

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Frank P. Vacek**

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Interviewer: Tommy Stavinoha

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

Location: Fairchilds, Texas

13 Pages



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Transcript

BACKGROUND: Frank's daughter-in-law, Tillie Vacek, helped interpret this Oral History and shares some information from a ledger Frank kept during the early years. It contains some of his farming and living expenses and some "advice." Some family history is also included.

Birth of first son, Milton, cost \$127 and, sadly, included \$12.50 for his casket as he lived only a day. Daughter Mary Ann's birthing expense was \$35; Georgie's \$60; Evelyn's \$50, and son J. C.'s in 1946 was \$48 (doctor \$25, hospital room \$12, operating room \$7.50, medication \$2.50, nursery \$1).

Frank moved to Fort Bend County December 6, 1938; to Ed Bockhorn's place on October 9, 1942; to John Janda's place on November 28, 1944, and to his own farm in November 1952. The cost of building his house in 1955 was \$5,632.74.

In 1939, cotton picking paid 50 cents per hundred pounds and corn pulling brought in \$1 a day. In 1940, Frank made 13 bales. He had a house-painting job which paid 20 cents an hour and he made \$6.25. Frank sold one cow for \$38, two hogs at 5 ½ cents a pound for \$25, and two heifers for \$47.

Frank paid brother-in-law Jerome Rainosek for farm labor, and in the evenings after he finished working, Jerome played his accordion. A neighboring farmer's daughter, Evelyn Bartosh, heard him playing. Later when she met him at a dance in Guy, he mentioned where he was working and she mentioned she had been listening to someone playing pretty music. He admitted to being the musician. Later, they became sweethearts and married when he returned from the war. Jerome reported to his brother, Herman, that Evelyn had a good-looking sister. Herman agreed and married Dorothy when he returned from war. Jerome served in the army and Herman in the navy during WWII.

Frank and Edna brought all their possessions to Ft. Bend County when they married, a table and two chairs, and Edna's dog, who jumped out of the moving car on the way but was rescued by her brother, Jerome.



Frank Vacek and Edith (Edna) Rainosek on their Wedding Day, Oct 25, 1938.

STAVINOHA: Mr. Vacek, when and where were you born?

VACEK: January 10, 1913, in Ammannsville, Fayette County, Texas.

STAVINOHA: So you're about 98 years old.

VACEK: Yes.

STAVINOHA: What did your family do for a living in Ammannsville?

VACEK: Poor, poor farmers! My parents came from Cermna, Lanskroun, Czechoslovakia, on a ship. They were on the steamship, the *SS Breslau*, which had departed from Bremen, Austria, on December 7, 1905, and arrived in Galveston December 29, 1905. They came with my four-year old sister Mary (nephew Sydney Anders' mother) and my 11-month old sister Annie.



Frank's parents immigrated aboard the SS Breslau in December 1905.

STAVINOHA: When did you move to Fairchilds?

VACEK: December 6, 1938, on Svaty Mikulas (Saint Nicholas) Day.

STAVINOHA: You were married already?

VACEK: Yes. My wife, Edna (Edith Rainosek) and I had to wait until someone moved out so we would have an empty house. We were married in October, 1938, in Hostyn.

STAVINOHA: Why did you move to this area from Ammannsville?

VACEK: (laughs) When my folks found out I was going to get married and we were going to move to Fort Bend County, they said, "WHAT, Fort Bend County? HUH!" They didn't call it Fort Bend County; they called it Frog Country! They also said, because of the heavy rain, there were lots of craw-fish. My mother told us she heard people swept craw-fish from the porch!



Edith (Edna) Rainosek on her Wedding Day in Hostyn, TX, Oct 25, 1938.

STAVINOHA: What about mosquitoes? Lot of mosquitoes here?

VACEK: Oh yeah! Oh yeah! We couldn't rely on screens; they were sorry screens. But where I was born, the house was built from one-by-twelve's butted together, not ship lapped. So when you walked up to the house, you could look through the crack and see what's going on inside.

