Interview with Dr. William E. Norris

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Date of Interview: October 17, 1985
Location: Room 312B, Science Building
Texas State University, San Marcos, TX

Before Tape 1, Side 1

John L. Horak: This is John Horak recording Dr. William E. Norris, better known as Henry Norris, in the Southwest Texas State University Science Building. The date is October 17, 1985. Dr. Norris, I would like to get started. Could you tell me a little bit about where you grew up?

William E. Norris: I grew up between Nixon and Smiley, which are two small towns located on Highway 87, which is the highway from San Antonio to Victoria. Smiley has a population of about five hundred, and Nixon about three thousand. The first two years of my life I lived out on a farm and went to school in Smiley. The first two grades were at a private school, and after that I went to public school. Following about the third and/or fourth I moved to Nixon, and I finished my high school education there.

Horak: Dr. Norris, did you play sports in high school or college?

Norris: I wasn’t a good enough athlete. In the first place I was young compared to some of the boys in the class, and I was pretty fat and consequently too slow to be very effective. I did come out for basketball, and I did get to play occasionally in a competitive game. I was too slow to come out for football.

Horak: Did you play any baseball?

Norris: Mostly softball and yes, we did play quite a bit of tennis.

Horak: Okay, that’s interesting. What about swimming, did you all have a swimming hole?

Norris: There isn’t enough water in that part of the country to swim.

Horak: What was it like when you first came to Southwest Texas State University?

Norris: Southwest Texas Teacher’s College, as it was called then, was a very interesting place. Many of our students that went on to college—came from there—came to San Marcos. By the way, my graduating class had about thirty-two in it. At the time I first came, I was sixteen years old—this was in 1937—there were probably 1,500 students. I don’t remember but that can be
documented—maybe not that many—but it was a pretty close-knit group. After a while, you knew half the student body at least, and a good percentage of the faculty—that was one of the nice things about it. The faculty worked hard in those days as far as teaching a number of classes. Students were about the same as students always are—they were pretty friendly. No one had any money. This was toward the end of the Depression, and recreation was simple. You could go to the picture show for a quarter, downtown. And Riverside—as it was then called, it is now called Sewell Park—Riverside had a concrete slab, and there was a recreation building where in the evenings, particularly in the summer, you could go over and check out roller skates. So, many of the students took their dates over and skated. Of course, Cokes and so on were a nickel. And, of course, all the strolling and courting was done in the fish hatchery ground at those times. I believe, if I remember correctly, outside of the faculty there were two students that had automobiles. The rest of us walked, and we probably did about as well as we do now. It was very interesting.

At that particular time I did not live in a dormitory—this was when I was a student—I did not live in a dormitory except the last semester. I did like the last semester at Harris Hall, which was the second dormitory. The first one was Sayers Hall, a girls’ dormitory that has now been razed. It was on the same sight that the current student union [LBJ Student Center] is. Living downtown on the local economy in the old two-story rooming houses in most cases—they weren’t all two-story—for example, I didn’t live in a two-story one but many did—represents an era of college life that’s gone. I kind of hate that because you got something out of it. You weren’t identified as a dormitory or as a certain fraternity, but you were identified as a boarding house in which you lived, and most of those boarding houses had anywhere from six people up to twenty or thirty people. Many of them fed the students right there. Others ate at a more central location which specialized in feeding. For example, I lived in a house that—well, I lived in two houses from time to time that actually sat between where the new Exxon station and the post office are now [300 block of N. Guadalupe], and I ate at a house, at a boarding house strictly, that sits where Younger’s Bus Terminal is [119 E. Hutchinson]. For this I paid the tremendous sum of $5 a month for room and $17.50 for board, and I assure that we ate much better than one does now. There was always a choice of numerous vegetables and a least three different kinds of meat for every meal.

