

# Interview with Dr. Bill Brunson

**Interviewer: Arlene Grainey**

**Transcriber: Arlene Grainey**

**Date of Interview: March 26, 1986**

**Location: Dr. Brunson's Office, Southwest Texas State University, San Marcos, TX**

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*Begin Tape 1, Side 1*

**Arlene Grainey:** The date is March 26, 1986, and I'm sitting here in the office of Dr. Bill Brunson. Dr. Brunson, you do acknowledge that I, Arlene Grainey, have gone over the letter of agreement with you?

**Bill Brunson:** Yes.

**Grainey:** You understand that the tape and transcript will be kept permanently in the University Archives, Southwest Texas State University, and copies may be placed in the San Marcos Public Library and other appropriate historical libraries?

**Brunson:** Yes.

**Grainey:** And you also understand that the tape and transcript will be available for the general public for research and other educational purposes. Nothing may be used in a published form without the written permission of the University Archivist?

**Brunson:** Yes.

**Grainey:** Okay, we can go ahead and start the interview. First of all, you could tell me a little bit about how you came to settle in the San Marcos area.

**Brunson:** My first teaching job was in Corpus Christi at Delmar College, and that's a junior college, a very good junior college, but that's what it is, a junior college. Never any opportunity to teach advanced courses. So I decided, in 1959, that I either had to make up my mind to stay there the rest of my life and be happy, or move. So I decided I would move, and I asked where I would like to go, and of course, being from Texas several generations deep in the family, I wanted to stay in Texas. So I decided that there were only three places that I would consider an improvement over where I was. One of them was UT–El Paso. One of them was Southwest Texas, and one of them was North Texas State.

So I saw Dr. Bill Pool in a meeting in Dallas, and he told me there was a vacancy here and told me who to contact. So when I got back to Corpus, I called Dr. Richard Henderson and arranged an interview, and I came up one day, and he offered me the job on the spot. I went home and talked with my wife, and we accepted. I had a contract signed and sent back within a week, and

I'm very pleased; I've been here since 1960. I sometimes feel guilty for getting paid because I'm exactly where I want to be doing exactly what I want to do.

**Grainey:** It must be satisfying.

**Brunson:** It's very, very satisfying.

**Grainey:** Can you tell me a little bit about how SWT was when you first came here?

**Brunson:** It was probably in the vicinity of six thousand students, which was about the size of Texas Tech when I started there as a student. It was a very friendly campus, and even though it was only nineteen thousand-plus, and I think it's probably still friendly—(Interruption)

**Grainey:** A little bit more about SWT.

**Brunson:** When I first came, they were only splitting what they called the social science department into a history department, a political science department, and a sociology department, and so on. So, I was here the very first year that there was a separate history department. Dr. Cecil Hahn was the chairman of it. Dr. Craddock was here, Dr. Pool was here, Dr. Pohl was here, Dr. Liddle, Dr. Kissler, and Ms. Fitzpatrick, and I believe that's probably all. All the others came in after me.

Dr. McCrocklin was president, and he's the one who is, of course, responsible for hiring me. And I think I came maybe a year after he did. He had been Mayor of Kingsville and a political science professor of Texas A&I—(Interruption)

When I first came, my wife had not finished her PhD. Even if she had, she couldn't have taught here. They had this hard and fast rule against husbands and wives. That was changed very shortly, mainly for the benefit of Sul Ross University, who had difficulty getting people to teach. So it was changed, and she finished her PhD quickly and became a member of the English department, and for something like eleven years was chairman of the English department. She is now the Associate Dean of Liberal Arts and also a professor of English.

My older son went here and graduated at the University of Dallas. My younger son went here and graduated here in chemistry, and now the three girls are going here.

**Grainey:** The whole family.

**Brunson:** Yes.

**Grainey:** How has your job, or responsibility as a teacher, changed over the past twenty-six years?

**Brunson:** In regard to the university?

**Grainey:** Uh-huh.

**Brunson:** My very first job was in the public schools, and I taught five years before I ever entered, before I ever got my doctor's degree, and entered the college world. I don't know whether it's changed very much, really. We still have excellent students, and we still have poor students. I don't know whether it's really changed all that much. There are probably more committee meetings and more paperwork, but I don't see that it's changed all that much.

