

**Oral History Interview of
Jim Huff**

**Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson
October 31, 2013
George West, Texas**

**Part of the:
*George West Storyfest Interviews***

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Related Interviews:

This interview was one of eight interviews conducted on October 31 and November 1, 2013 that discuss the George West Storyfest. Other interviews include: L.T. Davis, Ross Harris, Julie Kaase, Jim McGee, Mary Ann Pawlik, Pauline Word, and Glynis Holm Strause.

Transcript Overview:

This interview features Jim Huff, who discusses being the judge of Live Oak County, the George West Community, and what he appreciates about the annual George West Storyfest.

Length of Interview: 0:24:07

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Introduction and background information	05	00:00:00
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The Live Oak County community	12	00:12:36
The county's population	13	00:15:00
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His favorite part of the festival	16	00:19:27

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Keywords

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Andy Wilkinson (AW):

Okay. This is Andy Wilkinson. It's the—it's Halloween, is what it is.

Jim Huff (JH):

Halloween, the thirty-first.

AW:

Thirty-first, 2013. I'm in George West, Texas with Jim Huff. That's correct?

JH:

Yes.

AW:

H-u-f-f?

JH:

Yes.

AW:

County Judge?

JH:

Yes.

AW:

Of Live Oak County. Great.

JH:

That's right.

AW:

Great. Let me get some real basic things so that two hundred years from now, we know which Jim Huff we're talking to. What's your date of birth?

JH:

11/20/1954.

AW:

Great, and where were you born?

JH:

Was born in San Antonio, but have lived, all of my life, in Live Oak County, and mainly, in Three Rivers.

AW:

Okay. I drove through Three Rivers yesterday, and it'd been about—the last time I came down here to this festival, I think, was three years ago, maybe. And I also drove through Three Rivers three years ago. [Laughs] What a change.

JH:

Big difference, yes. Yes.

AW:

I didn't—I thought I was going to have trouble [JH clears throat] on I-10 in San Antonio in traffic, but it was in Three Rivers.

JH:

[Laughs] Yes, exactly.

AW:

So you grew up in Three Rivers?

JH:

Grew up in Three Rivers. Graduated from high school.

AW:

And you live there now?

JH:

I live there now.

AW:

What's your mailing address? And it could be the courthouse, too. It doesn't matter.

JH:

Okay. [REDACTED] in Three Rivers, Texas.

AW:

Okay, and what's that zip code?

JH:

██████.

AW:

Okay. Great. How long have you been the county judge?

JH:

My twenty-seventh year.

AW:

Whoa. That's kind of a record, too.

JH:

It's been a while, yes. I was—

AW:

I mean, how does that stack up in Texas, for a record? I think that'd be right up there in the top—

JH:

I'm assuming—I'm guessing that I would be. I ran for office when I was twenty-nine, and then was sworn in the next year, and I was thirty.

AW:

And is that a record also, in Texas? [Laughs]

JH:

I'm not sure.

AW:

I would think—

JH:

I'm not sure.

AW:

—that's pretty close to—what drove you into that service? As we both know, the county judgeship in Texas is a unique kind of animal.

JH:

Yes. [Clears throat] You know, being a county judge is not anything that you—when you're

young you think, That's what I want to do. [Clears throat] The situation just happened to present itself when—well, first, my dad was sheriff here for about sixteen years. He retired. I had been working for the sheriff's department in Nueces County; Corpus Christi. After my dad retired, I moved back and went to work for the new sheriff. And the position of county judge became available because the former county judge was not seeking reelection. And so I really did not know what I was getting into, but I knew that I liked people. You know, with law enforcement, like, with a county judge's job, you see people at their best and at their worst. And I just wanted to try to do something positive, and I think the way you begin is helping an individual, or helping your community and try to move it forward. Now, I don't know, when I was twenty-nine years old, that I would've put it in those exact words, but when I go back and look at it—I mean, I think that's why I continue to do what I do. So, no, it's not—a situation presented itself. I was very lucky. I had three opponents on the Democratic ticket and one on the Republican ticket. And I worked hard enough that I did not get in a runoff.

AW:

That's pretty good with that field.

JH:

Oh yes. Yes. So—[clears throat] and I guess I give credit for my longevity just to having a community of good people that basically, as long as you do your job, they leave you alone. I look at other areas and there's always something that's not right, or somebody's always after somebody else, and I don't think I could survive in that climate, politically. Live Oak County is just a great place to work in and to work for.

