

**Oral History Interview of
Ron Sosebee**

**Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson
August 1, 2016
Lubbock, Texas**

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Transcript Overview:

This interview features Ron Sosebee as he discusses the Range and Wildlife Management college at Texas Tech University. Sosebee clarifies what propelled him towards Texas Tech, the college's history, and the future of the Range and Wildlife Management college.

Length of Interview: 01:18:40

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Andy Wilkinson (AW):

I think—let me say—now that we've got this on—first, that this is the first day of August, isn't it? [laughter]

Ron Sosebee (RS):

Yes it is.

AW:

Of 2016.

RS:

August one.

AW:

The summer disappearing, and I wish the heat would disappear with it.

RS:

Yes, me, too.

AW:

Andy Wilkinson here with Dr. Ron Sosebee in his office, and we're going to be talking—finish—or continuing our interview from the last time. Today we're going to be talking mainly about his career here at Texas Tech. We've just been—before we got the recording turned on, we were talking about the history of the department that he is a very important part of creating a written history of it. And also, we noted or we discussed that he'd given me his CV last time we were here, so we have that for the file. So the dates and times are—we don't have to worry a lot about that. So I thought this morning if you could just talk a little bit about the sort of the non-date kind of history of your work here. What propelled you here? We touched on that in the first interview, but maybe recap that a little bit. And then I think one of the things that's important to, not only me in getting to hear your story, but will be important for people to listen to, is your take on how the department has changed and why. And then I think maybe if we could finish up by getting your point of view about what's the future like for the department. I think those are things that will be—although we're not expecting to have a crystal ball [laughter]. But if you do have one I've got some questions for you. [laughter] So anyway, let's go back. Just recap real quickly how you got here at Texas Tech.

RS:

Well that, and in at least in my opinion, is an interesting story. As I was finishing up my doctorate at Utah State, I was actually in botany there with the intention of ultimately getting back into range science with a more basic understanding of plant physiology and also plant

ecology. My advisor told me that if I wanted a job in range science I needed to go to the Society for Range Management meetings, which that year were in Calgary, Canada. And I did. And there weren't but two jobs available at that time, this being one of them. I had the opportunity to visit with most of the faculty who were here then who were at the meeting. This happened to be late January. And as things materialized through the summer that was the beginning of the major brush line item that we received from state funding. The original—

AW:

“We” being?

RS:

We Texas Tech.

AW:

Texas Tech, yeah.

RS:

Not just Texas Tech. The line item was designated brush, swine, vegetables—brush and weed, swine, and vegetable research program. So it came to the college. We in the department got half of that line item, and swine and vegetables divided the other half. The original line item was funded in 1967 at only a fraction of what it was funded in 1969. So that was the beginning of really the development of the department. It was in 1967 that the department expanded and added two or three faculty, and they only had three faculty to start with. And in 1969 when the other funding became available the department added three more faculty—I being one of them. And so it was from that funding that we actually began the real program in the department. The department became autonomous January 1, 1969.

AW:

And in “department” you mean range?

RS:

It was range and wildlife at that time. It was part of agronomy prior to that time. It was an option within agronomy, but operated separately. One of Dr. Thomas's goals when he became dean here in 1958 was actually to establish a range program. He being a range person himself, and had actually been experimentation director at A&M, and was in charge of the Barnhart station and so forth. John Hunter had actually started a wildlife program along with the range courses when they were still in agronomy, and so when the department became autonomous—separate from agronomy—it became the Range and Wildlife Department. And that was our major emphasis, is habitat orientation. Which actually separated us from other wildlife programs. Most wildlife programs cross country are primarily wildlife biology. We became a wildlife habitat oriented

program, primarily funded from the state line item of '67. And then with the major funding occurring in 1969.

AW:

Could I interject just a moment? One of the things that seems interesting to me is—and of course there's always the question in my mind as an outsider as to where does biology and arts & sciences stop and agriculture start? [laughter] You know? But that seems especially interesting when you're talking about wildlife. So the notion just seems to me like an obvious notion is that something that you would do over here would be looking at habitats, but you were saying that that was a fairly unique kind of thing?

RS:

Yes. It was and still is unique in the sense that the habitat approach deals with where the animal lives in terms of cover, food, water, protection.

AW:

Reproduction? All of that?

RS:

Reproduction. All of that. Certainly wildlife biology is a major player in that, but wildlife biology, per se, looks strictly at, as a general rule, the biology of the organism. Rather than where the organism actually lives and what the environmental situations are that they best can live in. And so that was the approach that we took, because at least in the southwest, and really we could say anywhere, wildlife live on rangelands or in forested communities, and we happen to be in a rangeland state. And so that was our approach. And we integrated—fortunately I got to be a part of the development of the department almost from its inception. I didn't get here until October first of that year. So I wasn't here when it actually was inaugurated, but shortly thereafter. And so the emphasis was, we will integrate the range program and the wildlife program so that the wildlife students will take range courses and the range students will take wildlife classes. And everybody who came out would have an understanding of both range and wildlife in a real habitat situation. And that made our students unique. They got preferential treatment when it came to jobs because of that. Particularly those jobs in applied areas. A number of our students went to work then, and a number still do, go to work for federal and state agencies as wildlife biologists, range scientists or range conservations. So that's been—that was where we came from. The line item provided a focus for the department. Since we are not part of the land grant system, we basically depend on outside funding. Our outside funding, very fortunately, came from the line item. And for twenty plus years the line items accorded the department, and provided a focal point for everybody to be aiming in one direction. Although, obviously, security and extramural funding from other sources was not discouraged, but it did provide us a focus point.

AW:

But it also strikes me that an integrated program like that would be very difficult to fund from the usual suspects in donors because it doesn't have a clear single focus. I mean if you're studying cotton there are a lot of people that won't put money into that. But if you're talking about integrating wildlife with range, and not only that we also don't—I mean it doesn't just pop into my head. A lot of people want to fund one or the other. And then when you're trying to put them both together it seems like that having that source of funding would be really critical. Is that correct?