STAVINHOHA: Did any of your brothers, sisters, or other family members move down here with you?



Wedding "Pluckers": Relatives butcher chickens for soup to serve at Frank & Edna's Wedding Oct. 24, 1938

VACEK: Two of my sisters and their husbands moved here, and then later my widowed father came.

STAVINOHA: What was your dad's name?

VACEK: Josef. Mother was Rosalie Vurstova.

STAVINOHA: Where are they buried?

VACEK: Ammannsville. My parents are buried there and my brother, Joe, and his wife, Martha (Muras), too. There are lots of Vaceks and Josephs in the Ammannsville Cemetery.



Josef Vacek Family: Joe, Josef (Father), Frances, Rosalie (Mother), Frank, (behind) Eliz, Annie, and Mary, ca. mid-1920's.

STAVINOHA: I've been there, so I know what you're talking about.

VACEK: They all were up in age when they died. My parents died in their early 80s. Only my sister Annie Cerny died in her late 50s from cancer. That was 1961. At that time, they didn't know much about cancer. Before, people died from stroke, paralyzed and like that; now its 20-25% cancer and heart disease. Annie was married to Frank Cerny, and my sister Eliz was married to his twin brother Louis Cerny.

My sister Frances married Emil Muzny. He had bought six or seven houses in Houston. They had to be moved because of that "Spaghetti Bowl Street."

EDITOR'S NOTE: The I-610 and SW Freeway 4-level interchange, completed in 1962, displaced 200 homes in the Bellaire area.

Emil had some land around Needville, and I helped him move those houses to his land. He remodeled, sold, and financed those houses for people wanting a home. He was a good businessman.

How about you, your family?

STAVINOHA: I've got five sisters, and all five of my sisters are alive.

VACEK: I'm the only one left.

STAVINOHA: Tell me about when you moved here in 1938. Did you farm right away when you came here or did you do something else?

VACEK: Yes, I started farming with Mr. Frank Shefcik. Brother-in-law, Emil Muzny, was living on Oswald Ulrich's place. It was later sold to the Borowicz, Polish people who loved to dance. By the time the second set was playing, they were out there dancing.

STAVINOHA: Was Fairchilds Hall built at that time? I think the dance hall was built in 1923. Was it built when you moved here in '38?



Frank's Brother-in-law, Emil Muzny and sister Frances, "Goin' Western" circa 1960s.

VACEK: Yeah it was here already. I remember hearing when they started. That was in 1912, when they started and added on more and more over the years. In 1945, the Grunwald people wanted to paint the hall. They had a 55-gallon drum of paint for that hall, and they couldn't get anybody to paint it. Big Joe Vacek, you know how he was, tried to get us to do it. We were, I guess, four or five guys: Emil Anders, Raymond Horek and the Grunwald people. Emil Muzny and me, we were cleaning it with a stiff brush and then we painted it. I painted the flagpole. Since I was the youngest one they said, "Let HIM go up there!"

They had a stepladder tied to the flagpole with a rope, so I took the climb up. That pole wasn't wobbling, and that box [cupola] or whatever you call it, was strong. I climbed onto that "pigeon coop" box. Well, I couldn't get high enough. So, we made an extension out of a chopping hoe handle. We tied a brush to the hoe handle, and a guy on the ground dipped the brush in the paint, then handed it to the next man who passed it to me tied on that stepladder. That's the way we painted that pole.

STAVINOHA: That was on top of the hall, the flagpole was on the very top.

VACEK: Yeah! It was a light that was switched on at night to let people know there would be a dance that night].

STAVINOHA: I remember that light being there.

Who were some of the bands that played at Fairchilds Hall? Did they come from everywhere?

VACEK: I remember they were mostly from up in the country. Syl Krenek and two Baca bands, the old timers and another Baca band were playing, and Joe Patek from Shiner.