**Grainey:** Tell me a little bit about your books that you've written.

**Brunson:** The first one was my doctoral dissertation, which was published by the University of Texas Press, and it's called *The Texas Land and Development Company*. And it's a company that started in Plainview, Texas, in 1912, and it's unique in Texas history. The company bought land and then subdivided the lands into farms. They built homes, dug wells, fenced it, the whole thing. Just like today, if you were to marry, and you and your husband wanted a house, you probably would want a house that's totally finished; all you'd have to do is walk in it. This is the way with the farms; all you'd have to do is walk on it. The house is there, the windmill, everything. As you can imagine, the cost was prohibitive, and nearly all the original owners lost, were all foreclosed on.

One of the interesting people involved was Dr. Frederick Stark Pearson, who had been an engineering professor at MIT. And the company had money problems, so he was on his way to England to raise more money. He was one of the casualties, along with his wife, on the *Lusitania* when it was sunk. In 1919, the company was reorganized, and the company concentrated mainly on leasing the land. And following World War II, [the company] sold off all the land and officially liquidated in 1956.

**Grainey:** And how about the *Texans All*?

**Brunson:** The *Texans All* was written for third grade, and was written with Dr. Billy Mac Jones, who was president here at that time. His PhD is in history also. He and I had the same major professor, so I knew him before he came here. So it's designed as a supplementary reader, and it contains stories on various Texas heroes, going clear back to the Indians. This includes Indians, it includes the French, the Spanish, it includes males, and it includes females. I wrote the first half, and he wrote the second half. And there is a teacher's supplement in it, and a teaching guide, and this type of thing, which the two of us didn't do. So it went; it was very good. The illustrations were done by a young man in Austin. And there is a map with every one of mine, almost with the stories that I wrote, and the illustrations are beautifully done.

And, in Texas, getting your book adopted is in part political. It was not adopted. It was one of the two finalists, but as I understand it, we lost in the committee by one vote. You're always hearing the difference of one vote. That's *Texans All*. There are only a few copies in existence.

**Grainey:** The next one, *Fragile Empires*, you got a \$1,000 award on it?

**Brunson:** Right, from the Sons of the Texas Revolution. These are people who are decedents of anybody who participated in the Texas Revolution. And I did the book with the former graduate students named Ferris Bass. He retired from the Air Force as a colonel, and came here to get his master's degree in history. That's his hobby, and we became very good friends. And he did his thesis on Samuel Swartwout. So, after he left here, we decided that we wanted to do a book together. So we got permission from the Rosenberg Library in Galveston, which owns the manuscripts, to edit the letters that Samuel Swartwout had written to his friend James Morgan here in Texas.

James Morgan came to Texas in the early 1830s, and settled on the Texas coast. And he was a very, very prosperous individual, and his home was a social and political center. Anybody who was anybody visited with him. He knew all the presidents of Texas; he knew anybody who was anybody. Prince Psalms visited him; Audubon visited him, when he came to Texas. Morgan owned the Yellow Rose of Texas, the lady whom the song is about. He gave her her freedom eventually in the mid-1840s. So this is an edition of their letters.

And Samuel Swartwout was Andrew Jackson's customs collector in New York City, and that's the most lucrative position the President had to give. It's also very political. He was appointed over Van Buren's strong protest. Van Buren was Jackson's Secretary of State, and he and Swartwout were both from New York. They were political rivals, and in spite of what they say in their letters, they really didn't like each other. If you take their letters literally, you would think they liked each other. Van Buren said, "I never entertained anything but the warmest feeling for Mr. Swartwout," for instance. So, they really didn't like each other. So Swartwout left office, admitting that he owed \$201,000-plus. And that was retained to pay anyone who brought lawsuits against them for overcharging them, terribly. That didn't originate with him; it was a long-standing practice.

Before his successor got through with him and one of his subordinates, he owed \$1,225,000-plus. Unfortunately, he left the country and went to England to raise money on property he owned in Maryland. And this made it appear as if he had stolen the million-and-a-quarter and absconded, fled the country. You would not believe what the historians have done as to where he fled and with how much. One of them has him fleeing to South America, one has him fleeing to the Orient, and this goes on and on, it's absurd.

