RONNIE VINIKOFF
Wood Purveyor – Forestry Management Service – Rockdale, TX

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Date: March 10, 2007
Location: Ronnie Vinikoff's property near Rockdale, TX
Interviewers: Lisa Powell, with assistance from Rebecca Onion
Length: 59 minutes
Project: Southern BBQ Trail: Texas

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Southern Foodways Alliance
in association with the American Studies Department at the
University of Texas, Austin
and
The Central Texas Barbecue Association

(*We were recording too early, so the first 00:02:17 is just sound check and is not part of the interview at all.)*

[BEGIN INTERVIEW] [00:02:17]

Lisa Powell: This is Lisa Powell, and we are outside of Rockdale, Texas, on tenth of March 2007. Rebecca Onion is checking sound, and we're here today to interview Ronnie Vinikoff. So, would you go ahead and restate your name for the tape, and, if you don't mind, state your age as well.

Ronnie Vinikoff: My name is Ronnie Vinikoff, and I am forty-two years old.

LP: Great, thank you. And where were you born?

RV: San Gabriel, California.

LP: Thanks. So, do you want to just tell us a little bit about what you do, what your occupation is?

[00:03:04]

RV: Yeah, I do forestry management, in the, probably the Milam, Burleson, and Lee County area, and as a by-product of what we do, we make various forestry, I guess, products, out of the things that we take off the land under the forestry management, and the things that we make are railroad cross ties, pallet material for pallets, barbecue wood for restaurants. We do a lot of mulch, stuff like that, and then we use, anything. There's nothing goes to waste, I mean, we generate sawdust also from the operation that we use in our own—. We use a lot of our own compost, you know, just in the managing of the forest. What we don't use or can't make forestry products is composted, and put back into the woods for, you know, future generations of trees.

[00:04:08]

LP: And how long have you been doing what you do?

RV: I've been, probably, for twenty-seven years, actually. I started this business when I was fifteen years old. I did work a second job, I was an iron worker, used to be an iron worker, and was in the iron workers' union in Austin, that was how I got into this area, was through the iron working. That job, the construction industry kind of went bad in the mid-eighties in this area, and so I was, I turned to this. I had to where I, I had to travel a lot to do the iron working, and I actually ended up getting hurt real bad on a construction job out of Gatesville, Texas, and decided, and once I recovered from that, I decided just to go into this full time. This has been the only source of income I've had since 1989. So, if you, want to go—. It's always just kind of been a part time up until '89; but it's been a full time since '89.

[00:05:11]

LP: And so, could you tell us a little bit, both about, about the land that you're working on, and about how you started working on this particular section of land, or in this particular area?

RV: Well, like I say, it was mainly as a source of supplemental income when I was working construction. I used to, you know, construction is a little slow in the wintertime because the weather is bad, and I had a background from, I used to live in east Texas and had a background in logging and stuff like that and, so I knew how to run a chain saw and started cutting firewood as supplemental income, and kind of got to noticing in the area, the amount of waste that was going on, trees just dying out here just because of the mismanagement of them. Nobody around here manages their trees. They either just let them grow to be totally thicket, or they just, until

somebody, a rancher or somebody decides he wants that piece of land for pasture, then they bring a bulldozer in and just doze it down and burn it. And I just, I just didn't like the waste, so I thought that there would be an opportunity there for somebody who was willing to come in and manage these—, and do it right, there's an opportunity there. So I, that's how I got in this area. I mean, they do do that in other areas, just not in this particular area. And a lot of it is because of the value of the timber. A lot of it's real low-grade hardwood, it's not really good for a whole lot of things, but it is some of the best barbecue wood there is around, I found out, you know.

[00:06:49]

LP: So, what kind of wood in particular are the barbecue restaurants that you sell to looking for, you know, what kind of attracts them to your product?

RV: Probably 90 percent use post oak, that's the particular species of oak. But there's, everybody's got their own secret recipe, and they use a combination of different things. I mean we also have hickory that grows out here, we have pecan that grows close to the rivers, there's several rivers around here that have native pecans that grows along the banks and the river bottoms. There's a little bit of mesquite, but probably 90 percent of what we sell is oak, is the post oak variety. There is also some red oak. The red oak burns a little hotter. We sell mostly red oak to people who grill with it, not necessarily barbe—, not necessarily smoke, there's different types of barbecue, there's you known smoked barbecue, then there's grilled. And then there's another thing going on, there's a lot of Italian restaurants in the area that have these big wood-fired brick ovens that they bake their pizzas and lasagnas and stuff like that in, and we cut wood, they like the hotter burning wood with those things too. And it's getting to be as the price of energy goes up, gas, electricity have gotten so high, that there's a lot of restaurants that used

to just have gas grills are putting wood-fired grills in just because of the economics. It's cheaper, cheaper than the gas and electricity. And it gives the food a better flavor, grilling over the smoke, it gives a little of the smoky flavor to their food. Normally, it used to just be regular electric grills or gas grills. So we're also just kind of like, it's also a form of energy that we're selling ***[Laughs]*** to some restaurants, yeah.

