

**RICHARD DONOVAN**

**Interview 178a**

**April 8, 2009, at The History Center, Diboll, Texas**

**Jonathan Gerland, Interviewer**

**Courtney Lawrence, Transcriber**

**ABSTRACT:** In this interview with Jonathan Gerland during a meeting of the Diboll Historical Society, Richard Donovan reminisces about his life in Angelina County and his work as an advocate for the area's rivers and forests. Mr. Donovan recalls growing up in Zavalla and spending his days hunting and fishing in the Angelina and Neches river bottoms. He also talks about working for Temple in Waco, Pineland, and Diboll and starting his Lufkin real estate business with his wife, Bonnie. Mr. Donovan spends most of the interview talking about his efforts as an advocate for the Neches River and the area's national forestlands. He mentions his canoe trips down the Neches, the need to have it declared a Wild and Scenic River, the damage caused by pollution, clear cutting, and replacing the native trees with non-native plantation trees, and the need for the public's awareness and efforts to stop dams like Fastrill and Rockland.

**Jonathan Gerland (hereafter JG):** Ok. Today's date is April the 8<sup>th</sup>, 2009 and my name is Jonathan Gerland. And I'm with Richard Donovan. We're at The History Center in Diboll, and we're going to do an oral history today. And since today is April the 8<sup>th</sup>, Mr. Donovan's birthday, maybe we'll start with just telling us where and when you were born.

**Richard Donovan (hereafter RD):** Well, first Jonathan...number one is I'm flattered and I'm honored to be sitting before you, and you'll think it as you might find something of interest of what I have to say. Number two it lets you know how old you're getting when people want to interview you I think. (laughing) So, having said that...I was born in Jasper, Texas...April the 8<sup>th</sup>, 1936. I didn't live there, they wanted my mother to be, you know, and me to be safe when I was born...so they rushed me from Browndell. Any of you know where Browndell is? It was a big sawmill...from Browndell into Jasper to the doctor, to the hospital so I could be born there. But, they took me right back to Browndell the next day I suppose. But Browndell was a big...got the Long-Bell Lumber Companies, sawmill. And the house that I lived in, we had our own generator. My dad had hooked up, built the generator system and put it there in the house. And the electricity that we had in our house was from that generator. Now, how much it ran I don't know...because, we left there when I was at a very young age, and moved to Newton. Lived in Newton until I was three years old. And then, at that time it was called Xact Clays, there was a clay plant located five miles south of Zavalla on Hwy 69. And they brought my dad in there to work at that plant...later made him plant manager and he stayed there until he retired in the '60's. But that was my home in Zavalla and at the clay plant, about as much as anywhere else. I grew up in there when I was from the time I was just able to walk. I can remember y'all, it's just uncanny to me that it would happen, but I was allowed to roam around in a huge plant with big machines running and no belt guards on anything. No chain guards on anything, you know, just a horribly dangerous

place. And I was just a child and just allowed to just run around. Now, no men...you know, there was no such thing as OSHA, you know, that was just unheard of at that time. You just built what you wanted to and everybody was...kind of like the sawmills of that age, you know, they were terribly dangerous places to work. But, I grew up in Zavalla, graduated in Zavalla High School in 1954.

**JG:** Tell us a little more about growing up in Zavalla. I know you mentioned a little bit of some of your experiences in your book, but is there anything...some of your earliest memories growing up there? Maybe, what you did for recreation? What was life like in Zavalla in the forties and fifties?

**RD:** Well, the first thing you got to know Jonathan is Zavalla was a much different place then than it is now. Saturday was a big day of commerce in Zavalla. I remember one of my jobs, growing up, was I would shine shoes in town. Started that when I was about 8 or 10 years old. I would shine shoes every Saturday. And one Saturday I made \$7.00, I believe it was...at ten cents a pair. So you can calculate that up how many pairs of shoes I shined that day. But, it gives you an idea of how many people were in town at that time. But there were two general stores there. Later on, I got a job driving delivery truck for one of the general stores. But there were two general stores and probably half a dozen meat markets. And let me tell you this...it's not about, the question you asked Jonathan...but I think it's would tell a lot of you folks here something. Had any number of meat markets, 5 or 6. But Mr. Barge, that ran Barge's Store, that was a patron of Zavalla. If that word means anything to y'all. What Mr. Barge said went, who he wanted elected Commissioner was elected and etc. etc. But, he did his own...that was about all the butchering that was done for his store, but, a guy named Herman Barker...during my lifetime, did the butchering for the rest of the stores in town. And he would buy beef and take it out to his butcher shop, which was on the outside edge of town, and he would slaughter the beef and cut it up into...you know halves and quarters etc. And then, the very same truck that he hauled it out there in, which is a pick up truck, had hooks on it like this. And they would take the meat and hang it up in the back of the pick up, and drive the mile back into town in the open air. Hot summer time, cold winter days...it didn't make any difference, you know. And then he would drive through the various shops in town and the guy that helped him would run in and ask what kind of meat they wanted...and they'd take the meat in and they'd cut a piece of it off and bring it back and hang it up in the truck and drive. But, you know, wouldn't a health department have a fit with that today? But, for recreation, the only recreation we had was kind of what you invented as you go along. And we invented a lot of recreation. 'Course swimming in creeks, which a lot of you can identify with swimming in the river. Swimming in cattle tanks or cattle pond was a big thing. I, to this day, I cannot swim like you're supposed to swim by putting your head in the water. And it's much easier to swim that way. I swim with my head up out of the water because I learned how to swim in filthy water, you know.

