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Interview with
Mrs. Walter Sparks
May 28, 1969

Place of Interview: Portland, Texas

Interviewer: Dr. Ray Stephens

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Oral History Collection

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Dr. Stephens: This is an interview with Mrs. Walter Sparks, Portland, Texas, May 28, 1969.

Mrs. Sparks: I came to Texas as a very little child in 1908. My parents came down as a result of a homeseekers boom. It was rather interesting. My father went first to South Dakota on a homeseeker train, and was quite sold on the land there. When he returned they decided they'd . . . you see, he'd decided that they'd go to South Dakota. He accidentally went back for something one day and found my mother crying in the dishpan because she didn't like the thoughts of moving to South Dakota. So they changed. And with his friend, John Ferree, my father came down in May of 1908 to investigate the possibilities of buying land. They came to Corpus Christi, went down to Falfurrias, then, as a result of some of the advertising they'd read. Then at Sinton a man got on who told them that land around Sinton was really selling because of the George H. Paul Company. And that it was the crossroads of two railroads, therefore it was an up and coming town. At Skidmore, my father, and Uncle John, as we called him, got off. They came to Sinton and spent the night and investigated.

My father wasn't about to make the same mistake as he did the first time, so he told my mother that she should go down in August on a homeseeker's train of George H. Paul's and investigate and see whether or not she was game to go to Texas to live. She and Uncle John and his wife came down and she was quite sold on the country. My father told her if she was sold to go ahead and buy some land. She went to Sinton and they took her out west of Sinton which is sandy land and not very good. And the man told her, "Look, you buy this land you won't have to spend a lot of money clearing it." But she was smart enough to get ahead of him and she said, "Well, if it won't raise brush, it won't raise anything else probably." As a consequence she went out to the south of Taft and bought some of the land with some of the thickest brush that you've ever seen. One of the interesting things--and I'm diverging a little bit--but one of the interesting things about this was that they had what they called flying cactus. It was horrible. The Mexicans just hated to get into . . . to break the head of it . . . but it was some of the best land. In other words if they'd hit this flying cactus it would fly and hit them. A woman . . . there is . . . there were several reasons that we came to Texas. My father and I both had catarrh and my father had had what they called in those days lung fever, although, of course, today it's known as pneumonia. And they decided that a better climate would be beneficial. Also, on the economic side, Marion, Indiana, where I came from had been the center of natural gas and the glass blowing industry. The natural gas played out and it was . . . also there had been the panic of 1907. Also

my father was quite active politically there and they wanted him to go on and run for something. My mother said she'd have no part in politics. So a lot of factors. You . . . let . . . you asked about other land seekers. Well, there were a great many who came at that particular time and later on my father and Uncle John worked together on a . . . incidentally, Uncle John's wife would have no part of Texas. She didn't like the climate because it was a very hot day in August when they were in Corpus. And so, anyway, they worked together to bring other land seekers down. One of my most vivid memories as a child was seeing five families who had just arrived by train . . . come across the lot near ours. My father had come home and said, "There are a great many people from Grant County Indiana, who arrived on the train this morning. And will you fix breakfast for them?" Well, when I looked up as a child I said, "Mother, an army's coming." There were five families and twenty-two children in all. And they all stayed for a while. One family moved in next door to us, and I remember my mother was very proud of herself because she helped at the birth of their baby when the doctor didn't arrive in time. In those days people had to go for the doctor--and often he had to hitch up his horse and buggy to come. All of them, however, . . . none of them from that five . . . from those five families, however, none of them stayed. There were many other land speculation companies. However, George H. Paul stayed for some time and also developed this Saint Paul area. And I remember one of our dearest friends--or my parents dearest friends--was a George Barrett who had worked for George H.

Paul and was working . . . living down there on the main farm and helping with the Saint Paul land. My mother . . . I can remember actually coming on the train and . . . maybe I better stop and resume. I think . . . (baby whine) Well, hello.