Tommy, that would take half a day to remember those days. There was one Czech guy, a showman. When they were playing, and it was 10:30 or 11:00 pm he'd pull out of his suitcase some ladies' panties and hang them on a trumpet. Everybody went "Wooooo hoooo" (laughing). Well, something funny but maybe kinda dirty.

I've lost track of which year I started working for Hauerland. I don't know if you knew I used to work for him.

STAVINOHA: Charles Hauerland that used to run the Hall?

VACEK: Emmett and Mary Hauerland. I used to help them in the beer joint.

STAVINOHA: Yeah, his boy was Charles.

VACEK: You're right. Anyway, I was helping, but we could hardly keep up. Louis Zapalac was also helping. Mrs. Nett was making hot dogs, and Mrs. Mary Hauerland was selling tickets.

STAVINOHA: So, you and Mr. Zapalac worked the bar, and Mrs. Levi Nett made the hot dogs. Tell me about how you farmed when you first moved here. Did you have to farm with mules, or did you have your John Deere tractor?

VACEK: When I came, I was farming with Mr. Shefcik on halves. He provided the tractor and fuel, and he helped me out. He said, "Well, you can move here, and if you don't like it, pack up your furniture and go back." I didn't have any implements and nothing else, just a house. I was farming four years with Frank Shefcik, and he said, "I know you've got some money saved. You don't want to work on halves. You want to go on some kind of share." So then, that was 1942, I went to Needville on the Bockhorn place. That was when Edwin Gutenberger was in that house. I moved in after him. He had married Bockhorn's daughter.

STAVINOHA: When did you move to this place?

VACEK: We moved here in November, 1952. You see, it was a small house on this place when we moved here. We tore it down to use the lumber for this house that we built in 1955. Brother-in-law, Leon Rainosek, from Dubina was head carpenter and others were helping, too.

STAVINOHA: What kind of tractors did you farm with early on?

VACEK: F-12. Steel wheels.

STAVINOHA: Pretty rough to ride?

VACEK: Yeah.

STAVINOHA: But never got stuck with steel wheels.

VACEK: No, but then there was a storm that hit us. So, we lost money. Then more people from Fayette County came after the storm.



The "Reality": Sis-in-law Frances Muzny (the Cranker) and Edna Vacek (in the driver's seat) on the F-12 Steel Wheel Tractor. March 1939.

That blue grain corn, I never saw farming like Shefcik was doing. He was living right there where Simon's Corner store is now, but before there was a hammer mill there and a feed store. Shefcik's was the house next to it, and he was farming way across the river by Mrs. Kostelnik, where he owned land.

STAVINOHA: The Bernard River, toward Boling?

VACEK: Yeah. On the corner where that pond is.

STAVINOHA: Blue Hole.

VACEK: That road is in the woods.

STAVINOHA: I think the Kostelnik's still own that farm.

VACEK: Barcak owned that place where Frank Shefcik was farming corn. Frank had a pair of mules; great big mules and one riding horse. Frank said, "Tomorrow morning, I'm going back of the Bernard River, and I'm going to start preparing the land for planting corn." So, he went in the woods with two mules and harnesses and everything. He got there, took an axe, and chopped down a six or eight-inch diameter pole. He'd put a chain on that pole, and he'd drag those rows with that pole. He'd drag it good. Then he had a walking planter. One horse would pull it. He planted corn in the middle [in the furrow]. He'd drag it and where it was the furrow, he'd plant corn there. I couldn't tell him that I thought it wasn't the right way to farm. Anyhow, when he had it planted, then he'd take two mules and a small bedder plow and plow that corn under. When he had it all plowed, he'd take the same pole and drag the rows to make it even.

STAVINOHA: Flatten it out?

VACEK: Yeah. Then, when it came to corn tops, he'd saddle his horse, take two knives, and ride that horse through the corn and cut those tops off.

STAVINOHA: Cut the tops off the corn? I've done that a few times!

VACEK: Blue grain. I don't think you'll remember.