[00:08:41]

LP: Great. So, could you tell us a little bit about the process by which you get wood from out here, you know, growing as a tree, to the barbecue restaurant, if you could just kind of walk us through how that happens?

RV: Well, mainly we start out on land that has not been managed, it needs to be thinned. Lot, like I say, we go in there and try to take out the worst first. There's a lot of crooked trees that through the years the older trees have died and fell on them, and they've came back up crooked and they're hard to work with, so we get them out of the way. And there's a lot of trees that have diseases in them, we take those out; there's a lot that are infested with bugs, we try to take those out. And then, after we've taken that many trees out, sometimes there still needs to be a few more just because the woods aren't thin enough. We try to reduce, in its natural state there's probably four hundred trees to the acre growing out here, which is way too much, and we try to reduce that down to probably forty to seventy-five trees per acre of the best trees, healthy trees that are out there. And one of the things too, we take out a lot of the older trees cause in this area, because the sand is real poor quality soil there's not a whole lot of nutrients in it, the trees only live probably to be about fifty to seventy-five years old here, that's about as long as they live and they die anyway. There's a lot of trees out here that are mature, and are dead or dying,

and we find out as we cut them down, they're probably over half rotten in the middle already. And, like I said, we take those out and it gives the younger, more aggressive trees a chance to grow. There's a lot of trees that are trying to grow that can't reach the sunlight because they are just in total darkness from these huge trees that are, you know, taking up all the sunlight and all the water. And as a means of doing this, it helps the trees that we live grow nine times faster than they would have if we left them alone, if they would even survived at all, you know, the mortality rate is a lot better, and it makes the land more productive, which means, less land will have to be cleared, you know, we're keeping more land that's in a plantation type mode rather than, you know land that will just get clear cut for the wood, eventually.

[00:11:08]

LP: And so, once you've kind of selected the trees, and, you know, gone through the process of harvesting them, then what's the next step in getting the wood to the restaurant?

RV: Then it is taken, we have a portable firewood mill, which there's very few of them even in existence. I was, helped some engineers actually design this mill. It was actually built over in North Carolina. Me and some people that were interested in automating the firewood, because of the labor situation, it's just very labor intensive work, and we're trying to take it and automate it anyway we can. And so we designed and built a few of these firewood mills, that are portable, and we can take them out there in the woods, and we can probably set them in the middle of a forty acre area and bring all of the wood out of the woods to this firewood mill and then it processes whole trees into firewood. It measures, cuts, and splits them, and as it comes out of this mill, it goes into some crates that we also designed. They look like, kind of like portable woodsheds. They get, we have different sizes—they hold anywhere from three to four tons of

wood apiece. And then the wood is, after it's been processed, and cut and split, it's stacked into these containers, and that's the first and only time that the wood is ever touched by human hands. And then we have a special truck that will pick that container up. We can put up to seven or eight of them on a eighteen-wheeler and haul them to town. And then that same truck that can pick them up and put them on the trailer can also take them off the trailer and deliver them one at a time. We'll just take the trailer to a central area in town. We have a wood yard north of Austin in Round Rock, and we'll take the truck there and we'll distribute them from there. And every restaurant that we do has, we have one for every restaurant, plus we have about thirty extra ones that we keep loaded all the time for them. And we just take them a full one and pick up their empty one. The driver never has to touch the wood, never has to get out of the truck to make a wood delivery.

[00:13:35]

LP: And about, I guess, both how many restaurant customers do you have, and about how many deliveries do you make, sort of each night or each time you go into town?

RV: It varies; it kind of, it fluctuates up and down. We lose a few, some of them go out of business, through no fault of their own, it's just the economy, you know, they come and go, and then there's new ones that start up. We usually try to keep anywhere from sixty to eighty restaurants all the time, and as far as consumption, we probably go we probably deliver at ten tons a day, every day, seven days a week, to that many restaurants.

[00:14:25]

LP: So, one thing I neglected to ask you a little earlier, because we had talked about it before, but just for the purposes of the tape, would you go ahead and talk about how many acres you work on?

RV: We currently have about fifteen thousand acres under our management right now. That, we, or I, own about nine hundred of that, and the rest of it is under lease, through other landowners, that we lease the property from.

LP: And, would you, getting back to the barbecue restaurants themselves, and sort of your work with them, and this may vary very much from restaurant to restaurant, but, kind of, how did you get started working with them, and how did they choose your particular product?

