

## Interview with Garland and Mildred Powers

**Interviewer: Ron Brown**

**Transcriber: Ron Brown**

**Date of Interview: November 13, 1987**

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*Begin Tape 1, Side 1*

**Ron Brown:** Today is Friday November 13, 1987. I am Ronald Brown, professor of history at Southwest Texas State University, and I am interviewing Mr. and Mrs. Garland Powers Jr. of San Marcos as part of the Southwest Texas State University oral history project and as a part of the history of the Guadalupe Valley Electrical Cooperative [GVEC] being completed by Karen Yancy, a student in the history department at Southwest Texas. Testing, testing, and now it's working.

I'm interviewing Garland and Mildred Powers. I'm Ronald Brown, a history professor at Southwest Texas State University. Mr. and Mrs. Powers are participating in an oral history project that's part of a jointly sponsored project in which Southwest Texas State University and the Guadalupe Valley Electrical Cooperative are gathering information to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Electrical Cooperative's origin back in the 1930s. I've explained to Mr. and Mrs. Powers that the interview will be made available to them in a copy form and that a transcription will also be deposited both in the University and the Guadalupe Valley Cooperative Archives as well as copies of the original tape. Is this your understanding, Mr. and Mrs. Powers, and are you agreeable to this being done?

**Mildred Powers:** Yes.

**Garland Powers:** Yes.

**Brown:** Okay. Thank you for your patience. We've had a few mechanical problems to get started this morning, but we seem to be functioning smoothly now. Can you tell me a little bit about your own backgrounds and how you came to be a resident of Central Texas, or have you resided in Central Texas all your lives?

**G. Powers:** Now, I was raised in Seguin but managed ranches in East Texas a number of years, and in 1958 we bought a farm in this area, but we couldn't build a house here because there was no water, so we lived, we rented a house near Staples. It was on the GVEC at that time.

**M. Powers:** You might go ahead while you're talking about the water, Garland, and tell them how we really became involved with Mr. Davis and GVEC other than using their electricity, and then I'll tell about my background.

**G. Powers:** Mildred was on a committee, a housing committee, in Guadalupe County, and they came up with the main need in this area in particular was for rural water because there was no wells in the area, and that was the reason we couldn't build on our farm. So, Mildred and the home demonstration agent really went to work on this and got Crystal Clear [Water Supply] started. Got it off the ground, I helped with them also, and as it was beginning, we borrowed the money from Farmers Home Administration [FHA], but we couldn't borrow very much, and this was a sparsely populated area so that Farmers Home Administration said we needed five [customers] per mile. Well, we ended up around three per mile. Three customers per mile, so that it was—the money had to, couldn't go very far. In other words, we were real short on money. The engineer developed, laid out the system and everything, but using all his money, but we were a little bit short. And we had been working with O.L. Davis, who'd encouraged us all along, and they agreed, the GVEC, agreed to lend us \$15,000 for a period of three years, I believe, at no interest, and this helped us get off the ground, and we did pay the money back in the three-year time period, three year period.

**Brown:** Now, what was Mr. Davis' role in GVEC at this time?

**G. Powers:** He was the manager.

**Brown:** He was the general manager of GVEC.

**M. Powers:** And a very charming, very capable; he's one of those people that you're so glad that you got to know. And one of the strengths, as far as GVEC is concerned, is that they had Mr. Davis there, and I think all of us that have worked with him would want to salute him in an interview such as this. Doyle also has done an excellent job, but Mr. Davis goes back in the history to our beginning with GVEC, and we were pleased that some warm feeling to have had contact with him, and I think this needs to be said in a GVEC interview.

**Brown:** Did you know Mr. Davis as a result of the work you were doing for this committee?

**M. Powers:** Yes, we really did not know Mr. Davis until we started working on Crystal Clear Water Supply operation, and we count it as one of the nice things about it is that we had this contact and friendship. We might say, Garland, too, when you said that you and I worked on this, there were about twenty other people that worked with us, or Crystal Clear would not have been in.

**Brown:** Are there any other people in a group of twenty or so that organized it that you would think should be noted especially for their contributions in the early period of Crystal Clear?

**M. Powers:** Well, I would like sometime to do a list of them, but I would hate to name some and not name [others].

**Brown:** All right.

**M. Powers:** I'm afraid not being prepared. I could do it, but because they're very vital to it, but I would want to do it when I'd thought through it so I didn't forget someone.

