

RUEBEN JELLIE SAMUEL

Interview 160b

February 14, 2005

Speech given at Angelina County Historical Commission Meeting, Lufkin, Texas

Patsy Colbert, Transcriber

ABSTRACT: In this interview/speech at the February 2005 Angelina County Historical Commission Meeting, Rueben “Jellie” Samuel reminisces about his days as a member of the Diboll/Southern Pine Lumber Company African-American baseball team in the 1940’s. Mr. Samuel played for both the Dragons and the Eagles. He recalls practicing on Sunday and traveling around the area playing other company teams. Mr. Samuel also tells how he became associated with peanut patties and how his team dealt with several different managers, one of whom stole their money. He recounts one of his favorite memories, the game between his team and the North Dakota All-Stars, where they packed the white stadium in Diboll. Jonathan Gerland, Johnny McClendon, Bettie Kennedy, and Carol Riggs also take part in the interview.

Jonathan Gerland (hereafter JG): Today is Monday February 14, 2005, and fixing to go to the Angelina County Historical Commission regular monthly meeting and Rueben Jellie Samuel will be the speaker.

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Bettie Kennedy (hereafter BK): I’ve known Mr. Samuel most of my life I guess. We were members of the same church, Long Chapel, CME Church. We were on many boards together and we worked on fundraisers and many, many things there at the church. But he is an unusual person in that he has always been very kind hearted and always been concerned about people of the community. Even today he has a community garden. Well he has a garden in which he passes out food to persons in the community. He is a family man, and grandparent and just a wonderful person to know. I was deeply impressed when I came to the Diboll Historical Center and saw him on the pictures there playing baseball. And I remember some of those years. It was an exciting time. So to this society and all of you that have come this morning, I present to you now, Mr. Rueben Samuel. Who is known as Jellie. (laughter)

Rueben Jellie Samuel (hereafter RJS): Well I want to talk about baseball. Back in the old days, every sawmill had a baseball team back in those days. In Diboll we had one of the best going. We beat everybody we met, all from ’40 up to ’46 that is when we broke up in ’46. Weren’t no teams could come there and beat us down in Diboll. We played every Sunday. We worked every day; we couldn’t practice until on Sunday before the game. That is what made us so good. We couldn’t do nothing but play baseball and I’m proud today; I love baseball today. I go to the baseball games here at Angelina. I’m too old to walk much, but I still go to baseball every time I get a chance; I’m there. I thank the Lord that I could play that long, like I did. Six years of nothing but baseball. And I’m proud to tell you all, baseball is one of the best games going right now.

BK: Mr. Samuel, tell us about the time you came from Shreveport. Tell us about the trip to Diboll, when you came from Shreveport.

RJS: Well Diboll came up to play Shreveport. I was playing in Shreveport, Louisiana then. And they came up there and beat us in Shreveport. And I hoboed back down here to play with Diboll. I had to ride the freight train to Lufkin and walk from here to Diboll. Back in the '40's 'cause the freight train didn't stop down there then. And I had to ride the bench down there one year before I could even get to play 'cause they had such a good baseball team. After one of the men died then I started playing left field. And I played it up until '46.

Question: How many people did you...did you have a nine man team?

RJS: Ma'am?

Question: Did you have nine on your team during those days?

RJS: That is right, nine players on my team. We had more than that but couldn't but nine play you know.

BK: How many of you are still living today?

RJS: Well there, the ninth one of our team died last year, Jeff Trimble, on there. He died last year; he was the last of our team. Me and him was the only ones. Jeff Trimble that is the last. I'm the last of the old Diboll, right now.

Question: Did you always play left field?

RJS: Ma'am, I always played left field back in them days.

BK: Can you recall many of the faces that's on the picture here Mr. Samuel?

RJS: All of them.

BK: All of them.

RJS: Yes.

BK: Isn't that wonderful.

RJS: All of them dead. Amos Simmons, Amos Randolph, Fred Randolph and Lee Overshine, Jeff Sibley, and Herbert Brown, Herbert Allen, and Willie Trimble, Smokey Barnes, Otis Spikes. That is right to left, Archie Nash and what is his name?

BK: Robert Nash, I knew him.

RJS: Robert Nash, Orea Hubbard, George Hodge, and Ruben Samuel was the last. (laughter)

BK: Amen. (she is helping him recall the names)

Question: You played six years and played until '46, you must have started in 1940. Is that correct?

RJS: That is right. I moved to Diboll in 1940.

Question: How old were you then?

RJS: Twenty-one.

Question: You were twenty-one then?

RJS: Yes.

Question: You were born in 1919?

RJS: I was born in 1919.

