What would they make? "Repeated the question twice"

Yazmin: Is there anything else you can tell us about the Fike family today?

Mr. Carpenter: Like I said I don't know them that well I couldn't name their grandkids or "Mrs. Estella repeats" especially grandkids and a couple of weddings some of them have seen me and know me but uuuhhh "Mrs. E giggles" I wonder who's this it has nothing to do with age you know it's just getting updated "everyone laughing" "mumbling"

Yazmin: Uhhh I guess that's it for

Jessica: that's fine

Mr. Carpenter: I don't think we're even allowed to spend taxpayer money on something like that.

Stella: No, no. Mm-hm.

Jessica: Not even something like an outreach program? To like let people know exactly what yall do or things like that because I know the public...

Rusty: We have such a, we don't really have a need for that uh we have a captive audience (laughter) you know the cities can't run away from us and we can't run away from them neither so all of our people, we don't need to advertise you know, now.

Jessica: Okay

Rusty: We work with people you know, we've donated some of our older facilities to the like the if you go to the museum you'll see stuff and things like that and work with people on history but as far as the kind of outreach you're talking about, you know not that we normally would do.

Mr. Carpenter: In a sense you have to work with all of them, even the people like magic valley electric and all of them, because they either cross our waterways or go along side of them or whatever. It's an uh network of pipelines and canals all over the whole area. So, a lot of it, the whole district owns and fees, a lot of it is easements that have permission to use.

Rusty: To give you an idea of kind of what expand on what he is doing the only thing facilities that are here before the irrigation districts were the railroads. And so, the only thing we run in to is when we have a problem with a railroad crossing or something, they always win because they were there first, Rusty: ...and it is usually their property. But anybody else, even the road ways. Most of these road ways were put down irrigation lines. You know, like farms and so the districts have been here so long that...

Mr. Carpenter: And most of them that cross the canals wherever, the roads came after the canals.

Jessica: So, since I am working on the nature aspect of this, what kind of effects would a drought have on the Irrigation District? Cause I know we've a couple of droughts in the past, and--.

Mr. Carpenter: Well, I won't call it devastating, but it was very, very difficult from numerous aspects. Number one if you don't have water, then (clears throat) our finances are down to nothing almost. Cause like I said we have a flat rate tax, but then the rest of the revenue has to come from the, we say, the sale of water or the service of water is a better term. But then that's just a part of it, because now you don't have water for the farmers to raise their crops and there's a lot of stress involved on both sides, because farmers are desperate for water and we can't deliver it or maybe we don't have enough water to deliver. And so now we got to figure how are we gonna allocate it to the farmers where it's as fair as we can.

Estella: You may want to mention how we get our water. How much water we get, it's not like you can take all of it from the river. You're given a certain amount of water from the water masters office.

Mr. Carpenter: Yeah, you're probably aware of it, but we have what they call the Rio Grande water master, and they keep track how much water comes into the Falcon dam and how much is flowing out to the irrigation districts and whatever evaporation, and everything that goes with it. And then from there, monthly or periodically, as they have inflows and they have enough to where they can divide it up among all the districts they service all the districts here in the valley then they will allocate so much based on acres that the district serves. So sometimes you don't have really enough to service all the acres. So that's what happens in a drought, the farmers necessarily have to cut back. For example, I don't know what the Fike's have, but I always figure

12-14 hundred acres, whatever it is, but because there's a lack of water allocated per acre they might only have enough water to water one time on all of their acre. So if they want to raise a vegetable crop that gonna take three irrigations and some of them might have five or more. Then they say, "Wait a minute, we can't water everything, so all we can farm this year is 200 acres out of, for fun, 2000." And so they stack all their water from all their land on that one small lot, so at least they'll have some kind of crop. If they try to spread it out and water everything they can't raise a crop, not down here because we don't have enough rainfall that is dependable.

Jessica: So, do invasive species like the Mexican giant cane or hydria, do they have an impact on the canal or any other services--

Mr. Carpenter: I'm sorry I missed the first part.

Jessica: Do invasive species, like I know we have giant canes, the Arundo.

Rusty: The Arundo

Mr. Carpenter: don't know what you're doing with that.

Rusty: Now we were lucky enough that we have turned over most of our drainage ditches and things to the county, so they are fighting the Arundo problem not us. But George, in the past took care of the hydria problem. Our district was terrible with it in the early 2000s. What they discovered is there's a type of fish, a grass carp, and I think you were the first district to bring them in, and we have maintained them over a course of about the last 10 years we haven't had any more hydria problems, so that's a biological control that has been great. He tells me story about animals running across, it was so thick little animals could run across it.

Mr. Carpenter: The flow of water in the canals was terrible, and you couldn't get water down the canal because it was all grown up. And it grows right up to the surface of the water. And not telling how many thousands and thousands of dollars and hours of excavator cleaning out the canals. Finally we heard about this grass carp and we got our information from Texas A&M aquatic department and all that, and they even sent a couple fellows down and worked with us showed us what to do and how to do it and ordered up the carp and everything. And so then we ordered some and we started putting them in the canals. And something kind of funny, I'll never forget-- behind the echo hotel that canal coming through there is one of our canal. I was driving down the canal bank back over there one day and there was, oh there must have been 10 or 15 big old carp. We bought them when they were about a foot long, these things were that big. They were laying on their side on top of that hydria in the water, just chomping like hogs at a trough and I thought if that's not the funniest sight you ever saw. But they did their job they cleaned out the canals over time. They sure did.

