

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: **David Bamberger** (DB)

INTERVIEWER: David Todd (DT)

DATE: June 17, 1999

LOCATION: Johnson City, Texas

TRANSCRIBER: Robin Johnson

SOURCE MEDIA: Mini-DV

REEL: 2003 and 2004

Number mark the time codes for the VHS tape copy of the interview. "Misc." refers to various off-camera conversations or background noise, unrelated to the interview.

(misc.)

DT: Can you describe a little about the landscape and the hill country and what it was when you first arrived and maybe why it had been degraded over the years?

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DB: Well, I tell you, when I came to Blanco County, was—I'm in my 31st year here on the ranch right now. And when I came here, I had spent a year on a quest and the quest was to try to find the worst ranch that was out here. And I wanted something of enough size—large enough size to be able to make an impact. And the reason that I was looking for the worst ranch I could find was because I had had my life influenced by an author whose name was Louis Bromfield and Bromfield was a Pulitzer Prize winning novelist but he spent 17 years of his life in Europe where he observed the way the European people took care of land and what kind of land stewards they were. And World War II breaks out, he comes back from Europe back to America and he wrote this marvelous book called, Pleasant Valley and it was about his journey from New York into the hills of Ohio searching for the farm that he'd grown up on, that his grandparents had owned.

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DB: And he was really shocked when he found the farm because it was abandoned. It was gullied and eroded, grown up with all kind of brush and other woody species and it was more or less "farmed out". And this marvelous story of Pleasant Valley is how he began his work to restore this farm and three contiguous farms that he had bought there together. With the help of young people from the university system and the Soil Conservation Service. It was a marvelous story. He—he called his farm Malabar Farm from the coast in Africa where he'd written some novels that had been, like I say, Pulitzer Prize winning novels, some of which were turned into Academy Award winning movies. But the story, my mother had passed on this book to me and the story intrigued me when I was a teenager and I—I thought that if I ever accomplished anything economically in my life, how I would like to have an adventure and to do something of that nature. And my life led me here into Texas. And let me tell you, David, the search for a worn out, poorly stewarded piece of land here in the hill country of Texas was only made difficult because there was so much land that was abused and worn out and run down and—and poorly stewarded. So my choices were many but I had to find the one that had some attributes that mother nature had placed on it, such as these hills, shallow, calcareous soils, not tall grass prairie. On the sides of the hill, at the best mid grasses. But when I came here, this landscape that we're looking at, all around us, it didn't look like this. The truth was, the first purchase I made here was

3000 acres and I have since expanded it to 5500 acres by buying contiguous pieces, most of which was like the original but not all of it. And I set about making a plan, in five year sequence, a plan for five years, ten years, fifteen years and twenty years. And it was pretty obvious because

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DB: let me describe what was here thirty-one years ago when I came. I met the Soil Conservation Service technician at the first gate. He had charts and maps and aerial photos and stuff and he said, Mr. Bamberger, and I'd only met him on the telephone, he said, Mr. Bamberger, I—I been trying to work with this place for some time, a absentee owner. I don't know what you plan on doing here. I surely hope you're not going to try to raise cattle because you just bought the worst piece of real estate in Blanco County. And then I thought, on my. He didn't really know that I was looking and to have a soil conservation service technician confirm that I had really bought a pretty crummy place. But the statistics went like this, he said, Mr. Bamberger, this will take—this land—it'll take 41 acres of this kind of land just to support one cow. I was a—always been a fellow traveler and a friend of the conservation organizations and my friends in the Audubon Societies in San Antonio and Austin and Bastrop County came out and helped me for years and years and they're still doing it, doing bird counts year round. I had less than 50 species of birds thirty years ago. There wasn't a—basically—my wife gets a little bit upset at me for saying it this way but basically there wasn't a drop of water on this ranch. I got a deer lease the first year because I needed the revenue. The guys leased it a dollar an acre, had 3000 acres, so I got \$3000. A year later, I called these fellows. I said, say, you coming back for your deer lease? They said, no, we're not coming back up there. Said, the biggest deer we got there last year, field dressed at 55 pounds. Why we took him home in a HEB grocery sack. But now we started our plan, our five year plan, our ten year plan. We had them and we began this process like Bromfield had done on his farm in Ohio. And when Bromfield did it, these two words were never, ever even put together or spoken. The two words are habitat restoration. Trying to take woody species, abused land, overgrazed, plants that were here that didn't really mean to be here because of drought, suppression of fires and overgrazing, all three combined but the principal reason was overgrazing. To try to restore this land to a situation of health by working with mother nature as opposed to against her. So this landscape looked pretty dismal when I came. But I'm going to jump the story and tell you that after we did this habitat restoration, all the wonderful things began to happen. Now there's water everywhere. On this 5500 acre ranch, I did not have one single functioning water well. We get a 100% of our water from springs that were not here when we came 31 years ago. We have over 150 species of birds today, including two federally listed endangered species, the Golden Cheeked Warbler and the Black Capped Vireo. We have water everywhere. You could water ski here if you use your imagination. Two creeks that run nearly all the time except in extreme drought. And I am concerned about the drought that we're in right now. And let me tell you, I—my deer lease—well our deer and our managed area—game managed area, last year, the smallest deer harvested in that managed area, field dressed at 105 pound and I took in \$43,000 from my deer lease. So habitat restoration was not only good for the quality of my life but it was—it was good for the economics of my life. And another economic factor that we now run 200 mother cows here and, if we want to, we can run a mother cow to every 18 acres versus 41 acres of the kind of land that I bought. So we had a pretty bad dismal picture when you think in terms of conservation, when you think in

