

SHEROD & ANNA LEE POWELL

Interview 76a

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Marie Davis, Interviewer

Retyped by Courtney Lawrence

ABSTRACT: In an interview with Marie Davis, Sherod and Anna Lee Powell reminisce about life in Diboll, where they opened a grocery store in the 1940's. They discuss rationing during World War II, life in a company town, the changes to the town since the 1940's, and Sherod's job as city judge. Mr. and Mrs. Powell did not work for the Temple family or companies, but their livelihood depended on the company and its employees.

Marie Davis (hereafter MD): Today I am talking with Mr. and Mrs. Sherod Powell. They live at 410 Carter Drive, Diboll, Texas. Today's date is August 15, 1985 and my name is Marie Davis. Mr. Powell, when did you come to Diboll?

Sherod Powell (hereafter SP): We came on the 22nd day of December 1942.

MD: You went into business for yourself in the grocery store? Tell us about that.

SP: At that time we bought a grocery store that was being operated by Nellie Burden, in the old Russell Building. She had been there five or six years and when her husband got killed she wanted to sell the store so, at that time we were living in Chester and I was working in Port Arthur. We came up and talked with her and made a deal so we took it over on the 22nd day of December '42. It was a general store. What I mean by "general" you could buy anything. You didn't just come there to buy groceries. You bought shoes, clothes, work clothes, anything you needed for family use, feed for horses and cattle. Everybody at that time had livestock here in Diboll and they ran loose. If you didn't keep your fences up they would destroy your property; they would destroy everything about your place. We stayed there in that store something over two years and then after that we moved back behind it, what we called a shotgun building that Dave Waller built. Right there next to Barber Williams. We stayed there for several years, during World War II we were in that little building. Of course, we had cut our store back then to feed and groceries, dry goods and handled just necessities of life which we could sell anything we could get hold of at that time. I don't know just what year we moved up, bought from the company a piece of property where John and Sandra are located now. That was sometime in the middle '50's, wasn't it? Anyway, we bought that piece of property from Mr. Arthur Temple, Jr., that was after he first came here. We have enjoyed our business in Diboll. We never had any interference from the Temple people. They have always been good to us and I don't think you could have found a better man for a neighbor or to do business with than Mr. Henry Temple today. One of the nicest men I ever met. Then he died and they put Arthur in here and it wasn't long after he came that things began to change. At the time of Mr. Henry's death it was just a sawmill town, no nice homes at that time to

speak of, most of them were what they called just “sawmill-town houses.” After he came he began to sell them off, everybody buy his own home and make a town out of it, a city instead of a sawmill town. We were one of the first, I guess, that bought business property from him. I don’t know of anybody else that bought business property until after we built ours. Then they began to sell off the side of the highway down there. Then they opened up this Pinedale addition for residences. I believe we were the third house that was built on this street when it first opened, third or fourth.

MD: And what year was that, do you remember when it was built?

SP: It was in ’62 or ’63. Since then there has been a terrible change in the town as a whole. Of course, it has gone forward altogether: there’s never been a day since we have been here that Diboll hasn’t grown. It has never been on a decline. In the business part of Diboll it has never been what it should have been. I don’t know why but we have had, we have several vacant buildings right now in Diboll. It’s hard to get business people to come here and invest in some sort of line. But other than that I don’t think you can find a better place in East Texas to live than in Diboll. Because the company as a whole, it’s a family town so to speak. It’s a town that the Temples have, and I suppose is and will always control the growth of it, because they own it and everything around it so to speak. It is hard for an outsider, more especially a manufacturer of some kind, to come in and get a place to set up. But if a person is just looking for a place to live and be treated right, I don’t think he could find a better place. We have enjoyed it and people have been good to us. The Temple organization has been good to us and we don’t have a straw to discuss against the Temples. They have always cooperated with us, every way we have asked them.

MD: When you first came here, who were your customers? Did you feel any competition from the commissary because it was still going?

