



Special Topic: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program

Interviewee: Barry Austin
In Chatfield, Texas

Interviewer: Libby Herland
In Pittsfield, Massachusetts

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Oral History Cover Sheet

Our interviewee is Barry Austin, a private landowner who cooperated with the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program in Texas. He worked principally with Mike McCollum, who was the State and Regional Private Lands Coordinator in Region 2 for over 20 years. Barry describes his ranch, which is located on the Trinity River southeast of Dallas, and the types of projects he did with the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service to restore and enhance wetlands and wildlife habitat. He also enrolled over 1,900 acres of land in permanent easements through the Wetland Reserve Program. Barry describes his excellent working relationship with the Partners staff in Texas and extols the value of the program to him, his family and to wildlife.

The Interview

LIBBY HERLAND: Hi. This is Libby Herland. I am the Region 5 retired representative on the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service Heritage Committee. We are doing a special topic series of interviews, oral history interviews, with people to learn about the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program, and how it was implemented in the United States. Today we have the pleasure of speaking with Barry Austin. Barry is a rancher who lives in Navarro County, Texas, which is southeast of Dallas. He has done a lot of work with Mike McCollum, who was the State Coordinator and the Region 2 Regional Partners for Fish and Wildlife Coordinator. Today we have a different approach. We are speaking to a landowner about the wetland restoration projects that were done on his property and his interactions with the Fish and Wildlife Service. Barry, thank you so much for being willing to speak with us and tell us a little bit about your experiences working with the Fish and Wildlife Service. So, Barry, can you tell me a little bit about you and a little bit about your property to start off with.

BARRY AUSTIN: Well, the ranch here is a family ranch. It's about 2,400 acres here. One of the boundaries is the Trinity River, so we are in a river bottom. Lots of water here at times. So, with the programs that we got involved with, with the Partners program, we built structures to capture a lot of this water and keep it here, so it doesn't go down the river and get wasted. We have these ponds and stuff for wetlands. We also trap crawfish in these ponds. Being on the river bottom, there's a lot of old gravel pits here also, where they mined sand and gravel. We manage those for trophy bass fishing. It was a cow-calf operation when we first started it back in 1971, but in the last 15 years we leased out the property. Let somebody else run the cattle. We put about 1,900 acres in a WRP [Wetland Reserve Program] program.

LIBBY: That's wonderful. Thank you so much for doing that. Yes. I interviewed Mike McCollum for this series that we are doing on the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program. He told me that your project, your farm, was the first property that he had worked on. You were the first landowner he worked on in his habitat restoration program on private lands. That was back in 1989. Can you tell me a little bit about that? Mike said he was referred to you from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) people that worked in your area.

BARRY: Yes. The NRCS was another great partner in this. They are the ones who told me about the program. I contacted Mike, and it just kind of progressed from there. So, I've been building wetlands for years, just doing it out of our pocket, and doing it with our dozer. With the Partners program, I was able to get some financial help and the knowledge of how to do it better with the engineers that they had at the NRCS and the Fish and Wildlife Service. It was very beneficial to us. My contribution was usually doing the dirt work with them overseeing it.

LIBBY: Right, because you had to have some kind of skin in the game, right? You had to contribute in some way?

BARRY: Right.

LIBBY: So, you had a relationship with NRCS because you are a rancher. I assume that was a good relationship. Had you ever worked with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service before?

BARRY: I had not, till that time. It's been a great relationship.

LIBBY: Did you have any questions about meeting with Mike and wondering what this was going to be like, working with another federal agency?

BARRY: Well, I was reluctant at first, until we got together and talked about it and actually got Mike out here to look, to see what we had. Then, he said, "Well, what would you like to do?" So, we would drive around here, and I'd say, "Well, this is a great place. We can push up some dirt here and impound water. I just need someone to engineer it and tell me where to start, where to stop, how high to make it." Then, with their help, we ordered different structures – valves basically - to put in these structures so we could drain them at the time of the year when the migration is over.

LIBBY: So, tell me – your interest is to try to provide habitat for migrating waterfowl. Is that correct?

