

BACK TO THE PLOW

by Dan K. Utley

*An Address On
The 75th Anniversary of the
Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board*

*Given at the
74th Annual Meeting of
Texas Soil and Water Conservation District Directors
Galveston, Texas
October 27, 2014*

Many years ago in what was certainly another time and place, I was a fledgling history teacher at Cy-Fair High School just up the road in Houston. Teachers back in the early 1970s—and even now—didn't make much money, so I was pleased when I was given the opportunity to announce the home stand football games for extra pay. The negotiations went about like this:

“You mean I get paid AND I get in free to each football game? AND I get to sit on the 50-yard line? AND I get to work inside a room that's out of the rain and cold? All that AND I get paid?”

“Yep.” Well, that was truly a no-brainer.

Something similar happened, albeit with different results, when I sat down to negotiate with Rex Isom about my assignment to write the agency's history for the 75th anniversary that we're celebrating this week—and this year. The conversation, as I remember it, went like this:

“You mean I get paid AND I get to ride around the state for months on end with Rusty Ray? “Yep,” he replied. “AND I get to work with folks like Mel Davis and Clyde Gottschalk?” “Yeah,” Mr. Isom said, a bit more cautious this time. And then I made the mistake of asking one more question: AND I get to listen to Don Brandenberger tell stories?” With that, Mr. Isom said, “I see what you mean,” and he stood up, reached across the table, picked up the contract, and tore it into little pieces. We were back into negotiations at that point. Thankfully, though, he's an honorable man, so we eventually came to terms and settled for a contract worth \$137.73—which was really more than I wanted to spend to get the contract, but it was worth it, I guess.

Now, if you believe any of that opening story, I want you to keep in mind one important principle: “History Doesn't Lie—Historians Do.” The truth is, contracts aside, the time I spent researching the history of the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board proved to be, for me personally, compelling, enlightening, and reassuring, and I hope for the agency it proved to be memorable. After all, we're here tonight in large part to celebrate the history we all share with the people of Texas.

Now, every time I start a research project, whether it's for my own purposes or, as in this case, for someone else, it's a lot like a journey. Regardless of what I might know about the topic

upfront, or how familiar it might be, I really never know beforehand what the various twists and turns and landmarks of that journey are going to be. I may know the destination, but I'm not certain what the landscape will be like along the way. It's almost always an adventure, though, and the journey that brought me to this point was no exception. I thought that tonight I would share with you some of what I discovered about this organization as I worked for more than a year to collect, analyze, and interpret the various elements of its history. Certainly, some of what I learned was new, at least to me, but I also reaffirmed some things I might have known earlier but had forgotten. These are *my* experiences, to be sure, but I feel certain you will find some of them familiar in your own lives as well. After all, while the routes may be many and as varied as the Texas landscape you all work to preserve, the destination really remains the same for all of us.

So, I've come up with a list of four personal discoveries—things I learned, or relearned, in the research process—and then I'm going to wrap my travels all up with a bonus revelation or observation. I could have added more, I guess, and even considered doing a top ten list, but if I had, there was the question of paying a royalty to David Letterman, and as I've already indicated, that kind of cost just wasn't in the budget.

I think the first thing I discovered about the history of the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board is that it is largely untold, or maybe it would be more accurate to say “under-told.” That's due at least in part to the fact that most folks who have worked for the agency or on behalf of its mission since 1939 have been so busily focused on preserving the natural resources of this great state that they rarely stopped to put everything in a historical context. But it also means they rarely threw anything away. Believe it or not, that's the way most historians like it. Certainly it's the way I prefer it. Personal discovery is the engine that keeps me moving forward, because, of course, there are often detours or dead ends along the way, so you've got to have something that gets you back on the right road, and that for me is the personal discovery. Researching the history of this agency and its various components was truly like plowing new ground, and it's always rewarding when you can put the pieces together for the first time. The agency's history is, without a doubt, complex and multi-layered, but it is also fortunately underpinned by a wide variety of accessible resources, from newspaper and magazine articles, and correspondence to historic photographs, maps, and board minutes.

Really, the only thing that seemed to be missing were the voices of the past—the oral histories of those who were instrumental in the development and ongoing evolution of the agency and its programs. Given the great accomplishments of the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board in recent decades, that made it even more important to at least make an effort to gather some of those stories, and to gather them from all points of the bigger story.

