

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees: **Stanley Kucherka**

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Interviewer: Roberta Terrell

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

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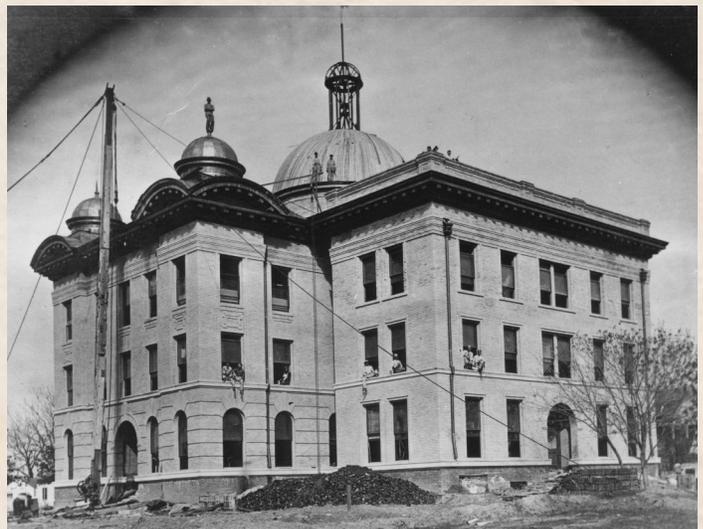
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Transcript

TERRELL: I am visiting with Stanley Kucherka in his home. Today is the twenty-second of October 2008. Could you tell us please tell us, Mr. Kucherka, where you were born and the year.

KUCHERKA: I was born in Columbus, Texas in 1926. Until I was a sophomore in high school I was in Columbus and then we moved to Eagle Lake. And I graduated from Eagle Lake High School. And then immediately I went into the service after I graduated. I went into the navy and served for two years.

TERRELL: Okay

KUCHERKA: After being in the navy for two years I was discharged and went to A&M for four years. I got a degree in engineering from A&M. When I graduated I came to Fort Bend County.

TERRELL: And did you come looking for job or did you come with a job?

KUCHERKA: I had a job in New Mexico and I came to Rosenberg to get a train out and while I was here I knew about a position so I met with Judge Baker, County Judge at that time. I talked to him and he convinced me to stay here and become manager and engineer of the Fort Bend County Drainage District, which was set up in 1949. It 1950 when I graduated from A&M and accepted the job here at in Fort Bend County.

TERRELL: And as manager of the Drainage District what was your challenge?

KUCHERKA: Well, of course at that time I didn't know how much, around 25 percent of the county, was in a flood plain! The Drainage District had been set up in 1949. But it didn't become active until 1950 when I was hired as manager and engineer. I was the first person hired by the Commissioners Court. The Commissioners Court was set up as the directors of the Fort Bend County Drainage District.

TERRELL: Okay. And was there already drainage in place or did you have plan how to drain?

KUCHERKA: At that time, before there was a drainage district, any drainage would have to be done by the individual commissioner in his precinct. And of course the Fort Bend County Drainage District was set up as a countywide district where you could work between precincts. By setting up a county-wide district we were able to plan the whole drainage system for the county.

TERRELL: Did you have people helping you, assistants, or were you a one-man team?

KUCHERKA: The county voted the drainage district and I was the first one hired as manager engineer and I worked with the soil conservation service in planning a drainage system for Fort Bend County.

TERRELL: That's a big job.

KUCHERKA: Oh yes and for several years I was the only person. And then when we actually started construction well then we hired operators to actually do the drainage construction, the ditches to drain the county.

TERRELL: And did you have to secure right-of-ways?

KUCHERKA: Oh yes, we had a right-of-way agent. The county had right-of-way agents that we used. We decided where we needed and how much right-of-way we needed and turn it over to the right-of-way agent, and at that time was Mr. S. O. Morrow, was the right-of-way agent and he actually went to the people to get the easements. I had to work with him some to tell the people what we were planning to do and so on.

TERRELL: And how many years did you do this?

KUCHERKA: I did that from 1950 to 1987, for thirty-seven years. In 1987 I retired from the County Drainage District. Through the years they didn't have a county engineer so the county engineer was the one who had to approve the plans and the Commissioners Court would approve it for the development in the county. During those years I assumed the position of county engineer and I'm not quite sure exactly what year it became official but when I retired I was county engineer and director, I mean, and manager and chief engineer of the Fort Bend County Drainage District. During all those years we hired a lot of operators and actually hired some assistant engineers to help the planning and so on. At one time I guess we had something over twenty total employees of the Fort Bend County Drainage District.

TERRELL: That's a lot.

