

J. SHIRLEY DANIEL
Interview 48a
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ABSTRACT: Entrepreneur J. Shirley Daniel came to Diboll in 1937 to open the town's first movie theater. Throughout his association with Diboll, he owned two different theaters, ran the Antler's Hotel, and worked as a pulpwood contractor. His first theater came to be known as "The Tonk" and the second theater was The Timberland Theater.

Marie Davis (hereafter MD): Interview between J. Shirley Daniel and Marie Davis. Mr. Daniel lives in Burnet, Texas. Today's date is February 15, 1985. My name is Marie Davis. Mr. Daniel, where were you born?

Shirley Daniel (hereafter SD): I was born in Waxahachie, Texas, on February 24, 1908.

MD: And whom did you marry?

SD: I married Elnorie Allen and we were married in Dallas, Texas.

MD: And the names of your children?

SD: Frances Shiree and Joseph Allen.

MD: Where did you work before you came to Diboll?

SD: I moved to Diboll...I moved first from Temple to Lufkin and then I came to Diboll in October, 1937.

MD: How did you hear about Diboll?

SD: Well, that is a long story. Virgil Milner was the chief engineer of the Southern Pine Lumber Company and he had a twin sister who married one of the best friends I had in Temple, Texas. And their father died...was an identical, well, they weren't identical twins, naturally, because one was a boy and one was a girl.

MD: Yes.

SD: But their father died and I went over to Kileen, which was a small town at that time, about like Burke used to be and went over there to attend the funeral. And I had decided that I was going into the movie business and my friend in Temple asked why I wanted to get into the movie business. And I said well, it just sounds like a good thing to get into.

And this Virgil Milner was there and he introduced me to him. And he said, "Well, if you are going to put in a movie, why don't you come to Diboll and put in a movie." And I said, "Diboll, where in the...[deleted] is Diboll, Texas?" And he began to tell me all about East Texas and where the town was and so forth. And one ...one Sunday afternoon Elnorie and I were down at Galveston with our kiddos on the beach and I said, "Honey, let's get up and go see Diboll." So we got up and came to Houston and they were paving the road. The new highway into Lufkin at the time and when we hit the edge of town the first place we could find to stop to spend the night was the "Shady Nook Trailer Park" right across the street from the present Angelina Chevrolet. That was the only place in town that was a motel or trailer park or motel. And it either there...you either stayed there or downtown at the...where the jewelry store is on the corner of the Masonic building. That was all that was there.

MD: Angelina [Hotel], isn't it?

SD: Yes. Well now, that was the place. Angelina was the only other place in town, but having two children, we wanted to stay in a tourist court. A little more room. That is how we heard about Diboll.

MD: Yes, and then how did you make contacts to come here?

SD: I made my contacts through Virgil Milner. He was a lot of help to me in getting things set up to where I could meet Mr. Henry Temple and Mr. Arthur Temple, Sr. He arranged for them...to meet....to see them both.

MD: Yes, and then they started building the show and....

SD: No. That was a long story. You will have to delete a lot of this, I am sure. I went to Hot Springs. Mr. Henry Temple was a big believer in going and taking the baths. And Virgil told me that Mr. Temple was in Hot Springs and for me to go up there and see him. So we left and went to Hot Springs and I went in the steam room with Mr. Temple and sat down with my clothes on while he was sitting there in the steam room. And we discussed about my putting in a movie and he was a big movie fan and he wanted a theater in Diboll. And he told me to come back to Lufkin and see Mr...what is the lawyer's name? Minton. R. E. Minton. It was on a Saturday afternoon and I went in and introduced myself to Judge Minton and told him what I wanted to do and that I had just been up to see Mr. Henry Temple. And he said, "Well, young man, your story sounds good and I am going to dictate this contract like you said he wanted it done." And he said, "I'm going to call down to Diboll and find out a little bit more about it." But he tried to call Diboll and Mr. Strauss and Mr. O'Hara were very unhappy when he put in a letter to Mr. Arthur Temple, Sr. that he tried to call Diboll and couldn't get anybody to answer. The reason the mill was closed and the office was closed was because Charles Frederick had killed himself the day before out at Ryan's Lake and they were all attending the funeral. That was why no one answered the phone.

MD: Yes.

SD: That was when that happened and we started to work on the theater and we opened it on August 26, 1937.

MD: Yes. What were some of the things that you did to attract the patrons. You had drawings, prizes and things like that, didn't you? For a while.

SD: Yes, we had "Pot of Gold" until they outlawed it. Where I put silver dollars in the pot and lucky number won that and we....well, we had twelve cent night and business would get a little slack and we would run a show for twelve cents and stack them in there for two shows. Quite often we did that, but during the war there wasn't much of anything anybody could do but go to the show.