[00:15:27]

RV: Okay, it goes back to when I was working construction, and I was looking for extra work, and started cutting wood, just, you know, mainly I was just doing residential, you know, cutting people that had fireplaces and stuff like that. And then it got to be where that was only seasonal, and as time went on, as I wanted to build the business, I was looking for other sources. And I just got out and hit the pavement, started passing out cards, and as time went on, those who decided to use my product were happy with it. When other restaurants would need wood, a lot of them that had been in business have had, a lot of them have told me that before I took them on, they would go through three or four wood guys a year because they're just not dependable. They were just looking for extra money. Most of them had jobs, and it was just extra money on the side, just kind of like when I started out, none of them really took it serious. I just took it serious, and devoted a lot to the service part of it. I'm, I wasn't necessarily the cheapest guy in town, but for the deal, you know, I was the best deal for the money, because you know, that was

another reason we got the automated delivery system. To where we keep these crates loaded all the time and if it's pouring down raining, there's ice, snow, whatever, you know, we're not out there in the weather trying to load wood, all we got to do is get in the truck and deliver it to them. And we can do it in the middle of the night, when there's less traffic. And like I say, I've gave them very good service and every time they've been real good about referring me to other restaurants as they came to them, looking for, wanting to know "Where'd you get that wood? That's good looking wood. How much is it? Who do I call to get it?" It's taken off from there, it's kind of like, you do people right, and it will take care of itself. So that's just, and now, I don't even, I have probably at least one or two a week come to me now, and there's people on a waiting list, waiting to get one of our containers and our wood, just because, you know, like I say, there's just—. And I won't take on more than I can handle, that's another thing too. You know, I don't want to try to just do everybody I can; if I can't do a person a good job, I won't take them on until I can. And so, you know, as time goes on, and also, I keep in check our resources. I don't want to deplete our resources either, you know, I want people to know that if they're getting wood from me that the wood is renewable, it is a renewable resource, and it's in the process of renewing itself, and I don't want to sell it faster than it can renew itself by what we do.

[00:18:25]

LP: Okay, so, here's just kind of a fun question, and you don't have to answer it [laughs], but what kind of wood do you, do you particularly like the taste of the barbecue that comes from that wood? Do you have a particular favorite yourself, or do you like lots of different kinds?

RV: It's according to what I'm cooking. Actually, like pork, I like the taste of hickory, pork cooked on hickory wood the best. On beef, I like the taste of oak. And, it's just, you know, it's

just like anything else, I like to play around a little bit with it. Mesquite is a tough wood to cook with. It's very, has a very, very strong flavor, but every now and then I like a little mesquite. It's good with seafood or chicken, stuff like that. But there's not a whole lot of mesquite out here, and it's getting harder and harder to find, because there's other things that they're making out of mesquite now that are more valuable than firewood and so we have to compete against that. There's a lot of furniture being made out of mesquite, this rustic furniture And hardwood flooring, which is, you know, they get quite a bit of money for that, and it's hard to pay what these other guys are willing to pay that are making those products from it, from the mesquite, so we're kind of getting away from that.

00:19:55]

LP: Rebecca is going to ask a question.

Rebecca Onion: Oh, did I have a question?

LP: It looked like you were eager to ask a question, if you weren't, that's ok.

RO: No I was curious about, kind of, the percentages of, or maybe you said this before but maybe I did not have it as articulated. What percentage of types of tree is on your land? Is it mostly oak, is it, the mesquite thing reminded me.

RV: Okay, yeah that's a good question. Yeah, probably, the basic trees, there's a little bit of everything out here, there's so many different kinds of trees, and then there's also so many species of each kind of tree. Like I say, the post oak is a particular species, and within that species there's probably a hundred and fifty different types of post oaks that are out here also, but they're all pretty close to the same tree. There is, each one has its own different

characteristics. But it's probably 60, 60 percent post oak, I would say, 20-30 percent of the red oak. Probably 5 percent hickory, and 5, 10, 15, whatever's left of that percent of cedar. We got quite a bit of cedar out here, and it's not the type of cedar that is in the, native of the Austin area, that is more of a juniper. There's a lot of people that don't like that because a lot of people have allergies to it and it puts off a lot of pollen. The cedar we have out here isn't of that type; it's the aromatic red cedar. This the type that they make cedar chests out of, and closet linings, that you, you know, see in these higher-end houses and stuff like that. It's a real nice wood. There's—I think that some people even sell them for Christmas trees, you know, for live Christmas that they cut down. The cedar is more like a weed out here; we try to take out every bit of the cedar that we can just because it saps a lot of the moisture out of the soil. It's like a wick; it just saps all the moisture out. In areas where there's cedar, I forgot to tell you this too, a lot of this area that we clear cut right here was probably 90 percent cedar. And the cedar had just kind of taken over, and where the cedar's at, nothing else will grow. It puts out like a sap which gets in the pores of other trees. They can't drink or breathe It just kind of smothers them out, and most of the trees that weren't cedar in there were dead, the oak trees that were left in there were dead. So we just went ahead and clear cut it, and put it into grass for cattle because we do run some cattle on our property too. They help, actually in the forestry, they help fertilize the woods a little bit. You know, we feed them, and they eat grass, and they actually plant grass for us too, because where they eat grass, they eat the grass seed, and some of the seed just passes through them, and they get into other areas, and if it can get sunlight, it will grow grass in those areas that didn't have grass before. So they're pretty beneficial in that way

[00:23:24]

LP: And then, are your cattle beef cattle, do you eventually?