JG: Mr. Samuel, tell us about your peanut patties.

RJS: Well now, every time I hit a home run, they used to give me a peanut patty. I hit a double and slid into second base, but my peanut patty came out of my pocket and I went back to get it and got throwed out. (laughter) And ohhh they talked about me back in them days. But I went back to get my peanut patty. (laughter) Yes, I really liked peanut patties back in them days.

Question: Did ya'll win that game?

RJS: Oh yes, we won it but I got throwed out. That is the reason they talked about me so, back in them days.

Question: Did you play with a sawmill team in Shreveport?

RJS: No it wasn't a sawmill team in Shreveport I played with. It was a store, a store had, up there they had, called Cush Groceries where we was at up there then in Shreveport. Wasn't no sawmill, we played with a grocery store. They had a baseball team.

Question: I guess I had always been under the impression that the sawmill teams played only other sawmill teams. But it sounds like you played other teams.

RJS: That is right. We played Beaumont, Houston, Shreveport. We'd get back to Shreveport again. We went to Louisiana plenty times. Leesville, we went everywhere we was ordered to come, we'd go, we went.

Question: Y'all was just trying to play anybody that thought they could beat you didn't you? (laughter)

RJS: Yes.

Question: I think after that instance about you losing your peanut patty and you going back to get it, all your opponents then probably gave you a patty (unintelligible). (laughter)

RJS: Well, we had plenty fun back in them days. (Unintelligible)

Question: Who were some of your biggest rivals, the teams that you played?

RJS: Well the biggest ones we played was the North Dakota All Star team. Because Beaumont had a team, Houston had a team. They hadn't been beat and so we beat them down there. Shreveport had a good team too up there. Beaumont, Longview, we played all of them. Yeah, back in them days, anybody called us and let us know where we could play them, we went to play them.

Question: And how did this all star team from North Dakota come down?

RJS: Well we had a man working down there, someone had went up there. And he told them about how good Diboll was, and so they called us and told us they wanted to play us. They wanted to come down and play us. And we, back in them days it didn't cost but fifty cents to come in. We sold \$300 worth of tickets out at Slippery Hill, and sold \$300 worth of tickets out there at old 94. And we sold \$300 worth of tickets at the gate, but our manager told us that we didn't make but \$300 see. And we knowed that it was \$900 and that is what broke the ball team up right there. We never played another game.

Question: What was the name of the manager?

RJS: His name was Otis Spikes, that was him. (laughter) He left us out on the tickets. He told us we didn't make but \$300 and that throwed us to not get but \$5.00 apiece, back in them days. So that broke the ball team up. We didn't play no more.

JG: And the whole time you were playing ball, did you have any other income, any other job?

RJS: Well I worked for Southern Pine. I worked at Southern Pine down there. I worked there until I left there in 1950.

Question: What department did you work in?

RJS: I worked at the planer. I worked on one of them big machines at the planer.

JG: And Sunday was the only time you had to practice or play, right?

RJS: Only on Sunday, that is right.

Question: Did you play year round?

RJS: No, just only in the summer time.

Question: Summer time, okay, baseball season.

RJS: Yes, baseball season.

Question: Who was the manager? I didn't understand.

RJS: Otis Spikes.

Question: Spikes?

RJS: Otis Spikes was the manager then.

Question: Where was he from? Where did he work?

RJS: Well he come there, he come there from Pineland. See Pineland and Diboll was both the same. And he come there to manage us. He had been managing them over there in Pineland. See Pineland had a team too.

Question: He went around organizing people to play and scheduling y'all to play, manage you?

RJS: That is right.

Question: But he was going to take \$600.

RJS: Of our money, that is right.

Question: Y'all went on strike. I don't blame you. It cost money to go on the road. Did you ever get your money from him or did he just take it?

RJS: He just told us he didn't make but \$300. And we all knowed when the money come in.

Question: I believe I would just take (unintelligible).

Question: You ought to have thrown a peanut patty at him. (laughter)

RJS: That knocked my peanut patties out. (laughter)

Question: What would be the youngest players on your team?

RJS: Our youngest player was Herbert Allen. He just had, he was just sent to high school and we put him to playing shortstop for us. Herbert Allen, he was the youngest player on the team.

Question: Did uh, you played, this was considered a Southern Pine team, what kind of help did they give you? Did they buy equipment for you or what did they do to help the team?

RJS: No, they didn't buy nothing for us, we bought our own stuff. (laughter)

Question: Y'all were just advertising for them.

RJS: That is right. We had to buy our own equipment and everything.

Question: Jellie, did you have any bats or anything left from those days?

