

OHD 005-06

The Oral History Documentary Series

Robert Farmer

Robert Farmer Interviewed by Sarah Duncan

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DUNCAN: This is Sarah Duncan interviewing Robert Farmer for the Sandy Creek Oral History Project of the Russell Library. This is August 2, 2005 and we are at the Sandy Creek Park Visitor Center in Athens, Georgia. Okay, why don't we go ahead and begin. Why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself?

FARMER: Well, I am self-employed at the present time in design and construction. I graduated from Commerce High School in Jackson County and attended the University of Georgia School of Environmental Design in the Landscape Architect division and have been self-employed since the 1970s and most of the time as a landscape architect and general contractor. I am married and have four children. Two of my sons work with the company now and two daughters and I have seven grandchildren. Sixty-two years old and presently plan to retire at 65.

DUNCAN: You said you went to UGA?

FARMER: Yes I did.

DUNCAN: At the school of Environmental Design about when did you...?

FARMER: In the '60s I think '61 through '64 '65. Dean Owens was dean who actually helped found and establish the school and at the time I attended the University of Georgia I think there were approximately 3,700 to 4,500 students, 7,000 when I graduated and we think had about a hundred students in landscape school.

DUNCAN: Wow. [DUNCAN laughs]

FARMER: So I go way back I guess.

DUNCAN: It sounds like that was a pretty intimate program then.

FARMER: It was had a lot of personal attention. One of my professors, Bill Barry, actually retired from the University and lives in Athens and we have done some work for his firm or - that he designs so we go way back.

DUNCAN: What kind of work did you start out doing in your early career?

FARMER: When I finished the University of Georgia I started to work for a firm in Columbia in South Carolina: Ken Simmons and Associates. Mr. Simmons was a landscape architect and civil engineer. He had started his career under the Roosevelt term with the park service and was from Columbia, South Carolina area and wanted to go back there, so he established his firm and I worked with him approximately two [and a] half three years and then I came back to Athens and was employed with Ben McLeroy and Associates for about

four years, left there and went with a large development corporation and worked about three to four -- four years I guess there and then I established my own firm and have been in Athens ever since so. From 1971, '67, '71, '74 I have been self employed.

DUNCAN: So it was 1974 that you established your firm? Now you said that that first firm you worked with was Ken Simmons and Associates.

FARMER: Yes.

DUNCAN: And he had worked with the National Park Services?

FARMER: Correct.

DUNCAN: So what kind of projects did you ... Did you do park projects?

FARMER: We did -- let's see if I can remember -- we did a lot of subdivision design at that time in Columbia they were just beginning to use landscape architects to design projects. Previous to that land surveyors had just laid out the subdivisions, so we were beginning to work into that area and establish that. Mr. Simmons had a lot of Government contracts. I worked on the Charleston Naval School site.

DUNCAN: Oh, neat.

FARMER: I always tell the story about that. I was drafted in the Army and they notified me that I wouldn't be called in, that my classification was being changed and I couldn't understand why. So I contacted my local draft board and told them what had happened and I said, "Is this a mistake?" and they said, "No you have been reclassified. You're working on a top secret project." So, I went back to my boss and said "What in the world is going on?" And he said, "What's happening?" and I explained to him. And he said, "Oh well, you're -- you've been locating trash cans at the Naval base in Charleston, South Carolina." So, our top secret project was location of trash dumpsters and cans [DUNCAN laughs]. But, I found out later that just as it relates to the terrorism now that that was a favorite thing to do was drop a bomb or leave a bomb in a trash can or dumpster. So someone had to locate those and they had to be relocated periodically and they had to be mapped and documented. So, I thought it was kind of an interesting project. We did a lot of college campuses. We did three that I worked on: Winthrop College, a Southern Baptist College, and then an all girls' college there in Columbia, South Carolina. I believe it was Columbia College. Principally either campus work or subdivision design or the Naval work -- which I had no clue what was going on.

[BOTH laugh]

DUNCAN: That's funny.

FARMER: Just did what they told me to do so....

DUNCAN: It wouldn't have occurred to me that location to trash cans [BOTH laugh] was such a....

FARMER: I didn't think it was such an important job at the time to be honest with you.

Then with Ben McLeroy and Associates we did a lot of University serving and engineering work for the University and then a lot of subdivision design in Clarke County and Cedar Creek subdivision, most of the older developments and then I guess when I became self employed I continued along the same lines, same type work.

DUNCAN: Had you done any parks before getting into this?

FARMER: Well, the college campus was my I guess largest experience and we had a- we did one -- oh we did the park in Oconee County, Michael Park, and we did Hurricane Shoals in Jackson County previous to this and had worked Barrow County I believe we had done their park prior to this, to Sandy Creek Park.

DUNCAN: What do you remember about this project?