RS:

That is correct. And it is difficult to get funding for those kind of projects. Most of these are funded through USDA ARS installations. Like the Jornada Experimental Range, the Southern Great Plains Experiment Station in Woodward, Oklahoma, and there are a number of others scattered throughout the country. Some of which have been closed, unfortunately. But they are the ones who can do long term research and the integrated concept whether we're talking about range and wildlife, grazing management. Doesn't really matter. The umbrella under which we operated within the brush and weed control program was really quite broad, but it all came to a focal point in putting all of this together in some kind of an integrated fashion. But we actually studied various aspects of wildlife, we studied various aspects of brush control, weed control, livestock nutrition, grazing management. We later added an aquatics part of our program early on, and incorporated some fisheries management for particularly the wildlife majors, for whom that enhanced their opportunities as a wildlife biologist in getting jobs. Even though we're up here on the southern High Plains where we don't have a lot of—

AW:

Don't have many rivers. [laughter]

RS:

No. Not too many rivers. Not any that are perennial. So we're looking—not really anything other than lakes and stock tanks. But still it's a very important aspect of the habitat for wildlife even and range management.

AW:

When I was a kid growing up my dad had a boat. We lived here in Lubbock. And people would say, "What in the world are you doing with a boat?" And his reply was, "We're in the center of all the boating in Texas. Five hundred miles in either direction, and there we are." So yeah, we do have that. How long—was it just instantly that potential students out there in the world looked at Texas Tech and went, "Wow, this is something different. I want to go there." Or did it take a time to build up a reputation or the knowledge of what was going on here?

RS:

Some of both. Dr. Wright and Dr. Dahl had actually been hired with the monies that were funded in 1967. Both outstanding individuals. Outstanding range people. One of the strong emphases within the department was a range plant identification team. And the Society for Range Management has always had a plant identification contest. Winning that for the students was a major accomplishment. And if you won it three years in a row you got to keep the traveling plaque. Well as it turns out, John Hunter had coached the range plant team and then Joe Schuster coached the range plants team. They had produced winning teams. When Dr. Wright came he inherited the team, and the range plant team began to basically dominate. We actually have either two or three traveling plaques that have been retired within the department. And we had students who actually scored a thousand on the contest, and that—In fact, some of our students got opportunities to go to graduate school because of their performance on the range plant identification team. They weren't particularly our best students. They were good students, but they were middle-class students. And yet that got them the opportunity. And so that actually enhanced our ability to attract other students. When we first got the major land—major brush line item in 1969 it was a scramble, initially, to get a program started. And so we were looking for anybody who was interested in going to graduate school who would be willing to come here. And from that then we were able to build a program and attract top quality students. By virtue of the nature of the project, where we didn't have to worry about it disappearing next legislative session. Although that was certainly always a possibility, but not a very strong probability. We were able to engage in some long term research projects, which you can't get funded usually by any other means. And so by doing that then we built a major program in fire, in brush and weed control, in grazing management, in habitat management for wildlife. And so we attracted a lot of students over the years for that. When that money ultimately disappeared—the focus for the department has not been on a single point. So now everyone is encouraged basically to get money wherever they can get money. That was never discouraged, but now that everybody gets money from wherever money is available to be gotten, obviously you don't have a central theme.

AW:

Right. You have a number of themes.

RS:

Exactly. And it makes it more difficult. And most of those are—I'm going to say—short term. Anywhere three, maybe five years and end of funding. Now we have been successful among our wildlife faculty to get Texas Department of TP&W [**Texas Parks and Wildlife**] to fund projects over the long haul. That's been very beneficial. We've reduced a number of students through that mechanism. Because of our habitat orientation we were able to secure the fisheries and wildlife research co-op unit on campus. Many years ago there was a co-op unit station at A&M, but for whatever reason it was dissolved. Texas did not have a co-op unit. But because of our habitat

orientation and because of some contacts that we had in Washington, D.C. we were able to regain that co-op unit.

AW:

Were those contacts—pardon me—were they political, or lobbying, or a national organization, non-profit?

RS:

How do I answer that? [laughter]

AW:

Carefully, probably. [laughter]

RS:

That's right. They were mostly by people we knew who had influence in Washington. And those people had contacts with, at that time, it was Fish and Wildlife Service who administered all of these. Through that avenue we were able to get the co-op unit. '88 or somewhere in there. I forget the years. And the co-op unit here, we had some input into who would actually be hired. Most co-op units have three faculty, or three scientist positions. We had requested two fisheries and one wildlife, because we needed help in our fisheries graduate degree program in order to basically have a bona fide graduate fisheries program, and one wildlife person. And that has been the case all along. We've been able to maintain that. Well that is another source of—I'll say—long term funding that's not usually available out there. And so those monies come through the—now it's I think they're housing the geological USGS [**United States Geological Survey**] unit. I'd have to go back to the history to look at that to be sure.

AW:

No, that's good enough.

RS:

That provides an avenue for graduate training. I'll say by law. Those faculty members cannot teach undergraduate classes unless it is a piggyback to a graduate class. The philosophy is that the Fish and Wildlife co-op unit faculty members should not be in a position to take a position that a regular faculty member—

AW:

Could have taken.

RS:

--would have in teaching undergraduate classes.

AW:

Got it.

RS:

But they do some of that with it's piggyback to a graduate class. But they certainly enhance—

AW:

When you say “piggyback” meaning it has a graduate number but you can—if you're an upper level student—you can take that class as part of your undergraduate?

RS:

As an undergraduate program, yes.

AW:

Got it. Yeah.

RS:

And that has certainly enhanced our fisheries program, and also the wildlife program. But we desperately needed it, because we aren't in a fisheries environment, per se. And that has been to our advantage. In late—well early nineties we actually were able to secure another major funding source. It was a bio solids, basically sewage sludge. That came to us. It's one of those situations that I'll say just happened. New York City had to have some place to go with this sludge. EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] had said by July 1st in 1992 there would be no more dumping in the ocean. There was a company out of Oklahoma that had put this together and they needed somewhere to go with this in a land application. But they also had a research component. EPA mandated that whoever got the contract must have a research component as part of that contract. Well, again, through some of our contacts who knew whomever we were able to secure those funding. From 1992 to—started out with a six year contract. Was extended for another six years, but only lasted three. The main company that we'd been working with sold, and the company to whom they sold did whatever they did with the money. In fact left us holding the bag. That was a project within the department that I had the opportunity to be the PI [**Principal Investigator**], and we had a number of faculty within our department as well as some in plant soil science, because it was incorporated soils, plants, water. And with some grazing management associated with this. We probably funded out of that thirty/thirty five graduate students over those six or eight years. A wonderful project, although it probably doesn't come across as the most desirable kind of thing to be working in. But it turned out to be a really good project. Trained a lot of graduate students and we also had a lot of undergraduates who worked with our graduate students and got additional training there as well. So it's those kind of things that have actually been to the benefit of the department. Even though I was a PI we had probably six or eight of our faculty members working on that project as well as plant soil science. It was

an integrated team effort. Again, with a central focal point—although everybody had their research within that. But it all was integrated to address a specific issue.

