

My history with Houston Audubon started at the Piney Woods Wildlife Society right after I moved to Houston. I moved to Kingwood. And my first place to go birdwatching was the Katy Prairie back before there was a Katy Prairie Conservancy. And while I was out there looking for longspurs, I ran into another guy birding alone looking for the same thing I was looking for, and it was Jim Stewart. And Jim Stewart got me to the Piney Woods Wildlife Society. And subsequently, Gary Woods, who was president of Piney Woods at the time, moved from there then to Houston Audubon. And that started the whole sequence that led to High Island.

So coming out of the Piney Woods experience, when Gary Clark became President of Houston Audubon, he realized that no one was taking care of the Damuth Sanctuaries. He asked Piney Woods if they would like to be the stewards for the Damuth Sanctuary. And then almost immediately we received two more properties from Steven Damuth, Steven Craig Damuth, which was called the Dobie Tract and Winters Bayou. And we formed a committee up there – Jim Stewart led it. I was his co-chair, and we began to take care of and manage that property, and that's how I met Malcolm Damuth. And meeting Malcolm Damuth up there was really a seminal little exposure that I had early on that really played into High Island.

Malcolm Damuth owned a 630-acre tract that had been logged over back in the early 1900s. It came into his family, and from that moment on, he shepherded the forest to regrow and became his personal sanctuary. He donated that to Houston Audubon. And then his son decided the two tracts he had he would also donate to Houston Audubon. And that was a couple of other tracts that were both more than 100 acres each, as I remember.

I've always worked for Phillips Petroleum Company. And Gary Clark felt it was great to have somebody with an oil business background to be on the board of directors. And with my familiarity within through Piney Woods of the Damuth Sanctuary, I was invited to fill a vacancy, a half-term vacancy, in I believe it was 1988 when Gary Clark was president and right after he'd left Piney Woods. And that was how I ended up on the Houston Audubon Society board and how I began to become more and more involved with the Damuth family and with our needs at High Island.

So at the time Amoco was selling their properties down there, we had received from Lamar University in Beaumont their lease with Amoco for a 10-acre tract of good birding woods. At the time we'd also, as I came on the board, we also had, as I recall, about a \$37,000 debt for the purchase of a share of Smith Oaks. And we'd also had some debt remaining yet on what we called Boy Scout Woods, later known as Louis Smith Woods. That was at that timeframe, that debt. And at the time Houston Audubon didn't have deep pockets. \$40,000 in debt was a lot of debt.

At the same time, I had a vice-president at ConocoPhillips who was interested in doing conservation projects and had already gotten ConocoPhillips involved in the Playa Lakes joint venture. And one of the people working for him knew of me and knew of him and put us together. And we became quite a team in Phillips Petroleum at the time.

And then the last thing that happened, which was hugely important, was the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, US Fish and Wildlife Service and then a number of other agencies began what was known as the Partners in Flight Program. At the time, there was recognition that North America's migratory songbirds were in steep decline, and there was concern about why

this was happening. What can we do to study it? What can we do to stop this decline? And a lot of federal funds became involved at the time, and there was a great deal of energy to work with non-governmental organizations at the same time in tackling this enormous issue.

Houston Audubon is in the oil and gas capital, arguably, maybe of the world. And not everyone in the oil business is as people may assume. And, certainly, there are people that care about the planet and care about where they work. And there were people in Amoco that felt that way as well as John Whitmire who became my backbone or became my foundation or my quiet support. John was so committed that, ultimately, we got him promoted to be on the national board for National Audubon Society. And he was instrumental in supporting myself and garnering an amazing amount of support from Phillips Petroleum, whether it was the land department to help us deal with land issues, or whether it was our drafting department to help us draw up numerous maps of various properties. And those maps, you can still see derivatives of those maps being used today.

The overprint of the oil industry at High Island is due to the fact that High Island is a salt dome. That salt dome produces a positive feature on the landscape that in the times of hurricanes it truly becomes an island. And many people have survived hurricanes by evacuating to High Island and then going back down the peninsula to see what's left. And that's been true as long as there's been people on Bolivar Peninsula.

It turns out that salt domes are very good traps for oil and gas reserves. And early on there were discoveries in certain spots around the dome. But ultimately, Amoco recognized how big the potential was, and they began buying up all of the smaller firms and ended up accumulating quite a landholding around there. And if you go to Smith Oaks now, you can still see their old pumphouse building. There used to be several large oil tanks there. And this used to be the gathering spot for production. And also Amoco had a Frasch sulfur mining business there at the same time. And the Clay Bottom Pond where our rookery is now was actually one of the ponds where they gathered freshwater that they used for this sulfur-mining process.