(Blank in tape)

Mrs. Sparks: As far as the trains were concerned I can well remember them. Not too many details nor did my mother ever tell me too much about them except my most vivid memory was that we were getting ready to change trains some place, or perhaps get on a homeseeker train, and my mother looked down at me and said, "This gentleman has just told me that William Howard Taft is to be the next president of the United States." As a matter of fact, my father came down in October. It was very fortunate in, as he came on the train, it was a George H. Paul homeseeker train, somehow he got in touch with Mr. Joseph F. Green who was the head of the Taft Ranch at that time, who offered to let him write abstracts and write insurance on the Taft land. Also he was instrumental in getting him the post office at Sinton, Texas. In . . . and these . . . and in these ways he was able to do quite well while he was getting himself established and clearing the land. My main memory of the train was the . . . a lot of green interior and all that sort of thing. The sort of thing that a three-year-old child would remember. The economic development of the area that you asked about was really, of course, slow in a way in coming. And yet when we first arrived in Sinton there were only seventy-five people there and very fast it grew to a much larger place. My father had all the faith in

the world that this was the country. "This is the place," as an old Mormon would say. He would never . . . you couldn't have paid him to go back to Indiana. He was always trying to get some of his Grant County, Indiana, relatives to come down and settle and some of them did in . . . oh, . . . invest in land down here, and it's really paid off for them, too. But he couldn't sell very many people on really staying here. In fact, he got his younger brother, my Uncle Otto, to come down here. And Uncle Otto's wife was certainly not made for frontier life. And, incidentally, it was certainly a typical frontier at that time, pretty wild and wooly. The land was full of brush. My father carried his Winchester pump all the time in the horse and buggy which we eventually bought, well, not very long after we arrived so that he could get around, could get out to the farm. And, incidentally, going to the farm in those days was a . . . at least a half a day's trip because it was twelve miles from Sinton. He always carried this gun--sound a little disorganized don't I--he always carried this gun in case he saw a rattlesnake run across the road. And many, many times, as he drove into the driveway to go into the barn at our place, he would see a big rattlesnake stretched out. And he's killed many of them. One time I went out (this was in town--but everyone had barns then) . . . to the barn to feed the chickens or something of the kafir corn that we raised then on the farm and right in the middle of the kafir corn there was a snake coiled up. And . . . well, I could tell some real scary tales about snakes if I wanted to. I've already told you what the land was like. It was thick brush.

However, it was really quite beautiful, especially in the spring. The flowers then were most varied you might say. There were a great many live oak groves with the moss hanging down. And from each of these experiences my mother got the greatest thrill. She was a very frail sort of person, but you never knew it actually. And she certainly wasn't suited to frontier life, but she pitched right in. And which is rather unusual in those days for a woman to get in and work. But she said it . . . it hurt her less physically to work with . . . along with my father. It was quite . . . fairly easy to get help in those days. Lots of the girls that they hired to take care of me because I still wasn't school age were girls who would like to live in town and go to school. And they were . . . and could educate themselves, take care of me. Part of the time my mother ran the post office while my father got out and pursued his other interests. And as I say he was very fortunate in making this contact with Mr. Paul. In years later when I met Mr. Paul he remembered my father as a great big red-headed man, slightly bald, which I thought was rather interesting. You asked about the Mexican-Anglo relations. I would say that when we first went to Texas, actually the ones that wanted to go to school went to school and we thought nothing of them. I can remember a very beautiful Mexican . . . little . . . a little Mexican girl that came to school and we all made quite a bit over her. My mother was quite shocked because most of the Mexican babies were stark-naked out . . . living out in these primitive conditions. You . . . you could hire someone to grub-out your land for fifty cents a day.