**JG:** Like a turtle.

**RD:** Like a turtle. And you kept your head up out of the water because, you know, no telling what was in it. 'Cause a lot of times we washed undesirable stuff back out of the way up on the bank so that we could swim. And, hunting was a big thing. We hunted, hunted and fished. I...for the last decade I lived in Zavalla I hunted and fished every week. One or the other...either the trot lines or casting, or squirrel hunting, or deer hunting, or coon hunting. And the people of the area learned who we were that coon hunted so much. There were no telephones of course. And, they would send word to school that, "Hey, why don't you guys come over to our field, the coons are tearing our corn down." And we always had some kind of old hoopie. We load the dogs in and go over there and give the coons a run and kill a bunch of them most of the time. And then the next week we'd hear somebody else that wanted us to come there. So we did an awful lot of that. And we stole watermelons. None of y'all ever did that I'm sure. But we stole an awful lot of watermelon. And we stole a fair amount of sugar cane. And I must confess...and I never did think that was stealing. I never did...that never was...but I did steal one thing and I always knew it was wrong, but yet I did it...because the times folks. I stole gasoline – and mainly from school buses. We learned how to dig into the school bus tanks and the school bus had got to getting out on the route's and running out of gasoline and they started taking precautionary measures and put a stop to that. But, for a few months we had a good deal with stealing gasoline out of school buses.

**JG:** And that's when gasoline was cheap.

**RD:** And, well, we didn't have any money though. (laughing) But, to show you that I was...at least had the reputation of being honest...there was a service station there in town, Trav Jones was the operator. And y'all...I could just, I had free rein. I could just go into that service station and put as much gasoline in my truck as I wanted to. I had an old car, didn't have any doors on either side. And I could put fuel in there and go on about my business and never make a mention of it to anybody. And periodically I would stop by and say, "Trav, I wanna pay you what I owe you." And he said, "How much?" And usually it was two dollars or something like that...I never bought it but fifty cents at a time, you know, 'cause that was about all the money I had. But, I did have a reputation of being honest. They didn't know about all this gasoline stealing that I was doing.

**JG:** Describe if you would, hunting back then as compared to what it might be today. To someone of today's generation and what they might think of as hunting.

**RD:** Well, if you had told a person of my vintage, at that time, that he was gonna drive up to a road in a thirty thousand dollar pick up, pulling a trailer behind him that had a, I don't know, a ten thousand dollar four wheeler on the back end of it. You get out, you get on that four wheeler and drive a hundred yards (laughs) and get off of it and climb up into a box, you know. That had carpet on the floor and a cushion swivel seat and probably a little heater that he could put at his feet, and a corn feeder out there that spins some corn out or maybe some rye grass. You know, he would have just...he probably have hit you. He wouldn't have done it, you know, because...you know, he would have said that's just, you know, that's nothing to it. The hunting of my day was primarily with dogs. Now there was some still-hunting...I'm talking about deer hunting now. There was some still-

hunting where you just took your gun and you went to a bottom or somewhere where you know deer would likely to be. And you just slipped from, just like squirrel hunting, it was the same way. You just slipped from one place to another and stop, be real quiet, and then move up another, you know, twenty or thirty steps and stop again. And I've had deer just come right up on me before either one of us saw each other. And, you know, it's startling to both you and them. They don't know what to do and you don't know what to do either. But the dog hunting was the thing. Big thing is they would put standards along a road. You know what standard is, is you would drop people off at strategic locations along the road, where deer were known to have crossed previously. You know, you learned the routes and patterns of the deer...when they are flushed out of a certain area they are gonna take a certain route out. And you would put the best shots at the most strategic location. And then you would have somebody that would take the dogs and make a drive into the area that you felt like the deer would be. Well, when the dogs struck, and then the deer...if they were not so close they would try to slip out. And you'd catch an old buck just slipping out of there just as quiet as it could be. And he would go out past one of those standards and he would get him. And then sometimes the dog would just jump him hot. And he'd be within sight of him almost, you know. And, at that time, you had to be a good shot, or to catch the deer that bounded across the thirty foot opening at, you know, fifty miles an hour. But, the dog hunting was a big thing. And people were...there's a book, *The Dog People*, about the Big Thicket that I don't think addresses that issue really as well as it should. But those people loved their dogs if the dogs produced. If the dogs didn't produce, he was out of here. And I mean, he was out of here suddenly. You know, like with a load of buckshot. And, but if it was a good dog they treated them better than they did their wives sometimes. And...in my day there was no such thing, it was later on in my young life, they came along with the Walker Hounds that will run forever. You know, you put a Walker dog on something and it just runs till either the dog or the game dies. I've seen those Walker dogs that people have turned loose and it would be so stiff, you'd find them days later, they'd be so stiff that they could hardly walk. But, most of the black and tan, and the blue ticks, and the red bones. The red bones were a real common dog, because they like being next to the Cur dog, I guess because the Cur dog was versatile, it could do everything. Black Mouth Yellow Cur dog, John Ralph raised some...a decade or so ago, two decades ago I guess it was – just beautiful dogs. A lot of them had the extra dewclaw up on their legs, that's the way you could identify them. They were a very highly sought after dog. 'Course they could do everything except read and write in those days. They could tree squirrels, they could run deer, they could bay your hogs for you, they catch a hog, they guard your house. Whatever you wanted that dog to do, and you usually started out on, you know your sortie, and he might jump a deer or start trailing a squirrel and the owner of the dog would just say, "Hey boss." And that was all it took, just pull him off there and he knew what was expected of him after that. But, the dogs were a real integral part of life...people, they just couldn't have existed without them y'all. That's the thing I want y'all to know today is...dogs, up until the 19...the latter part of the 1950's I guess, were as essential to a household as a water well was.

