

**Oral History Interview of
Ross Harris**

**Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson
November 1, 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 Geroge West Storyfest. Other interviews include: L.T. Davis, Jim Huff, Julie Kaase, Jim McGee, Mary Ann Pawlik, Pauline Word, and Glynis Holm Strause.

Transcript Overview:

This interview features Ross Harris, who discusses being president of the bank, being the official bank of the George West Storyfest, and the town's peaceful community.

Length of Interview: 00:26:38

Subject	Transcript Page	Time Stamp
Introduction and background information	05	00:00:00
Working at the bank for the last thirty-five years	07	00:03:44
George West Storyfest	10	00:10:20
The George West community	13	00:20:42



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Keywords

George West Storyfest

Andy Wilkinson (AW):

—and we'll do that. But I'll start it by saying this is the first of November, 2013. Andy Wilkinson here with Mr. Ross Harris, who is president of the bank, in which we've been doing these interviews in George West the last two days. So, again, thank you for that—

Ross Harris (RH):

Surely.

AW:

—help. And I do need to get just a little bit of information so that—

RH:

Yes sir.

AW:

—two hundred years from now, we'll know which Ross Harris we're talking about. So what is your date of birth?

RH:

7/19/46.

AW:

And where were you born?

RH:

I was born in Three Rivers, Texas.

AW:

So you're a Live Oak County person?

RH:

I am.

AW:

Have you lived here since?

RH:

Yes. I escaped for about eight years, and went off to be a CPA [**Certified Public Accountant**], and came back, and went to work at the bank.

AW:

Where did you go to college?

RH:

All over. I was a horrible student. [AW laughs] UT Austin. Took my—I went all over. And I spent two years in Kerrville at Schreiner.

AW:

Really?

RH:

My freshman and sophomore year. I flunked out of UT. They asked me to move on. And then, I went to Texas A&I, now, Texas A&M Kingsville. And then, I was about to get drafted in the—what was this? The late sixties. And took my last six hours at OU in Norman, Oklahoma.

AW:

Really? That's—

RH:

Scrambling to get a degree so that I could go to officer's school.

AW:

Yeah, and did you go to officer's school?

RH:

[Laughs] I got a draft notice, so I immediately went down and enlisted with the Air Force. This is be in the summer. My officer class didn't begin in December. And in between, they came with a lottery, and they started winding the war down.

AW:

Nineteen-sixty-nine.

RH:

So I went to officer school two weeks, and they came into the auditorium and said, "We don't need this many pilots. Who wants out?" I knew better. I wasn't supposed to volunteer. That's the only thing I knew. So I waited until the next day—the next time they asked—and then I raised my hand. So I got an honorable discharge, but I was subject to the draft again.

AW:

But you had the good number?

RH:

I had a good number.

AW:

Yeah. It was quite an interesting time period.

RH:

What is your age?

AW:

I'm sixty-five, so was drafted in February of '68, and at the time I was a police officer working night. Went to school during the day and working nights. And I felt sure, you know? In fact, I took a paperback book because I thought I'd be on the train to Fort Bliss, you know—

RH:

Yes.

AW:

—at the end of the physical, and they flunked me because I was allergic to tetanus shots.

RH:

Is that right?

AW:

It was quite a surprise. So I wound up not going with something that I thought was a complete fluke.

RH:

Right. Really freaky.

AW:

Yeah, it was. I was—I mean, I was working in a job that required physical stamina and all kinds of other things, and so I thought I was—but it allowed me to get my degree finished and all that sort of thing.

RH:

So it worked out?

AW:

Yeah. So after you got your CPA, you came to this bank and went to work?

RH:

Yes. My predecessor was a majority owner, and he was selling it to out-of-towners. And the out-of-towners didn't have a man to come—excuse me—a man or a woman. Didn't have anybody in mind. I kind of fit the bill. I had a little bit of technical knowledge, being a CPA. And then, I was from these parts. And I graduated—I went all twelve years to school here in George West. So I fit that bill, a local guy. And they said, “Well, try it for a year.” My predecessor said—it's his famous words—“If I can do it, anybody can do it.” [AW laughs] And he didn't do it very well, and neither am I.

