

KENNETH NELSON

Interview 75c

November 30, 1987

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ABSTRACT: In this 1987 interview with Joel Cook, Kenneth Nelson (1915-1992) provides some biographical detail not covered in his earlier interviews. He again tells of working in Southern Pine Lumber Company's Land & Timber Department and working under Dave Kenley, but he does it less anecdotally than in the two interviews with Megan Lambert in 1985. With much insight, Nelson also contrasts the working conditions and attitudes of the 1930's with those of the 1980's.

Joel Cook: My name is Joel Cook; I am interviewing Mr. Kenneth Nelson at his home on November 30, 1987. First of all, Mr. Nelson, where and when were you born?

Kenneth Nelson: I was born here in Diboll, April 14, 1915.

JC: What type of recreational activities did you do as a child, any sports or games?

KN: Other than baseball and touch football that was about all there was to do here in Diboll. Diboll didn't have a football team nor a baseball team in school. So it was several years when I was growing up before they had any organized sports.

JC: There wasn't a movie theater?

KN: Yes, there was a movie theater that only had a picture show on Friday and Saturday nights. The first one was right below where the loading shed is now, where they load trucks, the Temple plant they had a section for the colored people upstairs and the white people downstairs. Back in those days they had to change the reels between – it was a three or four reel movie. Someone played the piano while they were changing the reels.

JC: Just to keep them occupied so they wouldn't get bored?

KN: That's right, just a little music.

JC: What occupations did your parents hold?

KN: My dad was timekeeper here in Diboll for years and years, up until he died. I was born here but my folks lived in Nacogdoches first and my oldest brother was born there, then we moved to Diboll and I was born here and then we moved to the state of Washington and then to Arkansas, Jacksonville, Texas, Trinity, Texas before we moved back here in 1928. Most of the time while we were gone, that four or five years, dad sold

insurance, stocks and bonds and automobiles. When he came back to Diboll he was timekeeper in '28 up until he died in 1944.

JC: Your mother didn't hold any job?

KN: No, she was a housewife.

JC: Were there any favorite pastimes you had as a child?

KN: We didn't have a whole lot to do then except a bunch of us would get together and go down to the creek and swim or play "Dare" up and down the creek banks. Occasionally, if we could get enough money and buy enough bee bees we would go down and shoot our air guns at tin cans or something like that. We would get to go to Lufkin, maybe sometimes on Saturday night, to the picture show and have a hot dog and that was about the extent of our recreation in the early days.

JC: Did you finish high school?

KN: Yes, I finished in Lufkin though. When we came back to Diboll I was in the fifth grade and I stayed in school here up until the middle of the eighth grade. Back in those days we only had eleven grades, we didn't have the twelfth. At midterm of the eighth grade I transferred to Lufkin and finished high school in Lufkin. The main reason I transferred, I wanted to take some typing and shorthand which was not offered here. I also wanted to be in the band, the main reason I went to Lufkin. I was in the band and I did take typing and shorthand. I graduated in Lufkin in 1932.

JC: Did you take any college courses?

KN: No, I went to Commercial College, Satterwhite Commercial College, at night for about nine months but I didn't finish. Went long enough that I thought I could – well, I did get to where I could type pretty good and use short hand pretty good even though I didn't finish.

JC: What was your first job?

KN: Actually my first job was in the land and timber division where I have worked for forty-eight years. Mr. D. C. Kenley was head of the land and timber department at that time and they only had one girl as his secretary and two men in that department. They were over all of the plants, the company at that time owned about 239,000 acres of timberland. As I said, I graduated in '32 and there were no jobs that was in the middle of the depression. We lived next door to Mr. Kenley's secretary who, at that time was Mildred Richards, and later she married a Mr. Clark, after that she and Mr. Clark were divorced and she married a Mr. Winder. They are both deceased now but she asked me one day, since I didn't have a job, if I would like to come up there and work some in the office and try to get some experience, up in her office. I said, "Yes, I didn't have anything else to do." I went up and I would help her file, do some typing, do a little

shorthand until I got to where I was pretty familiar with the land and timber office. Mr. Kenley, after about three or four months – of course I wasn't getting any pay – he said he would give me 10¢ a page for typing these big pages like you see in books in the county clerks office. I said, "All right." The first day I typed 30 pages. That was \$3.00 and he said, "That's a little too much for a boy to be making." He put me on salary then of \$10.00 a month, that was my first job. Later when NRA came long, which was the National Recovery Act, I believe, back in Roosevelt's days, you could work maybe a couple of hours in one place and the government would subsidize the company. I went to work in the store at 7 o'clock, in the grocery store, the commissary, and worked until 9 o'clock, then I went on over to the office and worked until 5. In 1928 my dad built a restaurant here in Diboll, it was known as the "Believe It or Not Café." My brother and I would work some in the café at night. Also we had all the paper routes here in Diboll. We delivered newspapers, got up at 4 o'clock in the morning. We had the Houston Post, the Houston Chronicle and the Lufkin News, the Dallas Morning News, and on Sunday we even had the New York Times. We delivered papers for several years in addition to working in the office, I did and in this café some nights. We made ends meet, but as you say, times were tough back in those days, '32 was right in the middle of the depression.