KUCHERKA: Yes, but most of those were actually machinery operators. In 1949, they voted for two and a half and little over two million dollars of bonds. That money was used to buy equipment and to hire people and and to do the extra construction of the drainage ditches.

TERRELL: Were you involved with any of the levees?

KUCHERKA: I had to approve the levees that were put in. And of course I had to approve all the development in the county. In other words, through the years, it became necessary for the developers to get permission from the Commissioners Court to approve their plats. In approving the plats we had to check to see that they met the drainage problems in the area. Naturally development increased drainage and runoff in the area so we checked those. And then the Commissioners Court had the final authority on whether they approved the development and so on.

TERRELL: Well are you surprised at the development in the county?

KUCHERKA: Oh yes. I was...I had no idea! When I went to work for the county there was really no development. Rosenberg was the largest city and didn't have too many people. Sugar Land was the next and I guess Missouri City had just a few hundred people in the city limits. And Sugar Land had had two or three thousand. Of course everything in Sugar Land was owned by the Sugar Land Industries at that time. Rosenberg was the biggest city and it was well under ten thousand. The whole county didn't have but thirty thousand people in 1950 when I came. When I left in '87 it had between two and three hundred thousand.

TERRELL: That's amazing.

KUCHERKA: Right.

TERRELL: Isn't that amazing?

KUCHERKA: Right. (chuckles) It was.

TERRELL: Do you have favorite story about the county as engineer, anything funny, humorous, or something that I might not ask you.

KUCHERKA: Not really. The interesting thing was about twenty-five percent of the county was in the in the in this floodplain. Of course no was real sure where the floodplain was and so on at that time. And one of the big things that we had to work out with the Corp of Engineers was the elevation of the floodplain, especially on the Brazos River.

And for years we worked with them in trying to determine what that elevation was. Of course the problem with all of this is that we designed a system for agricultural drainage and the urban development that was here at the time.

TERRELL: Now that changed (chuckles).

KUCHERKA: And then with the growth, we had to change our planning and actually go back over and redo some of it to take care of the growth as it took place. And then eventually it got to the place where the development was so great, so much development, that the developers themselves had to put in detention facilities to hold the water and let it go out at a controlled rate. Because there was no way the channels would handle the flow that was generated by the development in the county. Not only did we have to work with throughout the county but also with the cities in the county. Most of the growth in the county was in utility districts, which were outside the actual city limits. Eventually that went into the city limits. But we had to work with the cities and the utility districts on designing and approving developments that wouldn't affect the cities and the rest of the county.

TERRELL: Tough job.

KUCHERKA: Right. (laughter) It was, but it was interesting job. And being countywide as it was you could you could plan a whole system, although we have a lot of areas that drain into Harris County and some into Brazoria County. We had a situation where we had to work with Harris County and Brazoria County. Brazoria County had individual drainage districts. They had six or seven individual drainage districts. And so we had to work with all of those in the areas that we were putting water into or draining through Brazoria County and Harris County too. Harris County was the only other county that had a countywide flood control, drainage and flood control district.

TERRELL: Well changing the subject a little bit, weren't you involved with the Czech Fest?

KUCHERKA: Oh yes (laughter) oh yes. I was...

TERRELL: I thought...

KUCHERKA: Judge Jodie Stavinoha and I worked during the whole time that the Czech Fest was going. Until it changed and became more of a local situation instead of area wide as it was. And it really became a big production.

TERRELL: When did you all begin? Do you remember?

KUCHERKA: No! (chuckles) I don't remember the year. I worked at it for about ten years. But I don't remember the years.

TERRELL: Well what is it today? It was a Chamber event I know.

KUCHERKA: Yeah, it's a Chamber affair, but then the Chamber got out of it and it became just a group of local people that put it on. I worked on it a little bit after the Chamber ended it but then I kind of pulled back.

TERRELL: Have you visited the Czech Republic?

KUCHERKA: No. I've been in the Pacific area, the Philippines and Hawaii and that area but never in the Atlantic.

TERRELL: What about the Chamber of Commerce? Were you involved in that?

KUCHERKA: Oh yes I was president of the Chamber. I was on the committees almost immediately after I got here. And in '70, '79 I think it was, I was president of the Chamber. I worked on Chamber committees for years. And the Chamber did a lot helping to get the drainage district started and getting things done in the county. And in stressing the development of the county.

TERRELL: Well has the Chamber of Commerce changed its focus?

KUCHERKA: Oh no...

TERRELL: It's still focused on development in the county?

KUCHERKA: Oh yes, oh yes. The Chamber has been growing through the years and it's a real active group. Of course there are Fort Bend the Chamber and Sugar Land-Missouri City area too.