But he wasn't the most effective. Actually you had to pay a little more than that if you wanted real effective grubbing. And I well remember some of my father's experiences. I remember them, and yet I couldn't go into detail about them. My child amusements . . . I had a great time. Of course, then when it rained, the ditches were absolutely full of water. In the place that we lived the drainage was terrible. All of the rain that accumulated came in from Sodville and went slap up against the SAP Railroad which was not too far from our house. And then there was another railroad which is now the Missouri Pacific but went the other . . . in the other direction and hit . . . they formed a dam. And I can remember if our house had been flat on the ground--which no house was in those days; they were all up on pillars so that you could catch the air flaps underneath--but if it had been down on the ground, I'm sure we'd have been flooded out many times because I can well remember my father coming up in hip boots and picking me up and carrying me across the road. And later on when I went to school--first school was not very far from there--but he often, in times of heavy rain, had to carry me to school to keep me safe because it was too difficult and the water sometimes ran too swiftly. The . . . but I had a great time also out in the brush. And I think one of the things that I most . . . I was thinking about the other day that I did so many things with never any fear (and my parents apparently didn't have any fear) that you wouldn't think of doing today. I wandered around out in the brush. I got on the train which was not far . . . they slowed down at the crossing not too

far from where we lived. I would go to Corpus by myself when I was, oh, seven to twelve years old, and I'd come back. I had some sort of doctor's appointments over there, and my mother couldn't always go with me so I'd go and get off the train and go to the doctor's office, which wasn't too far, get back on the train and come back. And nobody ever thought I'd be . . . I'd come to any harm at all, you know. You just wouldn't do that with a little girl nowadays. And I always knew snakes were there, and I always watched them when I wandered around. I used to play by myself a lot because I was an only child until my brother was born. And I had . . . oh, I had a little . . . I'd stake out a playhouse imaginary out with my little friends, or I'd pretend that I was going out to conquer a dragon and attack the cactus. And, of course, sometimes I came back full of stickers (chuckle). But, anyway, that was that, and we . . . I'd play under the castor beans that were . . . grew in our yard and make mud pies out of all kinds of things that were scraps--scraps of china and things like that. Although my parents were going . . . particularly that first Christmas I was down there went all out to see that I didn't feel that I had become completely a step-child out away from home. They gave me a lot of nice things that first Christmas to make it especially fine. But I used to love to play like I was Swiss Family Robinson. I'd gather up a whole group of children. I'd . . . Miss Sudie Hamilton that you interviewed this morning--Mrs. Dick Gerdes--can remember, she said, when I used to have to act out all the things I'd read. I thought . . . I didn't have much entertainment. Of course, there were eventually lyceums

in Sinton. There were Chautauquas that my father worked very hard to promote. There were medicine shows, and my mother looked down her nose at those. And she also looked down her nose at these flicks, you know, these wild movies that she didn't feel there was anything to them, and they were hard on the eyes. So I didn't always get to go to some of these things when she felt that that would be throwing money away. And they . . . Christmas was always a real big thing with me and also my birthday. My mother made a big thing out of my birthday, I suppose, because I was an only child. We used to go out and cut a limb of some maize, tree, or shrub, and I'd decorate it with little paper things and all that sort of thing because my parents worked hard to pay off the land. And they didn't believe in throwing a lot of money away. They were just real Quakers. And then you were asking about the educational facilities. In the beginning there were only ten grades in Sinton school . . . I mean, it was . . . it was very small, I think, the year we went. Then finally the second year we were there they built a larger place. The children . . . of course, some of them came in from way out, and it was very difficult to get in over the muddy road. My mother didn't think too much of the educational facilities. I think that's the reason she sent me away to a boarding school when I was a junior in high school. She had been a teacher. She taught me at home before I entered third grade, which is a mistake sometimes. You know children like that? The . . . oh . . . I was rather interested in what Mary said this morning about the yard. Definitely you kept the yard very clean, kept it

swept clean. But my parents went . . . worked very hard to put in, oh, garden, and my mother loved roses so we had rose bushes. And then my father started an orchard. He bought three lots where we loved, and he put out . . . tried experimenting with fig trees, which they loved, peach trees. They had . . . he had a grape arbor. And, of course, we had a chicken yard, and my mother was quite a chicken fancier. I mean, we . . . you just lived this way. Walter says that his folks kept a pig, but my mother said that's one place she's going to draw the line. She was an Iowa farm girl, and she held no truck with pigs. Well, once every two years my parents saved up so that my mother and I could go back to Indiana or my father and I. So we went as long as my grandmother . . . my grandparents were alive. We went . . . oh, we loved to go to Port Aransas, which was called Tarpon Island in those days. Any time we had visitors from the north--and believe me we had lots of visitors, I don't know where my mother put them but we had lots of visitors --we'd get on the train at Sinton early in the morning. Then we'd change at Gregory and go to either Aransas Pass or Rockport, take a boat over to Port Aransas and eat a fish dinner there at Tarpon Inn or somewhere. Hire a rig to take us over on the Gulf side and pick up shells, just worlds of shells. Then come back, and you'd hear the boat go, "Toot, toot, toot." And everybody'd dash to get in the rig and get back to the boat to come back. It was a great . . . oh, I just looked forward to those holidays terrifically. We had lots and lots of picnics because the folks would fix . . . pack up a picnic basket and Daddy'd have to go see the farm or see