FARMER: A lot of fond memories of the people that we worked with and just the site itself. As I expressed to you earlier I had worked with Ben McLeroy and Associates who did plan the original boundary survey and design documents and -- we of course I was very familiar with the site having worked on that. And then I remember that this was one of the largest park designs in the area and I think it was very fortunate that our firm was selected. Originally the Soil Conservation Services had selected a firm to do some preliminary design work and there was some disagreement between the county and the park and the Soil

Conservation Service as to why they would not let local designers, which were two or three firms capable of doing this type design do the work. And so Clarke County interviewed the firms on their own and we were selected by Clarke County. And then Soil Conservation Services reviewed us or our firm and allowed us to do the design work at the request of Clarke County. At the time there were a number of commissioners who felt like that local people should be utilized as much as possible for this project because there was a lot of local tax dollars going into the project. And the feeling of the commissioners was that local firms could do just a good of job as out of state or out of town firms. We had a good working relationship with the Soil Conservation Service and they were principally in charge of reviewing all documents, Clarke County was our principle employer but the SCS was the design supervisor -- so to speak -- and review all documents. Some of the most rewarding parts of the project to me was actually seeing our design implemented and then as the park opened experiencing or seeing the use of the park. My family and small children utilized the park quite a bit and it was, I thought, well received by the community and as far as I know it has been well used and enjoyed by the community. Design I think was good, there is always improvement and changes that you could make, but the goal for the project as I envisioned it was to have a natural site that parents and children could feel comfortable in and enjoy nature and the natural environment.

DUNCAN: Maybe you could expand on that a little bit, what did you see as the original priorities for this park?

FARMER: Well, Clarke County had a need for organized recreation as well as at that time Sandy Creek Nature Center was just a baby and being envisioned so to speak. There were no nature trails so that was an ideal site for the trails and we did construct trails all around the entire lake. There was at one time a plan to have a bridge across the lake but we were not able to ever see that accomplished, which was a disappointment. But the trails were completed the amphitheater, and the programs that would bring the children in this city back to the community and the country. Our envision was to have both, a naturalistic area and a formal area, and that was why the soccer field was one of the first in Clarke County or in the area was designed for this site. I don't think it was utilized as much as it could have been because of later the direction of that the park took but -- and then the ball fields, the tennis courts are used quite a bit, community building, the outdoor or open-air activities of course the swim beach is a major attraction, one of the disappointments at one time there was a dock in the lake that you could -- a swim dock you could swim out to and back and I think that was eventually taken down, removed. I particularly like the restriction of no motorized boats the electric motors would -- I know my sons and I would take that flat bottom boat and the electric motor was adequate to carry us through the entire lake for a day so that was I felt a good accomplishment that we were able to work out. You could actually row the lake in a canoe or whatever. The lake was approximately 250 acres which made it a very nice size for fishing, relaxing in a canoe or small boat. I felt like the setting for the park was fantastic. It was a beautiful terrain and we had a lot of versatility. We had hills, slopes, flat fields, open areas already established with some tremendously beautiful hard woods and the vegetation is lush and beautiful. That is about all I can think of about that topic.

DUNCAN: Okay. When you said that -- you were kinda describing the setting -- maybe you could just describe the first time that you saw this area and what you saw here you know say standing kind of at the gate house looking out on the park.

FARMER: The first vision of the site was the open pasture land. And then as you explored the site you realized that there were some very unique areas with large hardwoods and large trees, there was some history of how this site had been utilized in the past. It was thought to have been used by the Cherokee Indians on the creek bed area. At the time that I first reviewed the site for design purposes the lake was under construction and most of the area around the streams had been cleared for the lake area. When I worked for the firm that did the boundary survey I had been able to see some of the sites previous, but my first impression was the pasture and the hardwoods that were available and many times you do not have that in a park setting.

DUNCAN: When you talk about the hardwoods would those be roughly the same areas as they are today?

FARMER: Yes, many of them are still existing. We tried not to disturb any more than we had to, to put in the necessary roads, streets, and parking facilities for instance the amphitheater, the picnic area, the barbeque buildings and those type of facilities. We did do some interviews with local citizens as to what their desires would be for the park and that's the reason that the barbeque building and the amphitheater and the large community building

were constructed. Those were needs that the commissioners and the citizens felt could be utilized the most. Soccer field was one of the two areas that was requested.

DUNCAN: When you say that you did interviews with local citizens, how did that work exactly was it like what a study or ...?

FARMER: It was not as formal a study as I have seen prepared but what we did do was meet with local citizen groups. I remember the county commissioners had a group in that were just some of the citizens that were familiar with the site and the area. I discussed with some of the committee members for the Soil Conservation Service which are citizens and property owners. I believe one of them owned an adjoining property owner for this site. We discussed with ... at that time the recreation director for the county was just a minimal operation so we did discuss with them not very formal organization at that time. There was, I am trying to remember back -- there were many things that we did on the project that I probably don't remember -- I believe we met with the landscape architect school at one point what we thought their needs might be or the needs of the community. We did meet with two of the local engineering firms who were familiar with subdivision design and what their needs might be. We met with two legal firms and I am trying to remember why, but I do know that one had an interest in the soccer field and ball fields and the chairman of the county commissioners, Jim Holland, was very interested in the athletic end of the division. He had worked with the design. He had worked with the youth in the community quite extensively and Jim wanted to see the ball fields and the soccer field ... oh the county attorney had a very strong interest, Ray Nicholson, in the soccer fields.