terms of wildlife, when you think in terms of all the critters and creatures that were here going back 100 and 200 and 300 years ago. And my object at the very beginning was to document, was to see if I could record what was

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DB: taking place here and number two to be able to do a habitat restoration project that could be duplicated time and time and time again by anyone, irregardless of their economics. And we've done that.

DT: Can you tell us how you went about restoring?

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DB: Well, the first thing you want to do in these kind of situations is to—is to do an inventory of what—what's out there. In our particular case, we did an inventory of—of trees. We did an inventory of grasses. We did an inventory on wildflowers. We checked into where we had some soil and where we didn't and what places would lend themselves to more rapid recovery if we applied our science and our works to those particular areas. We did soil tests all around the ranch with the object of knowing what a range land consisted of, then looking into history books and journals of early explorers in this part of the world and try to get an idea from their writings what things were like when they first—the settlers first came into this part of the world. What we discovered was the tree culture, to begin with, was primarily dominated by Ash Juniper which the locals around here, we all call it cedar, it's really a Juniper, that my tree culture other was comprised of Spanish Oak and Live Oak and the—between the Spanish Oak, Live Oak and Ash Juniper, it comprised about 80% of the tree culture on the ranch. Other trees had been lost. For example, I found very few Cedar Elms. When I say very few, a handful, maybe a dozen on the whole ranch. I found a few Walnuts, a few Escarpment Cherries, I found just a very small number of Texas Ash. But, at that very period in time, there was a very sinister fungus beginning to show up in the hill country of Texas and now it's in our cities, San Antonio and heavily in Austin, Texas. And it's kind of wiped out the Live Oaks and the Spanish Oaks in Kerrville and Bandera and it's called Oak wilt. So we knew from the very beginning that this was a fungus that we were going to have to contend with. And at a later stage in our development, when we got a lot of the Ash Juniper out of the way, the Cedar out of the way, and grasses reestablished onto the ground, that—that time we were going to have to begin a program to trees, to introduce trees. And my object was not, even though I've done a very little bit of it, the object was not to introduce exotic species of grass and/or of trees but rather bring back to this landscape, to this environment grasses and plants and trees, etc. that were here at one time but due to the poor land stewardship practices, and I say a little bit contributed by drought but we could contend—mother nature can contend with drought. She'll just hunker down and hold on but not if man makes his imprint the way man has done here in the hill country. And that is by maintaining that livestock in fenced areas and try to keep pushing stock onto these areas to where the ground begins to get denuded. And when grasses get grazed below half—half, well that root system begins to shrink. So in studying the whole picture about what was here and the inventory of what we did find here, we found here and there a colony of Side Oaks, here and there a few sprigs of Indian grass. Here and there some big blue stem but, for the most part, we found bare ground and shallow, calcareous soils. These soils have been falling off of these hills and eroding off of these hills for 100 years. And then the valleys that we have between these

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DB: beautiful old hills, we have some deep soils that are heavily organic because leaves have been washing down in there and it's been adding to it and it was in those areas that I perceived that we were going to be able to raise our taller grasses. And on the sides of these hills, the mid grasses and on top, an opportunity for some of the taller grasses. But the first thing that really made the original—that made the most impact was removal of the Cedar trees and, at the same time, introducing native grass seeds back onto the landscape. The native grass seed was the most expensive thing that I had to—to purchase because there was always a limited supply of native grass seed and so many times, you couldn't get it that was native to this general area. For example, a lot of your Indian grasses come from Wyoming and Montana and Colorado and places like that. And I was always attempting to get the grass seed that actually had come from around this area. One of my sources, and I teach this to people all the time, one of my sources was to drive the country roads in the Blanco and Hays and Gillespie and Comal County, drive those roads in the winter and the fall, in October, when the native grasses were heading out and see along your county roads and your highways, these—these grasses were never grazed so you get a wonderful seed source along there. And if you go out in the marketplace to buy native seeds, you'll know what I mean and what you can do. You can collect \$500 worth of grass seed in one Sunday afternoon on—on the highway system, country road system. And so along with the purchases and with what we did in that particular scheme of things, we introduced around on the ranch and the best sites for these grasses, we began to distribute native grass seed. We did some things that were unique as well. We scarified the ground to try to create a seed bed, even on the sides of these hills. And