So who will publish it, I don't yet know. There is one press that currently has it. I sent some feelers, and sent them a letter and a table of contents, and the introduction and asked if they were interested in seeing it. The full manuscript is four-hundred-and-fifty pages, okay. So currently, the press has it, and we shall see. I don't know, maybe they'll be interested; if they don't, I'll try somewhere else.

**Grainey:** Your newest book that you're working on is very similar to this, then?

**Brunson:** That is a continuation, really, to this book *Fragile Empires*, is an edition of letters. And editing is hard; I have more respect for editors. I always thought that when you published something, it was edited. You know, you tore out something in a book and got permission to print it and put your name on it; that is a joke! It took us several years. Morgan's handwriting got progressively worse. It's just scratching. He was blind in later years, and he had a male secretary. So sometimes, he didn't even take up his pen clear across the page. I assume his secretary could read it. But see the letters he sent to Swartwout all burned. So all we have are his drafts. So that was that book, and that was the one that we got the award for.

And this next one then is a biography of one of the two, Samuel Swartwout. And I have in the back of my mind, a biography of Morgan also, which I really haven't started.

**Grainey:** What inspired you to continue it?

**Brunson:** We intended to do it together, and due to a series of events—I guess we started it in 1978, and I had three of four chapters done, I'm not sure, and he was still taking notes, or writing the book up, however he intended to write it, and we had three other conferences. We met three other times in New Braunfels, okay, because he lives in San Antonio.

Well, in 1980, my older son was killed in a traffic accident in Italy. That has a very debilitating effect, so I probably didn't touch the manuscript for three years, and he [Bass] was still researching all that time. Coincidentally then, I guess about 1983, we both started back to work on about the same time. Then his wife became critically ill and died, and that had a debilitating effect on him. And he finally told me that there was no way he was going to do it, it was mine. So he gave me all the notes that he had taken and this type of thing. And so I finished it, I think, in November or December of 1985. And finally in January, I guess, I got around to writing some letters to some presses, and sent them, as I've said; the table of contents and introduction, and one's reading it. So, we shall see.

When we came to, planned to come to San Marcos, we had great difficulty finding a place to live. There simply were not any places, and at the time, the university rule was that we had to live in San Marcos is you taught at Southwest Texas, as if San Marcos had a monopoly on the university. So the university had bought several houses on Matthews Street. They were empty, one of them at least was empty, and so the university rented it to us for two years. By that time, the rule changed, and we found a place in Wimberley and bought it. So we've lived in Wimberley ever since.

**Grainey:** And where did you say that the house was?

**Brunson:** It's on Matthews Street, between what is now Jackson Hall and what is now Summit Oaks, a parking lot's there. The building that is the day nursery belonged to one of the former deans of the university. He was deceased, so I didn't know him. And Dr. Lewis Gilcrease and his family, he was a dentist here, a graduate of SWT, he and his wife and two sons lived next door.

So his two sons and my two sons frequently went over to Ms. Speck's and had milk and cookies, and she read to them and told them stories. The first time I found them coming out of her house, I had a fit. I couldn't believe they had done this, and she said, "Now, just calm down." She was such a sweet, gracious lady. She said, "I invited them in." She said, "If I'm busy, I don't let them in. Don't worry about it." So, I have no idea how often they went over for milk and cookies and story time. I thought that was so funny and very sweet of her. There were not many families up in that part of the world. They were building Jackson Hall. And there simply weren't many children in that area. Fortunately, there were two boys next door, so four boys.

**Grainey:** Are there any other faculty members that used to be here, or alumni from here that you knew pretty well?

**Brunson:** I don't follow your question. What do you mean?

**Grainey:** Just, um, you mentioned Ms. Speck. Are there any others?

**Brunson:** Oh, oh I see what you mean. Not, not that I knew well. The very famous Prof. Green, who was Lyndon Johnson's political science professor, I had the pleasure of meeting. I saw him one time to speak to him.

One of the ladies, one of the people after whom this building is named, Retta Murphy, I knew slightly. She died at the age of ninety-six. Something like that. I did not know Jimmy Taylor; he was deceased before I came. Those are the two people after whom this building was named. That's probably all that I recall right off-hand.