**JG:** Of the hunting clubs of this era, the forties and fifties, do you remember many hunting clubs? And how many people did you know who might have hunted in hunting clubs?

**RD:** [making the number zero with his thumb and first finger].

**JG:** He's saying zero.

**RD:** Yes, the hunting club was a cultural shock to people of East Texas. And the hunting clubs were really born in the latter part of the 50's and the early 60's...and they were a...piggy back on the back of the stock laws. The stock laws changed the face of East Texas. They eliminated the dogs. After the stock laws the dogs just, their need, just spiraled down. And, because, they could no longer run stock at free will so they no longer needed the Black Mouth Cur for that purpose anymore.

**JG:** And a lot of these dogs are used in addition to hunting deer...hogs. They were really hog hunting dogs.

**RD:** They were multiple purpose dogs...they really were. Except some people would have hounds. And some people had hounds. And that was all they did was hunt with them. But, by and large, most people had these multiple purpose dogs that for stock purposes and for hunting as well. Like I say, you didn't walk up on the front porch without somebody inside call the dogs off and told you could go in. Because, you know, they'd tear your leg off. They were vicious dogs.

**JG:** They weren't pets.

**RD:** They were not pets in any shape, form, or fashion.

**JG:** Serious business.

**RD:** They were serious dogs. And, I've had some real close encounters with them myself. I never was bitten, but I have come so very close so many times. Particularly working for that general store, and I'd be making deliveries. But, the hunting clubs were a cultural shock because, as I say in the book, it was seen as a pitting the haves against the have-nots. The wealthy people could belong to a hunting club. Now here in Diboll it was a little different because people that worked for mills had a avenue, I guess, that they could belong to a hunting club. But, where I was from, it simply meant they came in and put cables across the old roads. They plowed up a lot of the old roads, the entrances to the old roads. And...you know, people lost their, where they'd been...it was their life, you know. You just went into a place, and if it was a bee tree only...and if it was owned by Southern Pine Lumber Company, you didn't call Southern Pine and say, "Can I go in and cut that bee tree." You just went ahead and did it because it was your bee tree, you know, just as much as it was Southern Pine. If there was a cypress tree and you needed some shingles for your house, you didn't call Angelina County Lumber Company and say, "Can I go in and cut that tree to make some shingles out of it?" You just went and cut it.

If you wanted to fish or hunt and cross that land, or hunt on it, you didn't bother. You just did it, because it was your birthright. But, hunting clubs changed all of that. The stock law changed all of that, and it was a real culture shock to the citizens of East Texas when all of that came about.

**JG:** What's the first hunting club that you really knew of? Did you know of it when you were growing up in Zavalla, or was it after you came to work for Temple or...?

**RD:** Jonathan, the hunting clubs that I knew of came to work for Temple except for one. And I know there was the Barnes that lived across the Neches River over in Polk County. I don't know, to this day how that was all set up, but the Barnes had their own hunting club over there all my life. And I knew people that would slip in there to, they'd swim the river, or cross the river some way to get in there and kill a deer. But they, any time they went in there they dreaded running into the Barnes because they were apprehensive. And I think they did rough some people up occasionally. But...

**JG:** Did they shoot their dogs?

**RD:** They...people that went in there usually didn't take their dogs. They usually went into the Barnes pasture still-hunting.

**JG:** I'm thinking of the Darlington's.

**RD:** Oh, gosh, they...yeah.

**JG:** And people like that who...a noted family who would shoot dogs that came into their...

**RD:** Yeah, the Garlington deal is a real interesting deal. 'Course that was not terribly common.

**JG:** Was it Garlington or...?

**RD:** G-a-r

**JG:** Yeah, Garlington. I'm sorry.

**RD:** Uh huh. They were kin to me, by the way. They were about my...well I never did know my real grandmother's people because she died and I never did know any of those people. But...

**JG:** And what was her name?

**RD:** She was a Garlington...and she married an Ener...

**JG:** Ok.

**RD:** ...and then she died. But I never did know any of the Garlingtons because of that I knew my step-grandmother's people, which were Lowes. And that's the only grandpeople I ever knew because I didn't know any of my dad's either. But, the Garlingtons, they, it was known commonly that you didn't go onto...cause they were raising fine blood braimer [Brahman] cattle. And, sister, was an old maid sister, and...she was probably more notable for shooting dogs than were either the brothers. And deer, if a dog is chasing deer, or dogs are chasing deer, a deer will look out a herding cattle...to run through to confuse a dog. The old savvy ones will learn to do that, and a fox will as well. But, it was common knowledge in that part of the world, Sabine and Jasper and Newton County, that, you know, if your dog got into the Garlington Ranch, it was a pretty good size spread over there at that time, you know, a chance that it was going to be killed. In that particular day there was a terrible shoot out and several people were...one person was killed and one of the Garlingtons were crippled for life. And, it was a bad, bad event.