Utilizing the resources that I was able to tap through the support of John Whitmire in Phillips, I made approaches to Amoco and found my way into the Amoco land department where I was able to make a pitch for Houston Audubon saying we really need to expand our properties. High Island is becoming more and more popular. More and more birders are coming. We have a very small footprint. We have a very tentative hold on a portion of the really wonderful woods, which is almost completely surrounded by Amoco property. We really would like you to become a partner with Houston Audubon. We would really like to figure out some way of acquiring these migratory woodlands for the purposes of the general public. We'd also like to be able to improve our trails such that people now how to wear boots, and the trails are becoming deep with mud. We really need to do something because we have people coming from all over the United States to see birds on Amoco properties.

So one thing leads to another. Amoco said, "That's an interesting idea. Let us think about it." But so at the time I was talking with John Whitmire. I said, "John, we really need toilets at High Island." And I was having my interview with John. I was explaining all this stuff that was going on and my initial thoughts and how I'd had one conversation already with Amoco. And I said, "Can I get some money out of ConocoPhillips to help out on this?"

And he said, "Well, Steve." He said, "Look." This is John Whitmire telling me. He says, "I'd really like you to put something a little better. I'm not sure all I want to do is have Phillips' name on a bunch of toilets." [Laughs] And John Whitmire didn't laugh or chuckle much. He was a pretty serious guy most of the time, but he laughed about that at that moment. And so he said, "On an 8.5 x 11 piece of paper come back to me with the whole plan." And I did. I came back with him and I cheated, though. I had two pages. But I gave him the first one first and it was just everything we wanted to accomplish. But then the second page was the business plan, and that's when things got serious.

And National Fish and Wildlife Foundation had set up a fund for Partners in Flight where in-challenge grants were facilitated for projects that passed approval by the various agencies involved in the Partners in Flight Program. John Whitmire saw this as a perfect analog to the joint venture programs. And he'd been having enormous success with the business unit that was operating in the panhandle of Texas. So it was very easy for us to step into that type of a structure at least with respect to John Whitmire. And so he said, "Put together more. I need to see a proposal that you want to send to the Partners in Flight Program. And I want to see what I can do with public policy board at Phillips Petroleum Company and see if we can come in with some better support."

And at that same timeframe, there was a Partners in Flight meeting in Galveston in 1991, early 1991, I think maybe February. I met there Peter Stangel. I met there a long list of names of people that were working Partners in Flight. David Pashley comes to mind, John Bergen (*name is Jim Bergen*) of the Nature Conservancy and others I met at this meeting and said, "Look, here is our problem. Here is our opportunity. What can we do?"

Peter Stangel was directing the Partners in Flight Program in NFWF. And his eyes showed that he was seriously interested in what I was saying. And from there, the whole thing began. And by 1992, we began forming Fund A, Fund B. We ended up with Fund E in the end, each one representing a different iteration of matching various funds together through the Challenge Match Program, which was enormously successful in enabling us to build the partnership that we did in order to get done what we got done.

So the next step was grant-writing, and I never wrote a grant before, but I had some help. But I ended up putting together a stack of paper that was about a half an inch thick with everything that we could throw in there. It was too much, but I still had the two 8.5 x 11 pieces of paper that John Whitmire wanted me to write up at the very beginning. And, of course, we had a little history and a little bit of discussion. That document ended up being photocopied an amazing amount of times.

And one copy went to Amoco at one point in time. But that copy also formed the basis for John Whitmire to support a presentation to the Phillips Petroleum board of directors after it had passed approval by their public policy. And the proposal was \$60,000 for Conoco – excuse me – Phillips Petroleum later became ConocoPhillips. Phillips Petroleum decided that was the right number and why that number? Well, it turned out that to buy the remaining shares of the Smith Oaks property, they wanted \$120,000. So this became a perfect number to match: \$60,000 here, \$60,000 from National Fish and Wildlife Foundation through the Partners in Flight Program. We got \$120,000 we can buy the property.

It turns out this time the Damuths wanted to have one of those properties back for family reasons. They offered us \$100,000 for other land purchased elsewhere if they would be able to receive that property back. And that was one of my first acts then, as a board member at Houston Audubon, was to come and say, "Hey, look, I've been offered \$100,000 for one of our sanctuaries." And it put me in an interesting position on the board and maybe with the membership—one of the first acts that can be seen at Houston Audubon. All this other stuff was behind the scenes. But the first act would be, well, we don't have that property anymore, but we got \$100,000 in the bank. So this was an interesting starting point for me with respect to my commitment at Houston Audubon. So I felt compelled to make sure that we didn't end up spending \$100,000 on electricity and water and it made it back into the land. And then Damuths certainly wanted that as their donation now of \$100,000 rather than a piece of property.