SP: No, we didn’t have any competition from the commissary. Mr. Drew, the manager, no, he never gave us any trouble. He always treated us nice when we met him and talked with him. He never gave us any trouble as far as our business. Our business people, customers, were made up of people, the big majority of them worked around the box factory and the handle factory. We had quite a few people from Southern Pine to trade with us and then the country people out, more especially out east of town. We had lots of trade out there and quite a bit back toward Pine Valley. Our trade just came from the general public, you know, from all over.

MD: Mrs. Powell, what did you do? You worked in the store, didn’t you?

Anna Lee Powell (hereafter ALP): I guess I did the bookkeeping.

SP: She counted the money.

MD: Oh, she always picked up the money, did she? What – you had a ladies dry goods and a men’s dry goods over there, didn’t you?

ALP: Yes.

MD: Since there wasn't a bank in Diboll, what did you do with your money? Did you have a problem getting change and things like that?

SP: Well, when we first came here we borrowed money from the Chester Bank to come here on, so we – and then the President of Chester Bank was in partnership. When we first came here, Mr. Enlow, he and us were partners on a 50/50 basis but we decided it wasn't a big enough business to have a partner, so to speak, so we eventually bought him out. I guess that lasted a couple of years, but anyway, we did the business there. We would go down once a week to get money to cash the checks. We would go down on a Thursday, or Friday morning probably, and get money on payday to take care of the checks the customers would ask us to cash. Not only from the handle and box factory but from Southern Pine also, and then the railroad, the TSE [Texas Southeastern], the railroad from Houston.

MD: Southern Pacific?

SP: Southern Pacific – had a crew of railroad workers that worked on the road all the time. They lived here. They had their headquarters here and most of them traded with us. We would cash their checks. They got paid every two weeks and it took quite a lot of money to take care of that payroll. Then after that we moved up to the First State Bank in Lufkin. We have been with that bank ever since until this bank opened here. So we have been with this bank ever since.

MD: Were you ever robbed?

SP: Yes. One time.

MD: Oh you were? Did they get any money?

SP: I'll let her tell about that.

MD: Okay, Mrs. Powell, you tell us about that.

ALP: It was – we got our money back. I was checking up and three black people came in and they milled around and picked up some nickel things and brought them to the counter for me to check. I had the cash register open and I turned my back just a second and when I did one of them reached over there and got what was in just the ten and twenty compartments. They didn't bother any of the other because they knew I would hear them. When I turned back around I saw what had happened and I thought to myself, "what am I going to do?" I didn't know what to do; Sherod was back in the market and, finally, I just blurted it out, I said, "Sherod, he's robbed us." At that time he was down by the bread rack separating that money, I don't know why. Sherod saw him but he didn't know that was his money. Sherod ran up there and got between him and the door so he couldn't

get out and Sherod told him to put the money back. He hesitated for several seconds. He finally laid it back. I picked it up and counted it and I said this is not all of it, because I had just counted it and I knew how much was in there. So he hesitated a little longer but finally laid it all back on the counter and ran out. He got away from there.

MD: Did it really scare you?

ALP: Not too bad.

MD: He didn't have a gun or anything?

ALP: No, they didn't have a gun.

MD: He just took your money?

SP: That's what they call "snatchers." There were three of them, two of them stopped at the front and one came to the back and he had my attention back there. Of course, it made it much easier for them – she had the cash register open counting the money, instead of closing it she turned her back. I don't know, if I had been really thinking I guess I would have taken a butcher knife but it never dawned on me to take anything. If I had had a butcher knife I would have probably sliced them. And I thank the Lord I didn't have one.

MD: During the War, was it hard for you to get merchandise?

SP: Yes, it was hard. The fact of business when we first came here we had trouble getting merchandise out of Houston more especially. Because we were new, some of the customers that Mrs. Burden had been buying from, some of her supplies, went right along with us but some of them that we needed the most wouldn't because we were new; they wouldn't sell to us. They didn't need us, you know. But they did come back. The thing about it, at that time, you could sell just anything you could get hold of and they were making all the way up to \$0.35 an hour over here at the mill, the handle factory and box factory, common labor. Or course people didn't have any automobiles, very few cars, and they had their cows, their hogs and chickens and they just got along somehow, I don't know how. I've never been able to figure that out. They didn't have to pay any rent, so to speak, no water bills, no light bills, it was all free, worked for the company, didn't have any telephone bills because there weren't any telephones.