BARRY: That's my biggest interest, yes.

LIBBY: Is it spring and fall or are they overwintering?

BARRY: Well, they'll start probably in September. We'll get the first teal coming in. Blue-winged teal, they're the first ones to migrate out and they're the last ones to leave. They'll be here till May. In the meantime, everything else comes down. All your shorebirds, all the birds. Having the water out here and the vegetation - it's kind of a rest stop for them.

LIBBY: Oh yeah, definitely. (laughter) That's exactly the analogy that I often used; that we are providing a place for them to stop and feed and rest while they are on their migration.

BARRY: Right.

LIBBY: Right. Mike told me that your property, that the ranch that you have, used to have a lot of sand and gravel operations on it before your family bought it.

BARRY: Correct.

LIBBY: Can you explain what the ranch looked like a little bit? In the northeast, and maybe in some other parts of the country, too, we had traditional wetlands that were ditched. They were easy to restore because all you had to do was go in and put a little – we called them a ditch plug. You put a little plug in the ditch. You could put in a structure if you wanted to control the water in there, or you didn't have to have the structure. Sometimes you just had a spillway. And so, then it would hold water for however long it held water. But you are talking about habitat, that is, a landscape that is a little bit different, because it has been dug up because of the sand and gravel pits. Is that basically what you were working in, those areas?

BARRY: Well, the areas that we have for the old sand and gravel pits, they're not conducive really for waterfowl. They are deep water, straight banks, and that's not what the birds like. They like this long, sloping shallow water. So that's what we are building with the Partners program.

LIBBY: Oh, okay.

BARRY: We will take and put up maybe a three-foot dam – that's all the height it needs to be – and we will back water out maybe two, three hundred yards, maybe a quarter of a mile. So, it's shallow and it's what the birds like.

LIBBY: Are you starting in a field, you're working in a field, is that ...

BARRY: Well, they are pastures, yes.

LIBBY: Pastures.

BARRY: We run cattle on it. It's not completely flat. It's not rolling hills, but it has depressions. So, we will go at the end of the depression where the water runs down, and that's where we will put our structure there to hold the water. That's also where we will put our drain in there, so to speak. After the migration, we will drain the water out, so we don't kill all our beneficial trees and plants out there. We want everything to grow so when we flood it next year, or it rains, or the river comes out, then we have the water we want. We are also able with some of these gravel pits to put pumps in there, which is another part of the Partners program. They furnished a diesel pump and two miles of PVC pipe and installed it, where we could pump water actually out of the river into some of the wetlands.

LIBBY: Wow. That's awesome. I have never heard that, and this is the value of doing these interviews and talking to people from all over the country. We know that the Partners program – the habitat restoration program – was implemented differently in different parts of the country, because the conditions were different.

BARRY: You know, it was a great benefit for us – able to move water around, out of the river. We're still using that pump today. It's still a great one, and it allows us to flood these wetlands when it doesn't rain or when the river doesn't come out where we can impound the water.

LIBBY: You are obviously a long-time landowner there. You talked about 1971. That's 50 years ago. (laughter) You are actively managing all these - how many acres of wetland are you actively managing now?

BARRY: With the WRP, I think there is somewhere close to 800 acres of wetlands, but I was building ponds back when I started in the 70's. There were two-, three-acre ponds, maybe five acres, and they were all right adjacent to the Trinity River. We could put in a pump there and pump water out of the river into these places. One of the benefits of that is I lease out to duck hunting, so we have these different little ponds here and it generates revenue for the ranch.

LIBBY: Now, is that a permanent easement on those Wetland Reserve Program [wetlands], or is that time limited?

BARRY: The WRP, on the one we signed up for, is permanent; perpetual.

LIBBY: Wonderful. I feel like I'm ending this conversation; I don't mean to do that quite yet. Who is going to manage [these]? So, the next person – is this property going to stay in your family? Do you have family members who are interested in doing the same thing that you are doing here? Do they share your passion?

