

# Interview with Bruce Harper

**Interviewer: Michelle Brown**

**Transcriber: Michelle Brown**

**Date of Interview: November 20, 1986**

**Location: Mr. Harper's Office, 300 C.M. Parkway, San Marcos, TX**

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*Begin Tape 1, Side 1*

**Michelle Brown:** This is Michelle Brown, and I'm interviewing Mr. Bruce F. Harper at his office at 300 C.M. Allen Parkway, San Marcos, Texas, on November 20, 1986.

**Bruce Harper:** I went to summer school here at Southwest Texas in the summer of 1960. I think then the fall term of students at that time were like 2,500 students in 1960. So, look at the growth that we've had from 1960 to 1986. Twenty-six years and we've grown to be twenty thousand students, or nearly twenty thousand students. Back before that time, if I used to go somewhere, you would recognize everybody. Even like when Springtown Mall came in and Furr's Cafeteria was put in out there. You could go there, and you'd know four or five people. Now I go in there, heck, I don't know anybody who's eating in there. I think we have a very mobile society. I think a lot of people from Kyle and Wimberley and Lockhart and Luling and places come and eat out there. I see the same faces a lot, but I just don't think they're local. You don't recognize them as much. I've seen San Marcos come a long way in my time.

We used to go when I was a little kid. The big thing to do was go to the picture show on Saturday morning. We called it "Mickey Mouse." The picture show was over there where Pompey's Shoes and the Magic Coin, it's where kids can go play pool and stuff are. That was the picture show at that time. The town was small enough then; I could go in there, go to the show, pick up the telephone, and call the operator and say, "This is Bruce Harper. I need my mama to come get me. Would you call her and tell her?" She'd say something like, "Yes, Bruce, your mother's over at Mrs. Crutchen's playing bridge. I'll call her." And, you know, that was a real little town. That's before they had the dial system. I don't remember what year that was. Somewhere in the fifties, toward the end of the fifties to the middle of the fifties. That was the big doings to get dial telephones in San Marcos. I remember we stayed up nearly past midnight because that was the day they were going to switch over from the operator-answered phone to the dial phone. They switched late at night because the peak calling period was way down and they could handle it. I remember going through that. And of course, all the telephones then, the numbers were export, EX-2 or something. Now we've got all these other exchanges. The university's is 254, Gary's is 398, San Marcos is 392, 396, 353, and something else. But, that's a sign of growth. I think that our town is going to continue to grow and prosper.

We have a lot of different-type town than a lot of the other surrounding towns, like Lockhart, Luling, and Seguin, because of our university. We cannot do without the university because it puts money into the community. You never know how much money could be spent a day when a student fills up with gas or they go out to eat at Jack in the Box. All that money filters back into the community. That also imposes problems, though. We have too much traffic on our streets because of the students. We need the city and the university, of course, to work very closely together to try and make that a nice situation. I wish I knew the number of professors at the university versus the number of hired people to do custodial work, to do ground maintenance, to supervise the power plant or whatever. It used to be fifty-fifty. There used to be like about two thousand teachers and about two thousand workers. A lot of those teachers, in a sense, have an attitude that they are salaried by the state. So, anywhere they trade, it's good for Texas because they are paid by the State of Texas. Well, it would be great if we could get them all to have the same kind of attitude as they do in Seguin and New Braunfels. If they're going to buy a car in New Braunfels, they're going to go down the street and buy it from old Joe Blow, their friend. But a lot of times if we have a teacher at the university, if he can call over to Lockhart and get a new Ford \$50 cheaper than he can buy it here in San Marcos, they'll drive over there and buy it. That makes us more a mobile society, what I'm talking about. If we could instill that shop at home and shop San Marcos with our university people, as well as we try and do it with the townspeople, there's just no telling the amount of money that we could put back into San Marcos.

**Brown:** Do you think the focus is still the same on the university as twenty years ago? Did the town rely on it [the university] or not as heavily?

**Harper:** Well, I have a friend here that's in the clothing business, and he tells me that it used to be that he relied more on the university than he did on the townspeople to support his store. But now he said it's turned the other way. It's probably about 70% on the town and about 30% from the university. When I speak of the university, I don't mean the teachers. I mean just the actual students that buy clothes from him. He said years ago, when he first started out in business, it was very dependent on the university. More students would buy from him than townspeople. So, that can mean two things. We've got a lot more townspeople. Maybe they think like I do in a sense. I always try and shop at home unless I just can't get it. I think a lot of people are like I am. I get so irritated fighting the Austin traffic that I try and buy everything I can at home. But we still buy a large amount of our goods outside of the town because there're certain things you just can't get here. Like, I'm a big guy, and I wear a[n] eighteen shirt with a thirty-six inch sleeve. Well, my friend, Mr. Serur, that does have the clothing store, he's nice and will order me shirts. But the town, I understand, it's just not big enough to stock that and give me a huge selection. I can order what I want, but I just can't walk in and buy it off the shelf like I'd like to. Well, in Austin, there're four or five stores I can walk into and get a full selection of that sort of thing.