MD: Did you have a telephone in your store?

SP: Not until the first part of the '50's, I guess, we had a telephone put in.

MD: Did you have the produce in your store?

SP: Yes, we sold all kinds of produce, fresh produce. We had eggs and stuff like that that was delivered every morning, and bread. They delivered it before we opened up and would set it out and lots of times we would find the stock had been into it. Horses and

mules and cattle would get into your produce before you could get down there and get it into the store every morning. We had that happen several times. We used to have children or somebody, would pick up milk before we would get to the store. We didn't know if it was children, adults or who, but anyway it would come up missing. It was a problem until the city finally incorporated and they passed a law prohibiting any kind of livestock to run on the streets, which was one of the greatest things that ever happened to Diboll as a town.

MD: After you left Copestown, your store was in Copestown, where did you build your store?

SP: We built it up on Highway 59 on North Temple Street and – I forget the name of that street, anyway it was on the north side of the highway, just this side of the scale, where it is now.

MD: When you built there had Diboll incorporated?

SP: Yes.

MD: It had? So then you didn't have as many problems?

SP: Oh no.

MD: Nothing like you did up in Copestown. Mr. Powell, could you, during that time, could you see just a gradual rise in prices?

SP: Yes, things began to rise right after, well, during World War II as for that. Prices began to go up and labor began to go up. The one thing that made business so good during World War II, everything was rationed. You had to have a stamp to buy it. You take a man that had a family of four or five children, he had to have a stamp for shoes, he had to have a stamp for sugar, you had to have stamps for several items in the grocery line and then for nearly all of the clothing. Now, we never did have any trouble with stamps for we had so many customers who had big families and at the end of his quarter, or rather when his stamps ran out to him, if he had any left he would bring them and give them to us and we could increase our inventory that way, and we kept a good inventory on everything that was rationed. We never ran out of a product that was rationed.

MD: Mrs. Powell, was that hard to keep up with, did you have to make out some kind of report on those stamps?

ALP: No, I don't remember having any trouble with it.

SP: When we bought – we had – those stamps were just like they were dollars. We started off, when we built that store up there, with five hundred pounds of sugar, which we got criticized by some of our competitors. They didn't criticize us but they criticized the wholesale house for letting us have so much at one time. But when the stamps went

off we could have bought 2,000 pounds of sugar. We just kept building up with stamps. But it was a problem and you had to toe the line, if there was something that was rationed you had better not sell over the limit.

ALP: We doubled the size of that building pretty quick after we built it. There was a man wanted a place for a café or restaurant and Sherod told him he would build it for him so he did, right beside us, he just built an addition, the same size as the part we were in. I don't think he ever set up business, did he?

SP: Yes, he did set up business.

MD: Did you sell your store, Mr. Powell?

SP: Yes, we sold the fixtures. We didn't sell the property. We sold the stock and fixtures out to Leighton Lee in 1956. He stayed there several years and he finally closed his store up. From that time on we just rented it to whoever came along and wanted to rent. Never did have anyone stay there very long. We rented it out to, first I believe, to a radio man, a television man from Lufkin who came down and stayed two or three years and Sandra and John wanted to buy it so we just sold it to them, sometime in the '60's, I don't remember just when.

MD: Since you lived here in '42, I guess you have been involved in a lot of civic organizations and school boards and things like that?

SP: Other than the church and the school board we haven't been too much involved in anything else.

MD: How long did you serve on the school board?

SP: Fourteen years.

MD: Fourteen years, now was this in the time of integration?

SP: Yes, integration took effect while I was serving, and all the buildings, of course, there have been – other buildings have been added to it, but this first building up there on the highway, the old highway –

MD: You mean the elementary?

SP: Elementary school, that was built and over on the other side of the railroad, the Temple School.

MD: The junior high?

SP: Junior high, that was built while I was on the school board. At the time I was elected they didn't have anything but the – you remember, the old school.