AW:

That's good to hear. So you were county judge when the Storyfest came about?

JH:

Yes. Sure was.

AW:

What was that like? What spurred it and how did—[JH clears throat] how did people wake up one day and say, "We want to have a storytelling festival"?

JH:

Yes. I'm going to have to give—there's a number of people that deserve credit for the initial startup. One of the individuals who came up with exact idea of Storyfest was a man—is a man named Rob Schneider. And Mr. Rob Schneider happened to be the county attorney at the time. I'm sure he was—he was either county attorney, or he was in practice here, and very active in the community: the Chamber of Commerce. He, then, held the position of county attorney, but I'm

not sure if he was county attorney twenty-five years ago. But I remember storytelling of a kind of joke. I thought, you know, that should be—that sounds like the name you'd give to a political gathering. You know, "We're going to tell stories." [AW laughs] And this community is just wonderful about pitching in. I think the appreciation for where we come from, where we've been. I think we—

AW:

You mean in terms of the history of the county?

JH:

In terms of the history of the county, in South Texas, and in folklore.

AW:

This is, after all, the home of J. Frank Dobie.

JH:

That's right. Yes. And not many other courthouses—in fact, I'll venture to say not one has a longhorn steer in a cage in front of the courthouse. [Laughs]

AW:

How long has that been there?

JH:

I remember, as a kid, it was there, yeah. And then, it was actually—because I thought it was real neat. I think it was a four-sided, like, glass structure. Over the years, it's been revamped and the new hide put on Geronimo, the longhorn. And so, we have a more substantial structure. You can see it from the front, but, you know.

AW:

I walked by it this morning.

JH:

Yeah, it's neat.

AW:

Yeah, it is neat. Quite neat. In fact, it looks—it's very good job, too, because when you walk by you have to stop and look at twice to make sure it's—

JH:

Yeah, it's not—"I know I'm not seeing well." Yeah, but, you know, that's part of our local

history and I think it's representative of a lot of the history in Texas, you know? And I always like to personally look back at where we've been. You know, that kind of—there's a lot of progressive movement forward that I think even if you—December thirty-first. If you look back at what you were able to accomplish, or we all accomplish within a year, I think that's a good test. But as we look forward, we—it's good and enriching to know about the people that were here before, and to hear their stories, and how did they live, you know? It's pretty inspiring.

AW:

Yeah, if you don't know where you've been, you don't know where you are. And if you don't know where you are, you don't know where you're going.

JH:

Where you're going, exactly. I agree.

AW:

It's kind of an interesting connection there with history. Did it take long for people in the county to realize that a storytelling festival was really a good idea?

JH:

I think [clears throat] the first Storyfest probably resulted in such high marks that it was, in my opinion, was recognized early on, "This is what we need to do." Yeah. But I was one of those who was skeptical, because I'd never—you know, I'd never heard a professional storyteller, I guess. And there wasn't a real venue for even any of our local authors to present their work. And that was just really neat, too. The first Storyfest—I don't know that I could've told you a whole lot about it, other than it was storytelling. But, as I said, the community—it was success from the beginning.

AW:

I understand that it was in the same place it is now.

JH:

Yes.

AW:

So that means that you were a partner—the county government was a partner right from the start.

JH:

Yes, yes. We were really proud to do that, and still are.

AW:

There's no question it's been successful. [JH clears throat] The fact that it's still going is a measure of that. Has the county or have you or others in the county been able to step back and say, "How do we measure that success?" Is it economic? Is it cultural? Is it any one of the other things that you could measure? Are there things that you've looked back at intentionally to see how the thing has developed and what it's done?

JH:

One of the—and it's probably just, [clears throat] I think, normal for most people to do what I personally have done, and that's, "How many people did you have last year?" You know? "How many vendors? Do we have more vendors this year?" Financially, I know we've looked at what it does for the local community and it's a big boost.

AW:

Has it—have you been able to [JH coughs] quantify that in terms of either dollars and their multiples, or—

JH:

Yes. And, you know, part of that equation is even looking at the number of motel rooms that were booked for Storyfest. Yes, there is a dollar estimation. I'm not sure what that is, as we speak. But that's been looked at. With the Eagle Ford Shale on a gas boom—[clears throat]

AW:

Of course, that's making a big difference.