**Horak:** Where were you when World War II started, or when Pearl Harbor was bombed?

**Norris:** I happen to remember that one particularly because it, of course, changed the path—changed the events of my life—as it did in many of our lives at that particular time—and remember that was December 7, 1941. Of course, my birthday was February twenty-first so I was twenty years old. I had graduated from Southwest Texas in February of 1940, and I moved directly from Southwest Texas to the University of Texas as a graduate student. That particular afternoon, which I believe was a Sunday, I was en route from Nixon back to Austin. I had been
home for the weekend, and I was driving back to Austin, and actually I was on Highway 123, just about midway between Stockdale and Seguin, just about the sight which now is occupied by the beer joint known as Sandy Oaks Tavern.

**Horak:** What did you do for room and board in Austin when you were a graduate student?

**Norris:** As a graduate student—four of us—we had all known each other at Southwest Texas—four of us rented an apartment, and we more or less did our own cooking. We had a cleaning lady that came in sometimes once or twice a week, and one of our people was a pretty good cook, and so we made it. Now these were old apartments, not to be confused with present-day apartments. These were old apartments and again in wooden two-story buildings. They did have considerable floor space, but by present standards they were probably pretty ratty. For example, two of us slept on a screened porch all year-round and never slept inside even in the middle of the winter.

**Horak:** Just how exactly did you get into the Navy during World War II?

**Norris:** Well, as I pointed out, I was twenty at the time of Pearl Harbor. It was only two months until I turned twenty-one, so rather than do a minority enlistment, I simply waited until I was twenty-one and signed up for a program. At that particular time I had two years of graduate school—February 1940 to May 1942—I had essentially two years of graduate school completed in the sciences. The Navy was looking for individuals to send through short courses to train for either deck officers or engineering officers. All of us that had a scientific background or were engineers went the engineering route.

**Horak:** And so you became an officer or an officer candidate?

**Norris:** Officer candidate training with an engineering rating—first deck rating came later.

**Horak:** Can you tell me a little bit about where you trained?

**Norris:** Those of us that did engineering went to the Naval Academy for, I think, four months of intensive engineering training, not to be confused with what is now called engineering training. Not design engineering, not in the sense of electrical engineering or civil engineering, but strictly, predominately operational—even though in that length of time we finished a full year’s course in electrical engineering and steam engineering and in internal combustion engines.

Following that I did another several months course in diesel engines at Lehigh University prior to being a scientist, yeah.

**Horak:** I was wanting to ask you a little about your actual duties for the Navy.

**Norris:** Following diesel training we went through a short course in Miami, Florida, in anti-submarine warfare and small craft, and then for two years I spent time in the Central and South
Pacific aboard a small submarine chaser, which predominately did single-ship convoy. Such a vessel was not combatant in such a sense as a destroyer, and it was not involved in major small merchant convoys significantly behind the major battle lines.

**Horak:** Did you all ever sink a large ship or one single merchant ship?

**Norris:** No, we escorted. We escorted larger ships, but I said single-ship convoy, that’s what I mean.

**Horak:** Okay, I’m sorry.

**Norris:** We predominately escorted merchant.

**Horak:** Did you ever sight any Japanese shooting torpedoes?

**Norris:** Oh no, probably, we rolled a few depth charge patterns from time to time, but you are never sure if they were on an enemy submarine or not. But, as I said, the small ship, the small ship escort for merchantmen was usually pretty well behind the actual battle lines, even though some were involved. We spent our time at all the places, but after the war had moved on; for example, we were at Guadalcanal six months after Guadalcanal was hot, and that sort of thing.

**Horak:** Did you ever get to Australia?

**Norris:** No, very close, but not quite.

**Horak:** Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about more of your travels?

**Norris:** Well, for the Navy, basically they were island hopping—the South Pacific mostly. I’ve been to an awful lot of those South Pacific islands, the small ones; and we spent the first few months on board ship around Pearl and spent a little time at Midway, which is not south—which is north of Pearl—but mostly the Central Pacific.

**Horak:** Can you tell me a little bit about your career with the Naval Reserve since you’ve been—

**Norris:** Since active duty, which terminated at the end of World War II—I went directly in. I stayed in the reserves and have served in various capacities. My first reserve assignment was a little repair division in a shipyard in Philadelphia, and, as you may know, we met once a week for drill and then did at least two weeks active duty training a year somewhere. Many reserve outfits meet one weekend a month and get all of their time then, but we always met once a week, so I have been. I spent time with the submarine repair division in Philadelphia, with a circus division in Austin, with an electronic battalion in New Braunfels, with a circus division in San Antonio, back to a Naval Reserve officers’ school in Austin, and I believe at the time the Naval Reserve retired me—that’s the billet I was in.
Horak: Okay, getting back to when you were a child—did you listen to the radio much?