DUNCAN: You say he had a very strong interest like wanted to see them?

FARMER: Yes, he knew a lot of kids who wanted to play soccer but had no place to practice at that time. And most of the preliminary design work was previously established when we actually took over the project, but we added and took away from the project as our studies indicated the needs.

DUNCAN: I see.

FARMER: The barbeque building for instance was requested by some of the local organizations as a place to utilize for their meetings and big gatherings. There was a large request or need from the citizens for the campground and the R.V. campground but it was determined by the county commissioners and the SCS to design and build the campground but not the R.V. Park. And I don't think the R.V. Park has ever been established, but that was one item the citizens requested that we were not able to have put into the project. As far as I know we were able to accomplish most of the desires of the community with the project.

DUNCAN: When you talked about local citizens were these people mostly from Athens itself or out of the county or some of each?

FARMER: I would say some of each but principally from Athens-Clarke County. Our firm worked with a lot of the subdivisions and a lot of the community organizations at that time so

we had some input as to what they would desire to begin with [FARMER coughs]. Excuse me. We knew these subdivisions that were being developed in the area at that time did not have any recreation facilities and did not have very much open space, so it was a definite need for this type of facility in the county. I think it was one of the greatest assets Clarke County has been able to obtain: 250 acre lake, and approximately 800 acres I believe.

DUNCAN: It is somewhere between seven and eight hundred.

FARMER: Seven to eight hundred acres of land area which does include the 250 acre lake.

DUNCAN: Yeah, yeah, totally, yeah.

FARMER: I mean that was a tremendous asset to the county as I envisioned it. I am not sure that it has been utilized over the years with the potential that it does have, but it's certainly a beautiful site. It has been maintained well. I am very pleased to see that the trees have been established, the buildings are still in good condition over the years. This project is approximately 25 years old.

DUNCAN: Yes, that's right next year. You mentioned maintenance. Did you know what the maintenance staff would be when you were working on your design?

FARMER: Yes. We were told there would be a maintenance facility on site. The project would be maintained principally by the county and by either prison labor or a staff and at that

time, I am trying to remember, I think there would be two full time staff members utilizing prison labor -- if I am allowed to say that -- as assistance to this. I don't know what the present staff consists of at this time. Now I am calling maintenance staff, the security was done by Clarke County Sheriff department at the time and the entrance gate would have been another personnel type person. Also a local game warden was utilized in assistance for patrolling the lake and patrolling the property; there were deer, fox, squirrel, a number of possum, raccoon, a number of animals that were on site and the local game warden was very cooperative and helpful in assisting the county and maintaining the park and establishing the fish population in the lake. So there was actually, after we finished, three major three or four major government agencies involved in the park and I think they all worked together well. It is kind of unusual, but they did back then.

DUNCAN: That was kind of something I was going to ask you is how was it working with so many agencies from your perspective?

FARMER: Well, initially to be very frank the Soil Conservation Service was not happy that their firm did not do the design so it was a little bit difficult. But my approach and my attitude was that we have a job to do and that we want to work with everyone involved the best we can. I found that the personnel with the Soil Conservation Service immediately responded and we worked well together. We were actually given a letter from Texas in which I was very proud of, from the very high up in the service that we had prepared documents and plans that were of high quality and we really appreciate that. The most difficult part was initially working with the SCS, but as time progressed it became a very

good working relationship for us. We did not pursue any other government projects of this type because our firm was just very involved into other projects and we eventually evolved into a construction -- more design and build type firm -- but I enjoyed working with both government agencies. Clarke County of course was a very small government agency at that time and was very easy to work with their personnel. I guess at the end of the project George Chandler and Nancy Blount Smith were the two principal personnel that we worked with.

DUNCAN: Now you mentioned that the Soil Conservation Service reviewed the plans. Is that right? I was just wondering how that process worked?

FARMER: The SCS reviewed all documents that we prepared for the county and either approved, signed off, or we made revisions for them, but they had the final review of all documents. It was principally their funds that was doing the work, but the county had the share fifty-fifty in the design plans so that is why the county thought they had input into that area so strongly, but I don't remember the exact proportion of funding for the facility itself. I can look that up, but I just don't remember what the percentage ratio, but I would say that the federal government put in about 80 percent and the county 20 percent or something of that nature.

DUNCAN: And you did say there had been a design firm that had come through and done a preliminary design. What had already been done by the time you came in?

FARMER: The only thing that they prepared was a master plan of the site and that was what would be considered very preliminary document. I do not know how much research they put into that. I think most of it came from the Soil Conservation Service personnel, but it was just a one sheet document.

DUNCAN: Yeah so it was very preliminary from the sound of it [DUNCAN laughs].

FARMER: It was our responsibility and it out contract was to actually design the park and have the working documents and to have those ready for bids. I believe if I remember correctly most of the contracts were let by the federal employees, once we prepared the documents they would put them out for bids. The county did a lot of work on the site as in kind or their contribution to the project. That is where George Chandler and his crews ... I think George was a county engineer at that time and they did a tremendous amount of physical work on site. If I remember correctly most of the buildings were built by contractors that bid the project. Most of the streets and grading was prepared by outside contractors, but the county did the trails. They did a lot of the general cleanup and the undergrowth and I later became a lot more involved in physical construction, but that kind of evolved over the end of the project.