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DB: when I say scarified the ground, the bulldozer in doing the pushing, the tracks of the dozer, broke up a lot of that hard, caliche crust. It was just white from the sun hitting it and we also discovered something that was a major discovery and a surprise, even my soil conservation agent didn't anticipate, but there was no much cedar, this stuff was wall-to-wall, but underneath the bigger cedar trees, we found the soil—here's the trunk—we found the soil feathered out and we found 9 inches of soil, in some cases, that feathered out to the drip line of the tree down to zero inches and then you were into the caliche. We pushed those trees into piles and if I had to do anything over, I would not burn those piles but I burned them at the time for two reasons. I didn't know any better and second, they consumed so much land space that they were in my way. But when the bulldozer pushed those and then the operator twisting and turning, he distributed that 9 inches of soil a little bit. And we came in there and we—we had a cultivator type of a piece of equipment on the back of a tractor and sometimes we just drew—pulled logs and brush, big limbs from trees and pulled it along, just to disturb the ground enough to make a seed bed for the distribution of these grasses. And you go into the marketplace and buy native grass seed, you'll know why it's important to—to prepare a good seed bed or the best you can. But you just don't go out on these hills here and plow. You know, it's a little dangerous even to put a tractor on the sides. And as you look into the hills here, you'll see a series of steps and risers or treads and risers. And see, for the last 100 million years, this land has been changing. And there's been a big geological change in that there's been raised up areas and there's been erosion. And you can forget these hills and valleys, a 100 million years ago, you're sitting on beachfront property. This was all

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DB: underwater. We find fossils. We find dinosaur tracks here of fish and clams and mollusks and all different kind of things that come out of the—the beds. But when you look into the side of the hill, you see these treads and risers and we found that on the tread part, it was very shallow and as it rised up, right there in the riser, there was a—there was soil. And as we distributed the native grass, I got some marvelous pictures of this, you'd see the mid grasses grow just in that little part of the step and then it would be the—the lesser desirable grasses like some of the muhlies, seed muhlies, can—can—canyon muhly, lindheimer muhly, they would grow in those shallow calcareous places and then the mid grasses would grow on the riser part. And it was just marvelous what happened because when you look into these hills and you do your geology, and we did all of these studies, not with a—a rocket science approach, just by reading and observing and what we knew and people that came and helped us and so on. The top 125 feet of all of these hills around me are Edwards limestone. Edwards limestone...

(plane)

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DB: Edwards limestone is, if you could dig into it and look closely, it's like a big old piece of Swiss cheese. It's got a lot of holes all through it and what you have to do in order to get water, before you can expect to have water and springs and creeks running, you have to fill that aquifer. But prior to this habitat restoration, prior to removing the woody species which takes so much water, no water went into the aquifer. The aquifer here, the

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DB: Edwards limestone part was depleted. And so, there was no water going in because of the woody species. The dense cover of cedar intercepted the rainfall and that rain which did come to the ground was sucked up again or if it was one of the typical hill country rains that comes a lot at one time like 4, 5 or 6 inches, 6 hours later it was swished off the ground, into the valleys, into the neighboring creeks and rivers and finally into the Gulf of Mexico, carrying a lot of silt, a lot of soil with it. When we got the—the cedar off and got the place—got the grasses starting back in, now you have the interception of the raindrop by stems of grass and when the rain hits the stem of grass, it's not pounding away on bare soil. It's following the stem of grass and then the grass has just as much root system under the ground as you normally see on top of the ground. And so that water was able to go into this Edwards limestone, into this aquifer and 2 to 2 ½ years after we started that, we began to find springs that had sprung to life. We saw many and many little grottos and places where maidenhair fern and moss was growing. We went into those places and excavated and built concrete casements around them so they wouldn't cave in any longer, put pipes into those concrete casements and pulled that water out and then all around the ranch, at different elevations, we put up concrete storage tanks to where we could put that water, let it gravity flow into those tanks. It was the most marvelous thing that I've ever seen happen and quite honestly, I expected something but nothing like the response that we got. Fortunately, years later, some of the work that's been done by government agencies has quantified some of the very things that we learned from our work which was 20 years ahead of the feds and the agencies coming in and doing it. Right today, on this ranch, we have 11 or 12 springs that we

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DB: have—that have come to life that we—that are cased off, that are piped—the water's piped out of them and it goes into tanks. We've got between 30 and 35,000 gallons of water

in storage at various places around the ranch. And as I said earlier, I—I—we have not one single functioning water well on this ranch. All of our water today comes from sources that weren't here prior to the habitat restoration. Basically that is getting rid of woody species that have overtaken, and the reason the woody species overtake is because domestic livestock doesn't graze on woody species and mother nature's going to put something on the ground so when you abuse the land and overgraze it to where you got bare ground, and let me tell you, you can go to a Jack in the Box, nature will send grass up through the blacktop, you know. So mother nature's going to put something there and this particular hill country scenario it's put the cedar more than any other one thing and also we have some mesquite trees here in the hill country. I'm fortunate that I don't have those and they're much more difficult to get control of than the—than the—than the cedar is. So I say these things were like miracles that began to happen.