BARRY: Yes. I've got three children and two of them live in Dallas. They have families up there, and they come down every weekend. They have houses here on the ranch. So, we are going to pass this property down to them. It's their intention to keep this for their grandchildren. It's a big family compound. On weekends, when the weather is nice, we're here. We're fishing. We're riding around. We're looking at deer, picking up deer sheds. It's just a place that my kids and my grandkids have all been raised here. They know it like the back of their hands.

LIBBY: So, tell us about the projects that you did specifically with Mike. How many projects have you done and over what time period was it? It was more than just one, because he told me, and you told me you're still doing them. So, you've done some projects on your own before you started working with the Fish and Wildlife Service, then you did some with the Fish and Wildlife Service, and now my understanding is you're still doing some more on your own.

BARRY: Okay, you are cutting out real bad now. We're going to have to repeat all that.

LIBBY: All right. Just tell me a little bit about the projects that you did with the Fish and Wildlife Service. How many projects and for over – was it over a number of years? Just tell me a little bit more about that.

BARRY: I don't remember exactly how many years. If I was to guess, it was probably 6 to 8 years that we'd been working on this. The projects usually entailed us maintaining these projects for 10 years. Then, at that point, everything reverts back to us. Most all the projects involved the building of the wetlands with minimal dirt work. So, it didn't take a whole lot of work with the heavy equipment to generate what we were wanting – the wetlands. We'd get one project done and I'd be driving down, and I'd look at something, and I'd go, "You know, this would be another place here to do something." So, I would call up Mike and I'd say, "Hey, next time you're down this way, I want to show you another place. I want your opinion on whether you think it's a Partners program [project] or not." I was very happy with the Partners program. I've got so many of my neighbors that have come over. They'd look and they'd go, "Well, how do we do this?" I would give them Mike's phone number and pass that information on. So, there are wetlands all over this area because of Mike and the Partners program.

LIBBY: You just anticipated my question. I was going to ask you if you ended up becoming an ambassador for us because your neighbors saw what you were doing.

BARRY: Right. Everybody here – we're all on the Trinity River here – [we are] close. When they saw what we were doing, naturally they wanted to do it. They were really interested in the fact that we're doing the duck hunting here. To lease out the duck hunting, you've got to have water. Well, so that's where the Partners program came in. These people got involved in it for monetary reasons. Build these things, able to lease it out, and then they go "Man, this really enhanced [the land]; this thing looks pretty when it's wet." There's a lot of benefits out of that.

LIBBY: Did you have some projects that were not suitable for the Partners program for some reason, and can you tell me why? Would Mike come down and say, "Well, that's not a project that I can do"?

BARRY: No, actually everything that I suggested, Mike would look at and we'd talk about it and say, "Well, maybe if we included this little piece over here" or "Take out part of it." We just threw our heads

together and then we would get to the point where we would get the NRCS to get their engineers out here and say, “All right. Give us your opinion on what this is – the good points and the bad points.” We wanted everybody’s ideas before we just jumped into something.

LIBBY: Yeah. Now, did you have a lot of paperwork that you had to deal with, or did it seem pretty easy to work with the federal government?

BARRY: Oh, it was very easy. There was just, basically, here’s your agreement. One sheet or two sheets. Read that and sign it. Very simple.

LIBBY: That’s really great, isn’t it? (laughter)

BARRY: Oh, it’s a win-win situation for us out here. The Partners program is just – it wasn’t forever, it didn’t handicap you from doing what you were doing already – running cattle or what have you. It’s a good program.

LIBBY: Mike tells me that you are a darn good waterfowl biologist in your own right.

BARRY: Well, I was raised duck hunting since I was a small child, so I’ve been around it forever. My dad taught me all the different species. We put up – at one time I had 167 wood duck boxes out here on the ranch for raising wood ducks. I was lucky enough to get a bunch of those from the federal government and the State. They would furnish these duck boxes and we would put them up and maintain them and keep up with those over the years. We generated lots of wood ducks here that didn’t have homes before.