AW:

[Laughs] I don't think so. I hear that your—

RH:

But my secret is—it's been my secret for thirty-five years. I've been here thirty-four, thirty-five years.

AW:

That's a remarkable to tenure in this business. [RH laughs] Is it not? I mean, I watch what's going on in my community.

RH:

Well, yeah, but I didn't have any ambitions, so I didn't go anywhere. This is as far as I was ever going to get.

AW:

Yes, but your bank, isn't it growing now?

RH:

Yes, it is. Yes, it is.

AW:

And then, through that thirty-five years, you've gone through some really—I know—some difficult times, because of what's happened down here with drought—drouths. Was—before the Eagle Ford Shale, was there any—was there enough oil and gas here for you to be affected by the up and downs of the market?

RH:

Well, yes. There's been production here since probably—oh, I don't—I would say, the fifties were kind of boom-y. I don't know if that was technology, or—well, it had to be technology. All of sudden, they found it. It's been here a long time, of course. And so I would say, oil companies

were major taxpayers and major employers all along. We think of ourselves as an agricultural community, but that's not true. And it's certainly not true anymore.

AW:

Right. Yeah, I drove in through Three Rivers on Wednesday, and the last time I'd been through was just two years or three years ago, and the difference was startling, just in traffic.

RH:

It is amazing. And there are other communities closer to the heart of the Shale. We're kind of on the fringe. I was in Pleasanton yesterday and—all around it, all sides. Out on the interstate, you see some big warehouses and facilities. And then, on the west side—retail sales. I was so amazed. I guess it's been a while since I've been there. I asked our branch manager in Pleasanton, "What is the sales tax like? This is just retail, retail, retail. Often chains." And he said, "I would assume that the sales tax is probably three times higher than it was four years ago."

AW:

Wow.

RH:

So, anyway.

AW:

That's going to be a big boost to communities all through the area.

RH:

Yes. In Three Rivers, their tax base for ad valorem taxes is up substantially. Go out to the next county—is McMullen County. Tilden is the county seat. And their tax base doubled—over—in one year. It was just all those wells. All of a sudden, they came—they were taxable for school taxes. [Phone rings in background] So it is remarkable.

AW:

Yeah. Has that been a challenge, that kind of growth? Has that been a challenge for your business community, and in particular, for the banking?

RH:

Well, I would say no. And I'm kind of—I kind of look at it—we've all benefited indirectly. But there's a lot of national companies that are in the oil field, and they're not banking with us. They might put a courtesy account in here just so their people can cash checks here or whatever.

AW:

But they do their major banking wherever they're—

RH:

That's correct.

AW:

—located?

RH:

That's correct. And, you know, a lot of those people—in my opinion—that are in man camps, they're going home.

AW:

Spending their money there?

RH:

Over the weekend.

AW:

Um-hm. Yeah.

RH:

And they're here during the week, and they're busy. They're not—I don't think they're—we don't have any department stores to say—to speak of. But I don't—I don't think they're spending as much money as I would've liked for them to because they're going back. They're sending it back to their families. There's no housing here.

AW:

I noticed that the motel I'm staying at, the Best Western—they're gone by seven in the morning, and they're not back until seven at night. You know? That doesn't leave a lot of time for recreation or spending, as you say.

RH:

Well, but, again, that's a generalization. That's my observation, I'd say. And I would assume that most of those people are going to clear out Friday. They may keep their rooms so they'll have one Monday, but they're back home with their families.

AW:

So it does have to be an indirect benefit.

RH:

Yes.

AW:

So, you have been here long enough that you were here when the festival started.

RH:

Yes.

AW:

What—why on earth did people in George West decide to have a storytelling festival?

RH:

Well, when I was first approached, I—it was just almost kind of hard to conceive. “What is this going—what is this?” And again—

AW:

Had you ever been to one before?