**JG:** I want to get to the Neches River eventually. But, just for biographical purposes, tell us a little bit...you went to Stephen F. Austin, State University.

**RD:** Uh huh. Got a BBA there.

**JG:** Ok. And then what happened immediately after that as far as career biography.

**RD:** Well I came to work for subsidiary of Temple called Love Wood Products Company, which took the byproducts from different mills and made them into, primarily their primary product was a filler for the roofing that goes on your house. Chances are the roofing that you have on your house today is probably 80%, by volume, sawdust. And they sent me to Waco to a mill that was...incorporated with the byproducts that came off of William Cameron and Company. William Cameron and Company was a huge window, door...

**JG:** Sash.

**RD:** Sash...all different kind of stuff. And they would bring their product, their own materials in from the west coast. And when the lumber, the Ponderosa Pine Lumber that they were buying, came across the Rocky Mountains, they got what they call a milling in transit rate. And when they came to Waco and went through their shops and they just chopped all the knots out of that stuff. It's a tremendous volume of wood. And Love Wood Products is tied in with them. And they would load those cars with that ground sawdust. It had to be ground, and also classified as to particle size. Sent it through a screening device or auto screening devices. And the overs were recirculated back through and ground some more and the fines were went on into the car. And they could ship that car out of there, and my memory is foggy about it...but I think it's about forty dollars. They could ship a carload of ground sawdust anywhere east of the Rockies for forty dollars – if you can believe that. Because of that milling in transit rate that they had coming in on that raw material. And we would sometimes ship half a dozen boxcar loads a day out of that plant; we worked two shifts. And I stayed in Waco for five years. And

then, they decided Love Wood was in the bark business here at that time. Well, they decided they wanted to expand the bark production business here in Diboll. And they brought me back here and we built a new bark plant over close to the plywood plant at that time. And took the bark and classified it as Deco bark, and potting soil, and then just regular mulch. And so, we were cranking out a lot of bark. Selling that, and then the particleboard plant opened up and I got the job working at the particleboard plant and transferred out into that.

**JG:** Here in Diboll.

**RD:** Uh huh. Well, actually they sent me to Pineland...I stayed in Pineland...

**JG:** Pineland, to Pineland.

**RD:** ...for several months. Lived in the lodge over there, like to froze to death. Mr. Temple wouldn't allow the thermostat to be turned up above thirty-two I think, or something like that. (laughter) And it was the coldest place in the world. But I stayed in the lodge over there, swam in the swimming pool and just lived the "life of riley" for a couple of months and then came back and we built the particleboard plant. And I stayed there until '81 and we...my wife and I, opened the real estate office in Lufkin and we maintained that office until '96, I think, and sold out.

**JG:** How did you get into the real estate business?

**RD:** That's a long short story. (laughter) I have had a terrible back all of my life, a lot of back problems even as a youngster, or young man. And I...we were starting the particleboard plant up and I was on my feet about 18 hours a day for many days and...my back just collapsed on me I guess. And I had to have back surgery. And, I didn't come through it really well at all...and the doctor prescribed to me that I had to walk a lot. So my wife, Bonnie and I, we, after hours, we walked up and down South Meadow Drive, that's where we lived at the time...here in Diboll. And, I told her, I said, "Bonnie, you know, chances are I've probably done all I'm going to do with Temple...with the kind of health that I'm in. And we need to, we need to think about something else." And I said, "I've always kind of wanted to go into business." Well, as you can imagine, we didn't have a lot of capitol. So, by the process of elimination, if you can believe this, we just kind of went through eliminating things, count the requirements. And it didn't take a whole lot of money to go into the real estate business. It just took a lot of nerve, I guess. So, we decided that the real estate business would be what it would be. We would try it and see how it worked. So we went to a local real estate company here in Lufkin and said, "Look, we'll make a deal with you." Real estate companies in Lufkin did not stay open on weekends at the time. None of them...they were just not open. "So, we'll make a deal with you...we'll keep your office open on weekends, and Bonnie will be your secretary for three years, if you'll, you know, accept us as an agent." And so, we got a real estate company to do that, and we did it those three years. And then at the end of three years we bought that site out there where we were for those twenty years total. And...it was just an old house up on blocks. We almost froze to death in it in the

wintertime 'cause the wind would just come up under that thing and just nearly freeze you to death. But, we renovated the little house and made it kind of look like an office, until we built the new office in '81, I think, or '82 maybe.

**JG:** Do you care to say which real estate company it was?

**RD:** That we went to work for?

**JG:** Yeah.

**RD:** Yeah...Janie Chapel, they're no longer in business...Janie died...a decade ago, I suppose.

**JG:** Ok...and you...

**RD:** But we like the real estate business. It was a business that, I guess, both of us were well suited for. Bonnie was real good...and she had an uncanny memory for people's names. Or telephone numbers. You tell Bonnie your name and telephone number and that's all you had to do. And five years from now you could ask her again and she'd tell you what that was, so. She had that phenomenal ability. And it just worked out really well for us.

**JG:** You do a...I think, a really good job in your book, in your introduction...in talking about maybe what led you to activism, I guess, in conservation matters. So, I'm not really asking you to rehash all that but...maybe in the perspective of having done the canoe expeditions, writing the book, in that context maybe...tell us a little bit, you know, from that side of it. Tell us a little bit about what alerted you, why did you do what you did? What were some of the things that, factors that contributed to that?

