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Interview no. 40

R. E. LeGross

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: R. E. LeGross
INTERVIEWER: Wilma Cleveland
PROJECT: El Paso History
DATE OF INTERVIEW: August 2, 1968
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
TAPE NO.: _____
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 40
TRANSCRIBER: _____
DATE TRANSCRIBED: _____

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Former District Chief of the El Paso Fire Department.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Calisher's Store fire of 1910; El Paso area wildlife; farming in the El Paso area.

Mr. R.E. LeGross
By Wilma Cleveland
August 2, 1968

L: This is R.E. LeGross speaking, called Captain by his friends. I retired from the El Paso Fire Department as District Chief in 1946. In 1912, I was stationed at Station #5 on Texas Street. It's a two-story building on the left, right where Alameda takes off of Texas Street. There, I was engineer of the steam pumper. We had a hose wagon and a steam pumper with 750 gallons per minute capacity. Back of the station, we had a corral where we had the department horses. We kept extra horses there in case we had an injury or for some reason or another we needed help. West of the station, there was unimproved land, nothing but mesquite bushes. So, we got in touch with the owner and asked him if we could use some of it for a garden. He said we could. We pulled up the mesquite, leveled the land and ditched it and cleaned our stalls several times a day and the corral once a day and so we piled all that we cleaned out of there in a corner and wet it down and we developed a compost. We heated it and kept it covered with dirt to retain the heat.

Then in 1912, one of the boys went to Mineola, east of Dallas to be with his mother and father; while he was there, he worked Saturdays at a cotton gin. In 1913, he came back, he hung up his overalls and prepared the land for planting. We had okra, tomatoes, cucumbers, watermelons, cantaloupes, squash, beets, radishes, onions, carrots and various other vegetables. While we were planting, he reached in his pocket and said he had some cotton seed. I suggested that we plant some of it. We planted five hills, a foot and a half apart. When the plants came up, we pulled out the bad and selected the most desirable...and what cotton! Along in the fall when the bolls

came out and it stopped growing, I called a friend, Mr. John Wyatt, who was at the First National Bank and told him about our cotton. That year, he was either president of the Chamber of Commerce or had been the former year. He got in touch with Mr. Joe Williams who was at the City National Bank, vice president, and Jim Primm, who was a banker at the American National Bank and Mr. Bert Orndorff, who was manager and owner of the Orndorff Hotel, also Mr. Charles Davis, who was in real estate and investments and Mr. Ed Hines, fuel, feed, and wholesale baker's flour, shucks for tamales and alfalfa by the tons. Those gentlemen came out and they counted the bolls on the plants and one plant had 96 bolls on it. So, they asked me if they might take one plant to the Chamber of Commerce and another to the lobby of the bank. I told them they could. In 1917, cotton began to appear in the valley as a crop. I think the first gin was at Bufford. Very few people know where Bufford is; it's a little station between Ysleta and Clint.

C: Mr. LeGross, will you tell us something about the wildlife in El Paso?

L: At one time, there were so many waterfowl in the valley that when they rose up off the water, it sounded like a passenger train in the distance. The bag limit was 25 birds. I had a great big red water Spaniel named Mike. I had two or three blinds built and my dog was command trained. I had a duck call and I could imitate almost any species of duck. I killed all the ducks that my neighborhood could eat. Mike never moved until I told him to fetch. He would wade into the water and look around and if there were any crippled ducks, he'd pick them up by their right wing and bring it to me and I would pull its head off. I had a police whistle and with one short blast Mike would turn towards me and I would indicate with my hand what direction I wanted him to go. This wasn't at any particular lake. This was down at

Collingwood and the whole place was filled with marshey land, bayous or lagunas.

There is no way to describe the fish. A friend and I dug out a flat bottomed boat of redwood and we had traps with a loaf of bread in it and we caught all the minnows we wanted for bait. We never used anything but cane poles. We didn't use string; we used bailing wire. We caught catfish up to fifteen pounds and big crappie. We would string them on bailing wire and have thirty pounds of fish. It has all been blasted out now and has homes there. The reason there is no more waterfowl and fish is not because of the sportsmen, but because of the greed of the land developers. We also had quail. We called them tree quail because they'd fly close to the ground and then up a tree. So, they were just sitting ducks for anybody. Even the kids with .22s could go down and get a bag full.

After cotton came in, the farmers cut down all the foliage and then there was no habitat for the animals. And they drained off the marshes and since the ducks were migratory, they went on in to México, where there was plenty of water and food.

C: Would you tell us about what El Paso looked like when you came?

L: When I came to El Paso, I had just finished a tour of duty with the Navy. I was about 22. I was on that battleship that made the goodwill tour around the world. We were met with open arms and love in every port except the Mohammedan ports like Port Said and the ports along the North African coast. I came to El Paso with the expectation of going back into the Navy, but I met a girl and fell in love with her and we got married. She was my wife for almost fifty years. At that time, I went into the fire department. It

consisted of 33 paid men. I worked for \$75 a month and 21 hours a day. I had one hour off three times a day, six days a week. The police had 12 hours a day to work, from 6:00 to 6:00. We had beds in the fire department and we slept there. We had bedbugs there. We exercised the horses every day; if we didn't their legs would swell up from standing in the stalls. We got up at 6:00 a.m., had breakfast from 7:00 to 8:00. All the meals were eaten in shifts over a three hour period. Then, at night, we were all there.

C: Were there any big fires while you were with the department?

L: Yes, I want to describe a fire where two people lost their lives. On Texas and Mesa, where Grant's is now, there was Calisher's Department Store. It occurred on August 10, 1910. It was a three-story building. It had an ornamental cornice around the top. We lost it completely. Robert Duke, Arthur Hull and I went on the roof and cut the tin away and cut the woodwork out. When we got through, Hull got on the ladder and I handed him the saw and then Duke got on the ladder and I handed him a saw. One of the fire commissioners told me to go on down about twenty feet and help cut some more at the other side. I said, "I'll come down and then come back up after they move the ladder." Well, when they pulled the ladder away from the building, the wall crumbled in. It killed Mr. W.F. Robinson, one of the commissioners. It was on the Texas side of the street. Hot bricks fell on him and crushed every bone in his body. A lady with three little girls was standing there and she asked if anyone was hurt and I told her that I knew that the commissioner was under there. She fainted right there on the street. She was Mrs. Robinson. She later built the Robinson Apartments on Ochoa and San Antonio Street.