about the farm. And so we'd go down . . . we'd . . . as I say, it was about a half day's trip. We'd go down to the farm, and he'd look at that, and then we'd go on beyond there and sit on the bay and look out over the water and eat a picnic lunch. That was a great treat . . . there was also, on the way to the farm, a beautiful live oak grove which we sometimes went that way and stopped there for our picnic. This was a great way. Then my mother loved music, and she . . . we'd . . . I can well remember that Dad and I would love to sit in the twilight in our home and listen to her play her . . . some of Dad's favorite pieces. She'd . . . this was part of our entertainment. And this is . . . I mean, this is not all . . . maybe this is not what everybody did, but this was just great. And parties . . . of course, as I grew older, we'd go to parties and play . . . Walter can probably tell you more about it, can't you? He was a partyplayer . . . but anyway they really didn't have many dances in Sinton. I mean, people . . . now Mother loved to play cards, but this was frowned on by some of the others, but she . . . we always played cards in our home. My dad was a great lover of playing. Any kind of game fascinated him, and he was quite a practical joker. And he used to entertain the children then because he could throw his voice as a ventriloquist. Dad loved to dabble in politics. Even though Mother got him out of Indiana, he still enjoyed playing poli . . . I mean, fooling with politics, and he was the first mayor of Sinton. Get that in before Walter says otherwise. But they . . . it took them a long time to get the city incorporated. They worked and worked on it, and they

finally got it. And then Dad got on the school board. He had a . . . he stayed involved with the school until he died. Yet at the time of the 1920 election when Carlos Bee was running for this district which then comprised clear up to San Antonio, Dad was the district chairman of the Republican Party and presided in San Antonio. And at that particular time--I've always been real fascinated--the Republicans sort of approached him on whether or not he'd be willing to run as the Congressman from this district. And, of course, my mother . . . he knew how my mother felt about it, so he said no. And this was when Harry Wurzbach ran and defeated Carlos Bee. So I . . . I was very interested in the fact that . . . well, I had a letter of my mother's which now is in the archives down at the University. She said, "Well, the count is in and Harry Wurzbach has been elected. I wonder what would have happened if your father had run." You know. But, of course, he had no thought of it. But he was a Republican when it was very unpopular to be a Republican in this part of the country. He was very determined about it. Of course, then . . . I well remember going to the Chautauquas under the big tent and being absolutely hysterical as a child over some of the absent-minded professor jokes they told. These sound kind . . . would sound rather corny today. Now we were even let out of school to go to the Chautauqua in the afternoons, if they had an afternoon session at that particular time. And the lyceums . . . of course . . . we took, oh, I don't know. I remember my first football game that I went to. I didn't know anything about it but I cheered anyhow. But it had just started. And believe it or not,

Sinton was playing San Antonio in football. My father looked after a great . . . he would . . . he would sell land to different people. And then he would stay on . . . they'd ask him to put it in and develop it. And then watch . . . I mean oversee whoever leased it, collect the rent and so forth. And . . . I think . . . I don't know how much they paid him, but I think it's rather interesting. My father was also very interested along about 1916 in oil development. And, oh, he'd get so excited. He'd work at . . . up . . . these oil deals. And, of course, he never lived to see the oil. But I well remember how excited he got too when the White Point blow-out in 1914 and then when another one in 1916. And . . . but he was . . . he and Uncle John of whom I spoke earlier always swore that there would . . . some day there would be oil developed in this country but, of course, as I say he never lived to see it. But I certainly wish he had. He would say, "Some day we're going to see such development in this country as you've never seen." And I've often thought, "Gee, wouldn't it have been great." So you see when he died they didn't even have very many paved . . . not all the roads were paved around here. I mean there were no country roads paved, only . . . only the highway. And he had . . . incidentally, he . . . I remember how hard he worked to get . . . to try to get a paved highway through Sinton and various and sundry things.