MD: 'Cause they couldn't...didn't have the gasoline to get out of town.

SD: That's right. That's right.

MD: Do you remember the name of the first show that was shown?

SD: The first show was "Wild and Woolly" with Jane Withers.

MD: Uh-huh. Well, good.

SD: And.....Junior Cook and I drove to Dallas to pick that film up because I couldn't have it shipped because I didn't know exactly when we were going to complete the show, but it looked like we would make it on that Saturday. So we drove up there Friday night and picked up the film.

MD: Was the theater full that night?

SD: Yes. I never will forget. I took in \$84.25.

MD: Oh my goodness. You were getting rich quick.

SD: And I was flat broke the night when....well, I didn't have change enough to make change on the first ticket. And I had to sell some nickel tickets first. I mean, ten cents tickets first so I would have some change.

MD: What was the price of a ticket. Do you remember?

SD: They were ten and twenty-five cents.

MD: Ten and twenty-five.

SD: Ten and twenty-five.

MD: And you....you had two shows during the week each night and then on Saturday?

SD: We had three shows a week. We showed on Saturday midnight, Sunday and Monday and then Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, we ran a show and then one on Friday and Saturday.

MD: Now what was the “Honky-Tonk? Or the “Tonk” that it later became known as?

SD: Well, there was a notorious place down at the river at the time. I shouldn't call names, but anyway it was known as “The Tonk” down the river where they sold beer, bootleg, more or less. I wanted to....we started out with a candy case in the lobby and there just wasn't room enough for the candy case and the popcorn machine. So I went to Mr. Henry Temple and asked him if it would be all right if I put a building out there on the side at my own expense. And he said, “No. We will furnish the lumber and you pay for the labor of putting it up.” So I put the first addition on...on the side of the show where we had a fountain in there and we sold hot dogs, and hamburgers and candy, and cold drinks in this building. And later we put the other addition on it where the kids could go in there and dance. That was added about two years...about 1939.

MD: And this was the major source of entertainment for the teenagers in Diboll?

SD: Well, one night somebody said where they were going. Well, they were going honky tonking up at the picture show. The name just kinda stuck.

MD: Yes.

SD: Called “The Tonk.”

MD: I know that this was the major source of employment, “The Tonk” and the show for a lot of teenagers and you were so good to so many of us that we all remember you for sorta giving us our first start. Do you have any idea how many teenagers worked for you through the years?

SD: I believe maybe...oh, maybe seventy-five.

MD: Seventy-five in all.

SD: Oh, opening night. On opening night, we had Larue Warner selling tickets. John Singer was the operator. Junior Cook took up the tickets. Ferris Sturrock took up the tickets upstairs and at that time it was segregated. And then we had quite a few that came down and swept out at different times. Cecil Seekings was one of the ones that worked for me. Paul Durham went to work for me when he was small enough that he had to stand on a Coca-Cola crate to be able to pour corn into the hopper to pop corn. He popped corn for me...oh, years I would say. Joe Homer Jones. Willis Jordan's boy. What was his name?

MD: Billy...Billy Jordan.

SD: Billy Jordan. Ray Kimmey.

MD: Carl Weber.

SD: Carl Weber Ferguson.....

MD: Geraldine..

SD: Geraldine Martin Pouland. And the Clark girl. What was her name?

MD: Jerrie.

SD: Jerrie Clark.

MD: Clark.

SD: That is just some of them.

MD: Just any number of them. I know.

SD: And then of course, I had Marie Glass.

MD: Oh, well....you really gave me my first start too. And I appreciate everything you have done for me. You also ran the Antlers Hotel for awhile. How did you get started in this?

SD: Well, on the Antlers Hotel. The company was running the hotel at that time. It was losing money every month and Mr. Henry Temple called me one day. By the way there was only five telephones in Diboll at that time. Mr. Henry Temple had a phone. Mr. Eddie Farley had one at his house, two in the office.....one in the office, one in the general store and I had one in my house because I had to have it to book pictures. They ran me a line over there. And Mr. Henry called me one day and said, "I am coming up there and get you in a few minutes. I have something that I want to talk to you about." I knew something was up, but I didn't know what it was and we rode around a little while. I said finally, "Well, Mr. Temple, what is it that you want to tell me?" And he said, "Well, Arthur and I have decided we want you to run the Antlers Hotel." I said, "Mr. Temple, I don't know anything about running a hotel. And I just don't want to do it because it is a losing proposition." He said....we finally came back and he let me out and he said, "Well, you think about that." And so I thought about it and I was eating out of Temple's pot. I thought I had better take....and I did. But with the understanding that I would get three months free rent and make some changes. So we went in and changed up the breakfast deal where I would...we would do all our cooking out in front for the breakfast for hotcakes and eggs. And not have all that kitchen help. And they were stealing the place blind. Absolutely. I caught old nigger Jack with a ham under his

overcoat one time. You can cut that out. But we ran it for quite a while until I was notified that I would be....my number was coming up and I would have to go in the Army. So I had been to Tyler and had my examination and I came back and made a deal with Mr. Jackson. W.W.....not W.W. Jackson, but Mr. Jackson.