RJS: Bats, no I gave all them to them youngsters when I left there.

Question: Gave them to who?

RJS: Them youngsters. See we had some youngsters down there then trying to play so I gave all my stuff to them. And I left and moved up here in Lufkin.

Question: Do you have any clippings or scrapbook or anything? Have you given that to the museum at Diboll? Is there some way to save this part of our history?

RJS: All these here we gave them to Diboll. All the pictures we had back in them days.

Question: Did the Keltys mill, did they have a team?

RJS: They had a team to. We used to play them, too.

Question: This lady I think is your age and she has always talked about going and watching the baseball games, my grandfather, her daddy. Did you know a Jack Geggs? Jack Geggs, Clarence Melrose, but he went by Jack all my life, C.M. Geggs. But he worked for Lufkin Industries when they were doing that. And before that he was driving an engine for W.T. Carter. I think one of the trains that they have got at SFA or out here at the museum.

Question: What year was that he drove for W.T. Carter? I lived out there. I worked for W.T. Carter.

Question: He was born down there in the woods, so I assumed, or close enough. But, I can't find him in the Camp Ruby records.

Question: See I used to live at Camp Ruby.

Question: She was born closer to Corrigan, her family was.

Question: I moved down there in '39.

Question: See they were probably up here working for Lufkin Industries then. She married my daddy in '36. They were out here at Two-Point and Harmony Hill, then.

BK: This is Mr. Johnny McClendon.

RJS: He played back in them days.

BK: And he played also and we were all in the same church together.

Question: And where did you play Mr. McClendon?

Johnny McClendon (hereafter JM): Texas Foundry here. I played for about 25 years. We broke up in '79.

JG: When did the Lufkin Foundry team disband?

JM: Lufkin Foundry didn't have a team. Most of them played with us, Texas Foundry.

JG: Who did you play for?

JM: Texas Foundry.

BK: Texas Foundry.

JG: Texas Foundry, oh okay, I'm sorry.

JM: We started, we got it up in '46, that is when we started. That is when I came to Lufkin in '46. I started playing baseball then.

JG: And it was an all black team?

BK: Yes.

JG: And about how long did y'all play?

JM: I played for 25 years.

JG: Did the team integrate during that time?

JM: We used to play out there at the high school, where the old high school was. We had a park right there then. In '49 and '50 we played baseball out there where the old high school used to be up there on Denman. That is where we used to play at.

RJS: They had a baseball field there.

JM: Yes, we had a big park out there.

RJS: A big park out there.

JM: With a yard (unintelligible).

Question: Y'all probably didn't play softball did you?

JM: I played softball.

RJS: I played softball here.

Question: Did you ever play the Papermill when they had a team? They went in operation in 1940 and I'm not sure what year they organized a team, but I know they played in Groveton, played softball.

RJS: No, I played softball here with Texas Foundry. We had a team, a softball team, That was way up here though.

JM: That is when Coach Redd came here.

RJS: That is when Coach Redd come when we had the softball team. 'Cause he played with them back in them days.

JM: Y'all remember Coach Redd don't you?

Question: Oh yes, we remember him. Was he there at the same time or did he progress on into that?

JM: He started at Dunbar and then he went to Houston. He coached at Dunbar for about what, how long Bettie do you know?

BK: I can't remember.

JM: He coached out there a long time.

Question: Yes, well he was a coaching down here in the '70's when I was at the day care. I worked at Lufkin Day Care.

JM: He was coach at Dunbar during the '70's and then went to Houston.

Question: I am sure that '73 or something, either '70 through '73 ya'll had kind of disband.

JM: We had got too old then. (laughter) Legs wouldn't hold up then. I had to give it up.

Question: Who wrote that little poem about Diboll, did you? Diboll, Diboll, sitting on a fence, think you are worth a dollar but you are worth fifteen cents.

RJS: It wasn't me. It wasn't me. (laughter)

Franklin Weeks (hereafter FW): Let's be very sure, do you remember Peg Leg John?

JM: Peg Leg Pete, I remember a Peg Leg Pete.

FW: Peg Leg John had a little old buggy and horse and rode around all over, I don't know what all he sold, but he came from over in the quarters. He made homemade caskets.

JM: Do you remember him Jellie?

RJS: No I don't remember him.

(lots of laughter)

FW: He made homemade caskets in Diboll, Peg Leg John.

JM: That was before my time.

FW: The quarters, both the blacks and the dagos, was built by a contractor out of Burke. And my father and his uncle worked for seven cents an hour and then they finally got a raise, and got a raise to ten cents an hour. And you think that was terrible back in those days, but in 1940 Lufkin Industries hired a man that I know that had 5 years of college, 3 years of teaching and started him off at 35 cents an hour.