DT: Can you talk about the scale of what you did?

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DB: First, I've got to tell you that I might have been the architect of this whole thing. The inspiration that I got from Bromfield's work, the inspiration I got from my mother when I was just real little because we lived in pretty poor circumstances and we had—we didn't have electricity or running water till I was 4 years old. And my mother kept us outside a

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DB: lot because we didn't have electricity inside. So she really introduced me to the natural world and taught me about bugs and birds and bees and she loved all kind of natural things. And in Bromfield's book that my mother actually passed on to me, he talks in one chapter about the plan. And in the plan, he's interviewing students from the agricultural schools there in that part of Ohio and I believe everything starts with philosophy and Bromfield was making sure that philosophically that the young people that he was going to get to help him really felt a strong desire that might be as driven as he to restore this tract of land of his. I felt the same way here. And I interviewed and followed and I had the good fortune to secure some awfully assistants here to help me in this project. And I ended up with four Aggies, Aggies being the Texas A&M guy, you know. I ended up with a cow aggie and a deer aggie and a tree aggie and a dam aggie and actually the dam aggie really wasn't an aggie but we always said if they ever came over here and took a look, they'd give him an honorary degree. All of us together working with the background, academic backgrounds and experience backgrounds and I had a lot of original ideas and things that I wanted to do on my own as well that were different, innovative. The scope of this thing—if you want to eat an elephant, you don't put a bib on and get a knife and fork and walk up to the elephant, no. You go up to the elephant with a hacksaw and then cut off below the knee and then sit down and just eat on his leg. So you cut the elephant up in little pieces. And that's what—that's what we did here. If you look out there and you see the beginning 3000 acres which became 5500, and if you look at it, it—it—it's liable to turn you. I mean, you're liable to say oh, you just get exhausted thinking about it. And you're looking for some signs of success. You're—so

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DB: we cut up the elephant and we did something here and we did something there. You got to realize we didn't have roads to speak of. Why you'd almost lose a transmission coming in here. We didn't have fences. We didn't have barns or buildings. Had a few shacks that leaned. They weren't much. And so, what became important to me, however, first

before remodeling the old house, before doing any of those kinds of things, first and most important was to get to work on the land itself. And in between our little—the gaps between doing a project here and doing a project there, we were starting to think in terms of fences and roads and needed capital improvements that we had to have to support all—all of our work. So it wasn't something that just happens. There isn't anything going to take place that just happens. You have to have a plan and people make it happen. People in the misuse and the misunderstanding of this—of this land is what got it into the condition that I discovered it in and something that wasn't going to be undone. I have a—I have a little philosophy that I use with people that come here to learn and that is, never initiate something that you can't sustain. When it comes to clearing woody species in the hill country and, once again, the woody specie that's the prime culprit is cedar, don't start the job if you're not prepared to stay with it because we discovered something. For every major big cedar tree we took out of here, 38 trees replaced it. So you take out one, you get 38. That don't make much sense does it? Think like you're going to be walking backwards. Well, the reason for that was simply this, over the years and years of all this cedar, there are literally millions of cedar berries laying in the organic matter underneath these trees. We remove a tree and the cedar berry says, ah, free at last, free at last. Sunshine, rain and those cedar berries start to germinate and we find these little

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DB: cedars running around. Now people—a popular thing today that everybody's talking about and there's workshops on it and it's controlled burns. That's the in vogue. Well I'm going to tell you something. I'm a pragmatist and you ain't going to do any controlled burns anyways near Austin, Texas or San Antonio, Texas or Houston, Texas because you got air quality problems, number one. You got too many houses in the neighbors, too many highways and high lines, you're going to set the world on fire. Controlled burns are not an option for people that are expanding out of our major cities into the suburbs and into the hill country here. It sounds good but it just, from a practical standpoint, won't work. You get—first of all, you got to plan it. If you don't plan well, because you got to plan it because you got to have the fuel. Well when you first do this restoration that I'm talking about, there isn't any fuel. You got to have dry grass, adequate dry grass. If it's too much, it'll burn the house down. If it's not enough, you can't go through. The second option would be biological control which means you could put a bunch of Spanish goats out there and they will, under hard pressed conditions, nip off all those little cedars. The difficulty with that—with under my program was, that the goats are going to eat everything else before they take out the cedar. And I was interested in restoring mother nature's balance and I wanted to—I wanted to attract the birds and the foxes and the coons and the skunks and the possums and the squirrels and all the critters. See I happen to believe something. I believe that we're all connected. I believe that you and I are connected with every critter and creature, every plant, every piece of grass, everything that has life and that a threat to any of those species, no matter plant or animal, it will come back and haunt us because when—when those species are gone,