**Brown:** Okay.

**M. Powers:** You ask about backgrounds, and my background's quite different from Garland's in that I was reared out from Navasota, Texas, in Grimes County, and I did not have electricity as one of my conveniences until I was in high school; in fact, about a junior in high school. And that was the time of the rural electrification program, and because of this program, Gulf States Utilities, that before would not, we could not get them out there, did come out and serve us, but although we were not served by a rural electric cooperative, this program did get electricity to us. And there is a great deal of difference in living without electricity and with it, and it's—Garland always says he was a city boy. He wasn't because his family was a rural background, but he did live in town where there was electricity as he grew up, and I don't know, unless it was when he was in the Marines somewhere, that he has ever lived without electricity. Is that right?

**G. Powers:** That's probably right.

**Brown:** Well, what are the most, as you think about it, what are the most important changes in your life, or the life that your parents perhaps lived without electricity until you were in high school and the life you and your own family have lived with electricity? What sorts of things, the most important conveniences and the most important assets that go along with having this electricity?

**M. Powers:** Well, sometimes I walk in and turn on the washer and dryer, get a package of meat out of the freezer and put it in the microwave to defrost and go in and maybe turn the heat, electricity has the house warm, and I turn on the TV, and I just think that how did I live all those years or how did they live without a refrigerator, a freezer, a washer dryer, and I do enjoy the comforts that electricity—in fact, I think that they are not only conveniences; I feel that when I use the dryer rather than hanging out clothes as I did many, many years that I am saving time for me to do something more worthwhile. It may be to work on our books or it may be to read a good book, but it's, to me, is a more worthwhile use of my time than just working.

**Brown:** I know some people back in the earlier period had some gas generators to run certain farm equipment and so forth or to light their barns and to assist. Did your family have anything of that sort?

**M. Powers:** No, I had two uncles that had generators, and they had electricity in their house of sorts, but we did not, no.

**Brown:** I remember my own father talking about that sort of thing because he always had to get up early in the morning and turn on the generator.

**M. Powers:** I remember that my mother was very careful to get the very best Aladdin lamp so that we could study it.

**Brown:** We take these things for granted, electric lighting and all the rest of it.

**G. Powers:** Electric pump we had, too.

**Brown:** That's right.

**G. Powers:** When you had a well, you had to pull it up by hand.

**Brown:** That's right. You were talking earlier about the role that GVEC had in starting the, or insisting you start the Crystal Clear Water Company. Would you like to expand on that a little bit? What sorts of—now they provided the loan, did they? Was there any other kind of assistance that they rendered in those early days of Crystal Clear?

**G. Powers:** We had a number of plants, water plants in the area. And they ran these plants, [which] required three phase power, which was not there at that time, and GVEC ran the lines that were needed at no cost to Crystal Clear, which was a big help for us.

**Brown:** That's a very big help.

**G. Powers:** Yes.

**Brown:** GVEC likes to think of itself as a very customer-oriented public utility. Have you found it so? Are there experiences you've had over the years, beyond—of course, it's a very important beginning for Crystal Clear, but either as homeowners or as [a] business associated with GVEC, that suggest that they were a customer-oriented company and put a great deal of pride in the way they worked with the customers?

**M. Powers:** We feel very close to GVEC and feel that our service is excellent. On one side, where our property is divided by a farm-to-market road, and on one side is another electric co-op, and [in regards to] our service with GVEC, we are delighted because when the others have ice storms and it's broken and they're out of electricity, we aren't. And we've been in our home twenty years this month, and one time in that length of time [there] was an ice storm [when] we were out of electricity for almost twenty-four hours. But this is quite a record in a rural area, and we are toward the end of their service area. And which, another thing our relationship with them is; well, we just feel like they belong to us and are real warm. You heard our son a few minutes ago say that if you're going to do an interview, tell them our lights don't flutter. And I think that their, our experience is that GVEC will correct this, that they do look to see what is the problem and work on it. It's, don't you think it's been?

**G. Powers:** Yeah, I would think they've been very customer-oriented. In fact, we've been to meetings, and we've just always had a good relationship with the personnel.