DUNCAN: What was it like coming into this and having this lake there and some preliminary plan, but working around that?

FARMER: In some areas it was kind of difficult. You wanted to put in your own design ideas, but it was a situation to where you were not allowed certain freedom. The Soil Conservation Service had for instance had never allowed an R.V. park design so they felt that would not be comparable to what their goals were for an area. And they quite frankly had to be very careful about the type of facilities they allowed in order to meet their guidelines for funding, so that was a little difficult. We had a quite a bit of flexibility in revising or changing the master plan however, there was some areas of the master plan that we felt were good wanted to continue with. The most difficulty was meeting the limitations that the government had to work with as far as design. I am trying to think of an example, but I guess present time the R.V. Park was the largest park we did not work with up front. The second area was for instance the community building had restrictions, by making it an open-aired building we were able to meet their design requirements and they could still fund the project. The amphitheater and the park -- I mean the picnic areas were okay with them. They were free to work in those areas with their funding. I don't remember any major issues that we were involved in as far as having to just scrap totally an area for design. But I do know that there were certain size restrictions on for instance the barbeque building and those type of things that just had to meet their regulations. As far as any technical construction they were probably more stiff than say the county regs would have been as far as paving and street construction, grassing specification, landscaping specifications, very detailed from the federal level. I would say the construction cost was normally a little higher than if you had been able to contract with local contractors, but there with the federal government paying the principal portion of the bill they had to go under their guidelines. Overall, we didn't find

anything that was impossible [Cell phone rings]. I guess, hold on. I am sorry. Can you erase or do you just...

DUNCAN: No I just hit pause.

FARMER: Oh.

DUNCAN: It works.

FARMER: Now I lost my train of thought.

DUNCAN: You just said that construction costs were a little high because they had to, I guess, bring in contractors.

FARMER: Well, there were requirements such as bonding requirements and experience requirements were greater than there were many local contractors that could have produced the job well, but were not qualified under the federal regulations. [Cell phone rings]. Sorry.

[DUNCAN laughs]

DUNCAN: We have a little music accompaniment. You mentioned earlier that the game warden was involved, how important was wildlife management to the project?

FARMER: Wildlife management was very important to all parties involved and I think with that agency working in the county particularly as the county maintained the project in the future. I think it was very beneficial. Nancy didn't go into that very much?

DUNCAN: Oh she did a little bit, but I was kind of thinking from your perspective while you were actually designing the park if that kinda was something that you were ... that was in your head somewhere?

FARMER: I don't remember us having specific consultation with the forest or game warden department, but I do know that on some occasions we had work with the game warden and when he was brought in to manage and assist it was very beneficial to the project I thought.

DUNCAN: Do you remember if it was originally planned to be a wildlife sanctuary from the start?

FARMER: Yes, I think the intent of the design was for the project to be a rural project. It was to be as naturalistic as possible, but there were certain design requirements that required some of the areas to be disturbed. I do know that all the ball fields, fortunately these were open pastures and open fields and we were able to work with a design that allowed us to maintain as much of the naturalistic areas as we could. The deer population was good. I don't know how it is now but, quite a few years...

DUNCAN: There are a lot of them. [DUNCAN laughs]

FARMER: Probably too many now. Fishing was good initially because the pond was managed the first year or two. I don't know how much of the other wildlife is still here. The birds, there was groups even under construction that did erect some birdhouses and some feeders. And of course being so close to the University of Georgia with so many departments involved, the park has been utilized. And then the nature trail being connected which I was fortunate to be working with a lot of the property owners in developing the subdivisions and I feel like I assisted by us donating some of the wet lands of the property or negotiating with the county and the developer to have that accomplished. The Cook Trail for instance was one of those areas we were able to -- I think there were four major property owners we were able to work with and have them donate properties to the county in return they received some tax credits so it was ... I think it was good for both parties involved.

DUNCAN: You mentioned donors for the land that became Cook's Tail. Now how was this land originally acquired for the park itself?

FARMER: It was acquired by the federal and county government again I don't remember the percentage or ratio. This was a lot of ... well see at the time this was developed the Soil Conservation Service the federal level had a regional office in Athens in the federal building. So a lot of the personnel there were local citizens and then the county commissioners were very aggressive and I believe Representative Stephens, or the representative before him on the federal level, was very involved in obtaining this site and approval for this project. So we go back to a lot of good foresight on county commissioners, and the state and local

representatives and the Soil Conservation Service. I guess one of the disappointing things for me was that being a Jackson County citizen and living very close to the north end of the park we were never able to get Jackson County involved in the project which today would be a tremendous benefit to Jackson County had they become involved, but the commissioners at that time were just not as able to visualize the potential as well as the Clarke County Commissioners and I think it is interesting we never ... you know most projects you establish a bronze plaque that lists the commissioners and lists the designers and everyone involved and the commissioners were not out for that glory. They just said, "We're fine. Don't put our names on it. Build the park. We will know that we established it." But commissioner Jim Holland, Gene Sapp, Ms. -- gosh I can't think of that lady's name, she was from the Cedar creek area -- and Mr. Hugh Logan, there was one other gentleman that were county commissioners and they were all very interested in this being a community facility. I will later on think of the other two gentlemen commissioners, but they deserve a lot of credit for the foresight they had. But I always thought it was interesting they did not need or desire the credit that many commissioners desire.