**RD:** To the writing of the book or to the exercise (unintelligible) Jonathan.

**JG:** Well, maybe, I guess the result would be the book and the expedition. But, what really called...your calling, maybe to activism.

**RD:** Yeah. Well, my dad never fired a gun that I knew of, unless he was shooting at a target. And he was a good shot...my dad was a good shot. But, he didn't hunt...I never saw him put a hook in the water. And I loved all of that, and it was completely foreign to him. And so, I was just kind of on my own with that. And I made friends with people that liked to hunt and fish. I spent an awful lot of time, as I told you earlier, doing that. And, I saw the quote unquote closing of the woods, with the stock laws and the hunting clubs. And that made a remarkable impression on me, and I think all people of my age at that time, just to see that happen because of the bitterness, really...that it caused among the people. And y'all have all heard that...see, what was it Jonathan about...pines won't grow where my dogs won't go. You know.

**JG:** Yeah.

**RD:** And it was just an arson threat, you know. You kill a hardwood and I'll burn the pine. You know, all those sayings...that all came out during my era. And I know, I had an old acquaintance of mine that was...spent some time in Huntsville for having burned the woods. And the burning was in retaliation to the closing of the woods to hunting. And, so, all of that was kind of simmering...and I saw all of that and, I wasn't particularly, myself, perturbed about that but I saw...but then, you come along and the clear cuts begin. And the clear cuts and the government subsidizing poisoning of the trees. Amate was a big product, and then they also were doing the girdling, you know, started out with axe. They would girdle with an axe and later they came out with a thing called the beaver (makes a buzzing sound). Boy, they could deaden a lot of stuff. In my house, where I live right now, on Whitehouse Drive, as you know I live back in a wooded area. And there are any number of Hickories on my place that were girdled during that time...that they weren't girdled quite deep enough and the bark grew back over the cambium closed back in over that...over that hickory one right at my back porch.

**JG:** And this is the industry as a whole...Temple did it.

**RD:** Everyone did it.

**JG:** The government was doing it. I mean on national forest lands.

**RD:** Yeah, and individuals too Jonathan. You could go make application for cost sharing, and they would send a crew out and do your land. That's probably what happened at where my house is. So that's real common...

**JG:** Timber Stand Improvement.

**RD:** TSI is exactly what it was. Timber Stand Improvement. And I saw that, and the people that I hunted with were embittered by that as well. And, I just...that alerted me to the fact that mast, hardwood mast was disappearing. And then...quail were, bobwhite quail were quite common in my day. But the fields, and the fencerows that were so essential to bobwhite quail nesting in and that sort of thing, they began to be converted over to cattle production. All these cow ranches that you see today, back in the forties and fifties were raising cotton. You can just bet on that. Now, some of these people have come later and bulldozed down timber and put it in but, by and large, most of the ranches that, the meadows, and the things that you see today...in the forties and fifties were cotton farms. And the corn to feed their livestock with, that they used to pull the plows and things. But, I saw that...and the thing that I was alerted to most Jonathan was, public land. People that own their own land, they're entitled to do what they want to do to it. I may not like it and I may wish that they wouldn't but it's their land. Temple can do what they want to and Champion can do what they want to. But it's their land, they pay taxes on it, they bought it. It's like I wouldn't want anybody telling me what to do with my land. People tell me, "Well, I wish you'd do this, wish you'd do that." Ok, I'll factor that in, but when the end result comes I do what I want to with it. But the public land...the U. S. National Forest...that's your land, that's my land, that's his land, that's her land. And I

have just as much input into that as somebody else. And I don't care to see it all converted to a pine plantation. And they were clear cutting national forest, and resetting into loblolly pine. Bam, bam, bam. And, that was the thing that really sparked my activism was clear cutting on the national forest and replanting it into loblolly pine plantations. And so, then that just, as I got into that more...and really, I guess the thing that really kicked me in was that...do y'all remember the straight line wind that we had I believe in '96? 80 mph winds that just blew everything down in a straight line like that. I believe it was '96. Just really hit the national forest really hard because they'd been in there clearing and leaving TSI work once again, and they take a lot of trees out and those trees were vulnerable. They just laid them over like Dominos. But, they had gone in there to log that, they hauled some of it as far away as Mississippi, I think, maybe even Alabama because there was so much on the ground. Huge trees, just as pretty a trees as we have left in East Texas they had to take out because that wind blew it down. But, there was a unique heritage site over in Sabine County, called Beach Ravines. And...they were supposed to avoid places like that and not only did they not avoid that place, they put a log set right in the center of it. Where they drag logs to and then pull the trucks up to and loaded them out. And, just that kind of stuff, on national forestland, just propel me to move into it more and more. And so, that was my involvement was actually the activities that were being done to national forest lands.

**JG:** So, it was the change in, and 'course it's been going on for a while...it just, I guess, took a while. Something, you know, in your life sparked it.

**RD:** Yeah.

**JG:** But...getting now more to the river...it was a change in land policies and management, I guess. As you mentioned public lands and...getting to the river now, I know you've mentioned before about the front page story in the Lufkin newspaper where...