JC: Did your family suffer much during that time?

KN: No, luckily. My dad, of course, was what was called a "white collar" man, he was the timekeeper here and, of course, he didn't make much but everything was cheap. You could buy a loaf of bread for a dime, a pound of bacon for 15¢. Even though he didn't make a big salary it was more than most of the mill people were making. There were a lot of those just making 10¢ an hour, so we didn't have it too bad. We had a garden and a cow. Always raised meat hogs and so we didn't suffer at all. We didn't have a whole lot but we had as much as anybody else.

JC: As an adult what kind of social and religious events did you go to?

KN: Well, I have been a member of the Church of Christ, I guess, for 35 or 40 years. Prior to that I went to the First Christian Church. After I married, my wife was a Methodist, and we both decided to go into the Church of Christ and have been members ever since. We attend the Timberland Drive Congregation in Lufkin. We got started up there, had a lot of friends even after they built a church here we kept going to Lufkin because we had so many friends in the church. When our kids were young they didn't have enough members here that had any small children that would make up the Sunday school class. That was another reason that prompted us to go there. As far as the other social activities I was a charter member of the Lion's Club here in Diboll when they first organized back in about 1939, I believe. I was the secretary-treasurer when we first started and I held that position for five years. You know the secretary does all the work in an organization, including making the money, seeing that everything is run right. I kept telling them to elect another secretary but they wouldn't do it. I said, "If you don't I am going to quit." They kept electing me and I finally quit. I haven't been back to the Lion's Club since. It's still a good organization but I just got tired of doing all the work.

I was on the school board here way back when it was just a three man board and it was a common school district, it was not an independent school district then.

We were under the county school superintendent. I was on the board for thirteen years. The whole time our kids were in school here. And I was secretary of that the whole time including making up the tax rolls when we first started having to collect our own taxes.

Of course, I'm a member of the Quarterback Club and practically everything else that has been here in Diboll but I haven't been active in it for quite a few years.

JC: How did your job with Temple change?

KN: As I said, when I started out the head of the department was Mr. Kenley. Miss Richards was secretary to Mr. Kenley, we had a Mr. Kirkland, who did most of the timber buying and we had Mr. L.D. Hall, who did some of the surveying and other odd jobs. When I went to work there I helped them all do a little bit of everything, did office work and then I would go out and help them do some surveying and help them do some timber cruising. That was the whole forestry department then. Over the years, well, I might say, in 1939 I started working in '32, and in '39 we were wondering if we might have enough timber to continue operating the mill, at the same rate of production that we were going then we didn't know if we had enough timber. So we decided to call in the U. S. Forest Service to help us make a survey of the company timber to see how much timber we had, which we did. We brought in some young foresters to help us and we cruised this 239,000 acres, totaled our timber holdings and found that we did have enough if we cut it right. Prior to that time we were going out and cutting every tree that was 14" at the top and up, some places there wasn't anything left because everything was that big. So we started then in October of 1940. I marked the first tract of timber that was marked on company land for cutting. In other words, we went in and selected the trees to come out. Usually about a third, say a tract had 9,000 board feet on it, we would cut 3,000 of that and leave 6,000 to grow. We figured we would go back every ten years and cut about that much. After we started this we hired two new regular foresters to help work for the company, we had timber markers and we didn't cut any tree unless it was marked, or painted. We would mark it down at the stump, even with the ground so when it was cut off we knew that tree was marked for cutting. If we would mark it up about eye level, where the – what we called "Flatheads" or sawyers would come through and they would see the paint on that tree they knew it was marked for cutting. So they would cut that tree and leave those that weren't marked. That's the way we continued cutting and harvesting our timber. Of course, in the meantime we kept buying up extra land with timber, etc. But we did that up until recently when we merged with Southwestern Timber Company of East Texas Pulp and Paper Company that was in 1972. We continued all that time cutting our timber selected.

JC: From '39?

KN: Yes, and at that time Southwestern and Eastex had been doing a lot of pure cutting and planting on their land, so in order to keep going in the same direction – and they had about as much timber as we did – so we put all of it together, they had 600 and some odd acres and when we put them both together we had nearly a million acres of land. To start

management right, so we started doing some clear cutting and planting on Temple's land as well as continuing on the Eastex land and we have been doing that ever since, we still do some selective cutting on certain tracts and they have a young stand of timber. It has changed considerably, now I suppose they have at least 200 people in just the land and timber division as when I started they had five. So there has been quite a change, of course, like everything else, there are modern methods. In logging back in those days we used wagons and teams, bring the logs in or we would load them on rails and bring them in on log trains. Now they have all modern equipment, the skidders in the woods, and we have loaders and, actually now a contractor when he starts out, say he only has a couple of trucks, so by the time he buys his skidders and his loaders we will have a quarter of a million dollars tied up in equipment to start out. So it has changed considerably since I first started.

JC: When were you married?