**M. Powers:** Well, we've served, I don't know, two years maybe on their advisory committee where they have couples that are.

**Brown:** Could you tell us a little bit about this advisory committee, and what's involved in it, and what you do at the meetings?

**M. Powers:** I started not to mention it because I felt that we did very little other than go and enjoy it. But, and I'm not sure as just a member how to give a lot of information on it, but there are couples that are representative of various areas in the Co-op that met and, I can't even tell you how often we met, but it was on a regular basis, and they were informed of programs and changes and opportunities that GVEC had as well as [had] a chance to input any suggestions that they might have, and I think it is, for any group, very good to have this type of thing. This has been some time back that we were on it, and I had almost—

**Brown:** Almost forgotten it?

**M. Powers:** It had kind of faded away. I have had an experience as the home economics teacher at Seguin High School with GVEC over a long period of years with a number of their programs, and one of them, they did a program—they no longer do it, I think—but it was called “Food Fun for Juniors.” And it was elementary students that came in for a week. They had senior home economics students that taught it, working with the home economists with the Co-op, and there were excellent information and materials on nutrition and preparing simple foods, this type of thing. Well, I think the program definitely was a success. Not long ago, I ran into a person that was here buying some things for their new home, and they said, “Mrs. Powers, do you remember me?” Said, “When I was in the fifth grade, I did Food Fun for Juniors.” And that was my opportunity to know them, so that I think is very good. Also, they furnished us many, many demonstrations and workshops. Many years, they had a home economist, or for a number of years, it wasn't many years; I'm not sure how many years they had. I think three different home economists worked for GVEC, and they did very up-to-date important demonstrations for our classes in home economics [on] the use of electricity, and the one person that I would, along the Mr. Davis, want to mention, and Garland and I both, is Clarence Hallmark. They have had one of the greatest public relations people in the whole country. He's one of their great, great assets, and Clarence had the ability to write, to gather information, to speak before a group, and when the home economics couldn't be there, Clarence could do the job just as well as they did. So I think that when you're counting one of the real key people to a good warm feeling for GVEC, I would have to put Clarence Hallmark at a very top place. I depend[ed] on him many, many times.

**Brown:** How long did, how long has he been associated with GVEC? Do you have any—?

**M. Powers:** A long time. We came here in '58. Garland came back here. I came here in '58, and I don't know, right away. It was in the sixties when he had some contact, very much contact with

them other than just being served by them. So, I don't know how long Clarence goes back, but he is.

**Brown:** But probably at least twenty years, then?

**M. Powers:** Yes, yes, I'm sure.

**Brown:** Well, when you were in Seguin, did they have—was Seguin one of the schools that benefitted by their providing demonstration equipment from time to time? I know they had a program in the sixties where they provided stoves and other kinds of electric utilities to the classrooms.

**M. Powers:** Yes, in 1967, I believe it was, we added an extra homemaking department at Seguin High School, and all of the—well, the washer and dryer and all of the ranges, except for one gas range and one other range, was provided by GVEC, as well as the refrigerator. And this program provided us with new up-to-date equipment for a number of years, and then they did discontinue the program and so, too, the school. But it was certainly a helpful program and a worthwhile program. And when I was trying to think of this morning of what there was, I had forgotten that one I was thinking more of not material things but other things.

There is one other thing that they did for several years, and that was they had an annual training program for home economists. All the home economists in their service area were invited to GVEC for one day, and their programs were the best that—well, they were up-to-date, the things that you could go back and use in your program. Many of us went, as homemaking teachers, went for a week every year to Dallas to the state in-service for homemaking teachers, and over and over we said that if we got that much material in a short time at GVEC that we could use that. It's a shame that we came home from Dallas with as little as we did. But they did a lovely wonderful job of that, and I'm sorry. I can see why it's no longer being done, but I thought it was one of the really good things that they did do that worked very hard. Anything that GVEC does, it's organized, and it's planned, and it's well done.

**Brown:** Well, I know back in the sixties, they often had, they received several national awards, I believe, for their various service projects related to their homemaking effort, their assistance to the public schools, and also for certain of their other projects. So, you would seem to be very satisfied customers of GVEC. You mentioned that another utility company nearby had perhaps a less successful reputation. I suppose this is the sort of thing that you sort of talk about over your fences from time to time, but—

**M. Powers:** We haven't really discussed it a whole lot, except that when our electricity is on, our neighbors across the road—

**Brown:** Sometimes they come over to get warm.

**M. Powers:** They, well, they have.

**Brown:** They have had some difficulties?

**M. Powers:** Mm-hmm. And we do have a membership in this other co-op too, and I would say that their service is very, very good, but I'm glad that we live on the GVEC side of the road.