**RD:** I still got the paper.

**JG:** ...where it showed, Rockland Dam and...

**RD:** Fastrill...or Weches at that time.

**JG:** Fastrill Reservoir. And maybe even the deepening of Dam B.

**RD:** Yeah.

**JG:** Speak a little bit to that if you don't mind.

**RD:** Well, the Neches and Angelina...as I grew up I fished at first one and the other just about every weekend. Until in the summer time when the river got low the paper mill was dumping a broth about the color of those pants in the river up there. And it turned it black all the way down. And there were rumors of big fish kills up river up there. So we knew

something was going on and we would not fish the Angelina, we switched over to the Neches. And I hunted more on the Neches, I guess, than I did on the Angelina. So, it was my river, you know. And, had a deep passion for the Neches.

**JG:** Your license plate says Neches.

**RD:** Yes. Wanna try and protect that river if we can. So, I saw that article in the paper that day and I thought, you know, the Neches runs unfettered for 235 miles. River miles. Between Lake Palestine to the north and Lake B. A. Steinhagen or Dam B as we know it, to the south. And, much of that river through there y'all, looks much as it did the day Davy Crockett spurred his horse across on the way to his demise at the Alamo. Some of...you know, Temple...I gotta say this about Temple. Of all the companies that I ever knew, Temple's forestry practices were the best. They took better care of the land than anybody that I know of. But, that area up through there, particularly, was almost pristine because they hadn't logged it in decades. Now, they've changed that in the latter years they started changing it. But, just the hardwoods up through the Neches and Temple owned all the land, almost alongside the Neches for ages because that was in that original tract that Mr. Temple, T. L. L. Temple, bought from Diboll, or however you pronounce his name, in 1897 or 6, whenever it was. And that land just strung up the river. In fact, they call the first lumber that he cut Neches Pine, simply because it did follow the river up through there where they were logging. But that land looks beautiful...and so, I called Texas Parks and Wildlife and talked to them about it and they said, "Well, there really only two wild rivers left in Texas, and one of them is the Neches. And one of them is," get this now, "An eleven mile stretch," eleven of the Devil's River out in West Texas. So he, you know, he said, "The Neches is indeed a rare treasure for the state of Texas and for East Texas." And so, I tried to figure out what I could do, you know. And, eureka, one day the idea came to me that I would paddle down it in a canoe and people would see what a wonderful asset it was...and would flock to the streets with placards and everything and say, "Save our river." (laughter) Somehow or another it didn't happen like that. You gotta kinda ho hum, you know. But the Lufkin Daily covered it, KTRE covered it some, and Jacksonville Daily Progress covered it. So, that was in 1999 and, as you know, in '01 I did the same thing over again...only this time we had a little bit better coordination. We went all the way to Beaumont...we got a whole lot better coverage. The Houston Chronicle picked it up and...

**JG:** A few canoes had signs "Save the Neches."

**RD:** Yes. That's right. Some...actually some children fixed those up and joined me for part of the way. And so...it was a great adventure y'all, I wish everybody in here had to do it, you know, at some time or other. I wish it was a requirement to get your voting right or something like that. (laughter) Because it was a... it was a wonderful experience.

**JG:** Talk about the Neches River Rendezvous. What is that?

**RD:** Well, that is, in fact that was started by Gina, my daughter. You know, it's strange that that would be the case...but Gina got into this thing with me. She was kind of my

media consultant on that last trip down the river. She's the one that made it as successful, media wise, as it was. And she was a member of the Lufkin Chamber at that time, and she suggested to them, and I hope I got this about right, but, she suggested to them that they have this event. And, I think first a year or two they declined to do it. But then, finally she got enough backing and they did it. And used to, they put in at Hwy 7 and went down river. And Temple sent out crews and picked them up somewhere down river and brought them back to Boggy Slough, North Boggy Slough. But that got to be too much of a hassle for Temple, I think, and so they went up river and found Anderson Crossing. Which is, ten river miles north up the Neches. And it's just a perfect four or five hour run for even the novice paddler. And so, take them up there and put them in, and they have a leisurely paddle down river. They take out at Hwy 7, take them over to North Boggy and feed them a hamburger, and French fries, and potato salad, I think, and a cold drink. And everybody just has a great and wonderful day.

**JG:** I think they almost have to limit their numbers now.

**RD:** They do limit Jonathan. They cut it off at three hundred. But last year they had three twenty I think, or something like that. And it may already be sold out now. Some people were asking me the other day, say, "How do you get..."and I was in Athens, they were asking me this, and I said, "Well, you better call, because they may already be sold out. That may be the case, I don't know." It's greatly anticipated by a lot of people.

**JG:** Describe from a perspective of canoeing...what's your favorite section of the river?

**RD:** Each section of the Neches has its own identity...its own personality. The northern Neches is narrow; the water runs much closer to the top of the bank. You can look out into the forest and see wild animals. The water elm, things hang over the river in such a fashion that you're shaded from the sun even during the hottest days. You're in the shade most of the time. You're shielded from sight...wild animals cannot see you until you're almost right up on them. And on that trip y'all, I can't tell you the close proximity that I got to animals. And at night, the nights were just...they were just special y'all. Because you ease into that canoe and you slide it up onto a sand bar or such and you take your **pent** tent, and you pitch it into a place and I had a little propane burner, I never built a fire. And I boil my water and poured it over my noodles because that was the sacrifice to the weight. Your noodles didn't weigh very much, and you wanted to keep your weight low. And, 'cause that canoe, dragging that over logs was a terrible ordeal. But you're lying there, and nothing knows you're there...and coyotes would come up so close you could hit them with a stick almost. Some of the most mournful howling that you've ever heard in your life. It was just awesome. You're close, you know, proximity to nature. But, then as you proceed downstream you begin to, the floor and the fauna begin to change. You don't hit any Cypress until...well, you see an occasional Cypress, but you don't really see any Cypress until you approach highway 59 and beyond, you encounter a lot of Cypress. So that changes. But, when you hit Piney Creek, and Biloxi Creek, and Shawnee Creek, and Billiams Creek...those are all major creeks. They come into the river channel while they start gouging that channel out. And so, by the time you get down to Fort Teran...you're down in a canyon when the river is low. You know, you're