TERRELL: I think so.

KUCHERKA: I don't think Needville has one. But the two that really worked through the years were the were the Rosenberg-Richmond Chamber and the Fort Bend Chamber.

TERRELL: What about the hospital board?

KUCHERKA: I was I was on the hospital board for thirty-seven years.

TERRELL: And this was Polly Ryon?

KUCHERKA: Thirty-eight years, Polly Ryon when it was Polly Ryon. In fact I went off the board just a couple of years after it changed over to Oakbend. I was president of the board for nine years.

TERRELL: Do you remember when you began your tenure there?

KUCHERKA: It was thirty-seven years back from last ...(laughing)

TERRELL: A long time.

KUCHERKA: I have a plaque here somewhere showing when I went off.

TERRELL: Can you mention some of the changes in the hospital?

KUCHERKA: Oh. It has changed considerably. For years it was just a community, mostly Richmond-Rosenberg, community hospital. And then it started expanding to the point that it covers a larger area. But it's still to an extent a community hospital and I would [like] it to stay. (laughing) That is a personal opinion but now they have a lot of committees and a lot of groups that stress certain areas and what they're doing on the freeway, that new construction that they they're doing, I think that's gonna help a lot. The doctors in the area all along had felt that they were kind of confined to too small an area. And a lot of them work out of Methodist and Memorial, mostly Memorial Hospital and through the years they always thought that we should expand more and setup where people from outside of the Rosenberg-Richmond area could use the hospital facilities but still stretch the Needville, Rosenberg-Richmond area. Of course our doctors had always been from the area and then then a lot of them started coming out practicing in mostly Southwest Memorial and then in this area.

TERRELL: Yeah. Are there other things you've been involved in that you would like to share with me?

KUCHERKA: I've been really involved in the church.

TERRELL: You're right. I'm sorry I didn't mention that.

KUCHERKA: I've been on almost every committee. I've been on the diocesan committees of the Catholic Church.

TERRELL: And which church is this you're involved in?

KUCHERKA: Holy Rosary Catholic Church. I'm a member of the church at Holy Rosary but I've been active in the diocesan area, which is Houston, a part of the Houston area. The Holy Names Society and the Knights of Columbus. At the Knights of Columbus I was Grand Knight of the Council here for a couple of years. And then the District Deputy of the Knights of Columbus for three years. I've been real active in the city of Rosenberg too. I've been on two or three committees ever since I've been here.

TERRELL: That's commendable.

KUCHERKA: I've been on the parks committee for many many years. And I was chairman of the parks board for two years ago. All the way from the time when John Janca was mayor here now. And now I'm co-chairman of the parks board and I'm on the on the image committee of the city of Rosenberg. But I've worked with the city of Rosenberg all along. We had two parks when we came here and now we have seven or eight.

TERRELL: That's great. What about your boyhood? Do you have something that you want to mention about that? About siblings or...

KUCHERKA: Well, I have a brother and a sister. My sister is in El Campo, Texas. And brother is in Eagle Lake. I have five children, three boys and two girls.

TERRELL: Are they still living in the county?

KUCHERKA: Yes. One's in in Pierce, Texas. And the rest of them are in this area. I need to mention that all but one of them went to A&M, all of them, and all their daughters and sons (laughs).

TERRELL: That's great. That's an Aggie family!

KUCHERKA: I was really involved with them all the time. I was president of the Little League when all my boys played in in Little League.

TERRELL: I think you've been involved.

KUCHERKA: (laughs) Well I think I have. I was looking some articles that were in the in the Herald Coaster and it mentioned that I was recognized for one of them that my wife got up and said that I spent a lot time away but I always tried to get back to the family.

TERRELL: (laughs)

KUCHERKA: But she did bring out the fact that I was involved in a lot of committees.
(chuckles)

TERRELL: You probably spent a lot of time away from home. Are there any stories that you told your children about when you grew up where they would just roll their eyes?

KUCHERKA: The biggest thing that is hard for them to understand, and also other people to understand, and I'm kidding all the time about the fact that I had to walk two miles to catch a bus to get to school because I lived eleven miles from the school at Columbus. We lived out on a farm there.

TERRELL: You dad was a farmer?

KUCHERKA: Yes, he was...at the time I was born he had a Model A dump truck. And he was doing some hauling too. But he was farmer most of his life. In fact he helped me buy some of the farms that I've had through the years. I'm real involved...I really love the land. I've bought and sold land through all the years but I always was careful that I did it outside of Fort Bend County so people couldn't say that I was doing drainage and stuff that helped my areas. All my land and stuff that I bought was in Wharton and Colorado County.