JM: That is what I started off at, 35 cents an hour.

FW: They said last week they just hired men in the foundry and they pay them \$10 an hour, and if they stay sixty days they will pay you \$12 an hour. (unintelligible)

Question: They wouldn't make it picking cotton back in them days would they?

JM: It paid about 25 cents a hundred. I remember that, 25 cents a hundred. Take you all day to pick a hundred.

Question: I went to Groveton to pick cotton.

JM: It wasn't but about \$10 was it? About \$10 to \$15 a bundle.

FW: I think it was twenty-two and a half.

Question: Mr. Rueben beside your peanut patty story, you have any other funny stories from your days of playing baseball?

RJS: No nothing but about my peanut patty, That is all I knowed back in them days was a peanut patty.

(Audience laughing and talking)

JG: Did you have the same manager the whole time, from '40 to '46?

RJS: This here was the only manager right here when we had the Eagles. We had this other one, we had a couple, was the manager. I forget his name, down there in Diboll then. It's been so long, he died. See Diboll had two different teams. When he come there we had the Eagles, when this other man, we had the Dragons. See I got a picture of one of them when I was a Dragon.

JG: That is the one with your son.

RJS: That is right, that is the one with my son on there.

JG: Dragons first and then the Eagles.

RJS: Diboll Dragons right there, when I had that one made. This one here is the Eagles.

Question: About how many people would you have on the team?

RJS: We had about 12 or 13 on there. We had...

Question: You had a pretty good chance of playing.

RJS: That is right. That is the reason I had to ride the bench so long till one of them died before I could play. (laughter)

Question: Well it is shame that somebody else didn't step up and be the manager and manage it without taking the money.

RJS: We got beat out of our money. When that other couple had it we was all right. But when Otis Spikes got it the money went somewhere, I don't know.

JM: He put it in his pocket.

Question: Did he leave town after he took your money?

RJS: No 'cause he was working in Diboll see. He didn't leave town that is the reason it broke up. He didn't leave town 'cause he was working in the sawmill like I was.

Question: Needless to say, you didn't care for him any more did you?

RJS: No ma'am. Sure didn't.

Question: What stands out in your mind the most? I know, is there any particular game that you remember fondly?

RJS: Well the best game was when we played them North Dakota All-Stars because we beat them one to nothing. But I remember one year we played Pineland the nineteenth of June. We tied up the first game and we couldn't beat Pineland, so we come back the next day to play them. The nineteenth of June was on a Wednesday then. They told us we had to come back the next day to play them to play the tie off. We beat them then. That was the only time we had a tie. Pineland come into Diboll and tied us up.

JG: When you traveled to the other towns, did you ride in a bus or go in a car?

RJS: No everybody had their own cars. I remember once we went to Leesville to play, not this boy but one of my other boys, we went to Leesville and I took my wife with me in my car. And when I got back to Diboll that night, the next morning my third son was born. I took my wife with me, and it was that close. (laughter) The next morning I had to go to the doctor with her, my third boy was born.

Question: What kind of crowd would you have? How many people would come out to watch you play?

RJS: Well they'd be crowded all the time. The little park we had in the quarters it wouldn't hold but about 35 or 40 people. But the night we played the North Dakota All-Stars we was in the white park, over there where the bank is now. Where y'all is now [The History Center], it was a baseball park down there, over there. We played them there so they had a big park. We only had a little park over in the quarters. But when we played the North Dakota All-Stars we played them in the white park over there. They had a big park. There was people all down the side there was so many people there.

Question: That time you lost your money, they sold 300 tickets at the gate and to me that would be 750 people paid at the gate, and if they made \$900 and 600 more, to leave \$300, that was about 450 people wasn't it.

RJS: I'm telling you, there was plenty of them there. That park was a big park and they were all down the side and everything. They were standing up watching the game.

Question: When was that, in the '40's or '30's?

RJS: In '46, 1946 that is the last game I played.

Question: Her Uncle and H.I. Biggs and H.A. Barkley that had the Eat-A-Bite on First Street, parched and sold peanuts 10 cents a bag. And before the game, he would parch and sell peanuts before the game. That was the social activity for something to do.

Question: Probably had some R.C. Cola's to go with them peanuts.

Audience talking and laughing. (unintelligible)

Question: That was back before Sears and Roebuck you know, I worked and retired.

Carol Riggs: Does any one else have any questions? This has been extremely interesting.

BK: Yes it has.

CR: I want to give, if anybody has anything to ask, I want to make sure you have an opportunity. Thank you very much.

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