MD: The building, the original, well, I think that was the second school, probably. Did you have much trouble when you had to integrate?

SP: Not any.

MD: How did you avoid it?

SP: I don't know, I have no idea why, as far as trouble was concerned. The teachers probably had a little trouble with the children but the town, as a whole, we didn't have any trouble. We didn't have any marches; we didn't have any mother sit-ins or anything. It just fitted in nicely. I think it is one of the best things that ever happened to Diboll School, in a way. The worst thing that ever happened to Diboll schools, any other schools, was when they began to take government aid.

MD: When the government took it away from the local people, a lot of the running of the school?

SP: Yes, anytime you take money from the government you may get by with one batch but the next batch they are going to tell you how to spend it. That's what they did to the schools. Not only in Diboll, any school that took government money had to do what the government tells them. Or, if you have any other kind of business or anything you do where you are supported by the government, you have to do what they tell you, you may not like it but that's what happens.

MD: Do you think of the changes in Diboll, since you have been here, do you think that is good for the town, made it a better town?

SP: It made Diboll. After Diboll was incorporated then they began to build streets. There were no streets here, mud trails and you could hardly get in and out of town other than on the highway. Of course, the highway came right up in front of the...what used to be the big office down there, where the old commissary was, and that was the only paved street in Diboll. Of course, that was years after we came here, and that's another thing that Arthur did when he first came here. One of the first things he did, he paved the street down there and began to pave streets all over town. Of course, he may disagree with me about government because he has sure got the government money since he has been here.

MD: Yes, I know, the housing here, the public housing. Now, you are City Judge now. How long have you been City Judge?

SP: Sixteen years the 28th day of this month, I believe.

MD: And how did you get your job, how does the City Judge get his job?

SP: I got it because the judge died. They had to have somebody. Mr. Smith died the latter part of August '58 and at that time Mr. Pate was the Assistant Judge. Mr. Lawrence was

on the City Council and he asked me...he didn't ask me, he told me...said "You're going to be the next judge, get ready." In a few days Mr. Thompson came down and talked with me about it, said the City Council had recommended me and wanted to know if I would take it and I told him yes. I would under circumstances. We agreed on the circumstances and I have been there sixteen years. I was talking to the present City Manager a short time ago about, you know, five months ago lacking ten days from today I lost my right arm. After I came out of the hospital I went in and talked to the city council, or City Manager and asked him if everything was running smoothly and if there were any complaints about me in any way, I would like to know it. He assured me there were no complaints whatsoever. He didn't see any reason just because I lost my arm that they wouldn't continue to work with me and I was reappointed for another two years in April.

MD: So you are appointed every two years by the Council?

SP: Yes.

MD: What are your duties as City Judge?

SP: Well, the City Judge has the responsibility on every complaint that comes before the, that the police make a complaint against, their part of it, on speeding tickets, and running stop signs, bumper dumping or any such like, or fighting and having trouble. There are always complaints and you have to process that complaint to the best of your ability. We have lots of complaints, family affairs, which I hate. I hate them. You take a person comes up there and files charges against their companion for hitting them or beating them or threatening them. Of course, nine times out of ten, in two or three days they will come back and want to drop it. You might as well drop it because they won't come to court and you can't convict a man without evidence, you know. So the only thing to do is drop it. We have quite a lot of that coming in and shoplifting, those complaints come before us, if it is not over \$20.00. If it is over \$20.00 we can't handle it. Being drunk in public, they come before us, now if it is DWI they have to go to the county, we can't handle that. But it is quite a responsibility regardless of who it is.

MD: Do you ever have juries?

SP: Oh yes, we have court every seven weeks. We have to. If you get a ticket, there has to be something done with that ticket. It has to be processed one way or another within 60 days or it runs out. So the people who don't want to pay their fines they have to come to court at least within seven weeks after he gets that ticket.

MD: How do you pick your jurors?