RH:

No, no. You know, it was a little carnival, a county fair kind of—throw a baseball, and knock something down, and get a prize. And so, that was—I guess that was my—that was my base. And I could tell that those people that were the organizers, they were trying to achieve something better, and start better. Oh, it's hard to say—anything in George West is first class, but they were just trying to accomplish something that was going to be quality. It was pretty much lost on me, but—hell, anybody that is going to go make an effort—I thought we ought to support it, and we did, so. And have done—have continued to do so. We're the official bank of Storyfest. That costs us little more, by the way. [Laughter] I don't think it gets us any business, but it was oppor—I don't want my Board of Directors to know this—but it was an opportunity for me to pay—for us to pay it up a little more, contribute a little more, and get something in return. Again, it's not a very marketable thing, being the official bank of Storyfest, but I think it's important. We want to—we want to support it. And there are—I don't know if they're called naysayers. But there's people that say, “They've got a lot of money.” And then, there was a while there—I don't need to know—I don't go to their meetings. But they really needed some money to stack up, because if we had bad weather, we were—“we”—they were going to be out of luck. They would not have any income, no street dance income, or beer sales, or whatever, and they'd be out on a limb. So, there were some people that said, “They have a lot of money. Storyfest has a lot of money.” I don't worry about that.

AW:

Yeah. I've gotten a sense, from the people I've talked to so far, that there are really surprisingly few naysayers, though, in the community about the event. Is that accurate?

RH:

I think that's correct.

AW:

And that's unusual. I mean, that—to find a community that's that—

RH:

Yes. And I'm sure—I'm sure somebody's—there's somebody that says, "I haven't been there in five years. I don't go anymore," but it's just because they're lazy. I mean, you've seen it. It's really kind of a wholesome environment and there's no pitching a baseball and winning prizes. If that's what you came for, you're going to be disappointed. [Laughter]

AW:

Yeah. [Clears throat] Well, it's quite—again, I think it's quite something to be proud of for the community that you have such an event that's, first of all, lasted this long, and is such a good event on top of it.

RH:

Well, I—you know, I don't know. I wouldn't have a clue how we get to the next level. I don't know what the next level is. I'm of the opinion that the people in charge really don't want it to be much more sophisticated or a bigger deal than it is now. It's manageable, I assume, and so that's kind of contrary to the American way: build it, make it bigger. Again, that's just my—that's my observation. I may be completely wrong.

AW:

No, I think you may be right. But that may be one of the reasons it's still going, too.

RH:

Right.

AW:

When they get too big. And especially, the amount of infrastructure you have here to support it if it got larger. I mean—and given today, with what's going on with petroleum, where would you put people if you had more of them?

RH:

Right, right. And there's—there's not many nice facilities in the county. But the fairgrounds, for example, is a big—there's lots of covered area at the fairgrounds and there's even a coliseum

AW:

Oh really? Where—and where is—

RH:

That would be between here and Three Rivers.

AW:

Okay, yeah.

RH:

And again, they want it to stay here. They feel—I think they feel they lose a sense if we moved it back out to the county fairgrounds, where, again, once a year, there's a booth for you to throw a baseball and knock things down. This is, again, as far as I'm concerned, it's pretty wholesome. They shut some streets down. It's centered around the courthouse. It's a shame we can't utilize the courthouse more. I don't know how. The courthouse grounds and the streets around it, as you know. I just—pretty self-contained. It's kind of gone out down Houston Street for the children's area. They've kind of gone into the next block. I guess there's a car show on the other end of Houston Street, or not the end of the street, but on the other side of the facility here. But I'm—I think they're pretty pleased with—I think they're pretty pleased with their achievement, and as far as I'm concerned, they should be.

AW:

Over the years, has it been an economic advantage or a boom to the community to have the festival?

RH:

You know, I've really never looked at it from a "What has it generated for the community?" It has been a source of funds for a number of non-profit or church affiliated entities. But I think that's—I think the fact that they're here, and having cakes, or hand-carved crosses, or whatever—I think they're contributing as much as they're taking.

AW:

So sort of a wash?

RH:

I think it's a wash. But I would—I would assume that the—well, it's not an issue now because

our hotels are full. [AW laughs] But it did sell some rooms.

AW:

Yeah. It's probably—I know it was difficult for me to wind up getting a room and I started months ago.

