

Hal Flanders – The Father of Alpine Recycling!

by Robert Flanders

Hal Flanders was born in 1915 in Denver, Colorado. As a youth he spent a great deal of time in the outdoors, hunting and fishing, hiking and scrambling up mountains in the Rockies. He followed his father into the Bell System, working for Mountain States Telephone and Western Electric all over the mountain states until 1955.

That year, he was transferred with Western Electric to New York, and began working as an engineer on the DEW Lines (Distant Early Warning radar network) across the top of the continent. He then went to Indianapolis and was in charge of the final assembly lines for ALL the phones being made in the U.S. at that time by Western Electric (early sixties.) Shortly thereafter he was transferred to Newark, NJ, where he was placed in charge of all the Western Electric personnel in the Northeast. It was from this position that he retired early, at the age of 57, in 1972.

Hal and his wife Mary, sold their house in New Jersey, bought a 33' travel trailer, and spent the next several years traveling all over the continent, from Canada to southern Mexico, always interested in photographing, birding, hiking, etc. His interest in birds brought them to Alpine in 1977, where he connected with Grainger Hunt of the Chihuahuan Desert Research Institute and began helping with a research project on falcons. They liked it so much in Alpine they stayed the rest of their lives.

They bought a house at the top of Sul Ross Avenue in Alpine, and Hal began a life that he described as "busier than before he retired." He led nature hikes in the Big Bend National Parks for groups from the American Museum of Natural History, helped numerous other carpenters in the area, fixed things for people, and ultimately, around 1990, decided it was wrong that Alpine did not have a recycling program. So he and a small group of mostly senior citizens started one.

At first they sort of camped out at the old landfill at the end of cemetery road. One fellow spent hours seated on a stump, crushing aluminum cans with a sledgehammer. Hal invented a glass-crusher, using an electric motor, a 55-gallon barrel, and lawn mower parts.

The operation soon moved to a location behind the present-day Beall's Department Store. There they really grew. Hal talked indefatigably to anyone who would listen about recycling, but especially to the powers-that-were in the city of Alpine government. He pursued grants, from the Rio Grande Council of Governments, among others. Before long, they had a cardboard scrap baler, machines for moving and loading what was by now tons of crushed glass, cardboard and other materials. The city hired Randy Guillotte to work at the yard, later hiring Johnny Galvan and others. Over the years, they sold many tons of materials that would have otherwise ended up in the landfill.

In the late nineties, when the new landfill opened towards Marathon from the US Highway 67 cut-off, there was a yard opened there, and the city had to staff both that yard and the one still operating in Alpine. There were then several paid employees.

Around 2000, City management decided that the program was not making enough profit (totally ignoring all the other benefits of the recycling program, which had won Hal and the city of Alpine numerous awards) and the program was shut down. Hal was, to say the least, not pleased about this, but could do little in the face of official negativity in regard to the whole concept of recycling. Besides, he was then approaching his eightieth year, and was slowing down some.

Hal's vision of a vibrant recycling program was kept alive by a group of his friends who named themselves Hal's Pals. Eventually, under different City management, Alpine Recycles was created, and along with the new disposal company, Texas Disposal Systems (TDS) which has a business model that incorporates recycling, has gotten recycling up and running in Alpine again.

Hal, who died suddenly on October 8, 2001, would be pleased to have the recycling center named in his honor. And he would hope that the program would continue and expand, and that eventually, all citizens of Alpine would know their 3 R's - Reduce, Re-use and Recycle. He loved this place so much that he wanted it preserved for the many generations to come.