**Brown:** Would you mind telling me the story about [when] your parents found you in the car. Would you tell me that again?

**Harper:** Sure. My mother always sung in the choir over here at the Methodist church, which is right behind the State Bank. She had choir practice one night, and when she left there, she needed gas. So, she drove over to the Texaco station that used to be where Jack in the Box is on the corner. Ross and Margaret Arnold owned that station for years. He was also the DeSoto and Plymouth car dealer for years. At the same time my mother pulled into the filling station, Mrs. A.B. Rogers pulled in there with her husband in an old Hudson. At that time, they owned Wonder World and the Aquarena and the A.B. Rogers Funeral Home. They were older people, and they did not want a young child. [A baby, Mr. Harper, was found in the back of A.B. Roger's car.] This was not the Paul Rogers that used to run Aquarena. Paul was A.B. Roger's son. This was the daddy and his wife. So, they were probably in their sixties when they found me. My mother said, "Well, why don't y'all let me take that baby home for four or five days, and I'll take care of it while y'all are deciding what you want to do."

So, by the end of the four or five days, my adopted daddy was so fascinated with me, he wouldn't let them take the baby. So, they went through the legal process of adopting me and gave me a birthdate. A year or two ago something came up health-wise, and I would have liked to have known who my real parents were. Not that I want to know their names, but I wanted to know where they were from. My aunt and my other kinfolks substantiated this same story that no one really knew who my parents were. Someone did come into the *San Marcos Weekly Record*, a man that was in the service out here came into the *Record* and talked to the owner of the paper, Mr. Buckner, and said, "I just want to know, did the boy who was left in the car at the Methodist Church get a good home." And Mr. Buckner said yes, he did. So, they think that was probably my father who was in the military here at the time. The girl could have been a local girl who at that time just didn't want to take on the obligation of a child. We never did really know. What else could I tell you about?

**Brown:** You mentioned the military. Didn't San Marcos way back have more military?

**Harper:** That's how the Job Corps came about. They had that military base sitting out there with nothing going on. I wish I knew how many acres it is. I'd say four or five hundred acres. It may even be bigger than that. Back during the war, they brought all the helicopter pilots here to train at that base, and then they would send them on to where they needed them. Later, it became a flight school. I really can't remember what year it was, but when I graduated from high school in 1960, it was still being operated as a military base. They worked real closely with the townspeople. My dad was real friendly with the base commander out there. So they let us have our high school prom out there in 1960. I've got myself standing with my date on the stairway at the Officer's Club out there. It probably started shutting down somewhere in the fifties. But in 1960 they were still running it; some people were stationed out there. But it wasn't big-time stuff like it had been in the past. Sometime toward the end of the sixties, about '62 or '63, Lyndon Johnson got the idea that that could be a job training center for youth that needed a skill to try and get them off the street and make them productive citizens. That's how the Job Corps was formed. I think I'm correct that this was the first one, and then there were others later. One at

McKinney, one at El Paso, and it seems like there was another one. One of those is for girls only, and then later they made them coeducational and have girls and boys at each one. I cannot say if that's been a good program or not because I only hear about the bad things that happen. I'm sure they're a lot of good stories that happen out at Gary. A lot of the local people, their thinking was it would be wonderful if you could take boys and girls in Texas or the surrounding states that wanted to learn a trade and bring them into the Job Corps and let them learn underwater welding. But when you go and try to bring in boys and girls from California or New York or places like that where they're already at the age of eighteen, they've already established their thoughts and the way they're going to be, and they just don't fit in real well down here in our area. The Job Corps has been a tremendous industry to the City of San Marcos. It has helped put money into the community. For instance, maybe the Job Corps buys meat to feed the boys from Hughson Meat Company. I don't know that, but I'm sure that we get a trickle of some of the money from that center comes back to this community.

One thing I noticed with the university teachers at Southwest Texas and with the Job Corps teachers. I was always so interested in banking because at one time I worked for one of the local banks here and was president of it. I used to help with the United Fund Drive and things like that. Well, we'd work the university, work the Job Corps. 50% of the checks we would take in from the university teachers and 50% or more of the checks from the Job Corps teachers were all drawn on out-of-town banks. Some of that comes from the fact that maybe this university teacher has lived in a little town for years, and they want to keep trading at the bank where they've been trading for years. But that was just 50% of the ones that we got a contribution from, and that may have only been 50% of the teachers that were there. So, it could have even been a bigger percentage if you had gotten everybody to contribute. You might have seen even a bigger amount. That goes back to San Marcos as such a mobile place. At least way back then, we know over 50% of the teachers were commuting over here to teach at Gary. Well, I'm sure we have a larger percentage that commute to Southwest Texas that live in Austin. Some of them may live in San Antonio. Some may live in Wimberley; some may live on Canyon Lake. If we could get people that worked here to live here and spend their money here, it would help the town prosper.