**Brown:** Do you get the *GVEC Review* as a part of your regular membership?

**M. Powers:** Yes.

**Brown:** Do you find it useful in terms of new changes that are happening at GVEC and things that—I know most public utilities. I'd lived outside San Marcos in the PEC [Pedernales Electric Cooperative] area, and they send out a brochure. But I've looked at some of the GVEC ones, and they seemed to be unusually informative and valuable. Is that the way you have seen them?

**M. Powers:** Yes, and I think their secret weapon is Clarence Hallmark.

**Brown:** Particularly is benefit of Mr. Hallmark.

**M. Powers:** That he is not, he's very, very; I started to say he's not only capable, very extremely capable, he also feels like I did about Crystal Clear Water, [which] is that it was my baby, and it has to grow up and be good. And Clarence feels this way about GVEC: that it's not just a job to him. It's very obvious that if it's something about GVEC, well, it's personal to him as well. And I think that this shows through, that he really intends for that to be a helpful, useful, good paper, and it is. I look forward to reading it each time it comes. I don't read everything else, but I always pull that out and put it aside to read. Might say, also, Doyle Hines has been with GVEC, and we worked with Doyle when he was in another position on this Food Fun for Juniors; he was the organizer of it. I don't know what terminology, what his title was at the time, and he has done a very good job, I think, of carrying GVEC forward and is a good businessman.

**G. Powers:** He was in on most the conferences.

**M. Powers:** With Mr. Davis.

**G. Powers:** When forming Crystal Clear Water with Mr. Davis. He was, of course, Mr. Davis was the manager at that time, and Doyle was at another position, but he was in on all of that.

**Brown:** From your observation, then, you'd say that like Crystal Clear, GVEC is a kind of family, not quite in the same sense that this is really a family business, but GVEC seems to have some of the elements of a family business, is that the way? Promoting people from in, long association with the Cooperative and so forth?

**M. Powers:** I would think so.

**G. Powers:** I would think so, yes.

**M. Powers:** This is, our contact has been with a certain group, and there are a number of them down there, Mr. Leotardes and some of the others, that we could mention as being people that we have enjoyed that we felt, that we really knew and could depend on through the year. But they do have good personnel. This is—

**Brown:** Now, what about the linemen and people like that? Do you have the occasion to deal with them or the various people who maintain the equipment on the—?

**M. Powers:** Well, we have very little contact with them because—

**Brown:** They do such a good job?

**M. Powers:** They do such a good job, I guess. But occasionally we have, through the years, and I think that you'd have to give them an A+ in courtesy, appearance, helpfulness, all the things you would want, and I think they're, the job that they're doing says that they know their job. But, Mr. Ulbrick. That's right, isn't it?

**G. Powers:** Lefty Ulbrick.

**M. Powers:** —is retired now. He exemplified this caring for people and still does, although he's been retired a number of years now. That is a trademark or something of GVEC. It's a—I would hate to start naming names because then you feel like, "Well, gosh, I should have named someone else."

**Brown:** You did name someone else.

**M. Powers:** But it's hard when you're just thinking off like this.

**Brown:** Well, and of course, I think it's important in a project like this. You can't know everyone that's been associated with them. But those people who have made an impact, I think, are part of the reason that people like yourselves think that GVEC is doing a good job. And it would be nice, I suspect, in any organization if you knew every single employee, but you can't and so.

**M. Powers:** Well, we have known many more than I have named here that exemplified this, but I do think that they have had, that one of their strengths is the people. Of course, I believe that that's true in any—

**Brown:** Any enterprise?

**M. Powers:** Mm-hmm. That the people make it.

**Brown:** Well, I noticed that. I don't know if you'd run across this, but Miss Yancy indicated that there's some talk by GVEC management about offering new kinds of services. I guess perhaps she learned this in her conversations with some of the people in the management, but including



perhaps satellite TV or sewage and garbage collection in the future. Do you think these are the kinds of services that a public electric utilities should be involved in, or are they things that would be consistent, in your opinion, with the sorts of innovation maybe that you associate with GVEC, or perhaps do they seem to be maybe less likely to be the sort of things that are actually going to come to pass?