DUNCAN: Yeah, yeah. You mentioned the R.V. park, now was that part of the plan originally?

FARMER: No it was not allowed to be because of the funding.

DUNCAN: I see.

FARMER: It was a desire in the community but it was not allowed by the federal government. At one point down the road, the county did obtain the permission to do design work for that, but it was never funded by the federal or local government agencies.

DUNCAN: That's why I was getting confused because I knew in the late '80s that proposal came up again.

FARMER: Correct.

DUNCAN: But that was the second time and it was actually thought at the beginning.

FARMER: Exactly, initially it was the desire of the community I should say, but it was not - actually under the federal guidelines it was not allowed at that point in time. The federal parks were mostly for campsites and picnic tables and picnic areas and that was designed and put in through the project.

DUNCAN: Yeah, yeah.

FARMER: The squirrel's nest I thought was a unique feature. We had a lot of fun designing that and working with that. It's basically a shed that has multi-levels and covered. And I know in the past the boy scouts and the girl scouts, and the local boys clubs, and girls club groups utilize that. And some local citizens have groups that stay there. Then we had a number of small covered campsites, and then open naturalistic campsites. None of these sites

were allowed to be entered by vehicle. You parked in the parking lot and walked to those sites and then trails were connected -- those sites were connected to the trails that were throughout the park.

DUNCAN: You mentioned that the sites were not allowed to be entered by vehicle is that another regulation or was that...?

FARMER: That was one of the design concepts that vehicles would be allowed into the park, but they would be parked and you utilize the trails. And that makes it a little inconvenient for our modern day life [DUNCAN laughs] but I think it is very nice we were able to accomplish that. We all want to park at our front door but the exercise doesn't hurt. [DUNCAN laughs]

DUNCAN: That's true. You kind of mentioned that you know there's the lake and kinda the Soil Conservation Service regulations and so on. Those are some kinds of challenges and that you pass as you came across. What about the natural area itself, the landscape itself? Did it offer any particular challenges that were difficult or advantages?

FARMER: I don't think that it offered any difficult challenges. I think it was exciting to be able to work with the vegetation and the terrain and the topography. I should mention at some point that one of the reasons for the lake was that there was a tremendous amount of flooding in Clarke County and particularly in the city area and one of the justifications for this lake was to control that flooding process and I think it has accomplished a lot of that but

by it being managed in the manner that it has we have had some wet lands that have been established, we have the water facilities that give us the utilization of pleasure and relaxation and recreation, but we have not destroyed the entire property by putting it all under water. So, going back to the design, the vegetation, the terrain, it was a tremendous asset, I think, for the site. [Water running]

DUNCAN: And how did you work with the terrain [DUNCAN laughs] You mentioned that you did put the ball fields in the sort of meadow area was that a conscious decision you kind of made [loud crash] because that meadow [unintelligible]?

FARMER: Yes, now there was fortunately a large enough clearing area. [Pots banging].

DUNCAN: [DUNCAN laughs] I think we pause this for a minute actually.

DUNCAN: Alright.

FARMER: I felt very fortunate that we had a large open area and that we could meet someone the desires and the requirements of the project by utilizing those open areas for the ball fields. Fortunately, the terrain did not require tremendous amount of grading. The topography was good and we were also able to leave, for instance the area around this facility in the natural pasture open area. This, I feel like, provides vegetation and feed for the wild particularly deer, and I am sure they are still here as populated as they were. So we were very fortunate in that area that we could leave some of the area natural in the open pasture.

Fortunately the cemetery was not a design problem. There is an existing cemetery on site. Many times the location of those can create problems, but this particular location of the existing cemetery did not create any problems. Some of the older citizens said there were ghosts wandering around on the project, but we did not become involved or see any [DUNCAN laughs] so that was very fortunate for us I guess. [BOTH laugh].

DUNCAN: I suppose that depends on the ghost, right?

FARMER: Yes, I guess so. [BOTH Laugh] The ghost didn't like us or something.

DUNCAN: I've heard -- you mentioned that it's thought that this may have been a Cherokee site at one point. I've heard there was a Cherokee site or perhaps a Creek site over by that camp area. Do you remember anything about that?

FARMER: We could -- in our work we did not find any visual signs, no pottery, no arrowheads, or anything that confirmed this. It's my understanding that while there was some grating at the lake site that might have been some pottery, but that could have been washed down from other sites, but I think that is the history, that at one point this was a general area used by the Cherokee Indian Nation. We did not on any of the site come across any graves or pottery, arrowheads, anything of that nature.

DUNCAN: Any kinda archeological finds?