RV: Yes, yes, they're beef cattle.

LP: Do any of them eventually become barbecue, do you think, as part of the cycle?

RV: I'm sure they do, yeah. We sell the calves off every year, and they go to feed lots. You know, the buyers, we take them down to the auction up here in Milano is where we market our cattle at. And where they go from there I don't really know, but I think the majority of them do go to feed lots. They go to Kansas, and places up in that area where they, Fort Worth, where they have big feedlots and they feed them out. I'm sure they're processing beef for some ***[indiscernible]***, so they probably do go to barbecue.

[00:24:12]

LP: So, just to kind of continue on some of the things you were talking about in your last answer there. Could you, I guess, just kind of verbally walk us through some of the different parts of the landscape around here? I know earlier you were mentioning, you're getting ready to build a lake, and you know there were different kind of parts of the property that you work on, and kind of what those different parts are like?

RV: Right. I just kind of use my experience of working the land over the years to try to prescribe the best application to do with each part of the land. You know, just according to how eroded the land is, that we'll go in there, and we try to stabilize the land as much as possible to keep it from erosion. We'll build dams, and we'll terrace the land in places that need to be, to hold water back from rushing away, and we'll put what they call rip rap in places, in gullies and stuff, which slows the water down and holds soil back. That's the main thing that we're—. I try to be a good steward of the land, is the main thing. There's really no set way of doing it, you just

have to kind of do it through my experience of working the land, prescribe what would be best for each area. Some areas we'll just go in there and we'll clear, you know, and that's the best thing to do with that particular area. Then there's other places of the land, where, there's just, because if, there's some area of the land—. We also do a lot of soil sampling, you know we'll take samples of soil, we'll try to figure out why the trees are not doing good in certain areas. There's some areas, where there's trees, that we'll cut down that won't be as big around as my arm you know, four or five inches around, and that tree is a hundred years old, and it's because, you know, the soil is just, there's nothing there. And then there's trees that are, you know, two-foot diameter that are only thirty, forty years old. They're getting lots of water, lots of nutrients, like I say, that's just, how we do, you know. ***[Short pause]*** And the land around here, it's mostly rolling hills. There is a lot of springs, a lot of natural artesian wells, the water just bubbles up out of the ground, it's real good for growing timber. It's mainly sandy soil, sandy loam type soil. There is clay down underneath the sand that holds water, but the, the summers out here are pretty brutal. You know, we get quite a few days, excess over a hundred degree days, and it just wicks the moisture out of the ground. We'll go through there, and where we thin the trees out, it actually makes you can see, these trees that we're sitting under right now, see how the limbs go all the way down to the ground. It makes the trees bushier, that's the trees way of shading its roots, to keep the water in the soil. And also, when you have more limbs all the way down like that, it will produce more leaves, and in the fall, the leaves fall off, and that also helps build up the soil, it turns to compost. And trees that are out, if you see up in them woods up there, there's hardly any tree limbs, except for at the very top, because it takes sunlight to get limbs, they won't grow, and they don't have very many leaves except for at the very tops of the trees. ***[Short pause]*** There's a science to it all, it's more than just coming out here and chopping

down wood ***[laughs].*** Like I say, if you manage it right, there will always be trees here for future generations, and that's the main thing that I'm, I guess what I'm trying to say is that. In my lifetime, if I just clear cut all the land, there would probably be twenty, thirty, forty thousand acres that I would probably clear in my lifetime, and I can try to take ten or fifteen thousand, and manage it right, and it will be better trees when I'm dead than when I was here. If everybody will take that approach to the environment, I don't think we'll have a problem, keeping the environment healthy. And that's just the main thing, it just hasn't been managed in the right way in the past, it's always been, you know, backed by big money and corporations and greed and stuff like that. And, like I say, these big, massive, if they couldn't make money on the deal they wouldn't do it, some of these big mills, and I'm not saying that, you know—. A lot of it, the sawmills are guilty of a lot of the stuff in the past, a lot of the damage to the environment, that's why a lot of people have gotten a lot of negative publicity that do that kind of work. And I just, you know, they've kind of turned it around now, they don't do it the way they used to, back a hundred years ago. You know, and hopefully through these tapes, they'll see that, they kept records of them, you know, that the big—. They just don't go in there and just clear, rape the land than they used to. There's quite a few big mills that are environmentally conscious. I mean, they plant millions more trees every year than they ever harvest and there's probably more trees down in the United States than there ever has been in the history of the United States. You know, or it's approaching to what it used to be, when they first settled the country, you know [laughs]. But, it's a different kind of timber now though. A lot of the timber back then, it was native, it was natural, and now it's planted, they have big plantations. That's mainly to save the natural stands of timber that are still here.

[00:30:13]

RO: Do you feel like people around here are changing their attitudes about conservation or stewardship, the people that you know?