STAVINOHA: Is that what they call Indian corn? Different colors to it, had a lot of blue instead of yellow.

VACEK: Well, it was white, some grains blue, some of them red. Blue-grained.

STAVINOHA: I think some people called it Indian corn.

VACEK: People could not believe how big an ear was!

STAVINOHA: Did he have to fertilize?

VACEK: NOTHING! He never even chopped it.

STAVINOHA: It was good river soil.

VACEK: I was maybe 22 or 23 and farming in Fayette County. We didn't farm like Shefcik. We used a two-furrow turning plow to plow out the stalks, and then came back from the other direction to make a row. Then later on in the spring, we'd take another two horses and plow the furrow out. This would throw the soil on the side of the row and cover some grass. Then the furrow was clean, and on the top of the row was some grass that got knocked off when we planted. But, when we were farming there on the San Bernard river, there was thistle higher than a tractor axle, and those thistles would fall over and make a mess.

STAVINOHA: It would break over, it was so tall. Did you farm any cotton or soy beans or anything like that?

VACEK: Yeah. In '45, we had two storms in one year. In the first storm in '45, I was out on the Janda place where Robert Myska lived. I had some cotton picked already, and here comes the storm. After the storm, the cotton was like string, hanging, and there were quite a bit of green bolls. So then it stayed dry; those green bolls opened and some were "cowlicks," but still we made something. But not much.



Mechanization: Son J. C. on the cotton picker with Frank standing by to give advice, ca. late 1950s.

STAVINOHA: Where was the cotton gin? Needville or Fairchilds?

VACEK: Fairchilds. That was called the Farmer's Gin. The Planters Gin was there, too. It was in the late '50s when we got a cotton picker.

STAVINOHA: One-row?

VACEK: One-row picker to pick cotton. Then some folks said that I should gin here at the Farmers Gin. They said that the Planters Gin was built in 1925.

STAVINOHA: That's the second gin.

VACEK: Yeah.

STAVINOHA: Farmers was the first gin.

VACEK: So, they were saying that at the Planters Gin (where Joe Vacek, Frank Barta and whoever else was running it), they made lots of home brew. When you brought your bale of cotton, you got a bottle of beer. So, they would get customers.



Waiting to be Ginned: Trailers Lined Up at Fairchilds Farmers Gin ca. November 1951

STAVINOHA: Was that during Prohibition when you couldn't buy it and you had to make your own beer?

VACEK: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Good days and bad days.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Prohibition of Alcohol during the Great Depression. The 18th Amendment to the U. S. Constitution – known as the Prohibition Amendment – was adopted in the 1920s and made the making, selling, possessing, and consuming of alcoholic drinks illegal. Franklin D. Roosevelt ran for president in 1932 on a platform calling for Prohibition's repeal, and easily won victory. Prohibition was repealed in 1933. --Wikipedia

STAVINOHA: So, the farmers got home brew if you brought your cotton to the gin. That was a good way to get customers! It seemed like there were a LOT of families who moved from Ammansville to this area. My daddy moved from Ammansville and you did. Was Ammansville that hard to farm with all the rocks and being dry?

VACEK: I heard some people came from Houston or somewhere to Ammansville to visit. One guy told the other guy, "You know what? It's getting cloudy. I don't think we'll stay here too long. See those spots? That cotton is red. The lightning struck and killed the cotton. So we're not going to be here too long. Let's get out before something happens."

STAVINOHA: What was the first car you owned?

VACEK: Model A coupe. It didn't have a rumble seat on the back. Grandma was here, great grandma. That was that first or second year we were living here. Then, depending on the weather, we were going to Ammansville. Brother-in-law Jerome Rainosek fixed the back. He opened it and fixed it some kind of way, put braces there. So we went to Ammansville. There was Grandma Cervenka, the wife and me. There were three of us in the front, and Jerome was in the trunk, in the back.