looking at twenty-foot banks on either side. So, you don't see out. But you, the geologic formations are visible and you can see a lot of geology that you, you know, that's real interesting to you. Then you pass highway 69, actually you start hitting that prior to 69. You hit Fort Teran – you start hitting rock. In fact, there at...just below Fort Teran, the river plows into a rock face and it turns it due south. I mean it's a big abrupt change in the river. And it follows that for quite a length of time till it can turn back around that rock outcrop and head back to its southeasterly projection that it followed the whole time.

**JG:** And that's at Best Bend.

**RD:** That's at the Best Bend.

**JG:** Yeah.

**RD:** ...loop. And, very interesting geological formations in that area. There's the filter clay outcrops that cause water to be just...I guess, brilliantly blue and clear is all I can tell you – the same thing that turns the blue hole blue. And...then beyond that you have the rock out crops and the big deep canyon that you're in. And rapids, you start hitting some rapids. Full of Neches there, you know. And then a waterfall...there's a real neat waterfall a mile below Highway 69 that...the only waterfall on the Neches. In low water it's about two to three feet, four feet, something like that. It's such that you can't paddle over it unless you wanna run the risk of capsizing. So, I took my lanyard and there's a name for that that canoeists call it but I don't know what that is. But you let your canoe go over first and then you lead it back around and you get into it. But, the Neches is distinct personalities wherever you are; it's not the same river anywhere. And, it just depends on what you want to do. If you wanna see wildlife, and be shady, and be kind of in a very cloistered environment then the north Neches is where you want to be. But if you want to see rocks and rapids and geologic formations then the lower Neches is where you want to go.

**JG:** What do you say to someone who might say something along the lines of, "Compare the Neches to a muddy ditch?"

**RD:** Well, I have heard that comparison before. First thing, let me explain to you, it may not change anything...but it gives you a better understanding of what has happened. The Neches particularly in the northern regions and what's the old timers used to call the Redlands or the red lands where farming was really good up there. That was where Texans, early Texans wanted to be was in the farming country, up north...the Redlands, because that's richer soil. But, as the water passes through the geologic formations up there, that earth, clay dissolves. And it dissolves into such tiny particulate that its specific gravity is such that it won't settle out. There's no feel for anything to it anymore than it is anywhere else. It's just that those solids are suspended in that water in such a...their particulate is so small that they won't settle out. So, as long as that current is moving those solids stay in suspension. Now, after it passes out into a slough and the river moves on out and leaves it there for a while, then it will settle out and you'll have the clear, black water that we're accustomed to in sloughs. But, that is not a muddy ditch the way I

look at it. I see that as solid suspended in water. And, it's just the river that I know. And, I don't have any aversion to it. Now, I know that it will stain your clothing if you have a white pant suite on and you get into that water and let it soak that water, your pants are going to be stained. It's gonna have red in it and I guess, maybe, you could bleach that out, I don't know. But, the stain is there simply because that particulate would adhere to your clothes. That's what it is. And, it will stain them. But no...the Neches is no more filthy than, or dirty than a lot of other rivers are...it's just that that characteristic of having those...particulate suspended in water gives it that discoloration.

**JG:** And I think too in your book you talked about how people don't appreciate the river, hence the reason why you...one of the main reasons why you took the trip, the canoe trip, is because we often just see the river from our automobile's flying at sixty miles an hour over a bridge that may or may not be labeled even what it is.

**RD:** Yeah.

**JG:** And for most people that is the river and...you know, it's...

**RD:** And around highway...

**JG:** ...it's one thing to actually get on the water.

**RD:** Yeah.

**JG:** And when you get away from it, say a bridge, and you don't have to get too far away and it's totally different.

**RD:** Yeah. Y'all, let me tell you...I don't know, there are a lot of bridges that cross the Neches River. And, some of them it just breaks your heart to know that number one...let me just regress here just a moment. You know, we Texans are really proud of our state right? I mean we're proud to be called Texans right? I mean, it gives us a lot of pride that somebody in Australia knows that we're Texas right? And I find that hard to believe. When you go and you go under a bridge and you see where people have a backed a pick up truck and kicked their garbage out. And you are going along and you see where people have gone over a bridge and they've tossed out two or three black garbage bags of, you know, household garbage as they went across. I don't believe we're very proud of our place of residence when we, in that kind of condition. But, back to what Jonathan said, when you leave those places of filth like that, human filth that we have caused.... and it's not peculiar to the Neches. I'm sure it's the same way with the Nueces and a lot of other rivers that I don't know. But I suspect that it probably, maybe not to the degree that we have here, 'cause maybe we have more people here with more access to more roads, I don't know. But, you get it and it's pristine...it's untrammelled, it's untouched. And, as I said, it looks just like it did, or much the same as it did when Davy Crockett and those guys were having their time here in our state. And beautiful and wild and deer swim across in front of you in the water, swim the river right in front of you. You can hit them with your paddle almost. Let me deviate here just a moment. Jonathan and I both are