LIBBY: I was the regional coordinator for this program in the northeast United States. Of course, our land is quite different than yours down in Texas. Then I left that program to become a national wildlife refuge manager, and I’ve managed 10 national wildlife refuges in my career. But I remember, I always said that even though our national wildlife refuges are critical to waterfowl, that working with private landowners was really important because you have so much more land than we have in the national wildlife refuge system, at least if you don’t include Alaska and you don’t include all the ocean refuges now. So, I really want to thank you for the work that you are doing on your property because you are a little, you’re a mini, a little wildlife refuge on your own.

BARRY: Well, we appreciate that. But, you know, my grandkids come out here and they’ll say, “Look over here! There’s a wood duck hen with their little babies. They just came out of the box.” So, all the grandkids here can pretty much identify all the waterfowl out here. They see the benefits of the wood duck boxes. They’re just very aware of what’s happening now out here and what we are trying to do.

LIBBY: You still stay in touch with Mike now that he is retired? Are you working with his successor or are you finished working with the Fish and Wildlife Service?

BARRY: No, actually we’ve got all the projects done that I wanted to do. Got them all accomplished. I still am good friends with Mike. We trade text messages probably every other day, if not daily. We get together. He comes down here. We fly fish a lot together. He’s learned how to do that. So, I take him out here; we fly fish. Then I have a rifle range down here, and we are both enthusiasts with shooting. He comes down and we’ll go down and spend two, three hours target shooting. We have a great time together.

LIBBY: So, not only did you restore habitat for waterfowl and shorebirds and of course I am sure there are other animals that benefitted from that as well, but you actually made some friends out of it too.

BARRY: Yes. If I have a question about what kind of trees to plant or that sort of thing, I'll call up Mike and I'll say, "Hey, I'm thinking about planting pine trees or cypress or oaks. Which oaks do you recommend?" Then, I'll go ahead and plant pine trees and then he will give me an ass-chewing saying, "Why did you do that? They're not beneficial for the wildlife." (laughter)

LIBBY: Right.

BARRY: Yeah, but they're beneficial to me, because I enjoy seeing the big, tall green trees.

LIBBY: It's nice to have some green down there. (laughter)

BARRY: So, we do argue here a little back and forth. I try to plant 3, 4, 500 trees a year. They are always pine trees, bald cypress, and all the different oak varieties. We do that every year.

LIBBY: Just make sure you're planting native trees. Natives, not non-natives.

BARRY: We get recommendations from the Texas Forest Service about what grows in our area, and we want them next to a water source. If we can plant them on a shoreline, that means they don't have to be watered during the hot summer. We have a 90% success rate with anything we plant by the water. Obviously, pine and the cypress. But the different oaks we're planting now, they're doing real good.

LIBBY: Great. I'm glad.

BARRY: They drop acorns in the water and the ducks are out there with the little acorns. They're utilizing that feed also.

LIBBY: Right. Native plants provide food and shelter for native wildlife.

BARRY: Right.

LIBBY: Sounds great. Sounds like you have a beautiful place down there.

BARRY: Well, we want you to come visit if you're down this way.

LIBBY: I know. I've got the travel bug. I really want to go somewhere. (laughter)

BARRY: Well, I'm sitting here looking at how pretty and green [it is]. I'm overlooking the lake right now on a hill. It's 65 degrees. You know, two weeks ago, we had snow. It was a big change. This is what I like.

LIBBY: Barry, is there anything else you would like to share? Any other thoughts about the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program or any of the experiences that you had with Mike or working with other people?

BARRY: No. All I can say is everyone in his office that we would get to come out here was always very professional, very knowledgeable. They answered all my questions. I recommended it to other neighbors. I think it is just tax money well spent to enhance the different pastures here that didn't have water and now they do.

LIBBY: Right. Great! Okay. Barry, I'm going to turn off the recorder, but you can hang on the line. I want to thank you so much for taking this time to speak with us about your experiences with the Fish and Wildlife Service.

BARRY: I've got nothing but good memories with all those people.

LIBBY: That's great.

Key words: habitat restoration, partnerships, ranching, water management, wetlands, wetland restoration