Norris: Quite a bit on high school. We listened to popular music and even then high school teachers were making assignments. For example, I specifically remember we had a drama teacher that would assign you to listen to plays. Car radios were just becoming popular then, and we spent a good deal of time listening to them—yes, not in the sense of background music we now do.

Horak: Uh-huh, this leads into the next question. When did you get your first automobile?

Norris: Oh, I got my first automobile when I was in graduate school; in fact, it was a cast-off automobile of my father’s. Must have been about—probably in 1941. I can’t remember—I was twenty years old at that time. I had never had an automobile, and I only had that one for six months, and then I left for active duty in the Navy.

Horak: I was going to ask you what make the automobile was. Do you remember?

Norris: Oh, it was a little Ford, about a 19—I guess it was probably a ’38 or ’40 model Ford.

Horak: Can you tell me a little bit about your father, such as, what was his career?

Norris: Oh, my father grew up in this same area that I did, and about his crucial career choice time was when World War I came along, and he served predominately at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, and because he had a professional skill—clerical skills of typing, bookkeeping, and auditing, and so on—he spent time—they kept him there in the offices and he didn’t get to go overseas. After the termination of World War I, he had a career decision to make as to whether he went into farming or took a civil service job. At that time, he chose the civil service job, which basically was a mail carrier for the post office—a job he kept until he died. At that time, economically it was a poor career choice, but remember, we are talking about 1921 or ’22. When the Depression hit, it proved to be one of the better career choices—but as I said, at that time it was a poor career choice because much more money could be made farming cotton, for example, than could be made working for the government.

Horak: How has the Southwest Texas State University campus changed since 1940?

Norris: Oh, it has done an awful lot of changing. It’s perfectly obvious—anyone who’s been around the last few years knows this, and I guess I have seen as much of it as anyone because, off and on, I have been around here except for approximately ten years from 1940 to 1949—I wasn’t here. But at the time I first came, what is now known as the Mall with Old Main was present; the Science Building was present; what is now Psychology and Philosophy was the Education Building; what is now Flowers Hall was the Library; the building that’s Art Building was Home Economics. No, I’m sorry, uh, maybe I’m right, maybe it was Home Economics and Lueders Hall, which by the way was not named Lueders Hall until much later, but the building
which once stood, occupied the space where the new Chemistry Building has now been built—was used as a classroom building for things like English and history and any straight classroom subjects. There were a number of classes taught in Old Main—that was a classroom building. The Science Building, of course, had all the sciences and math—the Education Building—and the Library, and that was—and then the present Art Building, which I believe I said was Home Economics at one time, and that was about it—those were all the buildings. One dormitory just below the Art Building, and as I said, Sayers Hall where the girls’ dormitory—where the Student Union now is. Harris Hall was the next one built. As I said, I spent my last semester here in Harris Hall.

Horak: Uh-huh, I had heard that the San Marcos High School would have been close to the university. Is that there?

Norris: Well, San Marcos was a very unique town in that it’s one of the towns that had no school buildings of their own. They had an old building, I believe it was over on Comanche Street, but it burned, and since the university, or the college at that time, used the schools for practice teaching, all of the San Marcos schools were taught in college buildings—most, many of them in the Education Building and later many of them in what later was known as Evans Academic Center—is now probably—has there been a new name? I don’t believe so. The one where Liberal Arts, or where the Liberal Arts Auditorium is going to be. It was a WPA building built in the middle thirties with federal assistance, and it’s interesting, my oldest son, for example, went to first grade in that old building, and he also took his last college course in that same building. Because San Marcos was unique in that it owned no school buildings, they were all demonstration schools and they were all in college-owned buildings, San Marcos put off building any so that the tax load got pretty heavy when they did decided they needed to build or they had to build some buildings.