**Brown:** For all those teachers and everything to live here, would there have to be more real estate development?

**Harper:** Up until we hit this real estate slump, or the oil crunch, yes, there would have had to been more subdivisions and more roads. But all of that creates jobs for somebody. Like it is now, there's so much property for sale, so many homes for sale, even in San Marcos for sale. I've lived up above the university on Mimosa Circle for over twenty years. This is the first time I can remember in my lifetime, that right now there're twelve houses for sale on our street and nobody's buying them. Usually, people wait in line to live in that area of town because it's a pretty good place to raise kids. It's got a good place for them to ride bicycles. It's kind of a quiet neighborhood, but yet it's just right there on the edge of town. A lot of the people that are selling their houses, it's not because they've lost a job. But, some of them are that way. One man up

there was executive vice-president at Wide-Lite. He just got fired because Wide-Lite sold their business to somebody else. Several of the people are just because of job moves. They've got to move because their job demands that they go somewhere else. Maybe a professor at Southwest Texas has been made head of a department at another university in a town close-by. Something like that. I think you could probably find the same thing in Willow Creek, Country Estates, any of the established subdivisions. There are probably several homes for sale. I was talking last night on the phone with our hospital administrator who's just been relocated. He's been here eleven or twelve years, and he's going to [the] Fort Worth-area to be with a bigger hospital. He's had his house on the market for four or five weeks and hadn't had a nibble, and he has it priced to sell. So, I think, yes, an answer to your question, under the current conditions, some of these people that I wished would live here on a permanent basis, we could take care of them. Eighteen months or two years ago, if they all decided to come here, we couldn't have.

I can remember going to Austin with my mother in 1948 or '49. We could drive from San Marcos to Austin, and we might go ten, fifteen miles without meeting a car. Now when you drive that road, it's bumper-to-bumper, and you can hardly change lanes because of the amount of the traffic. Everybody's going somewhere. It astounds me that you can drive out here at ten o'clock this morning or we could probably pull out there at three in the morning, and there'll be the same amount of traffic as there is at ten o'clock. I don't know where all these people go.

**Brown:** It was probably a lot longer trip to Austin, too, when the road was first developed.

**Harper:** Well, when we got to Austin, we used to go into Austin on Congress Avenue. We used to go in front of the Holt's Caterpillar place on the right and Waldo Junkyard on the left. That goes straight up to the Capitol. So, we went in on Congress way out there. Which now that's probably six or seven miles out of town or more, maybe ten. That street goes straight to that Capitol. You could see it. I'm just astounded at all the traffic. I went to San Antonio last Saturday to watch the San Marcos High School girls play in a volleyball play-off. They won, and we were trying to kill time between the morning game and the afternoon game, and we went to North Star Mall. This is supposed to be depressed times. People are not going to spend money this year. I have never even on the day before Christmas seen as many people shopping at that mall as there were that day, last Saturday. It looked like somebody poured out a big pot of honey, and the ants and the flies had all come to it. You couldn't even get around in that thing. So, maybe we're doing better than we think we are.

**Brown:** Are there any real distinct changes you can see? What was it like to live here years ago?

**Harper:** It was all made up basically of mom-and-pop operations. As far as the local insurance agency, the local drugstore where I used to go in and get a hamburger was Hillburn's Drugstore up on the Square. Now it's called something else. It's right across from the courthouse. They have luncheon plates at noon, and I think they play pool upstairs. That was the drugstore. There was only one for a while, and then there became two or three independently-owned ones before

all of the big chains came in here. We have had an HEB store for a long time, but we never had a big nice one like the one we have now that has drugs, and you can rent videotapes in there and things like that. We have gone more to the corporate-type franchises like McDonald's, Walmart. We have a new Wiener's. We have a Kroger's. We have a Back in a Moment where you can get your pictures developed overnight. None of that was here when I was growing up as a small boy. That leads us to be a much more viable community. At that time, we also had no industry. We didn't have Mensor Corporation. We didn't have Thermon Manufacturing Company. We didn't have Butler Manufacturing Company out here on the highway. We didn't have any industry. Of course, industry is usually good for a town; it's good for the tax base. It gives people their jobs.