RV: Oh, yeah. Yeah, a lot of them, just, you know, that, all they can see is the way they have done it for generations and for years Most of them are just ranchers, and they either want pasture or they want woods. They do want woods, but they want woods for cover, for their cattle to get in out of bad weather in the winter time, and they wonder why their woods are dying; it's just a matter of education, you've just got to educate them about it., just to let them know, if you want woods, you're going to have to manage them, because if you don't, they're going to get managed one way or another, either you manage them, or Mother Nature is going to manage them, and it may be in a negative way, you know. And a lot of it is, they're seeing, you know, Mother Nature is managing them. Their trees are dead, they're dying. They're starving to death, basically, you know. There's only so many nutrients in the soil, and you have so many trees sapping so many nutrients, it can only, it's just a matter of time, they're going to starve to death. And then you hit a two, like right now, we're in about a three year drought, and it's really taking a toll on the trees that have not been managed. But the ones that have are surviving it no problem. That's one thing we do, we take care of the soil. Main thing, like I say, you got to preserve moisture in the soil around here, what little we've had, you know, we've been able to keep in here. That's why you see a lot of these piles of bark around trees and stuff like that, we're trying to keep, you know you dig down underneath there it's wet; that's what it needs to keep those trees alive.

[00:31:56]

LP: And do you, again, talking about folks in this area, or maybe even folks from farther away, do you have any people who ask you for advice or come out here wanting to learn about what you're doing?

RV: Sure, sure. It's mainly, a lot of people see me on the road a lot, hauling wood, and they want to know where the wood is coming from, and if they would, you know, they're wanting to clear some of their trees off their land. Like I did a job out here in Lexington, the guy, in Lexington, Texas, it's about twenty miles down the road here, he had ninety-two acres he wanted to clear, we actually ended up clearing less than forty of it, just because I told him that, you know, it was not a good idea. You know, I changed his mind, basically. I educated him about his particular place. I went out there and looked at it, and he had a lot of rocky soil. He had this idea he wanted to clear it all off and put it in grass, and I said, well, you're not going to have any grass growing there anyway because there's rocks, and you're not going to be able to till the soil unless you remove all of these rocks, and that's going to be so expensive, and so he ended up, and he was, he's kind of a hunter, and he wanted some wildlife, and I told him that would be a good, just leave this part here in trees, the rocks aren't going to erode away, that's a good thing, just leave the trees on that particular, we can go through and thin them out a little bit, but, you know, as a point, that he wanted to clear ninety-two acres and we ended up clearing less than half, and he's tickled pink, you know, about not having to do it after he just talked to somebody who educated him about his own property, he didn't know—. Just because I, like I say, I, with my experience with this area, I've been in this area for twenty-seven years, I've been working this area and after a time you just know the area. So does that answer that question?

LP: Yes, it does, thank you.

RV: I wasn't sure if I got off, sometimes I get off.

[00:34:00]

LP: It's great. ***[Pause]*** So, just to go back kind of to one thing you mentioned a little bit, you kind of talked a bit about how your portable firewood mill worked, and it was really interesting, and I just didn't know if there was any other kind of special or particular equipment that you use that you'd like to talk about how it works. If not, that's okay too.

RV: There's a few things that we use out here. A lot of it is logging, actual logging equipment that they use, that loggers use, to cut wood that would normally be, go to lumber mills, to saw mills, stuff like that, that we've adapted to our type of wood here. Our wood here is a little different, like I say, it's low-grade hardwood. And the soil here is very sensitive, it's very loose sand, it's very easily broken up, and the more you break up the soil, the more it causes evaporation, and also it packs it down. So we've taken some things, like we've put different kinds of tires on them that would distribute our weight out, and we also build mats, out of the brush off the trees, that will, you know where, that way actually the equipment actually never touches the soil, it holds itself off the soil, it doesn't compact it, it distributes our weight out, especially in wet areas. We'll use mats also in crossing streams and stuff like that, just so we don't tear up the soil, so that when it does rain it washes away. But a lot of it yeah, that's mainly on the harvesting of the trees, because, and—. The reason why we do that is the labor situation, they're a lot more efficient, they're just high production equipment that we can get a lot done with minimal labor, which also keeps our cost down, and keeps us competitive. And the firewood processing mill also is, like I say, it's just an efficient tool. It takes, one man can cut probably four cords an hour, you know that's cut, split, and loaded it into these containers, versus

doing it the old way with a chain saw, you might could cut four cords a day, and that's just cutting it, that's working your butt off, having to cut four cords a day. That's not split, that ain't loaded, that's just cut laying in the woods still. And this is, you know, already out and ready to take to a customer.

[00:36:46]

RO: So, do you have employees? How many employees do you have, and who do you work with?