AW:

Yeah. Right. So this was another way of bringing the focus back from the different disparate projects.

RS:

Exactly. And when those monies dried up then basically we haven't been able to secure those in addition yet. We have been blessed within the department—extremely blessed within the department—to have a number of endowments. I guess one of the first endowments John Hunter started. Actually just provided scholarships for students, and then when John got married late in life, and then when he got married he and Katherine continued providing students. Finally they said, “You know. This is a hand to mouth operation. We ought to set this money up into some kind of endowment so that it can provide scholarships in perpetuity.” Well that was the beginning of our endowment program, and since then we've been able to secure—I'm going to say—a high number of endowments. Again partly from some of our students—former students, partly because of who we were. I could name you two or three endowments who just fell in our lap because we happened to be Texas Tech Range and Wildlife. As chairman one day I got a phone call. Said, “We have this donor who wants to contribute because their son—whom they lost—had a real passion for wildlife.” Well we didn't even know who they were, but they established an endowment, and it continues to go on today. We've had two or three incidences like that. One of our former students—he and his wife never had any children and he left us a significant portion of his estate, which is to fund undergraduates primarily, but also graduate students. We've most fortunate. And the department has a lot of money on paper. One of our faculty members said, “Yeah. We've got a lot of money.” Yeah, the department has a lot of money, but it's all dedicated. We have a lot of support for students and a lot of support for graduate students. All of these endowments, basically, are student oriented. We don't have any non-discriminatory funds or funds that can just be used in discretion. We do have a fund that, again, Professor Hunter and Dr. Wright started and others have added to it over the years to fund student participation in contests to get them to the national/international meetings. Provide travel. And again through our contracts originally Professor Hunter was able to contact an individual who's head of a foundation and that foundation provided travel support for a number of years for our students to go—at that time—privately arranged students to go to the SRM meetings where they could participate in the plant ID contest. So it's been through individual contacts, primarily, that we've been able to secure these kind of funds. And they have been most beneficial over all the years. Again, not being a land grant institution, our teaching loads are heavier than most. Especially if people employed at places with experiment stations. And we don't have the luxury of just hiring somebody to coach a plant team. We usually teach—we're bound by the state coordinating rule where everybody who's on full time teaching—which we all were—to teach an

x number of hours a year. Two long terms. Whereas those who actually work at a land grant institution are paid partially out of the experiment station, which eliminates then—they're not a full FTE [**full-time employee**] and so they only have to teach part time, and that then frees up some of their time. I don't begrudge that. I actually think we have as good a system as they do. Texas Tech is the largest non-land grant institution who offers a Ph.D. in the agricultural sciences. Our Ph.D. program in range and wildlife—well actually it was range management, initially—there were three that Dr. Thomas got started before he left as dean. Range management, Ag economics, animal science. And so from that then we've been able to expand and do Ph.D.'s in wildlife and Ph.D.'s in fisheries management. Now with the coordinating board's emphasis in the last few years—"Well you're not turning out enough students." We've actually now gone to the department of natural resources, where we now offer one degree with options. A natural resource degree in range and degree in wildlife, degree in fisheries. The same thing is true with the graduate degree program. I think right now we have probably around—I'm going to have to guess—sixty or seventy graduate students in the department. We started out with ten in 1969 and '70.

AW:

That sounds like a big graduate program. Is it?

RS:

It's pretty big. Now it has fluctuated over the years. Actually we have—it may not be quite that many, but I think we're close to sixty, anyway. Our undergraduate degree program has fluctuated. Influenced by a number of things. Vietnam War influenced. Job availability influences. So since I've been here in 1969 our undergraduate degree program has been up and down, up and down, up and down. We have about probably twenty-twenty five range management majors. Probably that many or so environmental conservation majors. More wildlife majors. Probably fifty or so wildlife majors. Sixty. Probably about twenty or so fisheries. There aren't that many range jobs out there and there are not that many wildlife jobs out there. In fact, one of our former colleagues who was where when I first came, Dr. Bowlen used to say, "Colorado State and Texas A&M can provide all the graduates for all wildlife degrees across the United States any given year." There'd be—shoot, I don't know—twenty to fifty to sixty thousand graduates in wildlife across the United States for five hundred jobs. I don't know how many. Anyway, way more wild lifers than there are jobs available. Now there's not that many actual active range programs training range students, and so there are lot of range jobs go wanting every year.

AW:

Oh really?

RS:

Yeah, especially with federal agencies. NRCS [**Natural Resource Conservation Service**], for instance, in Texas was not able to hire as many range people as they wanted. And of course their situation changes every year, because they won't have money and then all of the sudden they've got year-end monies. "Now we've got to hire as many as we can." Well the people aren't available. So their positions are up and down.

AW:

Yeah, I just finished—I was out all last week doing interviews with retired SCS [**Soil Conservation Service**] NRCS people. One of the things that struck me was that once they went to work for them they didn't leave.

RS:

Right.

AW:

So unless you expanded, your turnover for new people coming in was pretty low.

RS:

But those turnovers occurred in large numbers.

AW:

Yeah. Because a group would retire all at once.

RS:

All at once. And that's right. And that's where they had a hard time filling them. Well when I first came here, and one of the big debates at the range meetings every year was OPM [**Office of Personnel Management**] standards for a range conservationist.

AW:

What is OPM?

RS:

Office of Personnel Management. They're the ones who actually dictate qualifications for a range conservationist, a wildlife biologist, etcetera. Finally in 1980 it came to a head. Because, again, there weren't that many range people being hired and a lot of people who were being hired—especially by the Bureau of Land Management in the western states—were wildlife biologists who had no training in the habitat in which they would be working.