KN: June 4, 1938 so we are pushing fifty years now. We have two children, two girls, one lives in California, Carol Shaw who has five children and the other one lives in New Ulm down here who is Michelle, she is married to Charles Fuller and she has two little boys. We have step-grand children.

JC: And what is your wife's name?

KN: Virginia, she was a Hayes, she is from Lufkin.

JC: What hopes did you have for your children?

KN: Actually, we wanted both of them to get a college education and our oldest one did, Carol finished college at Stephen F. Austin, she made real good grades, was in the Honor Society. She got married before she finished school, she and her husband both were going to school there, but she did go ahead and get her degree and her husband worked at a radio station here at that time until he got a job with the television station in Bryan and they moved there, then he got promoted to a TV station in Dallas and they moved up there, lived there for a few years then they moved to Arlington but he was still working in Dallas. But they eventually got a divorce and she moved to Houston and married again, her husband was in the service, he was a career service man. Then they moved to Germany and stayed there five years, then they moved to San Francisco. They were living there when he died, he was 36 years old. My daughter now teaches school in California. Her oldest daughter has married since then and she graduated from college and now, her oldest son is in college, we hope all of her children will finish college. Our youngest daughter went to SFA for a year and a half but she didn't like college, she did go long enough to get her more or less a course, then she moved to Houston and went to work for an oil company and was doing real well up to the time she married, of course, as soon as she married she quit working and her husband is a draftsman with an engineering firm so she is just a housewife now.

JC: Do you have any regrets?

KN: Well, I can't think of any as far as my work, I was real fortunate, I guess, in being able to go to work when I did. I made myself, more or less, as useful as I could in my position because there was no one else, I kind of applied myself and learned as much about the job as possible because my boss was getting on up in years, until I learned a lot about the business, in fact, I learned to survey and I was eventually taken in, decided to make a forester, they don't take many in who are not regular foresters, through my experience, it made me a member of the Society of American Forestry Association in 1949. Back in the 50s I was elected chairman of the Texas Chapter of the Society of American Forestry, even though I didn't go to college and then I was also elected president of the Texas Surveyors Association in 1961 and '62. And I think I told you before, I was appointed to the board of educations of Texas Surveyors by Governor Price Daniel and served there for two years, they.... board of surveyors, and now I am a registered surveyor of Texas. So, as far as my work is concerned I have accomplished quite a bit. Of course, I enjoyed it because I like the woods and started out as nothing but when I retired I was group president of the company of Eastex and in charge of all the lands and when we merged with Eastex I was over the whole, over their group and ours, too. I was fortunate but I probably made some decisions I wouldn't have if I had to do it over but nothing real earth shaking, the decisions I made. I retired in 1980.

JC: Are you enjoying your retirement?

KN: Yes, I'll tell you, I haven't missed work at all. When I first retired we made a trip, just in the car, to Canada and down to Mexico City for about six weeks. We kind of got it in our blood and then in 1981, we bought a 32 foot travel trailer and we have made several trips. We have been to Canada, Mexico and all over the United States in the trailer with other couples. We enjoy that. We have been to Europe a couple of times, to China and Japan on these guided tours, Australia, New Zealand. We have made four or five cruises down in the Caribbean went to Alaska on a cruise, we have traveled in the last seven or eight years about every place we wanted to go. I haven't missed working. I recommend retirement.

JC: Have you attained the goals you made as a child, did you follow through on most of the goals you had?

KN: No, I really didn't. As I told you before I wanted to be an architect when I was growing up. I even took drawing and shop; of course, they had that in Lufkin High School, too, which they didn't have here so I took all of those courses that I could. When I got out, as I say that was in 1932, I guess I could have gone to college if I could have gotten a job somewhere and really toughed it out. But I didn't get to go and if I had I'd have probably gone and tried to take courses for an architect which I really wanted to do but it didn't pan out that way so, luckily, I just fell into this job, I had no idea, I didn't know anything about forestry, surveying or anything else but I just learned it myself and I'm glad I did. I enjoyed the work. We didn't know any better because we didn't have anything else to do, we were just lucky to have a job, weren't paying any attention to punching a time clock or turning in over time, we worked six days of the week, sometimes my boss, Mr. Kenley was heavily in the cattle business, he had lots of cattle

over Texas. I even kept his cattle books and helped him sometimes with his cattle. I didn't go out and ride a horse because I don't like to ride a horse, even though I had to ride one sometimes in the work, I didn't like it. Anyhow we didn't ask any questions, we just did what he told us to do and we had to do it. Times are a whole lot different now than they were then. Now, when a man works he wants to know how many hours he is going to work and what he is going to get paid. We didn't then, we just went to work and happy to get what we could.

JC: I thank you for allowing me to interview you.

KN: I was happy to do it.

JC: Is there anything you would like to add?

KN: I can't think of anything other than to say I did enjoy my work and I worked with some mighty good people. As I was coming up Mr. Kenley was real good to me even though he was pretty tight fisted, he didn't believe in spending any money but he was good to me, tried to be as helpful as he could. A little later after I took over and had men working under me that was real helpful, I had a good bunch and I was thankful to him.

END OF INTERVIEW