

## Progreso bridge owner was well-known figure at border crossing

McALLEN – Sam Sparks, a Rio Grande Valley farmer who turned proceeds from the sale of land into a controlling stake of the Progreso International Bridge, died Wednesday. He was 83.

The majority owner of the bridge catering to pedestrians crossing from Progreso into Nuevo Progreso, Sparks worked every weekday there until last week, when his health worsened from heart-related problems, said his first-born daughter, Elizabeth Johnson. Sparks was a common sight at the route linking Winter Texans and other U.S. residents to the kitschy border town, Nuevo Progreso, as he waved people he knew across the bridge for free or chatted with strangers near the toll booths.

Johnson said Sparks delighted in the “little things and sometimes big things” that went into operating the Progreso bridge, one of only two privately held international ports along the entire U.S.-Mexico border. While he fought fiercely to protect his business interests, once lobbying against a plan to force all commercial traffic toward Pharr, he maintained his bridge’s family feel.



Samuel Robert Sparks Jr., left, and Sam Sparks are shown in this photo taken in one of the family sugar cane fields for a magazine article on sugar cane, circa 1988.

A few Christmases ago, he asked Johnson’s sister-in-law to bring waffles and cookies to the bridge for holiday crossers. Aghast, she questioned how she could ever know for how many to prepare.

“It’s not an industrial bridge. It’s a small town bridge,” Johnson said. “The larger the Valley gets, the more we have to expand, probably still for the safety of it, but he always wanted to keep that small-town atmosphere.”

Sparks moved with his parents to Santa Rosa from Alabama when he was 2 years old, and he graduated from school in Edinburg. In 1945, he began farming and purchased his first tractor two years later using insurance money he received from breaking his leg (his children called it his “lucky break”).

A second break came a year later when he married his wife of 63 years, Seanne, the high school sweetheart he met on a blind date and often cut class to go see.

For most of his farming career, Sparks worked land – called Valley Acres – owned by an oilman out of Dallas. When the oilman sold the property and gave him a share of the profit in the early 1970s, Sparks decided to begin investing in the Progreso bridge.

Before beginning the venture, he asked for advice from Sam Vale, the owner of the Starr-Camargo Bridge which, along with Progreso, is the only other privately-held bridge on the Mexican border. The call launched a friendship between two men who often joked that the only way to be in the bridge business was to be named “Sam” or “Uncle Sam.”

Using money from the sale of Valley Acres, Sparks purchased ownership shares into the corporation that built the bridge in 1952, eventually acquiring enough to be called the owner. Vale recalled that Sparks bought up the stakes by simply calling other shareholders to say there was cash waiting for them at the bank once they dropped off their ownership certificates.

Understanding their unique status as private bridge owners up against cities that saw international traffic as a moneymaker, Vale said, the friends had a “habit of defending each other’s back.”

When U.S. Customs announced a plan in 1997 to direct all truck traffic to the Pharr crossing, Sparks fought against the plan he said would cripple Mid-Valley industrial development related to Mexico. He called for support from U.S. Rep. Ruben Hinojosa, the Mid-Valley native who worked with U.S. Sen. Phil Gramm to bring full commercial status back to Sparks' bridge.

Hinojosa said in a statement Friday that Sparks was a "pioneer entrepreneur of the Rio Grande Valley who believed in progress and in building up local communities."

Adopting to growing demands from northbound and southbound traffic, Sparks completed construction of a new six-lane international bridge in 2003, demolishing the 1952 bridge he once bought. Although the Progreso bridge still carries commercial traffic, it remains popular for U.S. pedestrians crossing its canopy-covered sidewalks to the tourist city on the other side.

For all his political and business acumen, Sparks was a kind and caring individual, Vale said. He gave freely to disadvantaged people on the Mexican side of his bridge and often kept cold bottles of water in his office that he passed out to border crossers sweating under the hot sun.

"He always liked to have lunch at regular places, just small restaurants or barbecue places," Vale said. "He felt there was a place for everything and used to tell me, 'We need to have places where people know everybody.'"

Sparks was active in the Valley's agricultural community, serving as a long-time board member of the Rio Grande Valley sugar mill in Santa Rosa. The Port of Harlingen named a warehouse used to store sugar in his honor.

Sparks also was a philanthropist who quietly gave to needed charities. In 2003, he contributed \$250,000 to the Sunny Glen Children's Home in San Benito to build a new cottage to house 10 additional needy children. He was a deeply religious man who served on the Abilene Christian University board of trustees and faithfully attended church every Sunday.

At today's memorial services, Sparks' children will take a cue from their father's time on the Progreso bridge. The family will pass out bumper stickers he once distributed to passerby that read: 'Practice random acts of kindness.'

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