Horak: Just when did the high school decide to move?

Norris: I don’t remember the exact date, I’m sure that’s documented in high school literature, but, see, the middle school was essentially in the old Education Building, the elementary school was at Evans Academic Center, and I don’t remember the details about high school.

Horak: That’s fine. Can you tell me anything about any floods you experienced in the San Marcos area or that you remember?

Norris: Oh, I’ve been here through two or three. I’m not one of those individuals who remembers dates that well; for example, you talk to people who remember the drought of so-and-so and the storm of this and the hurricane of so-and-so; I don’t profess to remember those. I was here through two of the major floods; again, the dates can be documented. I always look out for May, August, and September. However, lately we haven’t been getting the hurricane play we normally get in August and September that we used to count on to bring us the fall rains. But the
flood were fantastic—you would have to see them to believe them. All of the area, oh, for example, there’s a landmark where the Catholic church now is, where you see would have water from the river to where the interstate is—it’s a little surprising. And of course, the only way this happens is when you get massive rains in the Hill Country that come down the Blanco River. The lag time—anywhere from eighteen to twenty-four hours—then you get major rains in this part of the country that come down Purgatory Creek and a few others drain down the San Marcos River, so the Blanco and San Marcos crest at the same time. Actually, I’ve seen the Blanco run backwards. This has happened about twice supposedly—this fifty-year or one hundred-year flood plain, but it did happen twice in a matter of three or four years, and they were quite devastating. For example, all of the golf course at Aquarena and, of course, most of Aquarena Hotel, would be underwater, and all of the area from the railroad tracks to the interstate would be underwater. 

**Horak:** Can you tell me a little bit about Spring Lake when you first came to San Marcos?

**Norris:** Fortunately, Spring Lake has done no changing. There’s been a hassle over the years about access to Spring Lake—whether it’s public or private property. Used to, when I was a youngster, we could buy white crickets, and we would go out and perch fish or fish for pan fish on Spring Lake on Saturday afternoons for entertainment or something like that. Remember all this was walking, you could buy white crickets, which people collected out of caves around in the Hill Country here, and they made fine pan fish bait. And I believe at one time you could rent row boats down just about where Peppers [100 Sessom] is located, just above the falls, and you could paddle out and fish for perch. It was public access then, and of course, the hotel was there, but Aquarena Springs and that sort of thing was not.

**Horak:** Uh-huh, what did you think when the United States dropped the atomic bomb on Japan—do you remember that?

**Norris:** Oh, yes, I guess I was at sea in the Pacific then, I think we were at sea, as I recollect. We knew something was in the mill, we weren’t sure what, and that pretty well answered our speculations.

**Horak:** Have you ever found any Indian artifacts in the Hays County area?

**Norris:** No, I’m not that type of collector. Many people think of a biologist as a field biologist, but basically I’m a laboratory scientist and don’t do much field work, except I do very little hunting and fishing outdoors for my own amusement—but not scientific. So, I really haven’t looked for any in answer to your question.

**Horak:** Do you think that San Marcos will have a water resource problem in the next twenty years or thirty?
Norris: Oh, I don’t think that’s limited to San Marcos. I think this whole part of the country will. In fact, that is, it may happen in this area first because of the Sunbelt and the growth along the interstate corridor. It is already present in West Texas, as you well know that. Irrigation water has about reached the point where a considered decision has to be made—it cost so much to pump the water—as to whether to irrigate or not to irrigate. And, I don’t think there’s any question that that is going to be the limiting factor to growth in this area, and like all political problems, it will probably be addressed much, much too late.

Horak: Can you tell me a little bit about your experiences being an instructor here at Southwest Texas State University?

Norris: Oh, they have all be most pleasant because I like to teach. I enjoy teaching. I’ve taught a fairly heavy load, originally at any rate, later years I taught a less heavy load, as I did administration. When I first came into the biology department as an associate professor in 1949, I had two years of college teaching at Bryn Mawr College in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, prior to that time. I went there immediately after finishing my doctorate.

Horak: Have you done most of your work with botany or zoology?