That concept drove an awful lot of Fund A, B, C, D, and E in the end because everyone we got money from, they said, "Oh, you can't match government funds with government funds in a Challenge Grant." They would say, "You can't use funds from our philanthropy for bricks and mortar. They have to go to programs and maintenance or programs, education, these sorts of things." And others would say, "OK, we can do improvements, habitat improvements, habitat protection on the land with the funds." So putting these funds altogether became an enormous issue. In the first year we ended up with – we began to accumulate – this was 1992 by then. We ended up with Fund A and Fund B. And then, ultimately, we had to have a Fund C as we got another \$60,000 in the second year from Phillips Petroleum. They said, "We've got to keep going with this. The program is developing. You're pulling pieces together."

However, there was a large holdup at one point in time. And that was due in part to a family that we had living on the property, the George family. And they'd lived there for free through the good graces of the original owners of the property. But they felt some sense of ownership, and that was something that was handled delicately. Gary Woods led the – our president at the time, succeeding from Gary Clark, got involved deeply in those kinds of negotiations. And, ultimately, we achieved success. The Georges created quite a bit of interesting times down there as they were battling one way or another to not allow the property get away from them even though they had really no ownership there.

Eventually, they sent us an "all is well" letter one Christmas from Oklahoma. They'd moved and they said, "Well, we're very happy now, and we think this is the best answer. And, hopefully, everything is water under the bridge." And we decided to accept that in good graces, and everybody turned out happy. That was challenging because it held up the receipt of that property.

And at the same time, Amoco as part of their donation had a \$200,000 grant for coastal conservation with the Nature Conservancy. What they decided they wanted to do is they wanted to take \$120,000 of that \$200,000 and purchase the Smith Oaks property. Well, that was an interesting thing to manage as well because the Damuths wanted to buy that property with their \$100,000. And ConocoPhillips had \$60,000 in there to match NFWF, and they felt like they were buying the property.

Well, ultimately, we got everyone happy and redefined the funds and were able to start spending money. And we had the Georges off the property. At the end we had one interesting negotiation with Amoco as to the liability clauses by taking ownership of those properties. And

in the end John Whitmire, again, traveled to Chicago, laid out the case that if something happened to be found and a contract came through on the acquisition of the lands that said all future liabilities are Houston Audubon's, the argument was made by Mr. Whitmire that you probably don't want Amoco through this type of clause to be the company that destroys Houston Audubon through unmanageable liabilities of historical use of the land.

Eventually, the legal people were convinced by the senior management of Amoco that we should all be partners and let this happen, if it ever happens, as it would and remove those clauses. Then the dam burst, and in 1992 there was a meeting of the Partners in Flight again in Galveston. The heads of the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Nature Conservancy, Amoco had people there. Phillips Petroleum publicity people packaged up some amazing handouts. We had press. We were on the news wake-up... was it Good Morning America, I believe, on one of the NBC or CBS. And we ended up celebrating the coming together of the Nature Conservancy of Louisiana, who were supporting, the Nature Conservancy of Texas, Texas Parks and Wildlife, Amoco, Phillips Petroleum Company and, of course, Houston Audubon.

We received approximately 175 acres from Amoco. We ended up generating enough matching funds that Fund D ended up largely supporting Bolivar Flats—another wonderful story, which I'm sure will be spoken about here as well. And through that funding process, we will able to build a tower and help with Bolivar expenses and build some signage at Bolivar Flats as a result of this program.

In the end it was about \$2.2 million that was assembled and the people – I have to name some of the people at Houston Audubon that really got the job done. And whatever money was raised, Winnie Burkett was able to spend that money and keep it within the bounds of the funding requirements. Bill McClendon and Herb Orwig did amazing jobs in making sure all the bills, everything passed audit for all the funds. And also Steven Carroll was behind the scenes in all of our legal documents and in our real estate and land issues, many of which were dealt with through some assistance from Fulbright & Jaworski as well.

So Fund E became the birth of the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory in the end. This had always been a vision of the original plan to have a bird observatory at High Island. Well, for one reason or another, it didn't end up at High Island. But it did end up in birthing Gulf Coast Bird Observatory. And that's a pretty proud accomplishment of Houston Audubon along with many other accomplishments. And of that last Fund E, a portion of it went, \$25,000, to building their Cecilia Riley Center at Gulf Coast Bird Observatory as the very end of the last money that came out of the High Island initiative.