RV: I've got two full-time employees besides myself. My father is retired; he likes just to get away. He lives down on the coast; he is a retired fisherman. He used to do off-shore deep-sea fishing charters, but he's retired from that. And every now and then he just likes to get away, he likes to come out here and, you know, cut woods. I think this is the ideal job; I don't really look at it as a job, because I'd just as soon be doing this as I would be doing anything. This is what a lot of guys do on their vacations, they go deer hunting, and they go out to the woods to get away from it all, and I feel fortunate that I get to come out here and I get paid to do this. You know, I get out there and I work half a day sometimes, if I feel like it, I'll go fishing, I'll go riding on my four-wheeler, or go hunting, if it's seasonal, and if it's hunting season, if I feel like it. But I'm just around it all the time, you know, it's just. I do like to get away every now and then. I have a Harley that I sometimes just like to get out there on the open road, and just the freedom, just to, I like to ride. There's just a lot of beautiful country around here, on the back roads, I like to ride the back roads. And it's an efficient way to getting around with gas these days, you know [laughs]. And that was the main, the main, I probably, I go back and forth to Austin quite a bit, it's about sixty miles, fifty, between fifty and sixty miles. And it saves a lot of fuel going back

and forth versus driving a pickup truck or a car. *[Pause]* But yeah, I've got a couple of guys that work for me full time, that help, you know, like I say, the wood does have to be handled. Mostly I run the heavy equipment, I used to be able to, There's nothing I don't do or can't do out here, I do do it all, sometimes. But yeah there's, during the week I have guys that work out here full time, actually do some of the chainsawing. There's quite a few of the trees that we take out in the initial stage, like I say, there's a lot of the crooked stuff, the automated equipment doesn't work real good on the crooked stuff. They're mainly made for trees that have been managed and they're real straight-growing. And so there, a lot of guys that have this automated equipment, you either have the choice of, on the crooked stuff, you either have to do it manually with the chain saw, or a lot of it is wasted, and I'd rather utilize it, use as much, so we do some chain sawing, that's what we, but other than that. I mean, we might run one tank of gas a day in the chain saw, which isn't, you know. The equipment can handle probably 85 percent of the trees out here, you know, but there is that small 15 percent that I would just rather not just let go to waste, so we try to strive to use, to make a use for everything that we can out here. And, like I say, some of it is a little labor intensive, and so that's what we hire a little extra help for, younger guys. Like I say, I'm in pretty good shape for my age, and it's because I've worked hard, but you know I'm not as young as I used to be, and I know it. And I know that some of this work, it's a young man's job. And that's another thing too, why we've gone to the automation, is that I can Most people who do this kind of work, they do it probably until they're about thirty-five years old and then it gets just too hard work for them to do it anymore, and they go to easier jobs. People who do it this way, I mean I know guys who that seventy years old that still do it, and, because it takes a lot of labor, I mean we probably eliminate 75 percent of the labor by automating it.

[00:40:56]

LP: And so, on that note, what do you think is the sort of future of your operation and the future of your business?

RV: I think that it's, as time goes on it's just going to get better, actually, because of, people are more environmentally conscious, they're going to want to know where their materials are coming from, that they use in their business, and people are, like I say, if they're conscious about the environment they, or at least I would if I was a barbecue restaurant I would want to know the wood that I use is not just being clearcut land that will never be in trees, that it's being managed, and it's, it will always be, you know. I'm not in this business to cut all the trees down because then I'd be out of business if there's no trees, you know. So we want to make sure there's always work for us. And at least, and I'd like to be able to, attract enough employees that, I would hope that one day that I would have a family, it hasn't happened yet, I have no children, yet, that would carry on the business. But if the time comes for me to retire, I would like to be able to pass it on to the people that's running it, and have some employees in place that could basically keep it going, and go from there.

[00:42:21]

LP: And so I think I remember when I was talking to you on the phone, that you said you usually get up pretty early in the morning. So, I'm sure no day is typical in your work, but could you just tell us a little bit about when you start your day, and kind of, to the extent that there's some sort of typical day, kind of what your work day might be like?

RV: Typically, it varies on the time of year, but typically it's ninety degrees year round here ***[laughs],*** at least nine, nine months out of the year here, and so I'm usually up by about two

o'clock in the morning. And not all that necessarily has to do with the weather, some of, a lot has to do with our, we have a pretty bad traffic situation in Austin, and that's our major market, where we do our deliveries at, and so I try to get my deliveries done, some, you know, I start doing deliveries at two o'clock in the morning, and try to be out of town, or have them done, and finished before rush hour in the morning, which is about six o'clock in the morning, and I'm on my way out here, to work. ***[Short pause]*** And I don't necessarily go into Austin every day, I'll usually, you know, when you say, we take a big eighteen-wheeler load in and we can haul seven or eight of these containers at a time. And, but I'll go probably two, three times a week, in there, and get them all done. At least every other day I'm going there. ***[Pause]*** And when I'm bringing wood from, I'll leave here sometimes at ten o'clock at night, and have time to get to Austin by two or so, and get the deliveries done, and get back here. And then if I'm tired, I'll lay down. A lot of times I'll work until it starts getting warm, until probably ten in the morning, twelve, and then I'll go to bed. I'll sleep, sleep when it's hot, and then maybe get, a lot of times, what. Also, working at night helps if something happens, and we break down, and need parts. That, we're not working until five o'clock and then figuring out we're broke down and then have to wait until the next day. If I'm broke down during the middle of the night, and I'm done by ten in the morning, I got from ten until five to go get parts and get things repaired and going for the next night. So it works for us pretty good.