Dr. Stephens: Do you remember the 1919 hurricane?

Mrs. Sparks: Oh, very well. We . . . we sat . . . we sat and watched things flying around--debris and windmills going over . . . we . . . we

bought a house in the Paul . . . the George H. Paul addition. And gradually it was being taken over by the Negroes and Mexicans. And we were not . . . we could look . . . about two or three blocks away there was a Negro church that went over during the blast. And then my brother tells me that he can so well remember when my father went out . . . of course, we didn't have any reports or anything. My father waded out to go to town and he had to roll his pants' legs clear up and wade out. And my father . . . my mother had a keen sense of humor and when she saw him, he looked so ridiculous that she laughed. And my brother was very small at the time, but he can still remember her laughing so hard. And then I can . . . I can well remember my father coming back and saying, "Oh, they've had a terrible storm. They've . . . the people are being washed up on the beach." So he got . . . he and several others got in a mule-drawn hearse and went to White Point to help gather up the bodies just as Mr. Moore told you. And it took them all night and they had to change the mules two or three times before . . . before they got there because the mud was so deep and the hearse would sink down--the wheels in the mud. And I can remember how hot and muggy and then the horrible smell that came from that direction. And I . . . a week later I left to go to school. My roommate lived in La Feria and she was late coming because the train came as far as the Nueces River, then they got off and walked to another train that was waiting for them. And she said when she walked across she could see snakes and all that sort of thing hanging on the Nueces River Bridge that is right out of . . . well, Odem and Calallen

. . . you know where it is now. And this was really something. And, of course, Walter could tell you more about that because his father was mayor at that time and he helped some of the people to locate their friends.

Dr. Stephens: What about other hurricanes, do you remember?

Mrs. Sparks: Well, I remember the 1916 one. I . . . it was such a lark that I . . . when the 1919 . . . you know, I mean there's nothing very much to it. The only thing that bothered us was that one of our neighbors was in Spohn Hospital at the time and we worried about her. Spohn at that time was a wooden building on the beach--North Beach. But we found out she was all right so as far as I was concerned there was lots of excitement about it, you know. And I think at that time the window blew out then when it didn't blow out before. One of our neighbor's houses in the 1919 hurricane got blown off the block. But I don't think the 1916 one did too much damage except to wash the causeway out and had to be repaired . . . and . . . that really wasn't too much. Of course, I remember those since then as I was older but . . .

Dr. Stephens: When did another one occur after 1919?

Mrs. Sparks: 1932, wasn't that right or 19 . . . Walter, 1933? 1933. And then . . . well, you can talk about that, Walter, when he asks you. But there was one in 1933 and that was when Patty was about a year old and we were caught in Sinton. And we had to go home but got . . . we were living in Corpus at the time. We had to go clear around by Alice before . . . because that was the only way we could get back.

Dr. Stephens: I want to ask about . . . as far as entertainment was concerned, did you have ice cream parlors in Sinton?

Mrs. Sparks: Oh, yes.

Dr. Stephens: Well, tell us what the normal activity around the ice cream parlor.

Mrs. Sparks: Well, I think maybe Walter would be a better one to talk to you about that because I really can't remember too much about it.

Dr. Stephens: Well, I bet one you can remember about, courting traditions and . . .

Mrs. Sparks: Oh, well, there was a lover's lane out west of Sinton. Of course, I wouldn't know anything about that. That's another thing you ought to ask Walter about because he knows more about it than I do.