MD: Albert?

SD: Albert Jackson to buy the theater. I mean, to buy the hotel and I was out in the cotton patch. Corn patch with him when all the deal was closed and we shook hands and he was going to buy it, plus the inventory and everything and I came back home and evening paper came out and it said no father over thirty-six to be drafted, so that let me out.

MD: Yes?

SD: So Mr. Albert Jackson called me that night, or came by to see me, and told me. He said, "Now, you didn't know that when we made that deal and if you want to back out it is all right with me."

MD: Yes....

SD: But I had already made the deal and I had too much to do anyway, so I let the deal stand like it is and Mr. Albert Jackson took it over.

MD: Yes....tell me about the first power saw.

SD: Well, one night I was in the movie. My wife and I were in the movie and this man came down the aisle and squatted down beside me and said, "I have a new saw out and I would like for you to see it." And I said, "Well, I had heard that they were building a power saw and if you will sell it to me, I will be glad to go out and look at it and listen to your story about it." He said, "Well, I can't do that because I am on my way to Houston to set up an agency down there." Well, finally the answer was that.....well. All right, I will sell it to you if you will come out, try it and look at it. So we went out and he cranked it up and we went out beside the show and we cut down a small oak tree about eight inches big and when that saw started running, everybody started running out of the show, because they didn't know that was the first power saw that they had ever heard. They didn't know what it was and John Singer, the operator, he didn't know what was happening, so he shut down the show and everybody came out and watched the demonstration of the power saw. And after that was finished, well, the man sold me the saw all right and I still have pictures of it. And then after that was over, everybody went back in and sat down and we continued the show that night.

MD: Do you remember about what year that was?

SD: That was along in the '40s. The early '40s.

MD: Early '40s.

SD: I remember the two-man saw that is in the museum in Lufkin. We were running it out on Highway 94 and we were in the woods and we heard the explosion of Texas City. Out there in the woods. I know we were using that saw and had been using it for quite a while on that day. I remember that very well.

MD: That was in '40s? When did you move from Diboll? You moved to Lufkin.

SD: We moved to Lufkin in...oh, golly...I believe we moved to Lufkin in about...oh....it was shortly after Mr. Henry Temple's death and I believe that was in 1948. Mr. Henry Temple was a big believer and anyone that lived out of the Temple pot lived in Diboll.

MD: Yes.

SD: And when Arthur Temple came over and went to work. He said as long as people did their job, he didn't care where they lived. So we decided we would move. We had brought this acreage out from Lufkin and we moved up there and built us a house on it. Sometime in the '40s. I don't remember exactly.

MD: Yes. But now what did you do when you moved? Did you sell the show?

SD: No. We continued to run it. The show...oh, golly. Can't think when I sold that to Larry and Joyce. I guess about 1970, I guess it was. Maybe before then. We sold the show to...I ran it and we still lived in Lufkin and we came down here every night and ran the show. Albert Jackson was running it for me at the time. He was manager, more or less, and Larry Bowman and Joyce were running it after Mr. Albert Jackson died. They took over and ran it for me and they drove up here. Where were they at...Katy? They came up from Katy every weekend...

MD: Every weekend.

SD: Every weekend and ran the show for me and I finally wound up selling it to them.

MD: Yes. Now they tore the show down. The old Timberland Theater down and had moved before then?

SD: Yes, I had already moved to Lufkin by that time.

MD: No...I mean...another show.

SD: We built the new show down on the highway. Oh golly, I would have to go back and consult some records about when we did. I remember very well the name of the new show was King Solomon Mines with Stewart Granger....

MD: Was the first one.

SD: That was the first one shown in the new show.

MD: Yes.

SD: And that was along in the '50s but KTRE came on. That made a lot of difference in the attendance at the movie. They opened up up there and we debated whether or not to build another one. And we went down the new highway went in....I believe the first building down there was the furniture store that was put in. And the company put that building up for me right next to it. Temple Associates built it. And I would have to look back on the records.

MD: Yes...well...

SD: When that all took place.

MD: You did continue to run the show after the old Timberland Theater was torn down?

SD: Yes...yes...it was torn down.

MD: When you moved to Lufkin weren't you engaged in pulpwood?