[11:44:47]

RO: How do you have light, to work at night?

RV: We, just like car lights, these machines have lights on them. You know, they work off the 12-volt systems, the electrical systems on the equipment. Yeah, they, a lot of the big logging

operations, like I say, these big sawmills, they do the same thing, because the heat is so hard on the equipment. I mean, you imagine out there, these big diesel machines that generate lots of heat, just a lot of hydraulics on them, and just, you know, a hundred degrees out there, it's just, it's hard on the machinery. And the machines, the tires on them, just like cars, you know, where, have you ever noticed in your car, in summertime, and you're running the air conditioner, how, the difference in how hot it runs? Or if you have an older car, some of the new cars it just doesn't phase them because they're just engineered better. But, you know, your tires on your trucks. That's another thing too, we do the deliveries at night, because the pavement is so hot, and it wears the tires out, and we're carrying eighty thousand pound loads, you know, and it just wears them out. Everything just runs better when it's cool. So that's, like I say, they have lights these days ***[laughter].*** But we're not usually in the woods running chain saws at night. We usually do that early in the morning, usually about daylight, we try to do it. Like I say, we have very little of it that's not automated, put the part that is we do need to have daylight to do that. So it's done probably between daylight and ten o'clock in the morning.

[00:46:28]

LP: Okay, I just wanted to ask you a little bit about your camp here, if that's ok. You've got a pretty good looking ***[laughs]***, good looking camp out here. So, if you don't mind just describing a little bit about your camp for, for the tape, and kind of what life is like out here.

RV: Okay, well, the way I kind of look at it, it kind of dates back to, that's how a lot of small towns got started down through the South. A lot of these little towns used to be logging camps, you know, because they were just so remote out in the middle of nowhere that you couldn't drive back and forth to where the big cities were, so they set up temporary logging camps. And

eventually, they had like different, they'd bring a doctor in, and they'd have a, you know, different people that lived there, in a little camp that kind of grew into a small town. That's the way I look at it, it's just a modern day logging camp. You know, it brings some of the conveniences of home. So I, like I say, home is about sixty miles from here, and it gets pretty, like I say, when you get to be my age it wears on you, having to get out here and work all day, and then having to drive an hour each way commuting back and forth, plus the waste of gas, you know, I'd rather be able to work an extra couple of hours here than being stuck in traffic. So, we have, you know, kind of like an RV that we can move around on our property that's close to where we're working at, just kind of, like I say brings some of the conveniences of home here. We have a big water tank that we bring out here, and we have water, and we have a little portable shower, and a portable generator. We barbecue a lot. You know, it's just a way of life after a while. It's just, you know, it's very relaxing, just to be able to, after a day's work, just come in here and clean up, and just sit back under the shade trees, just sit back and barbecue, and have a glass of iced tea or whatever, and not have to worry about sitting in traffic for an hour.

[00:48:35]

LP: Alrighty, could you also talk just a little bit about some of the kind of relationships that you have with the other people who have land around here, and kind of, how you all work together?

RV: Yeah, well, I treat, I just try to treat people, not necessarily, the people and their land also as if they were family and if their land was my own property. I don't do anything different on their place than I would do on my own property. I, you know, and they see that, and they respect me for it, and like I say, I treat the people just like they were family, and vice versa. If they need anything, they call me; we call on each other a lot of times for help. Sometimes a neighbor over

here will get his tractor stuck, and I've got big four-wheel drive machinery like my logging equipment, and I'll go over there and wench him out or pull him out. You know, same thing here. Sometimes I'll, I might get mine stuck, and I might have another tractor to pull it out, but I can't drive them both, and I say "Hey, can you come over here and drive one of my tractors to help pull me out?" ***[Laughs]*** Like I say, it's just, like I say, we're all very close-knit neighbors. You know, that's the way I was brought up, and I think that's just the way it ought to be, you know, just everybody help each other out whenever you can. It comes back on you ten-fold, is the way I feel. Just treat people the way you want to be treated, that's part of the, you know, the country life and the living, the Southern way of life, is the way I look at it. And it's getting to be where it needs to be a global thing, I think. I think the whole world could take a lesson from us down here ***[laughs].*** We're all eventually going to have to get along one way or another I think, for us all to be able to survive here on this earth without destroying it. And like I say, it's just, we all like this way of life and we want to preserve it as best we can. Like I say, just, it's very peaceful out here, as you've noticed, it's very quiet, it's a great, there's a great, aw what's the word, what can I think of, recreation, recreational area, aspect to the land as well as, you know, just the business side of it. You know I don't, it's not just a business, it ain't just about, I'm not motivated by money. That is a nice part of it though, you know, that part kind of takes care of itself Like I say, if you treat the land with respect, and everything else in a conscious, environmentally conscious way. I am to the point, you know, a lot of people ask me, you know about, what about these environmentalists. I am an environmentalist, you know, about the land. I am not a preservationist. There is a difference. Most of the people who claim to be environmentalists are actually preservationists. They try to preserve something, and that I'm, that's good if something can be preserved. The woods is something that is ever-changing on its