I would like to say one thing about the history department. Never in my wildest imagination, in my wildest dreams, could I hope for a more congenial department. It's been congenial ever since I've been here. In some universities, there are people in each department who do not speak to each other. So I am very pleased and very proud of my colleagues and the association there.

As far as hobbies, I do play the organ, piano, and the clarinet. And I play only religious music. Now, I listen to other kinds of music, but as far as if one specializes, it's only church music. I am one of the organists at Saint Mary's Catholic Church in Wimberley. Dr. Emmie Craddock, who's retired from this department, who is currently Mayor of San Marcos, is also one of the organists. There is a lady named Hellen Zacts who is one, there are three. And the music that I compose is strictly religious music. I guess one would say that's a hobby. I used to play tennis until I hurt my wrist, and then it hurt to play the organ. So once it got well, I decided, "You got to play tennis or the organ, one or the other."

**Grainey:** Had you been playing since a boy?

**Brunson:** Well, no, I only learned to play since I came here. Now, I played the clarinet in high school and in college. But as far as the organ and the piano, I learned that here with Ms. Buckner, whose husband used to be chairman of the modern language department. And one of

the dorms is named after her husband. She's an elderly lady, a very kind and gracious lady, and she still plays the organ for one of the large Sunday Schools at First Baptist Church here. She's a dear, sweet lady. She taught me.

**Grainey:** You mentioned religion. How much of a part do you think it plays in the university system? Do you think religious affairs interfere, or do you think—?

**Brunson:** Oh, no. Oh, no. Religion is important to me, and I think it is to most of my colleagues, the ones that I know quite well. Now the students, I cannot answer for that. There is a total separation of church and state, if that's what you mean. No, no interference in either direction.

**Grainey:** So are you pretty involved in your church, besides playing the organ?

**Brunson:** Yes, you see my older son was studying for the priesthood for [unintelligible] University in Rome, which was the Jesuit University. My wife and I are both Catholic converts, no other Catholics in either of our families. She is probably more involved than I am, but we're both involved.

**Grainey:** Well, I appreciate your time for the interview, and good luck on your next book. I'll get a copy of this to you.

**Brunson:** You're most welcome, I appreciate it.

*Pause in recording*

[At this time, Dr. Brunson decided to include this additional information]

**Brunson:** I went into the Army in 1942 and got out in 1946. I had my physical in Lubbock, and for reasons that I don't know they sent me to Fort [unintelligible] Oklahoma, where I was inducted. That makes a lot of sense, doesn't it? All the way from Texas. I took basic training in Abilene in the medics. And I had asked for either some odd paratroopers or tank corps or something like that because I knew I'd get overseas. So they put me in the medics. I had basic training in Abilene. They put us on a train one night after basic was over and told us that we were going to California to train for desert warfare. And the train went as straight to Canada as you can get! So I was stationed on the Alaska Highway all the time I was in the Army, except for basic training. And as a medic. So I emerged from the Army with the exalted rank of Corporal.

**Grainey:** This was World War II?

**Brunson:** World War II, exactly. I got out in 1946 and immediately started school in early January, which is in time to enroll for the spring semester.

**Grainey:** You were going to relate that to religion?



**Brunson:** Well you were asking me how I got involved with Catholicism, being a Methodist. In Canada in 19, about 1925, I may be off a year, the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregational Churches all united, so there was that one large church called the United Church. There was no such thing as a Methodist or Presbyterian or Congregational Church in Canada, it was called the United Church. So as I worked nights, well depending on my schedule, that's the church that I frequently attended.

Another of the very large churches in Canada was the Episcopal Church, or the Anglican Church as they called it there. I sometimes attended it when I couldn't go to the other. And sometimes I went to mass with my Catholic friends. Those were the big three churches in Canada. Rarely, every once in a while, in the very large cities, you would find a Baptist Church or something. The big three were the Catholic, the Anglican, and the United. And I think that's probably where I got interested.

After I got out of the Army, I went back to the Methodist Church for a while and wandered through the Episcopal Church for a while, but I didn't join. And finally decided I wanted to take instructions from the Catholic Church and did, and liked it and joined it. That's when I was twenty-one. I'm now sixty-one, so that was forty years ago.

**Grainey:** And you still enjoy it?

**Brunson:** I still enjoy it.

*End of interview*