JH:

It's made a big difference. And some of the ways it has is those motels are probably pretty full year-round now. But yes, financially, it's been a shot in the arm for the community for twenty-five years. If I look at other—what else do we gain from it? It is a community get together. There's people that I'll be seeing—an example—this Saturday, that I hadn't seen in six or eight months. So the community's bought into it. [Clears throat] I think there is positive gains made in just the comradery, and having a focused project. And this is our twenty-fifth year in recognizing that something must done right. [Clears throat]

AW:

You mentioned early on that the people in Three Rivers—

JH:

[coughs] Excuse me.

AW:

—and Live Oak County are good people.

JH:

Um-hm.

AW:

One of the things that I've been struck by is how selfless this bunch that I've been talking to seem to be about this festival, and I don't run into that everywhere.

JH:

I'm sure.

AW:

What's the difference here? Other than these are just good people. I mean, there are good people in a lot of places, but there seems to be a real willingness to cooperate here that's maybe not universal.

JH:

Um-hm. [clears throat] You know, and that's a real good question. I'm just going to have to go back to the way most people around here have been raised. And if you look at a lot of them, their parents were products—or labeled the greatest generation, where you helped your neighbor out. It may sound corny, but that's still real important. Through your organizations, you took on role that may not be filled by someone else. And I'll give you an example, even from the county standpoint, all of our fire departments are volunteer. Don't get paid anything. They've got full-time jobs. They leave their work if they have to, to man a firetruck, to go out and put out somebody's fire, whether it be a house or grass fire, or whatever. There's still that instilled sense of responsibility to each other. And I think—you know, if—but where does that come from? That comes from knowing who we are, and where we came from, and where we are now. And we just—we all have a common interest of farming, ranching. Now, it's the oil and gas business, and has been the oil and gas business before, but not to this extent. I think it's just the way we were taught.

AW:

Yeah, you mentioned neighboring. I see that in communities, especially, that have a substantial part of their agricultural is in ranching.

JH:

Yes, yes.

AW:

Ranchers tend to do a little more, I think, in today's world than farmers. Although, I think back before mechanization, farmers probably did a lot more of that neighboring, too.

JH:

Yes. I think you're right. I think you're right.

AW:

George West—I noticed on the sign coming into town—is about twenty-five hundred. Three Rivers is—

JH:

Probably about two thousand.

AW:

Two thousand. And so the county as a whole is, what? Ten, fifteen thousand?

JH:

We have—and I kind of laugh about it. Somebody—I'll say, you know, "Live Oak County is approximately 12,500 people, and we have one gated community." And then, I'll usually explain, "Yes, well, that gated community is a federal prison," [AW laughs] and that's about twenty-five hundred of the twelve-five. But I'm going to say probably about 12,500 is our population—residential population.

AW:

That's pretty remarkable. Because this is a fairly big county, too, isn't it?

JH:

Yes, it is. And I could—I'm trying to remember how long and how wide it is, and I can't remember that right now.

AW:

This is the kind of population density that you'd find out, you know, in the Big Bend, around the Alpine.

JH:

You know, another area that's very unique is our neighbor to the west and it's McMullen County. McMullen County has about 854 people.

AW:

Really?

JH:

It is farming—ranching. Big ranches. A lot of Eagle Ford Shale exploration and production there. McMullen County has no incorporated cities. The county seat is Tilden, and it's not incorporated, but they have a top-notch school. I mean, the best of the best. They really provide well for their residents. It's a really unique place.

AW:

That is unique. I'm trying to think—you probably have to get out to Mentone to find a county without an incorporated seat.

JH:

You know, one of the other ones I'm thinking about that's not too far from here is Kenedy County. The county seat is Sarita, has a lot of the Kenedy Ranch in it, which is now a foundation—run by a foundation as King Ranch. I'm going to say Kenedy County has maybe a few less than McMullen. But it's just—you know, just a really unique situation.

AW:

That's interesting, because you think about Texas—when you think about sparse, you think about where I live, which is in the Panhandle, which is not that sparse, or you think about way out west and you don't think about South Texas.

JH:

Yes. You're exactly right.