AW:

So they would come out of biology and not out of—

RS:

Or they came out—not necessarily biology, per se, but out of wildlife biology programs. And they had no concept, and so they had no knowledge working with a resource and the lessees who owned that lease. And finally it came to a head and said, “No we’ve got to do something different.” They began to tighten up the standards, and our students were always among the leaders in being able to meet those standards. And so our students never have any trouble getting jobs—either in range or wildlife. We probably had over the years 50 percent of our students would go on to graduate school.

AW:

50 percent?

RS:

Yeah, which was high.

AW:

Yeah, it is.

RS:

Probably ten percent would just go do whatever. I always said that’s okay. We had students who would go into family operations. Not too many went into ranching. Some did. Most of the ranchers send their kids to school to get a degree in business or Ag economics or animal science.

AW:

And I know TCU, didn’t they have a ranch management program—

RS:

They had a ranch management program.

AW:

--That generates a lot of—But as I recall it those people go there and then come right back to—

RS:

That’s generally true, yes. Now they will take a few who are outsiders, but they generally also have their place to go to. One of my advisees over the years actually went into business with his dad as a realtor. Well that’s okay. I’ve maintained that these students are better citizens because

they have a degree. And more of them would prefer to do something like that and be able to spend more time out in the real world where they could do whatever with wildlife.

AW:

And the other thing in this world is you know—even fifty years ago, but certainly a hundred years ago—the number of people in America who understood something about agriculture was a whole lot bigger part of the population than it is today. So the more of people that understand agriculture that are out in the world doing other things, the better we all are.

RS:

Exactly. That is exactly true. When I first came our student population within the department was primarily rural. Today almost none are rural. Most of them come from Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, Austin, San Antonio. Have essentially no rural heritage whatsoever.

AW:

If you counted on rural population, all these schools would dry up. We wouldn't have enough people.

RS:

Exactly. And that does present a problem because these kids who go back to work with, let's say, the National Resources Conservation Service. Even though they may have—I'll say—book learning, they don't have the hands on experience that a lot of them need. Simple things like opening a gate. [laughter] They don't understand that.

AW:

Or at least knowing to sit in the middle so you don't have to open the gate. [laughter]

RS:

That's exactly right! That's me.

AW:

Me too!

RS:

You know, it's simple things like that. They don't understand the lingo. We've tried. I think the department is trying again to establish an intern program to provide some of these kind of experiences. Other people are doing the same thing. Students will say, "We would like to have more hands on experience," but when it comes right down to it they feel the need to go out and work somewhere to make more money, so they have more money when they come back to college.

AW:

Yeah. You know one of the things that struck me about these older SCS people was the extraordinarily high percentage of them who worked summers as undergraduates for the SCS. So they were doing a couple of things. One is the SCS knew who they wanted to keep. And plus they decided—the students—if that's what they wanted. But when they got ready to go to work they really had some experience.

RS:

Exactly. And that's good and that still happens. In fact we have a student right now who is a really good student and he worked with Jullian at the center. Some of the native grass plantings that we did, and is a really good hand. Well he worked last summer with the NRCS as a trainee and this summer they send him to Fairfield. Well Fairfield's in the middle of piney woods. Some of our former students really got bent out of shape and went all the way to the state office. Said, "Why do you take a good range student and stick him over in the piney woods where he gets discouraged? Doesn't do anything with range?" Well I say that's not a terribly bad experience because he's going to be in other environments. In fact I called him here a while back—two or three weeks ago—and said, "Ernesto, keep your head up. Look at this as a real opportunity. It may not seem like that now, having to work out in the piney woods, but someday you'll look back and say, 'You know I understand the piney woods better than I would have had I not been there. And so my experience is broader than your experience.'"

AW:

That's also the thing that I heard from all those guys that were—spent their careers with SCS, is they moved them all over the place.

RS:

They did.

AW:

They'd go from the coastal bend to the Dakotas to the—you know? But not a one of them said they liked moving, but not a one of them said they didn't benefit from it. Which was pretty interesting to hear.

RS:

That's true. You can argue both sides of that. At that time the SCS's philosophy was—is—one, is they don't get too attached to a general location so that they can't move. And second is by moving them every two or three years—which they did—it did broaden their experience. On the other hand those that they allowed to stay developed real relationships with the ranchers and landowners and provided a real service that those who were only two or three years could not provide.

AW:

And especially the way they were working in those days, they're much more on the persuasive, informative, teaching and a whole lot less oriented toward, "Here are the rules and reg. of this program. I'll help you fill out the paperwork." And that sort of thing.

RS:

Right. And now that's a lot of what it is, is program-oriented and driven. Some of our students—in fact one of my graduate students was a really good undergraduate and a really good graduate student. His wife is from Marfa. I knew the guy who was a human resources person at that time at the SCS. He called up and asked about him. I said, "Sammy," I said, "Wayne is the kind of guy that wherever he wants to go you need to let him go there. You need to put him there." Well they put him in Marfa, which was Wayne's choice. Well he got to stay for a number of years. Well he developed a relationship with those guys that he could—and he was good, and he understood. Whatever Wayne said they bought lock, stock, and barrel. You can't do that on a two year assignment.

AW:

No you can't.

RS:

But he had those guys eating out of his hands. Two reasons: one of them was he's good; second was because he was there long enough to establish that rapport. So you can argue both sides of that coin. The problem with this is—with Ernesto, for instance—what we found out was those decisions made for these interns are made in Washington. They're not made in the state office. The state office said, "We don't have anything to do with that. We would not have put him there."

AW:

And all those guys pointed that out, too. When the state conservationists made the change, they were a lot more likely to stomach it and go on with it, than if it happened in D.C.

RS:

Exactly, exactly. Well I don't know who all you interviewed, but I still work with all of those retired SCS guys.

AW:

Old people like James Abbott. He was one that I really enjoyed. And Dale Fischgrabe, and Dale Allen who's writing the history of the Texas. And the thing that I saw was—or I'm beginning to see—is that the Texas state SCS seemed to be its own sort of universe. I guess because of the

size and diversity of the environments in the state they approached their work a little differently than states that were more unified.