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DB: they're gone. And at some unknown point in the future, we're going to keep on knocking off these species at the rate we're doing it today and we're going—it's going to come back and haunt us. We're going to find that it's a threat to man himself. So, what's the other option for the person that does habitat restoration where you have a cedar problem

like I'm trying to demonstrate here. There's only one thing left to do and that's get a pair of lopping shears and cut those little fellows off. Now the good news, there is good news, the good news is as you get your native grasses restored back onto the earth, they begin to consume this bare ground, the ground becomes less bare and it was with that spread of these native grasses that raindrops now could hit and go into the earth. The same time, the new cedar berry that may be brought in by a bird, and I'm not an advocate of clearing all the cedar and I didn't do it here, I still have 3 or 400 acres of it, in various and sundry places. The good news is that when you get the native grasses covering the—the ground and a robin or a cedar waxwing drops that berry, or the seed of that berry, it falls into the crown of grass and when it germinates, it never does set a root. And so you cut these 38 that I discovered that come back and two years later, you're cutting about 17 that came back that didn't come back quite as quick and you cut those out and you come back two years later, you got about 5 and you cut those out and pretty soon, you don't have any. You defeated it but I said, don't initiate something you can't complete. Don't initiate an action that you can't sustain. So my—my message to the private landowner that wants to do this kind of thing is that be prepared. You can't sit back and relax just because you've cleared this woody species and you've introduced and planted some grass seed because there's a lot of things that are going to happen. And if you go back into a

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DB: mode of putting too much livestock onto these places too soon, you're going to have the woody species returning. And let me—let me state something else that experience has shown to me here that I was—I wasn't quite as tuned into then as I am today, that generally speaking, the woody species will take over all the time. Their opportunistic and since they're not hit on by the domestic livestock very much, why they'll start showing up, proliferate a whole lot. Those woody species could be in something besides cedar. It could be grape vines, green briar. There's a whole bunch of them. Some of our forbs and some of our brushy plants, those kind of woody species. So a person who wants to go into something like this has got to be prepared to follow through on it or he's going to just spend his own generation enjoying it and he's going to pass it onto the next generation about the same way that he found it. For the health of the cities and the Austin, Texas and San Antonio, Texas, if those people in the city want healthy drinking water, we're going to have to do these kind of programs all across the state of Texas. We're going to have to maintain watersheds that will refill these aquifers, watersheds with grasses that won't put polluted chemicalized fertilizers and stuff into the rivers that you get your drinking water from and that won't pollute our water wells that San Antonio gets their water from. And it all has to do with being a good land steward. It all has to do with putting—letting mother nature have her way and let us get grass back on the ground. A lot cheaper than building dams and this sort of thing. And it's so amazing and it, you know, so—so simple. I call it common sense conservation. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to do what we've done here. What happened to us here was that friends, birding groups, some of the conservation organizations that I'm a friend of would come out for a

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DB: weekend and I'm have them out, let them camp, let them do things and a lot of times I'd kind of Tom Sawyer them into helping me do something, you know. And then we—people began to see what was happening and it was remarkable. I mean, it's good stuff. Then along comes the Endangered Species Act in 1973 and all hell breaks loose. The paranoia of the



private landowner because he just was sure that the federal government was going to be taking his land because he might have an endangered species on it. The environmentalists in the extreme or the biologists sometimes, on—on poor science and there's so much that was unknown in these endangered species. Well there's a whole lot of them we don't know very much about or we didn't then. And I began to see all of this confrontational stuff and this litigation. Spending more money in courtrooms than we were out on the land and people getting grants for study this and study that. I'm privy to know that I know of one institution that their students got grants 11 times to do the same, identical project. And I say, it's—research is wonderful but listen, you're not going—you can research something to death—what we need is action on the ground. I want to see young and old people that are in— doing environmental conservation —conservation work. I want to see them on the ground. You can't do it with an overhead projector or a slide projector or a computer. It's going to take some physical labor out on the ground. And that's—that's the only way we're going to get it done. I'll tell you something else, we're not going to get it done with federal legislation either. Why there's not enough money in the—in the treasury, there's not enough humans out there to even police in the whole United States, to police all the environmental regulation we have. It's only going to get done because we have created an awareness in the minds of American people. That conservation and environmental issues are very, very important.

DT: Can you talk about how you've tried to make people aware, the educational work that you've done?