**G. Powers:** Well, I think there's things that they can do surely, like the sewage disposal and etcetera. I think they should be careful not to compete with other businesses in the area on things. Because, well, for several reasons, but they need to be careful of that is the only thing I can say.

**Brown:** Well, particularly, perhaps they'd lose some of the goodwill that they have created in their customers if they go into direct competition with them.

**M. Powers:** Well, in some parts of the country, not in Texas that I know of, but in some, we belong to a wholesale distributor organization association. And in some parts of the country, they have lawsuits against the rural electric utilities because they do sell water heaters and this type of thing that it's competing with the businesses, and this, as far as we're concerned, has not been a—

**Brown:** A difficulty.

**M. Powers:** Well, either we've ignored it or it's not a problem or whatever here, and I don't know of it. They do it here. It is done, but it's not a real problem like it is in some parts of the country, but I think that it's like Crystal Clear Water and GVEC, that groups like this need to provide something that no one else can do and do as economically and as well for the public, if it can be done as well by a private enterprise. I'm a private enterprise person and that, but I think that rural electric was a necessity and they should be protected because they gave us an area to live in and that a way of living that we couldn't have had otherwise, so I kind of agree there that there are other things they probably can and should do, but they need to look at it from the standpoint of is it being done or can it be done.

**Brown:** By someone else in the private sector.

**M. Powers:** Mm-hmm.

**Brown:** Does the—I know we talked a little bit earlier about the importance that electricity's had in your lives. Is there, do you see electricity now in the late twentieth century as almost a necessity to the kind of life that you'd like to live, or is it something that can still be seen as a bit of a luxury?

**G. Powers:** Well, I think it's considered a necessity now. I'm going to need to go.

**Brown:** Okay.

**M. Powers:** I think that we have to consider it a necessity, but I have several times thought, Could I live if we didn't have electricity? And I assume that I could.

*Interruption*

**Brown:** So, Mrs. Powers, you think that, you were talking about whether or not [it] constituted a luxury or necessity to have electricity in the modern era?

**M. Powers:** Well, I speak my thought, when we were interrupted there, is that I would hate to live without it. I think that perhaps that I could live without it. I'm not sure that people who've never lived without it would be able to adjust to it. I find that when the electricity is off, I think that, Well, while the electricity is off I'll vacuum the house. And, of course, I can't vacuum the house, or I'll sew on my sewing machine, and it isn't there, so we do accept it and expect it.

**Brown:** Mm-hmm. And it would cause immediate problems, I suspect, because of things, as you mentioned, Garland, such as the pumping of water. Most of us, if we do have wells, now don't even have a manual pump around as perhaps our grandparents or parents might have had. And if you'd have to do without electricity for about a month or so, you'd have to call you, I guess, and have you come out and install a hand pump for it.

**G. Powers:** Well, also the people that are on the rural water systems. The electricity is off, that water's off.

**Brown:** There's a very close connection between the utilities, these types of utilities, in this case.

**M. Powers:** And when you just think of the food freezers. If we did not have that, the ones of us that live out in the country would have a completely different approach to food. I guess we'd go out and kill the chicken right before lunch.

**Brown:** Right, the way I guess it used to be done. Yeah.

**M. Powers:** The way it used to be done.

**G. Powers:** And people used to have beef clubs. They'd, one farmer would kill a beef one week and distribute it to all the people in the area, and then another week someone else would kill one because they had no way of keeping the meat.

**Brown:** Now, I'd never heard about beef clubs, but that's interesting. Did they have it with any of the other kinds of larger livestock? Let's say goats or anything like that, or was it primarily just—?

**G. Powers:** Well, around here it was mostly beef, but probably they did it with hogs also, maybe, but they'd put the hogs in sausage.