RS:

That's true. In fact because of the—in fact, when I first came there was something like sixteen, seventeen, eighteen hundred employees in Texas. Now there's six hundred or something. Or less. Well there's two or three things working there. Most of the national range cons in Washington, D.C. came out Texas. Well that gave us an inside into that. Later on one of the range cons actually was one of my classmates in New Mexico State. At one of our meetings with the Range Science Education Council, which is held in conjunction with the Society for Range Management meetings. They were talking about [coughs] pardon me—employment of our graduates, or all graduates. And they were having trouble finding students who met all of the standards, because of the change in 1980. I started to say something and he looked over at me and said, "You probably shouldn't say anything. Just be quiet." [laughter] Because our students were scoring 92's and 95's and whatever and getting jobs, and other people were scoring 80. Well there's no secret to that if you have the right training. But because of that rapport that we've had for all these many years, the state of Texas has enjoyed a relationship that a lot of other people haven't. Well under his tutelage and under following him, we had two or three or four graduate students who were NRCS employees that got leave of absences to come get degrees with us.

AW:

Wow.

RS:

And that has happened to other places, but on a much more limited basis. Well, for a single university. So yeah. We've always enjoyed a rapport with the NRCS—SCS, formerly. And like I said, I still work with a number of these retired people now. Many of whom were our students.

AW:

Yeah, I've found students from two places. They were either from A&M or here.

RS:

That's right.

AW:

And that was pretty much it.

RS:

That was it. Now that has changed. Now students come from Angelo State, which of course is part of us. But we don't have the influence in their training.

AW:

Yeah, I did run into a couple of Oklahoma State people.

RS:

Yeah, they're not as common in Texas. Now a lot of them are coming out of—well some out of Sul Ross. They have a fairly strong program there. And also out of A&M Kingsville. They have a really strong—In fact half or more of their faculty were either our students or our faculty members.

AW:

Isn't there a woman down there whose specialty is fire?

RS:

Yes. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak.

AW:

Yeah. Boy, she has a great book started on fire, and I wish she would finish it. I need to call her to see if I—

RS:

I didn't realize that.

AW:

I went to that really great conference at the Ranching Heritage Center on fire, and I heard her talk. She talked about that fire up in the panhandle by Amarillo. She sent me a chapter, and it was brilliant. It was a brilliant firsthand account of that.

RS:

Well she worked with Dr. David Wester who was her mentor out there. He did wonders for her. Not that she wasn't capable. But she was a young faculty member and in fact I would almost put money on the table that Dave had a major influence in both her writing skills and in that chapter itself.

AW:

This was writing of the sort that's not done by an academic. It's a sort of writing that would be a popular writing. Not that it wasn't accurate and all that, but it had all those other things. Reminds me that I need to—

RS:

Right. She and he worked on a major project up there north of Pampa.

AW:

We're kind of headed toward what's happening in the future, but a couple of things looking back. When I listen to you mention deans, I hear Thomas's name come up a lot. Were there other deans who—not that they were necessarily the cause of expansion, growth, and good years in the college, but were there other deans under whom those sorts of things happened that just jump out in your memory?

RS:

Only one, probably. Now Dr. Thomas is unique. He is one of a kind. He is in my opinion a natural born leader. He had vision. He had insight. He was just an excellent administrator. He was here, oh, seven or eight years, and then became president at New Mexico State, where he changed that whole university. Well he changed the whole college when he was here. Following him was Dr. Anson Bertrand who had been—

AW:

Say it?

RS:

Anson Bertrand.

AW:

B-e-r-t-r-a-n-d?

RS:

Yes. And he came out of Ag research services USDA. He was a mover and a shaker himself. He was a soil scientist, soil physicist, and an excellent soil scientist, I might add. He was an excellent administrator, but of a different sort than Dr. Thomas. He probably did more internally than externally. He was the one who actually was responsible for purchasing the New Deal farm, just to get animal science and agronomy out there. He was responsible for seeing that this building took place. It was an interesting situation when I was a young faculty member and he was new dean. He came down to the department. Dr. Schuster was still chairman. And said to us, "If you had money to build a new building for your department, what would it look like?" Well

we didn't know what the deal was, didn't know where the money was, didn't know what. But he said that to us, to Ag economics, to animal science. Well later what we found out was that Mr. Goddard, whose son was a student here, had pledged to build a building for whatever department his son decided to major.

AW:

So he wanted to know—depending on what he picked as a major?

RS:

That's where the building would go. But the dean didn't want any proselyting going on, so we didn't know. As it turns out Bill decided to get a degree in wildlife and he now, basically, is in charge of the Noble Foundation. Mr. Goddard, his dad, has died.

AW:

Noble Foundation in Oklahoma?

RS:

Yeah, Ardmore, Oklahoma. This was—as I understand it—was the first money allocated to a building of this sort other than medical or space related activities. All of the other Goddard monies had gone to space—like New Jersey—or medical facilities. So we felt fairly good about that. So this became the Goddard Range and Wildlife building. And again, that's one of those things that's kind of fell in our lap. We talk about it in our history here. Was unique there. We've been really fortunate here. I can say with all honesty there was not another job out there in which I could have done what I have done, and enjoyed it as much as I do. I had the most fortunate experience of working with Dr. Dahl and Dr. Wright and John Hunter as mentors. Had I not worked directly with Dr. Dahl, I don't know what I would have become. I shudder to think about that. He was a gentleman's gentleman and a close personal friend. I think about him every day. He died way prematurely. Young age. He had wound up with cancer. I've also had outstanding colleagues in the department that I couldn't have had equal or better anywhere else. I couldn't have had the graduate students that I've had. I haven't had the most funding of people in the department, but I had adequate funding. I had I don't even know how many graduate students over the years. Probably thirty five. I don't know. I know the philosophy is to have six or eight or nine graduate students, but I always figured three. The most you could actually mentor was three, or a maximum of five. I figure if you've got more than five you really couldn't spend much time with them. I had a biochemistry prof at Utah State when I was working on my doctorate there who had eight graduate students. His comment was to us in class one day, "I spend an hour every Friday with each one of them." Well that's an hour a week. How much mentoring do you do in an hour? I also know from one of our other faculty members who got his degree at Utah State his advisor said, "You go do your research, and then when you get your thesis written come back and see me." Well that's not fair to the student. So yeah we could have had more students, but