Norris: Basically my research here is botany. I was trained as a general physiologist. That is a specialty that doesn’t exist today. The nearest to it today would be a molecular biologist. As a general physiologist, you were interested in processes, but you were not limited to any given organism or anything of that sort, such as human physiology. So over the years, as a matter of convenience, I’ve published most of my papers on plant physiology simply because it is easier to maintain and do experimentation on plants than it is on another type of—for example, if you are doing animal physiology, you have to have an animal colony, and this requires routine and regular space, care, maintenance, feeding, and what not, and it’s much more expensive. It’s much easier doing plants. Over the years, since physiology is not limited to any one area, I’m happy to say that I have published papers on bacteria, on yeast plants, salamanders, insects, and so on—and frogs.

Horak: Can you tell me what your favorite position was while you were an employee of Southwest Texas State University?

Norris: Oh, I think I could say I’ve enjoyed everything I did; probably I guess I may have got more satisfaction being chairman of the biology department, a position which I suspect I had for about fifteen years. I probably enjoyed that and perhaps being a scientist more than any of the others, even though I have been academic vice president and the dean of arts and sciences, and so on.

Horak: In your opinion, how had the university’s growth affected San Marcos?
Norris: Well, San Marcos’s growth is tied to the university, period. If you didn’t have the university here, San Marcos; well, until the [Gary] Job Corps came along after World War II and infused the economy somewhat—but it was more of an isolated unit. If it were not for the university, San Marcos would be a relatively small village. Now, this might not be so true now with the interstate corridor and the influx of manufacturing from the Northeast and the Midwest—they are looking for warmer climates and cheaper labor. But originally, and even now, if you come through during the Christmas holidays or between semesters, you find that things are pretty sparse when the university is not in session.

Horak: Have you ever traveled much in Texas?

Norris: Oh, I guess, being a native of Texas I’ve been over most of it. Some of it not as well as I would have liked to. Probably the least traveled or the areas that I have spent the least time in, and the areas that I enjoyed very much—northeast Texas from, say, Texarkana down about halfway—down the Sabine River—I haven’t spent a lot of time there. And then in West Texas, which I dearly love—I haven’t spent an awful amount of time there in the Big Bend area, even though I have been through it a couple of times. There’s another interesting part of Texas that I think you don’t find unless you are going there. You don’t have a reason to travel through it much, living in this part of the state. Most of us, when we leave from this part of the state going someplace, we are either going west, and we leave Texas in the El Paso area or through the Panhandle into New Mexico. If we are going east, we go through Texarkana. We may go the southern route toward New Orleans—but there’s an area between Fort Worth and—well, the area about where Wichita Falls is—that is an area that you really don’t get through very much unless you are going there.

Horak: When did you get your first TV and why?

Norris: Well, that’s one of the things that everyone assumes now, just like the C.B. [radio] fad, when the C.B.’s came out. Everybody stole them, and you couldn’t keep one, and now not many people even bother to use one. I keep one around that I use rarely for working purposes but not just to talk on. My son and I occasionally get involved in boat launching, and we use one talking back and forth, or sometimes working cattle we use them talking back and forth. But not like the C.B. craze was. Well, television, interestingly enough—I was in San Marcos at the time, teaching, living up on Bluebonnet Circle, and I suppose we got our first black and white TV, which by the way comparably cost as much then as the best color sets do now. I don’t mean in actual dollars, but in equated dollars. So, a good black and white in those days was in the vicinity of $300 to $400 and, of course, if you put that in present-day dollars, you can buy the best color set around for that. It was interesting what really caused us to buy our first TV set. We hadn’t missed it because we didn’t have it, you see. Even though we had been subjected to them, I think, I remember back when I was back at Bryn Mawr—when on Naval Reserve night, the wives would look at certain TV shows. That was ’48 or ’49. Probably about ’53 or ’54, maybe
'55, we ended up buying our first set, and interestingly enough that was because of kid pressure. We had a couple of small children at that time, and they always went to the neighbors’ because they had a TV, so we ended up buying one in the middle of the fifties to keep the kids home.

*End of interview*