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DB: I'm really, I am actually proud of what I'm going to tell you because I'm led to believe that I'm the only private landowner in the United States that gave testimony before the U.S. House Committee about re-authorizing the Endangered Species Act. I'm not the only one that gave testimony but I'm the only one that said, Ladies and Gentlemen, if you want to tell Americans that conservation and the environment's no longer important, if that's the message you want to tell Americans, then don't re-authorize this Act. But I'm telling you that America needs leadership and we're looking to you for leadership. We authorize this Act, just give your regulators a little bit of public relations training and—and let's recruit Americans in a voluntary way. Let's spend our dollars creating awareness about the importance of it and let's turn the bottom tiers and the landowners and the conservation organizations loose. We'll get the job done, just show us some leadership and tell us it's important. That—that comment drew a lot of boos because there were 800 people at the hearing where I gave testimony. Most of them were private landowners. But I kind of liked it. I like being different. And what came from all of that and the Endangered Species Act and all these things was that I ended up carving out a little niche for myself, I guess, and I said, what can I do at my age? What can I do to help

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DB: America? What can I do right here in my world in Blanco County, Texas that will help to create the awareness, that will help to change, to mitigate all of this damage that's coming back and forth from people. So, at that time, I—I dedicated my life and my land to environmental education and conservation and the creation of awareness. I ended up building a facility here on the ranch that will conference 100 people and sleep 48. And I named this facility, this building back here in the canyon, very simply, "The Center". And "The Center at Selah" which is what I call my land here was made available to any

organized group or effort that had environmental issues or conservation issues on their agenda or it was their area of interest and influence. And I named it The Center because I wanted to invite the left and the right of environmental issues, to bring them here in this environment where these amazing things had happened, to where they could see that you didn't have to be—a private landowner could see that it was worthy, it was valuable to protect endangered species. That—they were valuable to have and the good land stewardship, those species were going to come. All the while I was doing this, these bird species were going up and the different critters and creatures were coming and the weight of the deer and the turkeys and things that were going on around us, all these wonderful things happening with the water and so on. So I kept bringing these people in. No television, no telephone, no radio. I saw warring factions back and forth but I also saw a lot of peace and understanding begin to develop. In the later years, I had to put in some fees for the use of The Center because of my own age and because of trying to leave the ranch in perpetuity to teach these issues. I had to start building and endowment to do it. And that's where I'm at today with it. I've actually set up a 501(c)(3) conservancy that is

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DB: designed to keep our educational programs going in perpetuity and teach other landowners whether they're 5 acres or 5000, what good land stewardship is all about. Teach them about species of grass that'll work here and work there and trees that'll work here and work there. And we hold workshops. We host school groups. We just finished a workshop for teachers yesterday. We had a workshop for school teachers last week. We get a lot of cooperation from the extension service and what I call the Soil Conservation Service, that really isn't their name anymore. It's the Natural Resources Conservation Service. I have a little problem with that because I thought Soil Conservation Service was wonderful thing. They can't even find the Natural Resource Conservation Service in the phone book anymore. Nobody knows where to look for it. Seems kind of terrible to me as a retired businessperson that you spend 65 years building up a name and all—some day say, well, I think I'm going to change my name. That's what they did. Still a good branch of government though. So today, we're doing all we can to teach land stewardship, to teach what good land stewardship's all about, to initiate people that have—are new landowners coming out of the urban areas how to take care of the land they've purchased, what will work and what won't work. I'd also like to extend it into the cities which I do quite a bit by putting on programs and doing things. Because out here in the countryside where we control 100% of the watershed for the major cities, it's all controlled out here in the countryside. The ranch owner controls nearly 100% of the watershed and uses 4—4% of the water. But, in the cities, we've got to come up with a conservation ethic. Conservation ethic where they quit wasting water, where they start using the right kind of native grasses in their lawns as opposed to these

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DB: improved grasses that consume water, that take fertilizer, that require pesticides and herbicides and all this kind of stuff. All of this is on a collision course with the perpetuation of our society and so we have kind of a dual role. The urban person and the ranch person because we're all on this planet earth together. And, I think if we maintain good watersheds in the countryside, and the people in the cities maintain good conservation habits, we can extend without the hundreds of millions of dollars in water transfers and big dam projects and so on and so forth, we can accomplish an awful lot.

DT: Can you give some examples of restoration education projects you've done?

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DB: Well I'll tell you, in an effort to...

(misc.)

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DB: A number of things we've done here that we're a little bit different. One, in particular, I certainly don't recommend to everyone because it did require some capital but try to demonstrate whether man-made habitat could make up for or mitigate some of the damage that man has done to the landscapes. We constructed a cave which we call a Chiroptorium. Now Chiroptera, in science, is the order under which bats fall and, of course, an auditorium is a place where you can come and go of your own free will and watch the show. So my wife and my son named this facility I built a Chiroptorium and it's been accepted by the scientific community and most likely will be a dictionary word in the very near future. But it's a man-made cave that we built in a canyon that has three domes with connecting passageways that simulate the naturalness of a natural cave. It also has something unique. It has a man entrance, a tunnel that goes into an observation room where man can go in, scientists or study groups can go in and look through big plate glass windows into each dome so they could study bat behavior without actually donning a mask and going into the cave where their very presence would disturb the—the bats. This Chiroptorium has the capacity or the ability house a million to a million and a half bats. So if you could imagine building a birdhouse that would hold a million and a half birds, you know the size and the scope of this thing. Of course, bats congregate three to five hundred per square foot so they—they—they're much more dense in their habits. The other thing—well some other things we've done, we've built a number of—I call them bird feeders, modern day now they call them food plots. And planted within these food plots or bird feeders, the first one I planted things that would make good seed and good habitat for birds and they just work magically and all they are is just something like taking a football field and fencing it with a high fence so that the only thing that can come into the football field or into that area is a bird. Cow can't get in and a deer can't get in and we plowed up in those places and planted sunflowers and whole different