we adopted the philosophy early on that if we couldn't provide financial assistance, we wouldn't take them. One of our faculty members early on when I first came was always, always, "We took everybody." Writing proposals, trying to get money to fund this student, that student. And he wasn't able to do any of his own research. So we finally as a department said, No. We're not doing this anymore." Well we've been under the gun from the graduate school ever since. Numbers mean money. Numbers is the name of the game. "You need to increase your graduate program. Need to increase your Ph.D. program." Obviously Ph.D.'s generate more dollars than master's, master's students generate more dollars than undergraduates, and this old story. Well after a while you can only fight that battle so long, and pretty soon you succumb, and we have. We take a number of students on, and some of whom are I guess are not funded. I don't know. But I can almost assure you that those who come here and say, "Oh, I can fund myself," can't. And in fact I would say, "Okay, you've got ten thousand dollars to pay for your research? To get you there and back?", "No.", "Well, that's what it's going to take. Ten thousand dollars to support your research. That's not your salary." And the graduate school didn't seem to understand that. It's not like going to the library and doing research or working in a lab where everything is—like a chemistry lab or something.

AW:

It's already there. Yeah.

RS:

It's already there. Don't have any travel involved. All the chemicals are there. Although that research is not free either. Don't get me wrong. Library research is not free either, because the people I know who have done library research generally have got to go to other places to use their library resources. Well that's not free either. But the graduate school didn't seem to understand the cost of doing fuel research. And so—

AW:

Yeah, because in the field you're inventing your laboratory and your library every single time you go out.

RS:

Exactly. Yeah. Well and our research actually involved both. Field component as well. Not all projects, but nearly all. A field component as well as a lab component. Well early on our field research was done in summer and then the rest of the year we spent in the lab or at a computer. Well that's changed. Now you're in the field twelve months out of the year. It doesn't change. And we've always fought the battle of vehicles. In fact the lady, when I was chairman, who was in charge of the motor pool was always under the gun. Basically confiscated all of the vehicles and put them into one place. She said, "I don't want your vehicles." We have a third of the fleet—literally—on campus. We have a third of the fleet. Finally the dean and I—Dr. Kern [?]

[00:54:01] at that time—went over to see Dr. Lawless [?] [00:54:04], because I'd done some research trying to fight this battle to keep them from taking them. We have some that are just regular vehicles. We have some that are specially equipped for fire research or chemical research or whatever research, it doesn't matter. He and I went over to talk to Dr. Lawless, and after Dr. Lawless heard our story he said, "Don't you worry. They will not take your vehicles." He appreciated them and I really appreciated Dr. Lawless. Not just that but I thought he was a good president. He knew what we did over here. It seems like we're always fighting those kinds of battles. I think Dr. Willis has fought that battle again. "We're going to take the vehicles." Well I think when I was chairman—this was nineties, however many years ago that was—it would cost us a hundred thousand dollars a year more to operate these vehicles by renting or leasing or whatever, than by having them ourselves and just keeping them up.

AW:

Yeah, I find that the Southwest Collection—when I don't have to take a van—that it's cheaper for me to rent at Enterprise than it is to rent from the motor pool. [laughter]

RS:

Yeah. Exactly right.

AW:

And I don't have to worry about is it being maintained or not, and if something goes wrong with it I call them on the phone, they come get it. And none of that would happen if I was using a university vehicle.

RS:

Well and we see that our own vehicles are maintained.

AW:

Yeah. Exactly. We take care of our vans for the same reason.

RS:

Well you know it's—Those people in those kind of administrative roles—and they're often not academicians themselves. They're clerks—have no clue what we go through. Whether we're talking about your research or my research or whoever's research. They don't understand that. It's really unfortunate.

AW:

As they lack the knowledge in the same way that the legislature does when they're trying to describe our travel. Because they don't get up and do it.

RS:

Well and then came up with the idea a number of years ago—again, I was chairman in that era—when we converted all these vehicles to natural gas. Well like I said we had a third of the fleet on campus. What it cost us to convert the vehicles that we converted to natural gas cost us three vehicles a year that we could not purchase. And you can't buy natural gas everywhere.

AW:

I was going to say and that's the other problem. It's like driving an electric car. Well that's great but—

RS:

Where are you going to plug it in? [laughter] Well fortunately at Sierra Blanca where our bio-solids research was located—Sierra Blanca, Texas—there was a station there where we could get natural gas. Well the key to that is you burn the natural gas until it runs out and then you switch over to real gas where you've got a gage that says, "I've got a half a tank left."

AW:

Yeah, right. Well along the way were there setbacks or difficulties that were—other than the sort of ongoing things like the motor pool and that kind of stuff—but were there any times where it was really difficult to keep things on an even keel?

RS:

You always have some kind of adversities that you have to deal with, but not any that we really couldn't handle fairly easily. In my opinion. And again, since I'm not involved directly in the department anymore, I don't know the kind of deals that Mark faces. I think Mark has a much, much more difficult job than I had, or anybody along the same era that I was. I always just kind of joked with other chairman who come on. "Are you having fun yet?" It's a new crisis every day. It's those kind of things. But that's I guess true in every job. But nothing you couldn't deal with.

AW:

What do you see as the future for the department and the college?

RS:

I'm not sure I really know the answer to that.

AW:

Maybe because we are looking at big changes around the United States and the world in agriculture. And those things are having—we just talked about rural students versus urban students.

RS:

Right. And I don't see that changing. I think especially in our area—in the natural resources—I think most of those people are going to—at least any way in the near foreseeable future—are going to be urban rather than rural. For one reason there's not that many rural people out there to start with. I think there's always going to be jobs for range and wildlife people. The rangelands that we have today are not suitable for farming. That's why they're still in rangeland. There's always going to be wildlife, and there's always going to be people who want to go hunting and enjoy the outdoors. A lot of people don't hunt with a gun anymore, but hunt with a camera. And that's increasing. We see more and more recreational type of—

AW:

Ecotourism?