So, with the board's concurrence, and with the capable assistance of the Road Warrior Ray, he and I literally traveled to all parts of the state to harvest stories about this agency before they disappear. Sadly, some of those memories were no longer available for some key individuals from the earliest days, but even then we were able to piece together important elements of their stories through the memories of others who worked with them, and thus we were able to pay them the historical respect they were due. In all, I believe we conducted nineteen oral history interviews, and that is significant. You'll no doubt recognize some of the

names: Cheryl Spencer, John Millican, Joe Freeman, Bob Buckley, Kendria Ray, Pete Laney, Johnny Oswald, D.V. Guerra, Wade Ross, Omar Garza, Rex Isom, and Ben Sims—and of course there were others.

While the stories we preserved were there for collecting, they resided only in memory, so in effect that resource didn't exist until the agency gathered them up. So now, thanks to the foresight to remember the past at the 75-year mark, there will be even more history of this organization when a group similar to this gathers in 25 years to talk about a full century of service and accomplishments.

Anyway, thinking about all those stories we heard—and many were, I honestly believe, true, or based largely in truth—that leads to the second thing I discovered about this agency. The Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board, with all of its various layers—the districts, the state board, the field representatives, office staff, Ag Workers Insurance, the Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts, and so many more—is like an extended family. Having said that, I think many of you are recalling mental images of family gatherings over holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas, and all the warm memories evocative of those times. And that's obviously part of this agency's past. But then I would remind you, there are the other images of family, like the weird uncle no one talks about, the forgetful aunt who can never remember your name, or the troubled nephew who doesn't quite fit in, and maybe that's part of the agency's history as well. (I sense some of you are already putting names with those images.) But anyway, like any other family, the good times and the times when folks came together to share stories and memories, and to work together, far outweigh the others, and I know that to be true of this organization.

Let me give you a particularly poignant reminder of the family aspect of this history. Very early on in my research, it became clearly evident that the history of this agency is marked by the right people being at the right place at the right time. One of those, of course, was Vernie Caldwell Marshall, who, as a schoolteacher and a farmer in rural Bell County, was a compelling voice for those who had a vision of a program that would address a national problem—the devastation of natural resources and productive agricultural land—by means of a straightforward local solution, and that is putting the mechanism of solving the problem squarely in the hands of those most directly affected by it. It was sheer genius, but it was by no means simple. Today we might call it common sense or pragmatic conservation, but in its time it was nothing short of radical.

Another of those individuals who I came to realize was at the right place in the family at the right time was Marshall's capable successor, Carl Spencer, another remarkable individual and one with whose history we were able to connect through various resources, including oral histories with those who knew him best. Although he passed away many years ago, literally while in service to this agency, I got to know him in a personal way because of the abiding love of his own family, particularly his daughters: Cheryl Spencer and Nancy Spencer Hyde. The personal integrity of their father is reflected in their careful preservation of his accomplishments through a detailed collection of pictures, memorabilia, articles, correspondence—both personal and public—and family reminiscences. What these two ladies have done to record the contributions their father made to the story we celebrate today is nothing short of incredible.

We—all of us who appreciate the work of this agency—are indebted to them for their good work. I know Mr. Spencer, in spirit, is proud of them and this agency today, and for what it's worth, I am as well.

You know, among historians there's a saying that sometimes we find the story and sometimes the story finds us. The latter kind are often the most rewarding, it seems. Carl Spencer's story represents one of those that found me, in a sense, and I hope to work with the family to tell his story in a more expansive way somehow. One particularly good thing about being a history instructor is that I can often put a student in touch with a good story and just sit back and watch the magic take place. Anyway, I look forward to learning more about Mr. Spencer along the way. Thanks again to his family members, who are still part of this agency's extended family.

And family reminds me of a third landmark of my personal journey regarding the organizational past, and that is that each day, every day, the legacy is moving forward, passing from one generation and one frame of reference to another. This is most often a quiet and unassuming transition, but it is also remarkably steady and compelling. To me, there was no better evidence of that than an oral history Rusty and I conducted with two employees at the same time. Normally, it's not my preference to interview several individuals at one sitting, because oral history is better when it's one-on-one, and because the process relies on establishing rapport and moving methodically through the past. That rarely happens when there are two sets of memories and two personalities to contend with, but in this particular situation that I'm thinking about, the timing determined the scope of the interview, and we found ourselves having to interview two individuals, from two different generations, in a short amount of time about their experiences with the agency, and the outcome was nothing short of phenomenal. I'm talking about an interview we conducted in 2013 with Don Brandenberger and Kendria Ray. From the moment I turned on the recorder, it was evident these two have great respect for each other. And both are good storytellers. Now, Brandenberger, as Rusty explained to me, hasn't worked for the agency since it began; the truth is, he showed up about a week late because he broke a spoke on his buggy while driving into Temple.