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DB: variety of berries and seeds that—plants that give a lot of seed and they work marvelously. You can walk into these areas in the dead of winter and flush birds out that you wouldn't find in other parts of the ranch. And the whole thing became like a sponge, brining species of birds in. So that was—was two different things that—that we did right there. And we demonstrated those things to the public. We've also gone into the school systems, my wife Margaret is very good about this and she goes into the school systems with—as an informal educator with no—no fees or no paycheck but as a volunteer and puts on programs in the schools in the major cities, Austin, San Antonio and here locally in our schools. And puts on programs in the natural sciences about different things out here in the natural world. And then we turn around and the teachers, a lot of times, will bring the students out here for a field day. And we, like I say, we have 35 to 45 students here right today. I think this particular group today is 4th and 5th and 6th grade. We have opened the ranch to so many organized groups that—and, in turn, have helped us a lot by helping to further identify plants. We've created a herbarium that we're building and a herbarium is nothing more than kind of a graveyard for plants but we catalogue the plants and press

them and put them in—not hermetically sealed but sealed to the extent that they’re put up and properly handled, they provide a botanical record of all the plants. And that’s expanding and expanding. Third thing I did, another thing I did, was to build a series of nature trails and on these trails I do interpretive work with signage. Little outdoor classrooms out there and these are designed to demonstrate to the public and to groups that come, the use of native plants in our urban landscapes and the value of them. For example, our yard right around the swing here, this has never, ever been fertilized. It

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DB: gets mowed four times a year and it never gets irrigated and it’s not all that bad. And there’s no reason why the city landscape can’t do the same thing in your developments and subdivisions. Yet, everybody wants to put in a carpet grass or zoysia grass or something that don’t belong here. Something exotic, something foreign that has to be irrigated, that has to be fertilized. And every once in a while, a chinch bug or something else gets on it and they start throwing out the chemicals to dust that off and all of that stuff washes off of our lawns and washes into our sewer system and washes into our creeks and rivers. Then the public pays millions, hundreds of millions of dollars to clean that water so we can consume it. These kind of things need to be changed. They’re habits that America has that are destructive to the future. I don’t want my legacy—I want my legacy to be somebody that cared about mother nature and actually stood up for her and tried to expose Americans and neighbors and everybody and give them some ideas and motivation to see a model, motivate them to do something. And everybody that comes to this ranch, I try to send them home convinced that they can do something about the environment, that they can do something for conservation. It doesn’t matter to me if they live in a third floor apartment, if they’re a 5th grade child or a 92 year old grandparent and I have all of them come here. Everybody can do something. I’ve got some wonderful experiences with people, young people who have been here, some of them are tragic. One time they—one of the children asked what could they do about the environment when they got home. And I said well, one thing I’d like for you all to do, everybody take a clipboard and go under the kitchen sink and in the carport and in the garage or in the basement or whatever and make a list of all the chemicals and pesticides

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DB: and herbicides and fertilizers and paints and everything else that’s stored in your home. And send me a list but also take it to your teacher. You know we found DDT in 19 and 70 something, 20 years after it was outlawed. Still hanging out in someone’s house. So that was just one case that I like. I give them illustrations of how they can convince their parents to quit using fertilizer in the backyard or even quit mowing it as far as that goes. And I’ve had some interesting things happen over that as well but we also tell older people well you—you may not be able to get out here and hit the bricks, so to speak, or man a picket line or tie yourself to a bulldozer blade and I don’t advocate any of those things, but if you have time on your hands, you could write letters. You could call the 1-800 numbers and you can tell your legislators what you think, what you witnessed, what you feel and there’s—there’s something for everybody to do. We have to get on the same sheet music in America, all of us, no matter what part in society that we—we have. We’ve got to.

DT: What sort of response have you gotten from the children or the people or your landowner neighbors?