RS:

Ecotourism. Yeah. Birdwatching included. I have a friend who's past president of the Society for Range Management. Lives in Nebraska on the edge of a forest. He actually set up a bed and breakfast out of covered wagons. Well we'll see more and more that the urban people—

AW:

Yeah, sheep wagons up in Montana. They have B&B's with the sheep wagons. [laughter]

RS:

Well and actually that's what he has is sheep wagon that are Conestoga's. The urban people are looking for a place to go. To get out of. And if I lived in Dallas, I'd be looking for a place to go to. I cannot stand driving in Dallas. Well to put up with that five days a week or more, they're looking to get out. They're willing to pay almost any amount of money. Quail hunters pay the most. Quail hunters are the elite of all hunters. King Ranch, I think, has said in some of their field days quail hunting is their number one revenue source, cattle are next, deer hunting is next, horses are next. And I may have that order wrong, but quail hunting has always been. And quail hunters are the ones who actually spend the high dollar for dogs, and high dollar for guns, and high dollar for clothing, high dollar—One of the ranches that Dr. Dabbet [?] [01:01:18] works on in his quail research program, the rancher has the land leased to a lessee from Georgia. One of the times we were up there he came from Georgia for a week just to run his dog. Didn't want to hunt anything. Just to run his dog. Well, you know, that's not going away.

AW:

No. In fact if you look at the history there is a great book written in the nineteenth century called *Diary of a Dude Wrangler*. And this is a young fellow that grew up back east and as a very young man, went to Montana to buy into a ranch. And so at the beginning of ranching as we think of it in America, it was already dudes [End of Part A] [Start of Part B] and hunters were of

equal value to maintaining that ranch as were cattle operations. And you know so to me, it's like people say, "Well this is a new idea." No. It's been around for a long time.

RS:

It's not, but it's more unique in Texas because we don't have public lands to deal with. We're private lands and we can pretty well dictate. Even though the wildlife belongs to the state, you have to get on my land to hunt the state's wildlife. Well one of the other ranchers that Dr. Dabbert [01:02:34] works on the rancher is actually out of Louisiana, I believe. His biologist is out of Georgia. His comment was—and this is a big ranch, and an old historic ranch—his comment was, "When the quail are not on this ranch this ranch goes back on the market. I bought this ranch for quail." He has cattle on it because that's his tax write off. But the quail is why he bought the ranch. Well as long as we have an affluent society that isn't going to change. And so there's always going to be those opportunities out there. And there's more and more opportunities for environmental conservation and so forth. We don't have as many going into environmental consulting as some other universities do. But we do have students who have branched off into that area, and have done very well. We have students who've been hired by TP&W to, for instance, to manage a fisheries programs. At one time our students were sought out to manage urban fisheries. To establish urban fisheries program in Houston, in Dallas, in places like that. So I think the future for natural resource trained individuals is always going to be good. They don't make as much money as other people do, and that's one of the things that concerns parents. That's a common question that parents ask when they come to orientation, or at least they used to. Again I'm not directly involved in that anymore. But one of our former faculty members always said, "For a good student there will always be a job out there. For those who are mediocre students, there may not be a job out there." And there's probably—I don't know what the percentage is. Less than 10 percent—but some percentage of our students—and I'm sure this is true with everybody else—they haven't got a clue what they're going to do when they graduate. And a lot of them say, "I'm going to bum around for a year." Well by the time you bum around for a year you—

AW:

Hard to get hired.

RS:

You're not hireable, even. But kids are different from what they used to be. That would not even be a consideration back when I was finishing up. It was pretty much mandatory that I get a job, or go to school so that I could get a job.

AW:

Yeah, I never did quit working.

RS:

I didn't either.

AW:

I couldn't afford to.

RS:

But that's fairly common. And my advisor at Utah State, he did a sabbatical just before I got there and went to Ireland. And his son—when Dr. Weeby [01:05:18] came back—his son stayed there and worked a while, get enough money, go bum around somewhere else, run out of money, get a job. I don't know how long he stayed in the British Isles and Europe. Probably better part of a year. Just bumming around. Well when he came back he wound up going to Alaska and got on a fishing boat, and ultimately wound up buying his own fleet of fishing boats. So he did well. Those opportunities aren't always there for students who don't go to work.

AW:

Yeah, you have to make your own opportunities when you do that.

RS:

You have to make your own.

AW:

Well what's the future like for Ron Sosebee? Because you claim to be retired, but it doesn't seem to me like you're very much retired. Just as an observation.

RS:

Well I can set my schedule more freely than I could before. When Dr. Dahl was still alive back in the early eighties, he and I and another faculty member and a couple of our graduate students started a consulting firm. Both Dr. Dahl and Dr. Freeman have passed away, but we still have Rangeland Consultants, Incorporated. My partners and I do about as much consulting as we want to. We don't, of course, advertise, don't depend on it for a living. But we have jobs. Some of them were big jobs, some of them were little jobs, and they're all educational experiences. So I do some consulting. Still have the family farm. I have the—my wheat land leased out. Let somebody worry about how to make money on that. I figured I could never make money on wheat land when I was still doing it. Just having it custom done. I wasn't making money on it. My dad is passed away, and so there's no one there. So I basically lease. I take cattle on or stockers, whichever the case may be on weight gain or consignment or feed grazing sort of thing. And so I still take care of that. My wife and I do some travelling. I seem to stay busy. Way busier than she thinks I ought to be. She thinks I ought to be more available to do whatever. I still come here to the office when I'm in town. Most every day I'll come, usually early in the morning and

I'll stay until mid-morning until noon, or maybe mid-afternoon, depending on what I have going that day. I'm still involved with the Grazing Land Coalition. We have a really strong unit here in Texas. I'm working with Julie Hodges over at the Ranching Heritage Center trying to get some native grass planting established. And I visit with a number of ranchers on a non-feed consulting basis. It seems like I'm rarely at home to do nothing. But we spend more time going places, doing things. We just got back from a cruise to Alaska, and I couldn't do that. Used to, although that's not our—we've done a number of cruises. But our vacations be limited to maybe one a year. Well now if we want to pick up and go somewhere, we can schedule it, pick up, and go somewhere. So that's generally what I do. But I enjoy coming here. I don't do any writing for scientific journals anymore. I've been there and done that. I'm working with Dr. Cox on one of his research projects, and Dr. Villalobos on one of his research projects. In in a peripheral sense I'm working with Dr. Dabbert on his quail research project. In a peripheral sense—I spent forty years doing that so it's time that—I'm certainly happy to help them, but I'm certainly willing for them to do it type of thing. One of my former students is saying I need to put down some of my experiences and my research results and observations in some kind of an outlet so that it will be available to ranchers or to whomever. And so I've been giving some thought to that, and I'll probably work on that for a bit. I'm not spending my life in the library anymore. Been there and done that, too.