AW:

Yeah, real interesting. And I'm also—correct me if I'm wrong, but ranching's a bigger part of the dollar bill, in terms of agricultural product, here than farming?

JH:

Yes, it is.

AW:

I just wanted to make sure I had that right in my head. Well, what's the future like for this festival?

JH:

I know of nothing that is detracting from it continuing to be a bigger success every year.

AW:

There's not going to be any conflict with the demand on the resources by the exploration and development of the Shale?

JH:

No, and in fact—you know, there may be some with motel rooms, but the vast majority of our exploration companies have partnered up to be included in Storyfest.

AW:

Really?

JH:

Yeah. When you're there Saturday you'll see Conoco Phillips or Burlington Resources.

AW:

Yeah, I had a nice visit with Glynis Strause.

JH:

You know, she's lived here all of her life. Just a wonderful lady. I mean, won—that's the personality and the type that get things done, with Glynis Strause.

AW:

Okay. Here's another question, then. It seems like all the people that I've talked to, like Mary Margaret, whom I've known for some time—they're all Type A's. How do you get that many Type A's? [Laughter]

JH:

It's the water. It's the water.

AW:

Well, how do you get that many Type A's in a room and good things come out of it?

JH:

Yes. I don't know. [Laughs] But it works.

AW:

Yeah, that's good. Well, it's real interesting. Well, that's terrific. What have I not asked you about this festival—oh, I know a question I'd like to ask, what is your favorite part of the festival? Do you have a favorite part?

JH:

One of the things that I—the first part that I go and look for is our local storytellers. You know, Johnny Campbell. Johnny Campbell's a cowboy who comes from a ranching family. Johnny Campbell was my junior high science teacher, and will tell you stories that, I hate to say, are probably true about me. [AW laughs] But, you know, I mean—

AW:

I was going to ask, "Should I believe him or not?"

JH:

Yes, But, you know, I just think it's really—it just intrigues me that somebody as rough and tough a cowboy as Johnny is, is also so in touch with the finer things in life, and expressing himself like he does in his cowboy poetry. You know? I mean, I just—I think that's a quality that I really admire.

AW:

Excuse me just one minute.

JH:

You bet.

AW:

I need to put a new battery in here.

JH:

Okay.

AW:

If I may.

[Pause in recording]

AW:

This is Andy Wilkinson and Jim Huff back after a battery change. And we were just talking about Johnny Campbell a little bit more. It is interesting that you find that some of the roughest and toughest people, if you—you don't have to scratch very deep to find a storyteller, or a poet, or a singer.

JH:

Sure.

AW:

And something you mentioned, just now, about local storytellers, and I've heard that several times now—that it seems, to me, that maybe there is a local—if not a tradition—a local pool of storytellers here that may be a little different than other places.

JH:

You're probably right. And I can even take that back to—the first thing that comes to my mind—and it happens every day. And there's a group of guys that get together at the Dairy Queen every morning, at Three Rivers and George West. You know, it's a little social gathering. Most of the time, it's the guys that are retired, or stop by there before they go to work. And, you know, it's just—it's visiting. It's communing. It's sharing what's going on and your opinion. And I just think that's really, really important. I admire that quality.

AW:

Um-hm. So, J. Frank Dobie is a product of that culture rather than a creator of it?

JH:

You know, he kind of—he jumpstart—jumpstarted recognition, I think, in print. Yeah, but he was a really interesting character, really interesting fellow. He's one of our claims to fame. You bet.

AW:

What should I have asked you about the festival that I didn't? What else would you like to add?

JH:

I guess to sum it up—[clears throat] what do I think about Storyfest as county judge? I'm very proud of it because it brings recognition to our area. It's something that was developed locally. It's something that's recognized, I'm going to say, nationally. And it is just a activity that we enjoy. I'm out of town a lot. I'm in Corpus. I'm in San Antonio. I'm in other places. And people I don't know, when they realize I'm from Live Oak County, or especially, George West, "Oh, I went to Storyfest last year," you know? The advertisement has been good and then, word of mouth, besides the billboard, has helped. But I just—it is very cathartic for a lot of people. And a lot of the—and many times we don't—I'm one of these—we don't stop long enough to look around, or to look back. And that's what I'm proud of.

AW:

That's a great spot to end this off.

JH:

You got it. [Laughs]

AW:
Thanks.

JH:
You bet.

End of Recording