RH:

Well—so that benefit has maybe disappeared, probably—I have no idea. I don't think Beeville would probably be any different from George West, very possibly. We've sent people to these outlying areas, these other communities, to seek lodging. And again, this is—and it's just a one-day event, although, there's a couple of other things going on a day or two before. But this is—this is—this is a one-day event. Other than the talent, I just don't know—I just don't think there's very many people that would come—

AW:

And stay?

RH:

And stay.

AW:

Yeah, because even from San Antonio you could drive down here and spend the day and drive back.

RH:

Correct. Correct.

AW:

One of the other things that seems interesting to me is the—what I—for a lack of a better term—I would say lack of ego amongst the participants putting it on, in terms of who did what. They seem to be—everybody that I've talked with is quick to give the credit to somebody else, which is kind of interesting. And I would suspect that that's had something to do with the longevity of the event. Lack of infighting, by and large, it strikes me. But it also strikes me that this is something that's part of your community here. Is that a reasonable extrapolation on my part?

RH:

That it's a part of the community?

AW:

That your community is like that, probably, in the way they operate their PTA, and their church

groups, and Little League, and the other kinds of volunteer things.

RH:

I think so. I think so. I think that's a—I think that's accurate. Well, today is the day before Storyfest. And you can just look out these windows and just—I don't want to say they're like ants, but there's awful lots of people in this block that are working. Their personalities, you know, there has not been any infighting, as far as I know. Not all had a falling out, and we just can't even proceed because there's too many disagreements. That just doesn't seem to have happened. These are—this is just all hard work today. And then—and tomorrow, it's a big success. There's not a lot of patting on the back, or self—[laughter] self-praise. It's just—this is a part of the community and this is what we do. I would hope that most of these people here today would say, "It wasn't bad. It's enjoyable. I'm glad to participate and help where I can." And again, you know, in the end, there's no—we don't give anybody any plaques or—we maybe should, but we don't.

AW:

I don't know. Maybe that's what keeps things going so well. Is that—is this something that's different about George West versus other communities in the region? Or is this a regional kind of thing? Because I've got to tell you, traveling to a lot of communities, they're not all like this, in this regard, in terms of pitching in without insisting on glory, or financial renovation, or whatever. It seems to me—

RH:

I think you're right. I don't think the—ordinarily, I don't think there's anything special about George West. I love it, but it's just like any other place, but it's not. A larger community I can think of—there just seems to be a lot of factions. We don't even really have a whole lot of contested elections.

AW:

Really?

RH:

So it's—I'd say it's—they're pretty peaceful and pretty easy to get along with. You know, we do have one or two naysayers that don't want the street blocked. And it's probably people that refer to that. But, I mean, we're talking about one or two people. I know one guy who doesn't particularly like it because he's on the square and Saturday is pretty big day for him, but he shut up because he knew it was good for the community and he could stand a day. He can stand to be closed a day. There's another guy that's just—he just goes out of his way, I think, to irritate people. The city council is of one mind. They're not going to refuse to close the street if that's what Storyfest wants. [Phone rings in background] I have thought of something that's worked

with them, that this can't—in my opinion, this can't get—again, I'm usually opposed to everything. [AW laughs] You know, “Why waste the time? Let's forget it. We're not going to do anything. You're not going to accomplish anything,” but I don't think this can really get much bigger, because there seems to be a limited supply of volunteers.

AW:

Yeah, I think you're—and space. And who knows? If it got any bigger, would the quality be the same? Would people enjoy it in the same way?

RH:

Well, I've heard—I call them the organizers. Not necessarily a day one, but the people that are working in the organization. They're—I think they're happy. I think they're real happy with the crowds we get. They're very mannerly. As you know, you pass among these people, and everybody's friendly and polite. It's just kind of the best side of the community.

AW:

Well, I'd certainly say that's the case. It sure looks like it. What have I not asked you about that I should have?

RH:

[Laughs] I can't think of a thing and you're asking the wrong person, so.

AW:

[Laughs] Well, I'll say thank you very much.

RH:

Good, good.

End of Recording