SD: I worked for the company after the consolidation for four years and two months. I had worked for myself practically all my life. I was an independent pulpwood contractor out of Southland Paper Mills. And I contracted all of Southern Pine's pulpwood over each county that they operated. That they had timber in and when they consolidation between the Temple Pineland branch and the Diboll went together on one company. I went to work for the company and I worked for them for four years and two months and I decided that I had rather be working for myself, so I quit.

MD: Yes. Okay. I noticed that you have always been active in civic work. What projects have you done that come to your mind?

SD: Well, we had a youth worker that the company hired here. And we organized a Boy Scout troop and I took them on two or three trips. One of them to San Antonio for a two-week trip. Camping trip mostly. Then we organized the Lions Club. Incidentally I have been....I was Kawanian in Temple. I was a charter member of the Diboll Lions Club and now I am a Rotarian.

MD: Rotarian? Well, you have had it all then.

SD: We had a man in charge of the railroad here. D. D. Devereaux. It was always said of him if you needed a 2 x 4 on a job, he always put a 4 x 4 and that was how thorough he was in everything that he did. And the Handle Factory had just been built here and they were putting the blowpipe from the Handle Factory over to the fuel shed so they could use that much more fuel of good dry shavings. And Mr. Dred had a crew of men. That

pipe was way in the air. They were using a hoist to pick up the pipe and join it together and when they got up close to the fuel shed...why...the fuel house is about three stories high and they needed a line to run over from the top to help guide the pipe so the wind wouldn't blow it so they could make the connection. And he sent Doug Warner up on top of the fuel house and told him, "Doug, I don't want you crawling that ladder every time I need you. I want you to go up on top and just stay up there and when I need you I will send somebody up." And so Doug went up and Mr. Dred swung the pipe around and they made that connection and in a few minutes he was ready to put another one on there and it was on a hot August afternoon. And I'm sure it was shortly after lunch, Mr. Dred hollered for Doug to pull the line so he could hold the piece of pipe they were going fit in there next...no, Doug. They couldn't see him. He wouldn't answer. So finally he sent a man up the three story ladder to find out what was the matter and as the man reached the top why he looked over and Doug was asleep on the dog house up there. Sound asleep in the shade. He turned around and hollered to Mr. Dred. "He is asleep." Mr. Dred turned around and he said, "All you men, take off your hats and bow your heads." Mr. Dred took his hat off and with his grey hair streaming down his face, he looked up to the sky and said "Oh, Lord, I know that I have been a sinner, but Lord I want you to just grant me one request. Please let me live until five o'clock so I can fire that S.O.B. that is asleep on top of that building."

I have retired when I ended...when I was sixty-two and we bought us a travel trailer and we have enjoyed very much traveling around over the country. And we hope to continue quite a many more trips that is about all I got to say about it.

MD: Okay. Mr. Daniel, what was your first impression of Diboll and the people when you first came here?

SD: Well, we came through Corrigan on the way up here and I knew that was a river that we had to cross and I could start looking for Diboll. So when we got up here, why Lee Estes, Lee Estes garage there and a little café. And we turned and I didn't see anything else, so I turned around and went back down, and I pulled up...the old crossing was right there at the edge of the old building where the office and the commissary, and everything was and I pulled up there that Sunday afternoon and I said, "Can you tell me where Diboll is?" And the man said, "Mister, you are standing right in the middle of it." So I didn't think much of it. I thanked him and we drove on up and it fortunately happened. And I said, "Well, I am going to the first house that I can see a little activity." And I drove up to Virgil Milner's house and he was my only contact here. And I went to his house to find out where he lived. He lived down there right....

MD: Yes.

SD: You know, down the other side of Kimmey's.

MD: Yes.

SD: We were used to having hot water when we came here and naturally there was no natural gas here and butane hadn't been invented yet and I wanted hot water. So I took an

old hot water tank that used to sit behind the kitchen stove, you know. And I took it out and laid it down on the ground and dug a trench and put it on some iron bars and heaped the dirt on top of it and we would put...I hooked it up with water on the hot water side and we would put a pine knot fire under it and heat it up in the morning and we had hot water all day long. Well, see I was only three doors from Lee Estes' garage and Tommy Cosey was one of the kids. Joe King were two black boys that worked for me. Off and on. It was their job to come down and put that fire under it. Tommy Cosey's time to do it, he sent his little brother down there to do it and he just absolutely filled that underneath...he just kept pouring the pine knots to it and you know what a hot fire they made. Well, fortunately there was no check line on that line at the time. And Lee Estes came over to see me and says, "I want to know what is happening over at your house. "Why" A lady came out of the restroom awhile ago and said when she flushed that toilet, steam came out of it. From that boiler that we had backed hot water all over that end of Diboll.

MD: Hot water.

SD: Yes...we backed steam more or less.

END OF INTERVIEW