SP: We pick them just like the county or the state. We take the names of the people who live here in Diboll. They have to be in the city limits, put them in a bowl, shake them up and draw out a name and whatever name we get it goes on that list for three years, as long as he lives in the city limits. Anybody over 65 years old don't have to serve unless they want to but if we draw a name out of there that is 90 years old we put him on that list and

send him a letter that he has been called. Of course, all they have to do, if they don't want to serve, is drop us a note or call us and use that over 65 as an excuse. They will be dropped off the list. Anyone who has a child under 10 years old has a legal excuse, or a student in college has a legal excuse. Schoolteachers have legal excuses but don't many of them use it.

MD: Do you enjoy your work?

SP: Yes, most of the time. Some of the time. I have never had any real trouble. I have had a few nasty people but, as a rule, when people come to the courtroom they are very cooperative.

MD: And you think incorporation of the city has really helped?

SP: Oh, it has made the city. It would be a terrible place to live without it.

MD: How many hours do you work?

SP: I don't have any certain hours, that is to work. I go up around 8 or 8:10 in the morning and we stay there until we get everything processed, every ticket that has been issued the day before. If we have some appointments to meet we stay there until those are filled. Then when we leave, the clerk, the court clerk stays there from 7 until 5 and then she is out from 12 until 1 o'clock. Then if they need us she gets on the telephone and finds us. She takes care of all the rest of it, all the bookwork is taken care of by the secretary, all the reports are made out by the secretary. The judge does nothing but process the fines.

MD: Mr. Powell, we didn't get some of your personal history. When were you born?

SP: I was born March 20, 1899.

MD: That's great, you know, there's just not many people your age that does the things you do. What are some of your hobbies?

SP: Until I had this arm removed I could do almost anything a young man could do. My main hobby was – is "her."

MD: That's nice. I'll bet she is proud of that.

SP: Yes, I help her every way I know how and we cooperate very good, I guess, as a whole. But keeping the yard fit, growing flowers and the garden and playing golf. If I had a hobby other than gardening it would be golf.

MD: And you didn't ride a cart, did you?

SP: No, I walked.

MD: A lot of these younger men won't do that now, will they?

SP: Well, to my way of thinking about golf, it is a game for exercise to start with and if you're going to ride a cart you are not going to get any exercise that you should be getting. Of course, a lot of people don't go out there for the exercise. But I like to walk; I could walk 18 holes and still come home and work in the garden. I miss it. I would like to get back out there and try.

MD: Maybe it won't be long before you can. They miss you, too, playing out there. And where were you born?

SP: I was born out on a farm in Polk County, three or four miles southwest of Chester, that is in Tyler County and raised on a little 62-acre farm out there. There were seven children in my family, six boys and one daughter and we all had one girl.

MD: Mrs. Powell, where were you born?

ALP: Same place.

MD: Oh, did you know each other?

ALP: Not until '22, I guess.

MD: I know you have had your 50th wedding anniversary. You had that a couple of years ago?

SP: Last year, we have our 51st in November this year.

MD: Fifty-first, you have been married that long and you have had a happy life, haven't you?

SP: She was raised out East of Chester there in the Enid community where she was born in 1905, September 10th. My mother, my father died when I was fifteen years old and left my mother with five boys and a daughter. The oldest boy had left home before dad died. We had one brother that just took over and he and mother operated things and the rest of the boys did what he told them to do. Of course, he married a couple of years after dad died. And about four years after dad died mother moved to Chester so the daughter, my sister, could go to the Chester school. That's the time I met Anna Lee, my wife, while mother was living there in Chester. I was about 20 years old, I guess. She was about 16 so I was 22. I am six years older than she is. We had a short courtship and got married in 1934, eleven years.

MD: That was longer than most of them.

SP: In the meantime she went to Angelina...ah...Nacogdoches College, Stephen F. Austin. She was the thirteenth person that registered when the college opened. She got too smart and quit before she got through and came back down to Tyler County and Polk County and taught school four years.

ALP: Five years.

SP: Then she went to work in the Chester State Bank as cashier and bookkeeper and worked there for – about how many years?

ALP: Eight.

SP: Of course, we were married while she was working there.

MD: Mrs. Powell, I guess you think there are a lot of changes in the school since you first taught and now, don't you? You think you could teach now?