But of course, Brandenberger's many years of service, which are in reality quite a bit short of the 75-year mark, give him something of a senior status, and also a special perspective of the past. He provided us with some of the best insights into the collective story of the organization, and he also left us with one of the best oral history quotes in that regard: "I'm the best *field man* in the agency," he said, "And Kendria is the next best."

As Rusty and I listened to Kendria and Don swap stories, barbs, one-liners, and plenty of laughs that day, it became evident to us both that the future of this agency is solidly grounded in the past and that the future is in good hands because of that. I couldn't help but recall the words of another individual I interviewed about the same time concerning another organization. Speaking of the generational transition that moves history forward within the broader continuum, he remarked: "We're going to be okay," He paused for a moment to reflect and then quietly added again, "We're going to be okay."

History is, in its simplest form, the study of change over time, but change—transition—is not always easy. And history, I would add, is not always easy to tell. It's never perfect or without blemish, but it nevertheless has to be honest and as true as it can be. That's crucial to the generations to come. In that regard, I want to add something that is particularly important to me. In the course of my work with the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board, I was given unprecedented access to the agency's historical records, and I was free to go where the research took me. Not once did anyone say, "Don't go there," or "Don't include that story," or "Those records are out of bounds." As a result, what you will read about this agency is, I believe and hope, an honest portrayal of what happened to this agency, and I greatly appreciated that freedom, which I sense is unique these days.

So, I'm happy to report to you tonight that it's my belief, based on my understanding of the historical records I reviewed and the oral histories Rusty and I conducted, and maybe because of the historical fabric we all worked on together for this special anniversary, generation gaps are not something this agency needs to worry about. And so you would be correct then if you're thinking, based on the relevance of the past to the present as it relates directly to this group, "We're going to be okay. We're going to be okay."

And finally, before I wrap this up with my overarching observation that I hope will bring this all back home, I want to talk about a very special group of people—most of them unnamed, unless you knew some of them personally—and I did, including family members who worked the blackland soils of Bell County—people who figured into the broader history of this organization, and those are the citizens of this state who pulled together in an unprecedented time of great despair, and in the shadow of the hawk, as the saying goes, to make this a better place for all of us. "A society grows great" I've heard, "when old men [and women] plant trees in whose shade they shall never sit." Quite literally, in locales all across this state, in every county, we rest today in the shade of trees someone else planted—and planted sometimes with great sacrifice.

One of the difficulties for history teachers especially sometimes is helping members of the current generations not only know about the past, but also to *understand* the past—that is, to put themselves back in a past mindset and then try to figure out the problems those people faced from that perspective. It is almost impossible, which is why history so often repeats itself. It repeats itself because we weren't listening the first time.

In that regard, here's what I learned about the past that shaped this organization. Despite what we have heard about the Dust Bowl era, a time when lives and land were literally turned upside down, and soil and hope were blown away on the wind, it was *far worse* than we can even imagine today. And let me leave you with just one specific example from the history that I think illustrates this best. Here's an excerpt from *Plowing New Ground*.

"The true turning point... occurred on a day now known as Black Sunday. Timothy Egan's description of the seminal black blizzard [in *The Worst Hard Time*] that would, by its very nature, alter the national discourse on erosion provides a graphic account of its fury as it blew eastward across the plains:

A Sunday in mid-April 1935 dawned quiet, windless, and bright. In the afternoon, the sky went purple—as if it were sick—and the temperature plunged. People looked northwest and saw a ragged-topped foundation on the move, covering the horizon. The air cracked with electricity. *Snap. Snap. Snap.* Birds screeched and dashed for cover. As the black wall approached, car radios clicked off, overwhelmed by the static. Ignitions shorted out. Waves of sound, like ocean water rising over a ship's prow, swept over roads. Cars went into ditches. A train derailed.

The day was April 14 and, as Egan added, “The storm carried twice as much dirt as was dug out of the earth to create the Panama Canal. The canal took seven years to dig; the storm lasted a single afternoon.”

So, with that, here's the overarching revelation I promised that I hope ties the past solidly to the present. If history is truly about change over time (and it is), and if it's about how people handle transitions (and it is), then you can be proud of the change you have helped bring about. *You* are part of the history. What you have done, and what you continue to do, is commendable and life-changing, and grounded in the lessons of the past and the promises of the future. There's still work to be done and still challenges ahead. As Hugh Hammond Bennett, the “father of soil conservation” used to say, “We have only begun to scratch the surface.” I know each of you will remain active in that regard, both during the sessions here and when you return to your places of work later this week, but in the meantime, remember this: *IT'S TIME TO CELEBRATE!*

Happy Anniversary! Happy 75th Anniversary to you all!