Rusty: The surprising thing it hasn't really come back. They, I guess, ate enough of it off, close enough to the dirt.

Mr. Carpenter: it's their favorite food.

Jessica: So does, your district include any place that provide ecotourism? Like birding site, butterfly spots?

Rusty: We're right next to the McAllen birding deal, it's not a part of our site.

Jessica: Oh wait, which birding site?

Rusty: The one off of old 83, that new one.

Jessica: I work there, the McAllen nature center

Rusty: That's us, we own that property right there

Mr. Carpenter: The botanical gardens?

Rusty: Yeah, the botanical gardens they are really fixing up nice.

Mr. Carpenter: That used be a pumping station

Jessica: Yeah, we've seen pictures of an old pump house.

Rusty: That pump out there used to be there.

Mr. Carpenter: That part of the district I'm almost certain was developed like I said by a land developer. He had a pump down close to Hidalgo some place, I don't know if I've ever been to the old site. But anyway, water came north up to that point, but people don't realize that we call this the Rio Grande valley it's actually a delta it's not a valley. You pump the water out of the Rio Grande River and it runs away from the river not back to it. But then in our case, all up and down most like this area the whole waters that way up to at least this upper end. Then we have what we call the second lift, we have to pump it a second time. That set of pumps there was our second lift pumps we had to lift it some more in order to get it flowing further north. Once you got it on that second ridge then it would flow. What we pump out at Penitas now, well first let me back up, I think it was 1925 wasn't it that the engineer by the name uh--

Rusty: Yeah he's in all the minutes.

Mr. Carpenter: It's a famous name, anyway there was an engineer, and it's on the tip of my tongue. Anyway, he proposed the district to eliminate the cost of pumping the same water twice, because it's expensive to pump big volumes of water, I mean you use a lot of fuel, whether it be diesel, natural gas, electricity, or whatever it is, it's still costly. And he suggested we move the pump system on the river way up so you only had to pump it once and it gravity all the way down. So I think, in about 1925, as I remember reading back. Was that Rockefeller? It was another famous guy, he was the engineer whoever he was. And so that canal comes all the way from Penitas now and once they pump it through it can gravity all the way to the Gulf of Mexico.

Stephanie: Ingenious.

Rusty: But if he'd of moved how many miles 4 or 5 miles downriver, I mean up river we would have never had that pump. It's because of that, if you read the old history, because that's where the ridge that runs through the valley starts in Penitas, so you would have had to pump onto the ridge, I guess to get it-- if the river was higher we never would have had to pump. It's pretty interesting, I think it was like I said an engineering problem to get it back up the ridge or something. It's kind of same as the railroad, you notice there's a railroad down there, that's the ridge that comes all the way through the valley there's a certain Jessica: So how does the Irrigation district deal with water conservation, because I know our water tends to evaporate really quickly down here?

Mr. Carpenter: Anything we do is try to conserve it, I don't know what the price tag is, but you're spending an awful lot of money behind my house right now.

Rusty: For last 6 or 7 years, every year we've had a project either putting canal into pipelines or like behind George's house over there it's a big project through the swift loans of the water development board and that project is lining a canal because it's much cheaper. You still have evaporation, but you don't have any seepage; it's a liner with cement on top and were gonna come all the way across eventually all the way across to Jackson road all the way south through Edinburg so we're very active in trying to identify the areas that are going to be in service the longest, and going to have the most leaks and things in them and getting that fixed. But that pretty hard because the cities don't like to pay much for water. They pay us 17 cents per thousand gallons and they charge the homeowner your know up to 2 dollars about a thousand or something like that. Anyway the Rio Grande has real cheap water, and so it's pretty hard to get enough water --

Mr. Carpenter: I don't how many miles of pipelines you put in before that.

Rusty: Yeah, we're always improving

Mr. Carpenter: Almost continuously.

Jessica: A main topic we talked about this semester was hurricane Beulah, were yall here at the time hurricane Beulah--

Mr. Carpenter: Don't get me started on Beulah.

Jessica: How did effect the irrigation district or you as a farmer? Ridge and our main canal and railroad kind of intertwine all along that area.

Jessica: What are some other uses canals provide to the region? I know people use them for fishing even though--

Rusty: Well we don't allowing fishing

Jessica: Even though they're not supposed to.

Rusty: We provide on this side of the valley, a lot of the irrigation districts now provide significant portions of the water they pump goes to municipals, to the cities because of all the housing and stuff. In fact monetarily, several of the districts make more money off the cities than the farmers anymore. But in reality, in the past there's been little drainage into some of the canals, most of that has been stopped because of the new drainage ditches and things like that. It's because of the times, we had some real serious talks with Pan American, at the time, and city of Edinburg to put a hiking and biking trail that would connect all the way to Second Street from Pan American go down all the way to Jackson and use our canal, because people love to walk next to water. But nobody could take on the liability of something happening there and so when you cross roads you can't count on people stopping and looking, and you would have to build bridges over to make that work, and so it never worked out.

Mr. Carpenter: Now district 2, if you've been up and down Second Street and you see that nice corridor there for walking and bicycling, and I'm sure it still belongs to irrigation district number 2, but that's underground pipeline and so they've got some agreement with the city to where the city can beautify and use it and all that.

Rusty: It would be very hard today to get that done because of the issues, the liability, and road crossing and things like that it's huge.

Jessica: I guess my last question would be do you see different species of birds during migrations seasons stop at canals or fields close by to those canals?

Rusty: With all the trees there probably is, but I don't know.