members of the thing called the...it's a recently formed organization and I invite all y'all to find out more about it...but it's called "Friends of the National Forest and Grassland in Texas." And we held a tour in the Angelina National Forest last Saturday. And there were about 35 to 40 people in attendance and we took them to Boykin Springs, and Old Aldridge, and a pitcher plant seep, and a red cockaded woodpecker recruitment stand, and then took them down to the bank of the Neches. But...and all these were people that were out from town, they were not from towns like Diboll. They were from cities the size of Lufkin and larger. But, to see the rapt attention that these people paid to what was being said and what they were seeing was just unbelievable. And, they were just completely divorced from the things that people of our age, for the most part, knew as we were growing up, and still know about today. But, they know nothing about things like that. And it's just, that is what is happened to the river, is people...I used to ask young people that I associated with, I'd say, "Do you know where the Neches is?" And these are college graduates, well-informed people. One guy in particular had a real good job with the state. He said, "No," he says, "I don't know where it is." I said, "Well, it forms the western boundary of our county." "Oh," he says. But, my point is that people, they don't even know where the Neches River is or what it does. All they know is zip, they cross it between here and Houston and like Jonathan says, there's a lot of litters on the ground and a bridge is up there and you're looking at it from there as you're going across at seventy miles an hour. So, we have become divorced from the world that we live in. And it's becoming more so every day. The natural world to the present generation is something that you see on National Geographic or the Planet Earth or some of those TV programs, or gameboy, you know. A lot of it's in gameboys that they have. And they really and truly, and I say this tongue and cheek, but, it's true, they think they're gonna die if they sweat a lot. (laughter) And mosquitos carry such things as West Nile Virus, and yellajaundice [yellow jaundice], you know, all of that kind of stuff. And ticks, you know, you get Rocky Mountain Fever, and Lyme Disease. And that's all true. But you also get killed out here on 59 a whole lot quicker than you will getting Lyme Disease and something like that. And we think nothing about sending our children out there. So, I tell you there's a crisis and you may scoff at it if you like, and I don't know what the consequences of it are, but I can tell you that there is a crisis. It's just like people say, they tell me, "Let the Forest Service manage the National Forest, they know what they're doing." And my response to them is this, "They brought," and I can remember some of this. A lot of it was already in the ground, but, "They brought the...," my mind is gone y'all... "...the slash pine, they brought the slash pine in here from Florida and Georgia and it was going to be the super tree." It was going to revolutionize growing trees in Texas. And the Forest Service brought them in by the thousand and planted them. And a lot of it's in the Angelina National Park now. You know what, they're wanting to clear cut that and take it out because those trees are not performing as they should. They've been in the ground since the 30's and 40's. So, you can talk to me about management all you want to, but they make mistakes just like you and I do. And, like the clear cutting, you know, you go out there and you clear cut that land and it's gone forever. Whatever you say about it. You might say, "Oops," but you know, it's too late; it's gone. So, I'm saying that we better try to hold on to a little bit of things that we held dear because it may come back around as that may be essential some day.

**JG:** I see we're pretty close to an hour and as I mentioned before, you can't get it all into one interview. But I wanna open it up if anyone has any questions you would like to ask Mr. Donovan? Based on what he said today or maybe the book. Anybody? Now's your chance.

**Becky Donahoe (hereafter BD):** Well I want to know the definition of wild if there's only two in the state of Texas?

**RD:** I would give you my definition of wild.

**JG:** That's Becky Donahoe.

**RD:** I will not give you the Texas Parks and Wildlife definition of a wild river, but my definition of a wild river is that there's not a lot of houses, and club houses, and golf courses, and service stations, and hunting lodges, and things along the bank. In fact, most of the time along the Neches, you don't see or hear anything. It's only when you come, approach and you're departing where a highway crosses. And there are a few places on the upper Neches and in...some of the hunting clubs that you'll see a clubhouse every now and then. But most of the clubhouses that you see along the river nowadays are dilapidated. I mean, in a few years they're gonna be gone. Because, somehow or another those mosquitoes and those air conditioners affect the adults of the age and the don't relish the idea of going to a clubhouse on the Neches, where it's, you know, there are bugs that might bite you and things of that sort. So those clubhouses are disappearing. So my definition of wild is you don't see very many evidences of mankind....of....

**BD:** Civilization.

**RD:** Civilization...that's what it is...civilization, thank you.

**JG:** Is that stemming, Becky, from the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act? Is that what you're bringing in, or just the title of the book?

**BD:** I was just surprised there's only two.

**JG:** Oh ok.

**BD:** In all of Texas.

**JG:** From Parks and Wildlife. Oh ok...I see what you're saying. Well, Mr. Donovan I know we could talk about a whole lot more, but I know we've got some birthday cake to eat too. (laughter) So I wanna thank you...appreciate it very much.

**RD:** Thank you Jonathan.

**JG:** And we'll hopefully follow up with maybe a few more interviews.

**RD:** Well, it's been a pleasure being with people I haven't seen in a long, long time. All these people go back a long way with me that I just have gotten away from that I haven't seen in a long time. And it gladdens my heart to spend this hour, hour and a half with you.

**JG:** Thank you.

**RD:** I lived longer in Diboll than I ever did in any one place in my life y'all.

**END OF INTERVIEW**