ALP: I might would enjoy trying it. I enjoyed seeing the children learn, the discipline is what bothered me and, of course, now discipline is the biggest problem for the teachers. I didn't like the discipline part but I enjoyed seeing the children learn.

SP: She worked in this school after we sold the store for – how many years?

ALP: Four and a half years I worked as a teacher's aide.

MD: So you haven't had just a life of leisure either?

ALP: I surely haven't.

SP: You don't know about leisure, I'll tell you. When we married in '34 we were still in the Depression, wasn't no money to be had. I went to, I don't know how come I was back there, after mother moved to Chester and we left the farm, I went on the road and spent about eight years all total, soliciting the circulation for farm papers, and my younger brother and I worked together most of the time. We worked in all the northwest central states in the United States, clear up to the Canada line. Working that circulation. Then in 1932 I came back to Chester and that's when I went to selling the Houston Post, working from Corrigan to Woodville, sold it at \$0.50 a month. Cost me \$0.15 for the paper and the other was mine, the \$0.35, the profit.

MD: Yes, you had to pay your gas and all that?

SP: Yes, and it is pretty rough. While I was doing that I ran a bread route, when I picked up my bread every morning I picked up my papers. In those days there wasn't any bread, you may not think that, but there was very little bread sold anywhere in them little country stores. So I put bread in the stores at Chester and some in Woodville. That helped our business out some and at the same time, when summer time came I opened up an ice route, wasn't any refrigerators then either. So I bought ice in Woodville, had a trailer

hooked behind the car, bought ice in Woodville, two bits a hundred, \$0.25 – but I sold it for \$1.00 a hundred, cut it up into 50's, 25's, whatever a person wanted we blocked it up. Then finally opened up a little icehouse there in Chester and had ice all the time. Then on top of that a barber shop came open, I'm not a barber understand, but a barber shop and a pressing shop came up for sale and I bought that. We hired us a barber and, luckily, enough, he knew how to press so he learned me to press. After I got through with all the other things I would do all the cleaning over there and he did most of the pressing. Then on top of that, we opened a potato chip maker, believe it or not, made potato chips for a while.

MD: Did you? Were they packaged or did you sell them?

ALP: Yes, it didn't last long though.

SP: We had a man running a candy route that lived there and he was our distributor. I don't know. We didn't make much success out of that.

ALP: They would get stale too quick; we didn't use any preservatives.

SP: Then before all this happened we – no, along about the same time but before I began to make potato chips, this man owned a piece of property there and I got him to build me a building to put my pressing shop in and the barber shop. Had to build it in three sections, one section a man wanted to run a little café, and we rented it out to him for the care. Then he wanted to get out of the café business so we took the café over.

MD: Did Mrs. Powell run that?

SP: No, at that time she had a little boy to take care of. Then we had a filling station and a garage at the same time. Supervising it and it was being run by hired help and that's what wrecked us. The filling station and garage. So the latter part of July in 1942 we just closed everything up, sold the pressing shop, the café was closed, no, I sold the café to somebody, I don't remember who. I rented the barbershop to a barber and I went to the defense plant in Port Arthur and worked there until we came here.

MD: Well, then what is your philosophy, do you think people should just sit down after they get older, after they reach retirement age, or do you think they are better off if they keep busy?

SP: I think a person should never sit down, that is quit, and I believe if every young person today that claims he can't do anything, nobody won't give him a job, it is nothing but his own fault. If he has a desire and wants to do something he can find a place to go. The same way, I don't think a person that is able, if he is physically able to ever quit, of course, you have to slack up but when it comes to quitting, no never.

MD: You need to stay busy. It is better for your mind and body, too.

SP: As long as you can do something, it doesn't matter if it makes money or not, just get out and dig in the yard.

MD: Let's see now, we didn't get your children's name on tape.

SP: The boy – you tell them when he was born, Gary Don, in 1937.

ALP: 36, I think, he was born on May 22, 1937 at Chester. And Sandra was born here May 8, 1943.

MD: And how many grandchildren do you have?

ALP: Five.

SP: And they are all grand.

END OF INTERVIEW