AW:

I'll tell you, getting your institutional memory down is really important. This is a little step toward that by doing the interviews, but being able to reflect on it and write it will be a value to a lot of people.

RS:

Well it's been fun to do. It was really fun to do the departmental history. And again, Dr. Fishton [?] [01:10:36] didn't actually come into the department until—in the early nineties. So really Kay—our secretary—and myself are the only—she wasn't here when I came of course—we're the only two that've been in the department for any number of years. And like I said I was here when it was actually separated from agronomy—because autonomous. So I've seen and known all of the students who've come through here, and I see and still know the students when I go out. I don't know the students today like I did. But to do that history was really fun for me to go back and recap some of those things that took place in the past. I think it'd be fun to go back and try to summarize some of the things that we've done in terms of research that may be of value to somebody. I don't know.

AW:

I think it would. And I think some of the things that you're saying today about the big picture, too, are really valuable. You know?

RS:

Well some things in terms of research that you don't get in scientific journals are one's own experiences and observations. People in the scientific world aren't interested in my observations. But I feel like I know more about broom snake weed or mesquite or whatever because of what I saw, not just because of what we found out in the field or in the lab.

AW:

Right. And the people who vote on line items and who create endowments—they're not reading the scientific journals. They're reading your observations. That's how they're going to know what has to be done.

RS:

Exactly. It's interesting that you bring that up. Because for many years we did a *Research Highlights*, then we stopped it but I understand this year we went back—we, the department, went back to publishing that. That was a major vehicle in basically informing the legislators of what we were doing with the line item monies that they gave us. And they weren't interested in long articles. They wanted two or three paragraphs and a picture. And so all of our *Research Highlights* would be thirty, forty, fifty pages long, but they would be a compilation of everybody's research. So look at the breadth of what we're doing. And we'd have two or three or four paragraphs at the max with a picture—we'd have one cover story that would be longer—to highlight what we were doing since the last year. Well and that was good for me. Dr. Wright edited that and then he asked me to help him. And when he quit I did it and then I finally got Dr. Wester to do it. But that helped me in knowing what was going on in the department from what everybody else was doing. But you're right. They're not interested in a long article. They're not even interested in a one page letter. They want to see a picture and two or three paragraphs that explains what that picture is talking about.

AW:

With a headline.

RS:

Exactly. And then if they want to know more then we'll get in touch with you and find out more.

AW:

And the other thing that strikes me. Just personally I like to read things like the Museum of Natural Science, their magazine *Natural History*. Well it doesn't go into detail, but what it does is you can sit down once a month and say, "Oh there's something happening over here in astronomy, there's something happening in biology, there's something happening in here." And quite oftentimes you see connections between them. Whereas if you were reading a really detailed piece in any one of those areas those big connections would be lost to you.

RS:

Exactly. We've faced that very same issue in our certification process within range management. Those who are—we have two certification processes. One is a certified consultant. One is a certified professional in rangeland management. And that—the second one—was actually designed for those who work as a technician for NRCS, Bureau of Land Management, Forest Services. Basically to make sure that those people who signed off on programs knew what it was they were signing off on. And this was part of the battle of getting the OPM standards changed. The range science degree program is more than range management classes. It's a breadth of many things. Ecology, physiology, soils, plant ID, genetics, even agronomy. You name it. Well everybody wanted the range students to have twenty-one hours or twenty-four hours of range management. Well no, it's all these other things. It's animal science. It's soils. You just name a litany of things that actually contribute to one's ability as a range person. Well the same thing is true in the certified profession of rangeland management. They want to, "Well this wasn't a range program." No, but it had to do with ethics. Is ethics not important? You know? Or it had to do with weed control. In fact I had one rejected because, "Well that had to do with cotton." Well does cotton not use water? Do we not have cotton varieties? How do they come about? So all of these things, I say, people can learn something that will apply to what it is they're doing. In fact the trip we just got back from. I see things that apply to—well when I teaching the class—that I could use in the classroom. Didn't have anything to do—even though it was a pleasure trip. But I saw the arctic tundra. I saw boreal forest. Those kind of things. Well anyway. That's one of my pet peeves.

AW:

Yeah. No. I'm with you. I'm a holiest from way back.

RS:

Yeah, I am too.

AW:

If you don't see the connections then it's really just trivial sometimes.

RS:

It is. And it's disheartening. It is.

AW:

Well, thank you very much.

RS:

Well thank you.

AW:

I will probably have more questions, but I'll look—as soon as I hear back from Julie I'll get with you, and we'll pick a time that we can get together, and then maybe with Hubbard.

RS:

I put together some notes. I don't know if they—well.

AW:

Oh. Oh yeah. Okay, so what is on your notes that we haven't talked about?

RS:

This has to do with Anson where I grew up.

AW:

Oh, okay. Yeah.

RS:

Here is something that came out of the paper. This doesn't mean anything to anybody really except that how things have changed. At the end of 1935, Anson had twenty-seven filling stations.

AW:

Twenty-seven filling stations?

RS:

Four blacksmith shops, three coal and feed stores, four dry good stores, two railroads, thirteen cafes, ten grocery stores, seven physicians, two dentists, six law firms. In the nineteen fifties we had five grocery stores, two dry good stores, two drug stores, two dry cleaners, one bank, four cotton gins—there's one today, ten gas stations. There's—

AW:

Two today?

RS:

About that, yeah.

AW:

Two or three. And they're all at the corner.

RS:

Two extra. Yeah, that's exactly right. Three medical doctors. Today there's maybe—there's one constantly and some others changing. One farm implement house, which now, there's not really any. One feed store, one oil field supply store. There's not any anymore. We had a couple of jewelry stores, two indoor theaters, one drive in theater, three restaurants. Now see all of that's changed. There's no rural people anymore.

AW:

Yeah. That's—and there's a lot of problems with that. I mean the obvious one is that those are good places to live and raise families, but—

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