San Marcos's first industry, I think, was Wide-Lite. It started in a little building out there by the railroad tracks. Probably not more than four to six thousand square feet. My dad and a friend of his named Jack Pughes who used to own the Ford place here. He came here to retire in 1950 and bought the Ford dealership from a man named Tom Summers. He and my dad were on the Industrial Commission trying to get industry into town, so they built that building for Wide-Lite and then rented it back to them to get them to come to San Marcos. From that little building they grew to be a pretty major industry. But then down the line, they sold out to someone else, and then that person sold to someone else, and then virtually they're about closed down out there right now. And they have a lovely facility. I'm sure you notice, when you drive to San Antonio, that International Electric that's on the left. It's a real pretty building. It's got ninety thousand square feet. It's for sale. They were a division of Stewart [&] Stevenson, which is a division of General Motors, which makes turbine generators for hospitals or a country club or industry. Someone that needs a lot of power in case there's a power shut-down. That has completely shut down this year, and they've relocated and moved back to the Houston area. I'm sure because of the oil slump and the real estate slump, there's just nobody ordering those expensive-type generators. So, now you've got a real expensive piece of land out there. I had heard that building had sold, but I still see a "For Sale" sign on it.

**Brown:** Was there any other time, maybe twenty or thirty years ago, where you saw a slump and didn't think San Marcos would continue to grow?

**Harper:** I had always thought, and I guess I was brainwashed, that we would keep growing. We had some hard times. My daddy, predominately his income was from farming. I can remember several times in the fifties when we had a drought that he would come and talk to my mother and say, "Don't buy anything unless it's absolutely necessary. I don't want you to go hungry, but we really don't have the money right now." Because it would be dry, and most of his income was from cotton farming. If it got too dry, then we couldn't harvest anything. You have to have that moisture just at the right time. Where our farm was situated, you couldn't irrigate. There's a few people who do irrigate from the San Marcos River. But you have to have your land located close to the river where you can pump out of there. Mr. Cummings was a good example of that. His land is all still situated right along the San Marcos River, and he used to pump out of there. He was a character. He is a man that only had a seventh grade education as far as school, but yet

when he died, he had 289 patents registered to him. He founded a company called Kruetchner, Lock, and Cummings in Houston, Texas. They were predominantly a pipeline company. Later in the early sixties, he sold out his interest in that company and came back here to fully retire. He had a really pretty home up there on the San Marcos River right where that dam is that's in the news a lot. Right there in what I used to call Rio Vista, where we used to go swimming when I was a kid. Right before his death, he gave our hospital here a million dollars to help them defray their costs of taking care of the sick. He would be someone you wished you could interview because he is truly a character, but he was smart.

**Brown:** Did a lot of people make their living off farming? There is still now.

**Harper:** There were a lot of people that made their living off the farming area. The land around Lockhart, Luling, San Marcos, Martindale always had been big farming communities. H. Conrad and Sons was a big operation at one time. They were from this area. They produced a lot of cotton seed. They own a lot of land over around New Braunfels still. One of their places is where Walmart and San Mar Plaza is now. They owned all that land at one time and farmed it. They farmed over as far as where McCoy's Building Supply main office is right there behind San Mar Plaza, across the railroad track. Then there was W.W. Bagley & Sons at Martindale. They were big seed producers and sold hybrid corn and cotton seed all over the state of Texas. There were Harper Seed Farms at Martindale. There was the Kasch Seed Company at San Marcos that my dad owned. Mr. Kasch was one of the regional founding directors of the First National Bank here in San Marcos. In our business, we used to ship seed to Israel and Turkey and Guatemala, and a lot of seed to California. It was a real big business, but it has dwindled off every year as the agricultural land is taken out of production because the farmer is no longer able to make a decent living. A lot of that land has been converted to grazing land for cattle. A lot of the land has been sold at high prices as real estate for one purpose or another. That's what makes it so hard to understand that in other areas our farmers are just starving to death. Whereas some of our farmers have made a lot of money, but it was off of selling their land, not farming their land like they would have liked to have done. We were seeing more and more that we were having less and less local business all the time. Our main business was coming from way out. We sold a lot of white corn to the California Corn Growers Association. That was a group of men that formed an association, and they all grew the same kind of corn on different land, and then they would sell it to the Frito-Lay Company to make Fritos out of. All of that has stopped. They are not buying it anymore. I don't know where Frito gets their corn now. At one time, that was predominantly from the Texas area. Now, Kasch Seed Company sold to a company out of Corpus Christi. Harper Seed Farms is out of business. W.W. Bagley & Sons is out of business. They sold all their land for a big price. The only real seed company that I know that's left close to us is up here at Waco called Conley & Sons. They've been in business for some time.

*End of interview*