own. You can't preserve something that is ever-changing on its own. So you can just, you just have to manage it, like I say, in a good way. So, you can preserve it to a certain extent, but that's to say, that's why they have a lot of these, they thought they could preserve them, up there in the Northwest, and all up in that area. They banned tree cutting, and try, and they're doing a lot of it for the wildlife, you know, the spotted owls and all that stuff, and now there's nothing left because a lot of it's burned. It takes years to replace it. I think it's better to manage it, than have to replace it.

[00:52:39]

LP: Okay. One thing I haven't asked you yet, I keep referring just to "your operation." Do you have a name for your operation?

RV: Yeh, Forestry Management Service is the name of my operation. Most, but it, most people just know me by my, by my personal name, Ronnie Vinikoff, you know, which I, I've got that name out there more. Just because, people want to be less, I've noticed, fixed to a corporate, more to a person than a corporation or company name or whatever. And I like it, you know the, me and all the barbecue places and restaurants that I furnish, I know all the managers and owners on a first-name basis, and everything is just real close-knit and personal. And so I've kind of just done by the wayside of that corporate name, and just use my personal name, and I just like it better that way. It keeps a better, more of a lower profile. And I did have a trademark name of Lickety Split Firewood there for a while, but I, like I say, like I say, it just—. I don't know, I just like going by Ronnie, more than a business name. Like I say, it keeps things more personal and more of a low-key. And that's the thing I, I've been very careful to not attract a lot of negative publicity, because I just don't want the liabilities of it, and I just don't need it. Life's too short to be, you know, worried about things like that **[laughs].** But, like I say, I just, I, once

people, there's some people who have had some concerns about what I do, but after talking to me, it takes me about twenty minutes and I can turn them around pretty easy, and let them know, and like I say, if they still have any, if I can't talk them into it, I'll bring them out here and I'll show them. And I said, here, look at what it used to be, and this is what it is now, and you tell me, you know, what would you rather have.

[00:55:02]

LP: Rebecca, did you have any questions that you'd like to add?

RO: I just had one small one, which, probably is kind of ridiculous, but what kind of wildlife do you see out here?

RV: We have quite a vast area of wildlife. I don't know of a bird that we don't have out here. There's just, there's more out here now than there was when I, before I bought the place. We have a lot of deer, we have the white-tailed deer. We have all of your varmints. We have raccoons, possums, skunks, you know, armadillos. There's quite a few feral hogs that roam the area. There's, there's wild housecats that live out here, that have gone out, you know, and escaped to the wild. They're feral cats you know, but they're, they're not. We have bob cats. I have heard, I've never heard one, but I know what they sound like, we have a panther that's out here. And I don't know if you've ever heard a panther or not, but it's pretty spine-chilling to hear one. I mean it sounds like somebody is out there killing a woman, I mean, a woman screaming for bloody murder, that is what a panther sounds like when they scream ***[laughs].*** And I expect to hear that, you know, like I say, it's just kind of, it's kind of frightening ***[laughs]***.

RO: Yeah.

RV: We do have a lot of coyotes, a lot of wolves. At night, when it's dark out here, and the stars are out, the moon, you can hear the coyotes howling all night long. Yeah, we have quite the wildlife out here, a lot of squirrels. And like I say, there's when we go in there and thin out the woods and let the sunlight in, there's grass, there's berries there's all kinds of things growing now that weren't there before. Before it was just. If you look over there in those woods right there, what do you see growing on the floor? There's basically nothing but leaves, because there's no sunlight, nothing will grow in there, it's total darkness, and it takes sunlight for plants to grow. Like I say, we have a lot of wild blackberries that grow out here, they're edible, mushrooms, all kinds of things growing, all that wildlife and deer will eat. And grass, we plant, in areas, we'll plant grass in areas, if nothing else will come up. We try to keep stuff growing all over, and we fertilize what we plant. And we have four lakes on the property right now that are stocked with fish, catfish, and bass and perch and stuff like that. In the wintertime we have a lot of ducks that will show up that migrate from up north. Geese, will stop, sometimes, they'll just—

LP: Sneeze, but it's okay.

LP and RO: ***[Laughter]***

RV: Bless you. The geese will stop here on their way, on their flight down south, to rest, and get water, down at the lakes, so.

LP: Any other questions? Do you have anything else at all you'd like to add to the recording right now?

RV: Not that I can think of.

LP and RO: ***[Laughter]***

RV: I think we've pretty much covered, covered everything

LP: Great. Well, thank you very much. Just to end the official interview recording. Signing off on the tenth of March 2007, interview with Ronnie Vinikoff.

[00:58:55]

[END]