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DB: Oh by—for the most part, very good. I got some very good neighbors. One of my neighbors where you come in is a awfully good land steward and he did all the work on his land with his own muscle, his own muscle power, his own back and cleared his land and established grasses and he said one time well, Bamberger's just doing what some of  
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DB: us have been doing all along. But what's—what's happened now is we have a lot of aged people in the Hill Country of Texas that bought their land up here for \$15, \$20, \$25 an acre and now they have no capital and now they're old and the land is overrun by the cedar. They don't have the capital to hire it done, they don't have any physical ability to do it themselves even though they'd like to. And that's where I think society's got to ante up. I just don't believe that you can expect the private landowner to do it all. And I believe that it's so important from watershed management standpoint that we need to re-institute something like our—our 3C programs of the '30's or our WPA programs or something like President Clinton started when he first got into office, the AmeriCorps. We need vastly to extend those programs because getting—getting our watersheds reestablished and grasses back on the ground are very important. You know, when we talk about the erosion I had here, the gullies and the erosion that was set up on the hillsides, I set up a can one time to see—a one gallon can—to see how long it took. You get a 5 inch rain and my cans filled up with dirt come off. Do you know it takes 500 years for mother nature to manufacture one inch of soil, 500 years and yet a 5 inch rain can take it away. But if you have grass on the ground, it's the best conservation thing going. You can spend millions of dollars building Hoover dam or the Aswan dam in Egypt. You can build diversion ditches and terraces on the landscape. You can work on the creek banks and try to concrete them or rock them in, (?) or not, that'll cost your millions if not billions of dollars. There's nothing as quick, nothing as simple, nothing as easy as restoring native grass. We got healthy grasslands in America, we're going to have plenty of water and then if we work together in a conservation ethic, there's enough to go around. Now I do have one other—one other problem...

(misc.)

00:51 – 2003

DB: The only thing on this ranch that's contrived is the historical marker when you first come in. I put that up at and it's kind of like a cemetery. I'd like for you to be sure to look at it. And this stone, I had it carved with some words that we—we don't want it to be out epitaph but the stone basically says, "In Memory of Man". Now re—remember this looks like a little cemetery. "In Memory of Man". 2 million B.C. to 2000 and ? A.D., he who once dominated the earth destroyed it with his waste, his poisons and his own numbers. And that's the path that we on this planet earth, that man is taking. We're now around 5 billion people on this planet. There's a sustainable factor here. This ranch is a—is a—is a planet of its own cause it's got a fence around it and it can sustain just so much life, whether that's humans or cows or goats or deer, or whatever. A lake is a planet. A lake, a body of water, an earthen tank, a stock tank, it can sustain a certain amount of aquatic life and no more. We are putting so much pressure on the planet earth with our waste, our poisons and our own numbers that—some of my friends get a little bit peeved with me because I happen to be an advocate of land use planning. I believe that we can no longer be carving up America, scarring up the countryside with bulldozers, bulldozing streets, putting up more houses, putting in more septic tanks, drilling more holes in the ground trying to get water and

leaving behind vast wastelands of strip centers and shopping malls that are almost abandoned. Take a look in the cities. We need to change our whole way we look at land. But I don't believe it and my friends say, well Bamberger, you sound like a socialist. You come into this country of a poor guy, you

03:28 – 2004

made some money and you done some things and now you sound like a socialist. You made it under capitalism, you're going to throw it away. I said nope, that's not it. I believe that if we had a land use, developed land used plans for all of America, the whole country, and those areas that we, as a society, decided would not be disturbed because nature has got to have some hidden places, we can't go pumping everybody into a federal park or a state park. We can't go shoving everybody in to see an endangered species here or there cause we start shoving too many people in, the species is going to leave. So those areas that we, as a society, decide should be preserved and set aside for mother nature and for us, our health, our mental health. If that turns out that it says to Rancher X, your land can never be developed for housing but over here, ten miles away, this ranch can be. We have economically taking—taken away from you some value because a promoter, developer sort would maybe give you 2 or \$3000 an acre but now that our land use decisions have been made and it can never be developed then your land is now maybe only worth \$800 an acre. Therefore, I claim that society owes you \$2200 an acre and that's where it's going to call for all Americans to belly up to the bar. The City of Austin were—had some foresight. They passed a bond issue here a year or two ago and they—they raised \$65 million in a bond issue to do nothing but to buy conservation easements around—watersheds around the City of Austin. Got one gentleman over there, right around the Circle C development on South Austin, that bond money paid him \$4 ½ million and he still owns his 400 acres. He still runs cows, the only thing is he can't ever build more than 4 houses on his 400 acres. So in perpetuity, that thing is taken care of. That's the kind of thing that I think society has to—the kind of programs and the kind of

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DB: plans that we have to do as a society. We got to belly up to the bar. I don't believe in taking away the growth that somebody's put on their calf, i.e., the growth and the value of their land. But I do believe that as a society, we've got to make some hard decisions. We got to quit having everybody with a big lawn and everybody with a little John Deere tractor to mow it and that we've got to have our housing, we've got to look at it more like they do in Europe and other places. Some marvelous adaptations to space and land. And we can do it. But we got to keep on teaching and educating and create this awareness. And that's part of the reason that we do the programs we do out here. Try to con—show America and show other citizens how they can make a difference on their own little tract of land or in their—the older person that wants to lobby or write letters or make phone calls. We can—we can all do it but we need leadership and we need that from Washington, we need that from the State and we need it from City Hall.

[End of reel 2004]

[End of interview with David Bamberger]