Dr. Stephens: (Chuckle)

Mrs. Sparks: But you'd go . . . go to people's houses . . . I mean, you'll . . . you know. You'd have parties. You . . . it . . . you didn't have . . . and you always . . . usually walked every place you went. And then somebody would have a party and have Spin the Bottle and Wink'em and a whole lot of stuff like that. I don't know.

Dr. Stephens: Now, in earlier . . . and this was not a frontier . . . but in earlier frontiers, new communities . . . I understand the young people played games--Spin the Bottle, Post Office and things like that--in which the entire main object was kissing. Was this the purpose?

Mrs. Sparks: Well, I don't think so. I mean, really . . .

Dr. Stephens: It wasn't serious?

Mrs. Sparks: No.

Dr. Stephens: What about a chaperone? Were you . . . did you ever have to have

chaperones?

Mrs. Sparks: Oh, oh, well, yes. I remember the first real dance in this area that I went to was down here at Portland. And I had a chaperone. Mrs. Virginia Benson came down with me. I mean . . . and even then my father wasn't very happy about it. My mother was ill at the time, and Virginia was keeping . . . taking care of my brother and me. And when I . . . she . . . this fellow asked me if I'd go to the dance, I thought it would be fun. And she said, "Well, sure she'd chaperone me." So she did. I had a wonderful time. It was down here on the water at Portland. But I . . . I wasn't about to go to a dance with someone like that unless I had a chaperone, I guess.

Dr. Stephens: Well, when do you think this tradition changed?

Mrs. Sparks: I don't know. I really don't.

Dr. Stephens: You didn't require your own daughters to have chaperones did you?

Mrs. Sparks: No.

Dr. Stephens: So it changed in between times, some way.

Mrs. Sparks: Yes.

Dr. Stephens: Do you know why?

Mrs. Sparks: Well, I suppose because life became more complicated, I don't know. Maybe it became old-fashioned to have a chaperone. But, of course, we always had a chaperone . . . I mean all my life . . . I mean all through my life. I . . . we had chaperones at parties and things like that.

Dr. Stephens: Did you go riding in buggies?

Mrs. Sparks: No, I never did.

Dr. Stephens: On dates?

Mrs. Sparks: No, I mean that was . . .

Dr. Stephens: Or did anybody do this at that time?

Mrs. Sparks: Oh, yes, yes. But I was too young when they still had buggies to do that.

Dr. Stephens: By the time you were old enough . . .

Mrs. Sparks: Well, they had cars.

Dr. Stephens: . . . cars were around.

Mrs. Sparks: Yes.

Dr. Stephens: Of course, not everybody still had cars.

Mrs. Sparks: No.

Dr. Stephens: In fact, cars would be in the great minority then. Is that right?

Mrs. Sparks: Yes.

Dr. Stephens: But some people did go out . . . your contemporaries did go out in buggies?

Mrs. Sparks: No, I don't . . .

Dr. Stephens: Wagons?

Mrs. Sparks: I don't really think . . . yes, I guess they . . . well, when I went to Indiana, used to, we'd have buggy rides . . . I mean wagon rides and things like that. I mean they were a little more backward about getting cars, I think, than we are. But, actually, I suppose we did have . . . they did have hayrides. But I just don't remember anything of that. You see I left home when I was fourteen and I never was home except in summers after that very much. And . . . as far as . . . I went to parties when I was home and . . . and so forth. But I went to a girls' school for two years and then I went to the north to school. And so . . . and then by the time

. . . by that time, of course, everybody went . . . if they had a date, they went in cars.

Dr. Stephens: What about local politics? You were involved in this through your father.

Mrs. Sparks: Well, there was quite a bit of politics. And, of course, I think any time you have a bunch of new poeple coming in . . . I think this is part of the homeseeker's pattern. You have new people coming in, then the old people coming in, then the old timers resent it. I see this pattern, I mean I saw it all through this country. When the old . . . the oldtimers were there and they were just surprised and didn't think that anybody ought to come in and take over from them. So there was quite a bit of real fighting around. And the newcomers trying to get . . . take over, and . . . and . . . that sort of thing.

Dr. Stephens: Well, who were some of the people involved?

Mrs. Sparks: Well, look, why don't you interview Walter a while and let me . . .