FARMER: No. Not that I consider. The cemetery was the only archeological. And of course that as we mentioned and earlier discussed it had a lot of very old graves some very well marked and some not so well, maybe just a rock that is a headstone or something. I was fascinated with the gates and the iron work around the cemetery at one time it had been well linked and maintained.

DUNCAN: What kind of condition did the Soil Conservation Service leave the land after building the dam? Were there any particular challenges with that?

FARMER: [I am] not as familiar with anything with anything they might have experienced. I did know that there was quite a bit of research involved in the dam spillway because of the fact this was a flood controlled dam and they did not want to restrict the normal flow of the creek which was fairly large. And of course I haven't been back to see what kind of erosion problems but the four or five years that we worked with the project it was a good design. It worked well so we didn't see or experience any major erosion problems. You have the natural erosion of the bank from the lake water movement from wind does erode and my understanding and we did experience in the end some silting in the upper end of the lake, which actually created a very nice wetlands or natural area. It was very difficult to do any boating in that area, but as large as the lake was it didn't seem to cause a problem. The development fortunately to my knowledge was restricted around the lake so there have been no major disturbances. There some subdivisions that have been put in around the lake but most of those have large lots and have not created any environmental problem to the park that I am aware of. We didn't experience any during the design period. There were some

pastures with of course and cows and horses and some of the streams would have visual signs of that, but not on the capacity according to the water quality people that we had any concerns with and would anticipate. [Cell phone rings] Okay.

DUNCAN: Okay. What about like the area where they kind of took land to make the dam, which I assume must have come from the ball field's area?

FARMER: No I think principally that [unintelligible] was taken for where the beach is.

DUNCAN: Oh okay.

FARMER: I think there was a considerable of soil taken there. Actually this is not a very long dam, not a very large dam for the amount of water that it backs up. It was a good site for the dam. There was some bar area on the east side of the dam, but I don't remember there being very much bar area. There is a very little bit on the west side of the dam I remember that.

DUNCAN: Okay.

FARMER: Of course the Soil Conservation Service re-grassed and did an excellent job of preserving that area.

DUNCAN: So it was refurbished?

FARMER: Yes, it was immediately re-grassed. We ... our major erosion problems came from just the existing gullies and ditches that probably originated when this was cotton or farmland. There was ten or twelve deep gullies and ditches in the wooded area. One area I remember we had to be a little bit cautious and careful with. We tried to just leave it in its natural state but we did have to do something for erosion control in that area. The farmland had been well maintained as pasture so it was not in what I would call in poor condition most of the areas we grassed we didn't have to re-topsoil we just were able to establish grass and maintain normal amounts.

DUNCAN: And those gullies you said they were in the wooded areas?

FARMER: Yes. On the northwest side of the property, I remember in particular.

DUNCAN: You mentioned the swim beach and that's really one of the most popular parts of the park now. How did the idea for that come up?

FARMER: I don't remember the exact idea, I do remember at that time there were a lot of swimming pools in the area. Most of the subdivisions would have a community pool and there was a desire by some of the citizens that a more natural area be provided. However, when we decided to use the white sand and because of the red clay it is very difficult to keep it as natural, so the sand beach was ... the final decision was made to do that. We had some erosion problems with the sand. It's always a maintenance problem. At first I think it was

approximately 10 inches of sand over some sand stone base and that eroded down initially and had to be re-established but that is just part of the process of establishing a beach. Again I am not familiar with how much sand they have to add with the water and the lake ... action then does erode the beach and you have to maintain it, add sand to it occasionally.

DUNCAN: What about the other elements of the park? What did you envision first and then what came later maybe as you heard from more people?

FARMER: I think again we had a preliminary a very preliminary plan. We did like the circular ropeway around the ball fields. And so we definitely were able to maintain that. And the areas on the north side of the lake we wanted a more natural informal flow of traffic. The one thing that I do remember in design of the boat docks and the pier, this lake is designed to fluctuate in elevation -- I believe about eight to ten feet, I forgot the exact flow stage -- so those were some design difficulties that we had to take into consideration. As far as I know we were successful in accomplishing that although the pier appears to be ... the walk pier appears to be high above water it was required because of the change in elevation. The floating boat docks had to be designed so that they could rise up to the max flood level. We were fortunate on the design of the boat ramps that terrain very gradual natural so that was easy to design. Amphitheater was located in a natural area that lent itself well to the amphitheater. The campgrounds were very easy to design because we had a nice terrain and the gentle slope for the area and it was just a -- actually it was a very easy project to work on. [DUNCAN laughs]. Maybe I shouldn't say that they may want me to return the fee, the design fee. But no. compared to some sites that we have worked on I think that it has an

excellent selection of site by the county and the federal agencies. And of course as I stated earlier one of the goals was to control the flood that was very dangerous to Clarke County. There had been a number of deaths prior to from flood in the county downtown area prior to - - not downtown but lower near the downtown area. That I remember there were two deaths or three just prior to the establishment of this thing.

DUNCAN: Oh.

FARMER: [FARMER clears his throat] Excuse me. I consider it a very unique opportunity and a pleasure to work with site. Some you look at them and you say do I really want to tackle this project, but this is one that I considered very easy to work with.