TERRELL: Well did you ever farm, at all?

KUCHERKA: Oh yes. I grew up farming. When I got home from school I would get on a tractor. My dad had one of the first tractors in the Eagle Lake-Columbus area. And I would get on a tractor and then during the summer I took care of all the people who work in the cotton crops, the choppers and the pickers and so on. I would pick them up and bring them out and weigh and stuff like that. So I worked in a farm all the time. And of course all the time I had cattle too. And I still have...

TERRELL: Still have some cattle?

KUCHERKA: Yeah.

TERRELL: And where do you keep them?

KUCHERKA: Eagle Lake.

TERRELL: Okay. And so does your family still have property in Eagle Lake.

KUCHERKA: Oh yes. I have quite a bit of acreage in Eagle Lake area.

TERRELL: Are you a hunter?

KUCHERKA: Yes. (chuckles) Yes I am. I don't hunt near as much now at the age I am now but through the years I was a deer hunter and now I love turkey hunting. I really love turkey hunting. I don't fool with deer too much because it's harder for me to handle deer and so on but I love turkey hunting. I still go deer hunting though, in fact in the week before Thanksgiving every year a group of us go out to Mason, Texas.

TERRELL: Oh, okay.

KUCHERKA: And go deer hunting or turkey hunting. I tend to hunt for turkey more. But like I said for years for thirty-seven years I got deer every year. I have deer on my place at Eagle Lake. I let my sons and my grandsons do the hunting.

TERRELL: Well what do you do today to stay active, still committee?

KUCHERKA: Take care of my farms and serve on committees. I am on two committees with the city, especially the park committee and the image committee, both that I've been on for years. And I still stay on those. I always say I need to get off, I need to quit, but it's hard to leave once you do that. And of course, since my wife's gone, well has passed away, I really have more time. And of course the children tell me I outta quit and retire. (laughs) I've retired three or four times from different things already. After I retired from the Drainage District I did engineering work. I went with a company, a Houston company for several years. And then I did engineering work on my own after that. I'm still a registered engineer, but I'm inactive now. About three years ago I became inactive. I don't do any outside engineering now.

TERRELL: Well do you mind telling me the name of your wife and then the names of your children.

KUCHERKA: My wife's name was Magdalene Dobrava. She was from here. In fact, I met her after I came to Fort Bend County. And we had five children. The oldest is Kathy Rod. She lives in Pierce, Texas, which is right out of El Campo and teaches at Wharton County Junior College. And her husband is a rice farmer, rice and turf grass. He grows turf grass. And then my next my son, Chris, is on my farm at Eagle Lake. He takes care of the farms in Eagle Lake.

He worked for years for the county in the landfill and part of the time for the Drainage District. And then my next son, Kenneth, is with Amergy Bank here in Rosenberg. And my daughter, my next, my daughter is in First Colony and she has a window treatment business. And her husband is with Center Point Energy.

TERRELL: And what is her name?

KUCHERKA: Cheryl [Suter]. And then my youngest son James, is with a Houston mortgage company and works out of Houston.

TERRELL: Well, okay.

KUCHERKA: And he has two children. Cheryl has one boy now. Her daughter died a year ago. She was seventeen years old and had a blood condition and she died. I have eight grandchildren, five children and one great-grandchild.

TERRELL: Oh how fun.

KUCHERKA: One of Kathy's daughters has a little girl that's seven years old. (laughs)

TERRELL: My goodness. That'll keep you young.

KUCHERKA: (laughs) Right.

TERRELL: Well can you think of anything else that you would like to tell me.

KUCHERKA: No, talking about the Drainage District I think Fort Bend County has gone a long way. We were right behind Harris County in planning and taking care of the drainage problem. And we really still one of the few counties that really have a program to provide drainage and flood control and so on in the state.

TERRELL: That's wonderful.

KUCHERKA: Right.

TERRELL: We live in a great county.

KUCHERKA: Oh yes! We sure do. Between this and Colorado County (laughing) I have...

TERRELL: A little piece of heaven.

KUCHERKA: Of course, Colorado County didn't have but thirty thousand people now, they have twenty-eight thousand, I believe. But which is about the same as this county had when I came here. But they're starting to grow now. We're starting to spread out these areas...

TERRELL: Push 'um out.

KUCHERKA: Spread out. Of course, I kind of like those rural counties. I have a house out on my place and lakes. I have lakes out at Eagle Lake. I'm not much of a fisherman. I like to fool with cows and hunt. But my children all fish...

TERRELL: Isn't that wonderful. Well I think time has flown by. I don't want to keep you too long.

KUCHERKA: That's alright.

TERRELL: But it's been very interesting.