But these items, these things that happened during this timeframe are part of Houston Audubon's legacy. We birthed Armand Bayou, for instance. Armand Yramategui, whose name I'm sure I just butchered there, was a member of our board of directors at one point in time. The Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, the Katy Prairie Conservancy, the wildlife refuges that now exist in the Trinity Valley with the boardwalk that overlooks the Spoonbill rookery there just as you cross the bridge at Trinity. Houston Audubon has been enormously impactful in very positive ways in the Houston area. And this period of time all of those things were passing through the board during those four- to five-hour board meetings that we had.

I'm sure I'm leaving something out of these stories. I also need to recognize Gary Woods who did a lot of the hard negotiating, helped us seal the deal with Nature Conservancy and also, during this same time period, started the very first Audubon Gala at which Phillips Petroleum Company and then in Year No. 2 Amoco Petroleum were major table buyers at the gala.

I was really fortunate to be on the board of directors during this timeframe from 1989 through 1996, when I left Houston on transfer. During that time period, we would have board meetings that would start at 7:00. Later we moved it to 6:00 because it was lasting so long. We would stay in board meeting until 10:30 in the evening, and this was during a workday. We had them on Tuesdays, the first Tuesday. I believe it was the first Tuesday of every month back then. And it was quite a ways to ... it was an interesting way to start your week by not getting home. I lived in Kingwood at the time, so I had to drive an hour back after the meetings.

This era, '89 to '96, saw Houston Audubon raising money to defend the Lower Trinity River from the Wallisville Dam project. At the same time, Houston was exploring the idea of building a west side airport at between Brookshire and Katy on the Prairie, something that would basically bury an awful lot of wetlands, prior converted wetlands. There was a number of environmental issues out there that said this wasn't a terribly good idea. The Federal Aviation group from Texas, their pilots' association sent us a check for \$1,000 to help legal fees. They didn't want to fly airplanes through geese, which are no longer there because the rice is no longer there. But back then, we would have 250,000 to 1,000,000 geese out there every winter.

So Houston Audubon is recognized as one of the leading chapters in the United States as far as what we've been able to accomplish. And you might ask why is that? Well, it helps that we're in a really huge city. But it also helps that there's an awful lot to be done around here. So it's not like we're just trying to go watch some birds. There's stuff that needs to be done, and somebody needs to do it. Why is Houston Audubon successful? Well, it's the quality and depth of the board of directors and the staff and the community that supports it, and it's a three-legged stool. And if you didn't have the opportunity, of course, we wouldn't be here. But that doesn't mean that we would be able to do anything about it as Houston Audubon.

So a Houston Audubon board member gets there because they already have something that's burning in the back of their mind or they have a need for an outlet. Houston Audubon provides that as long as you're within the mission, obviously. But the thing is is that everybody on the board is carrying weight. This is a working board. It always has been a working board. And the board is never 100 percent in favor of anything. That's why we have four-hour meetings. But the fact is is that it's going forward all the time. So I would say, yeah, it's leadership. And that leadership is experienced through each leg of the stool. Community giving is as important as board leadership is important as the dedication of the staff. And Houston Audubon is a national leader because of that.

We even have leadership within the heirs of the Hughes estate, which were the owners of Smith Oaks. At one point in time our residents there, who had no real tenure on the land other than their presence, had decided that they were going to set up their own reserve system. Began issuing patches—well, actually, stickers—and charging entry fees. And eventually we invited them to share some income through the sale of our patches, which started in '89.

But at one point in time, there were a little bit of disagreement about how this should all play out. And the entrance road was blocked with large pieces of trees, and fishing line was laced back and forth across all the trails. And one of the heirs, who was willing to sell her piece of her property for the \$120,000 we were offering, basically took a chainsaw out, started a chainsaw. And here's a woman walking down the street, and she's going through the tree limbs, and she's slicing through the fishing line. And everybody stayed out of her way. But eventually, the sheriff came and got involved, and they were preparing a court order that the public streets need to be maintained open, and eventually it faded away, but there were some testy moments.

There's one other thing about Houston Audubon that for me surpasses everything else. And that is it's an avenue for personal realization, for self-realization. And it can start just with helping on a stewardship committee for one of the properties. And Houston Audubon is incredibly enabling. If you have an idea, you have a passion, and it fits within the Houston Audubon mission, then anything's achievable, virtually anything. And it's just individuals who have – and it's not one individual. It's not a single individual. It's a team. There's no question. There are many people whose names I haven't mentioned in my remarks today. But in every one of these, whether it's Armand Bayou or the Katy Prairie Conservancy or the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, the sanctuary system Houston Audubon has, the succession of people and passion and self-realization has been enabled through Houston Audubon, and it'll continue to happen. And it's not fly-by-night. It's permanent. It'll live longer than we will. So, it's someplace to go.

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