DUNCAN: Was there any part of the project maybe I don't know a building or a picnic area or something that was sort of last minute or an after thought that you all of a sudden thought, "Ooh we really need this?"

FARMER: Not that I can remember except maybe the building we are occupying, the visitor center. That was not on the original master plan. We probably did not anticipate the need for that, this facility until the park was opened and utilized. The initial I think design was such that the office for personnel would be in the government offices and this would be open in the mornings and they would come out and be closed in the early afternoon or early evenings. I think this building is the only one I can think of that was not initially envisioned. Let me back up. I think there was a vision for this type of facility but could not convince the

agencies that we ... to justify it 'til the park opened and it became obvious that they needed just a little bit more on hand, a local facility for office and visitation and orientation projects.

DUNCAN: How involved were you after the park actually opened?

FARMER: I am trying to remember I would think at least ... we did this project in phases so we were probably involved after it opened for probably three, four years. I just don't remember the exact time period, but I do know that once the park was opened all the facilities were not in and we were fortunate enough to be allowed to continue on with it on the design phase of those projects. We did do this building as part of a later contract and then as far as the daily operation that was county responsibility.

DUNCAN: Yeah that would be something you'd have to deal with I'd imagine. Let's see I am trying to think what else I was gonna I've got a bunch of other things that I was gonna kinda ask but I am trying to remember... [DUNCAN laughs]

FARMER: Sure.

DUNCAN:...what I've already asked. Do you remember any parts of the park being added later other than you already mentioned the visitor center? I know land was actually added and were you involved in that at all?

FARMER: I can't remember I don't think I was if there was additional properties other than what I have shown you on the original boundary.

DUNCAN: Okay

FARMER: Except for the from dam south is part of the nature trail. I was involved in some of the acquisition of those properties as I stated earlier working with the developers and property owners, some of which had never developed their property, but were willing to either donate or trade for tax incentives.

DUNCAN: And that's Cook's Trail?

FARMER: Yes that's Cook's Trail.

DUNCAN: Was that part of the original design?

FARMER: No it was not. That was something that came later and I think that was probably Nancy and Walter Cooks' desire. I do remember one instance where I walked that before it was established with Nancy and Walter. And I remember walking in waist deep water and swamp and actually very concerned that snakes would bite me, but Nancy and Walter assured me they would not and so I still hold that against them [BOTH laugh]. No actually it is very interesting we walked the trail and got to a point that we were so deep in the trail that it was not beneficial to turn around so we just went on through. It was quite an experience

that day, I don't know if Walter and Nancy remember it, but I do very very vividly. But I did walk the initial trail with them and did do some volunteer work as far as designing the nature center but most of the work was under contract with the county and we did design some of the facilities at Sandy Creek Park in the early stages of the park. But I have not worked on this park in the last, I'd say, fifteen years.

DUNCAN: Do you visit the park?

FARMER: Yes, more so in the '80s and '90s. 2000 I have not visited it very much at all.

DUNCAN: The kids are grown up I assume.

FARMER: Yes the children are grown up and have children of their own now. And as I get closer to retirement we have some property in the North Carolina Mountains and so most of our time is spent there.

DUNCAN: How did the park today, or the park even fifteen years ago or ten years ago when you visited more often -- how did it compare to the original vision of the park when you first came and looked around and thought "Okay this is what this will be?"

FARMER: I guess I would have liked to seen over the years a little more care and maintenance of the park and a little bit more of the advancing of the park. And by that I mean just refining the areas that we established. And I am a little disappointed that during

the '90s that I think the park may have been a little neglected. I think funds floated to other areas in the county and probably that just had to be. But that was a little disappointing to me that I felt like Sandy Creek Park was neglected. But I don't know the inner workings of the county organization at that time the thought process was and what the citizens were demanding and you have to many times, when it is public facility you have to go with the citizens requests you got so. I just don't know, but that was a little disappointing to me that I felt like it just wasn't maturing as elegantly as it should and would like to have seen refinement.

DUNCAN: When you say refinement I guess what do you mean by that?

FARMER: Well, what little that I have observed is that the visual manicure of the facility the buildings have not been maintained quite as well, however, as we were saying this room for the use of twenty years it looks good, but I still think that very little has been done to update and enhance the park, signage things of that nature, just a little more care personal care maybe hasn't been involved. And hopefully you just express – there's a new manager and maybe he will have the opportunity. And like I said I don't know the inner workings of the last ten years so I don't think that the formal ball fields -- I don't think this park was designed to be a very formal high use facility. I think that the ball fields were designed for families and groups to be able to come out and play informal ball. The county does have facilities that are more -- how should I say – intense, designed for intense use. I don't think this project was intended for high intensity use. But I don't know what the daily use is now, but I think probably it could be a little higher. I am not sure how many citizens and new

citizens are really aware of the facilities that Sandy Creek has and Sandy Creek Nature Center are available to them. Of course, I do know from being with some of the services offered Clarke County there are a lot of services that in the leisure service department that are offered so maybe this is just one that is being utilized more than I realize at this time.

DUNCAN: If you had the opportunity to come back and as you've seen the park developed change something about the design, what would it be and would there be anything?