**M. Powers:** And you could preserve the pork. Beef did not keep that well, and as I grew up, this was the way we had our beef. We belonged to a beef club, and I don't remember—I was a child—so I don't remember how many people was in it, but every so many weeks it was our time to butcher and distribute beef, and there was a formula that this time you got so much of this meat and so much of this meat, and a certain person got the liver this time in an order, and also we had an icebox. We kept a hunk of ice in it—a block of ice, I should say, correct terminology—but the beef, you didn't keep it in that for a week. You cooked it at a certain time so you didn't have spoiled meat on your hand, and this is a total different way of life from what we're used to now.

**Brown:** Yeah, well, I'm told, and maybe you as a home economist can confirm this, but that some of the sauces and so forth that are associated with, say, European cooking, French cooking, and the like, actually had their origins in the need to cover up the taste of decaying food in earlier periods. Not in the more recent period but—

**M. Powers:** This could be true, but of course the sauce covering the taste would not keep it from making you sick.

**Brown:** Right, that's right.

**M. Powers:** I think that a lot of the sauces had vinegar and this type of things in it that helped with the preservation.

**Brown:** As a preservative.

**M. Powers:** Yes. Helped preserve the food longer, and perhaps this probably is, I'm not an authority on that, but that would seem more logical to me than—but we should have a lot less intestinal problems with our modern day refrigeration and freezers than we did back in that period of time because food just had to spoil. I remember that we did our own, had our own milk cows, did our own butter and this type of thing, and we had a safe—it was called a safe—[and it] had wire on it, on the porch, and we kept cloth over it that was damp so that the breeze kept it cool, and the other day I saw this joke about people saying, Back when I was young. Now they say or cartoon or something on it. But when I came home from school, besides having ice cream or a coke or this type of thing, well, I had milk and cornbread and thought it was delicious, so it's all what we're—

**Brown:** In what we're accustomed to?

**M. Powers:** Accustomed to.

**Brown:** Well, is there anything else you'd like to say about GVEC or your association with GVEC?

**M. Powers:** I wish that every group and organization or business that we worked with, that we could have the feeling that we have toward GVEC. I feel that any problem that we have, we can go to GVEC. That it's not only the electric service, but that it's always been an organization that had people feeling warmth there. I think I said before that I really believe that people are the key to every success, and GVEC certainly is a success story. I think any, you may find in interviews something that people have been unhappy with it, but I would suspect most of the interviews are going to be people saying nice things about GVEC and the service that they've given, the growth that they've had that they do stand out among rural cooperatives in the United States.

**Brown:** Yeah, that's, at least from what Miss Yancy's found and from what our other student interviewers have found, clearly is one of the things that we can say about GVEC [is that it] has a very happy and satisfied, I think, group of consumers who have had very pleasant associations with it much as you have.

**M. Powers:** I hadn't thought it until just now, but when I said that we'd been in our house—I had to figure up it's twenty years this month—is that Doyle Hines was in the position that he did look over our house plans for insulation and energy efficiency, but our home has been very inexpensive to heat and cool.

**Brown:** And this was certainly at that time [when] they would have been leaders, I suspect, in energy conservation measures, as a part of—

**M. Powers:** Yes, yes. My husband and I are very conservative people, so we were looking for this, and we found it there.

**Brown:** Did you contact them about it in order to get him?

**M. Powers:** Yes, yes. I'm not sure that they really had a program as—well, I would, they would have to say whether they had a real program, not like they do today. But, of course, they did have training and the ability to help with it, and they did.

**Brown:** Great.

**M. Powers:** But that was twenty years ago that they did that.

**Brown:** Twenty years ago, that's right.

**M. Powers:** Mm-hmm. And we have seen phenomenal growth in this area of the country, Guadalupe County, because of the electricity, and when water became available, well, it became ideal home site.

**Brown:** Home site, right.

**M. Powers:** When we bought this place in 1958, there was, no one lived here out in this part of the world because every, the older people had retired to New Braunfels or Seguin, and the young

people were just waiting to get away from home where there was not many conveniences. And now we have seen this growth back until we're becoming [a] very populated area.

**Brown:** Yeah, it's almost a continuous line of settlement from San Marcos to Seguin now.

**M. Powers:** Mm-hmm. It's been a very fascinating thing for us to watch, and, of course, that's not a very long. We were talking about '58 and us less than thirty years, twenty-nine years, which is interesting. You have anything else, Garland, you want to add to this?

**G. Powers:** I don't think so. You off the air?

**Brown:** Not yet, but I'll turn it off if you're ready.

*End of interview*