STAVINOHA: Today, you can drive to Ammansville in probably an hour and a half. How long did it take you to drive to Ammansville then?

VACEK: At that time, I was driving 35-40 miles per hour. Not too fast. It took a little longer, but it didn't take as long as it took me five years ago. Don't you remember that one? [Referring to Hurricane Rita traffic congestion in 2005.]

We had everything fixed up, and we left. They said, "Well you remember how bad it [Hurricane Katrina] was and how the town and everything was destroyed... and this and that." So, Mary Ann (Roznovak, daughter) came for me and Georgie (daughter). We were driving after sundown from East Bernard, and we got to Weimer at 1:00 a. m. after midnight.

It was sixteen miles. It took four hours! Usually we drove from East Bernard to Eagle Lake in one hour. That time it took FOUR hours! I'm never going to forget! Everything choked up, bumper to bumper.

In 1961, with Hurricane Carla coming, we were picking 48 hours straight, day and night. That was Mary Ann, J. C. (son) and me picking, and brother-in-law Herman Rainosek came to help us. We didn't wait for the dew to dry, and we got all that cotton in before that storm hit.

STAVINOHA: What was the first tractor you had for yourself?

VACEK: John Deere, the A. Now Tommy, you've got a John Deere?

STAVINOHA: Yeah, two of my tractors are John Deere and one's a Kubota.

VACEK: Do you make it go "chick-a-dee, chick-a-dee, chick-a-dee"? (Said in a rather high voice and musically.)

STAVINOHA: No (laughs). Those old John Deere's had just two pistons in them.

VACEK: I know you are big friends with C. D. Fojtik.

STAVINOHA: Yeah, he's a good mechanic. That tractor you have outside, is that a John Deere A or is it a B?

VACEK: That's a 50. I had to buy another one for parts to fix it.

STAVINOHA: How much did a tractor cost back then? Couple of hundred dollars?

VACEK: First I had an A, a big tractor for planting, cultivating, and harrowing. Then I was looking for a B, a smaller, lighter tractor. So finally I got it. The owner's neighbor said it was about third or fourth-handed, and he said he felt sorry for me. Man, the owner was farming lots of land with that tractor. I guess I paid him \$500-\$600. Then, I had it for a year. I had a one-row corn puller. In that one year I pulled, with that same B, a hundred acres! Mary Ann liked to pick cotton. "Well, okay, if you want to pick, run the cotton picker." So, I ran the corn puller. Later I had that B in the shed when a guy finds out it was in good shape. That guy on Highway 36 that has those antique tractors. He wanted it! He gave me \$750!

STAVINOHA: Oh man! More than you paid for it (laughs). Made good money on it. Those tractors, how much horsepower did they have back then? Twenty, twenty-five?

VACEK: Twenty-seven.

STAVINOHA: Some of those lawnmowers you buy nowadays are bigger than that!

STAVINOHA: What did you have to pay for this farm here, how much, ten dollars an acre? Fifteen?

VACEK: \$225 per acre.

STAVINOHA: How long did it take you to pay for it?

VACEK: Brother Joe said, "I heard that you bought some land." I said, "Yeah!" "When are you going to pay for it? God almighty, that's so much money!" Well, I guess I have 86 acres. Anyhow, it was under \$20,000. We made pretty good crops. But then again in 18 months, we helped pay for three weddings.

STAVINOHA: That's your kids, getting married?

VACEK: Yeah, daughter Evelyn married Leland Buenger from Wharton, and they have a son, Troy. J. C. married Tillie Blazek from Wallis. Mary Ann married James Roznovak from Weimar and they have a son, David. I gave every one of my children \$500 when they got married, so they didn't have to go to the bank to borrow money. I helped them out. Everybody was working at a job, and nobody wanted to farm.

STAVINOHA: I'm going to go ahead and conclude this interview. Thanks Mr. Vacek!

Interview ends



Frank's Family: Frank, Evelyn, Edna, (unnamed), Mary Ann, and Georgie, August 1956.