FARMER: Today, I don't know of anything. Of course I haven't in 2005 been through the park and looked at it but I can't think of anything in the present time.

DUNCAN: It was well done I guess. [BOTH laughs]

FARMER: No, I wouldn't say that. I would be interested to hear the comments of the managers and what they have to work with and what they would like to see changed or revised. But I do think we were fortunate at the time that the park was designed that we had some flexibility and were able to work out some of the major problems you would have. And with this large of site and no more organized activities than we purposed for this site it was easy to work with.

DUNCAN: What is your favorite part of the park?

FARMER: I guess there were two areas that were my favorite part, the trail on the west side of the park I remember from the amphitheater around to the pier and back into a wooded area there and into the community building and some of those trails I personally enjoyed. I also enjoyed the east side where the camp facilities were. I always liked to walk in that area. Did not ever camp here, my sons did camp here quite a bit, fish and utilize the lake and they liked to camp here. Of course, they were younger and wanted to know why they couldn't drive their car there -- their pickup truck down the trail, but I think they realized after they utilized the facility why it was done that way. I would say the trail around the lake was my favorite part.

DUNCAN: The natural areas?

FARMER: Yes.

DUNCAN: What have you been doing since designing Sandy Creek Park? You mentioned you have your own firm.

FARMER: When we finished Sandy Creek Park, course this -- always when you do a project of this nature it opens doors to other project. But we just continued to do design projects and then evolved from clients wanting us to stay with the project from design phase all the way through. We became a general contractor and pretty much for the last 15 years that is what we have done. We now present time are working on a large church addition which we designed and constructed. And we are working on a branch bank which was

designed by a local architect and engineering firm. And we are negotiating on two exciting projects for the future so principally design and build projects, ranging everywhere from daycare centers to parks to commercial strip shops or commercial developments.

DUNCAN: Are those projects now are you doing actually buildings or landscape?

FARMER: We do the entire facility. Our firm is more of a design and build. We sit down with a client and we find out their needs outline our services and what we are able to provide and normally we carry that project to a complete finish. To where the client occupies the facility and that would include all the site work including the landscaping the complete project so it is very interesting.

DUNCAN: That was actually something I meant to ask was coming in as a landscape architect and doing the buildings here. Had you done buildings before or was it...?

FARMER: Well, we actually hired an architect to work with us on this project. Fortunately he allowed us to give him a design concept and he then implemented our concept drawings so and it was a very close venture. Wood Campbell was the architect we selected to work with us he is since passed away a couple of years ago. Wood would allow us give him some design ideas and then he would improve on those and do the finished architectural drawings. So we did not -- although we were responsible for the entire project we did utilize architects and engineers. Ben McLeroy and Associates did our field staking and field work.

DUNCAN: Looking back on this park now you mentioned what areas that you would like to visit the best, what areas are you proudest of?

FARMER: I am sorry?

DUNCAN: What areas are you most proud of from a design stand point?

FARMER: I think it would just be the park itself.

DUNCAN: The whole thing.

FARMER: I think it was a project in our time in our own life and in our business that was very -- it was a large project, it was a unique project because of the joint venture of the county and the federal government and the different entities that we had to satisfy. I am not sure that at my stage of life that I would want to design this size project again. [DUNCAN laughs]. I can't remember the exact time but I think it was approximately nine months of working time involved in it drawing document presentation. I want to remember there was approximately a 100 pages of documents and of course large specification booklets. And I think my staff was me and two people, so it was quite time consuming for us. I was fortunate enough to have a good assistant, Michael Chamfer. He, I think, did an excellent job helping me carry the project through. I guess in any firms' life you have certain projects that you are very excited about and enjoy working on and those you do because you have to make a living. Sandy Creek Park was not one that we did because we had to make a living, it was

one we were excited about from initial concept or contract time to finished product. And that's just one of the projects that come along in a lifetime that you thoroughly enjoy working with and working on. And as I said earlier we were fortunate to have good commissioners. They took a personal interest but they did not want to dictate to you what took place as far as design and concept. They wanted to give you their input but you were to take it and utilize it the best you could. So we were very fortunate.

DUNCAN: That is about it for actual questions that I have, do you have anything to add?

FARMER: No, I have enjoyed the interview and you have been a lot easier than some of the people I have had interview me so [DUNCAN laughs]

DUNCAN: I hope so, the idea is not to put you on the spot. [BOTH laugh] Well, thanks very much.

FARMER: You're welcome.

[End of interview]

Biographical Information

RBRL OHD 005-06

Robert Farmer

b.

Occupation:

Ken Simmons and Associates

Ben McLeroy and Associates

1974 established his own firm

Richard B. Powell
Library for Political Research and Studies

Subject Analysis

RBRL OHD 005-06

Robert Farmer

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- Working with Ken Simmons
- Starting his own firm
- Working with the Soil Conservation Service
- Priorities for the park design
- Setting
- Citizens desires and needs from the park
- Maintenance
- Working with multiple agencies
- Construction Costs
- Wildlife management
- Trails
- Involvement of county commissioners
- R.V. Park
- Campsites
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