

**JOHN O. BOOKER, JR.**

**Interview 224a**

**June 20, 2011, at the History Center, Diboll, Texas**

**Jonathan Gerland, Interviewer**

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**ABSTRACT:** In this extensive interview with Jonathan Gerland, East Texas native John O. Booker, Jr. reminisces about his life in East Texas and his time as a Prisoner of War in World War II. Mr. Booker speaks about growing up in Lufkin, his family's experiences in Diboll and Lufkin, and going to Lufkin schools. He also recalls his time at Texas A&M University, which led him to the Army Air Corps, where he became a pilot. He tells about flight training and the treacherous journey across the Atlantic, as well as about his missions over Germany. Shot down over Holland near the end of his tour, Mr. Booker was rescued by Dutch civilians, but was betrayed by his guide that was supposed to take him to Belgium and then France. The Germans took him to Amsterdam for interrogation and then he became a POW at Stalag Luft 1 near the Baltic Sea in Germany, from the Fall of 1943 until the Russians drove out the Germans in Spring 1945. After the war, Mr. Booker returned to East Texas, where he became an engineer for Southern Pine Lumber Company in Diboll. He worked on infrastructure projects in Diboll for several years and then moved to Pineland. He worked on infrastructure projects in Pineland at the mills and in the city and eventually became mayor, a post he held for 21 years.

**Jonathan Gerland (hereafter JG):** Today's date is June 20, 2011. My name is Jonathan Gerland. I'm with Mr. John O. Booker, Jr. We are in the History Center conference room and we are going to do an oral history today. And, Mr. Booker I guess just tell us a little bit about your father.

**John Booker, Jr. (hereafter JB):** Okay, he was born in 1884, I think, pretty sure. He attended John Tarleton [Tarleton State University] out in Stephenville and that is where he learned basic engineering. But, his father, my grandfather was a surveyor too.

**JG:** What was his name?

**JB:** George L. Booker. He was a confederate veteran and my great grandfather was also a surveyor and his name was John Sylvester. I was named after him or my father was named after him and of course me.

**JG:** He was a Booker also?

**JB:** Yes. He was a captain in the Confederate army. So my father went there and then he got this job in Mexico with the survey crew and they went down and that was during the time of Poncho Villa's escapade, so they for some reason, they were trying to run the surveyors out. I don't know why, but anyway they had to leave and had to leave all their surveying instruments and everything, so they came back to the states after a year and a

half, two years down there. He read an advertisement in the Fort Worth Star Telegram where Southern Pine Lumber Company was seeking a land surveyor and contact...who was the guy...oh, shoot...you shouldn't have asked me. Anyway who was head of that department at that time?

**JG:** Was it Gilbert, L.D. Gilbert?

**JB:** No, Mr. Gilbert was here at that time. He was my father's best man.

**JG:** Was it Kenley, Dave Kenley?

**JB:** Kenley, yes that is who it was. Yes, it was Dave Kenley and he sent him his resume and Mr. Kenley told him to come on down and he got a job land surveying. He also knew how to lay out railroad tracks and all the curves and stuff, so he did a lot of work on the plant too at the time. Then he left here and went to Lufkin as city engineer and was there ever since.

**JG:** So, I think on some of the stuff your daughter had written said he worked for Temple, began approximately in 1908.

**JB:** Yes, something like that.

**JG:** Is that about right?

**JB:** Yes, sounds about right.

**JG:** Did your father ever talk...and I guess you became an engineer also?

**JB:** Yes.

**JG:** Did your father talk to you much about the engineering or the surveying that he did in Mexico, anything specific?

**JB:** No, very little. Most of it was...he didn't talk very much about anything like that. It was an experience that he had and he enjoyed it. He enjoyed it, he liked it and...

**JG:** So, you were the fifth generation surveyor?

**JB:** I am not a surveyor.

**JG:** Oh, but you have an engineering degree.

**JB:** Yes and he was a professional engineer but he was grandfathered in because he didn't have a degree in engineering but he was a registered surveyor too.

**JG:** Okay.

**JB:** So...no, he didn't mention much about the Mexico episode other than it was pretty tough living because they were going through the country through the wilds of Mexico and then they got involved in that revolution and was lucky to get out.

**JG:** So, you didn't really know what railroad lines he might have been working for?

**JB:** No I have no idea. It was going to Vera Cruz I think from Mexico City I believe.

**JG:** Okay. Did you know your grandfather much?

**JB:** Just vaguely yes, he died when I was about six I think, five or six.

**JG:** You were born in '21?

**JB:** In '21 yes and he died in '27 I believe.

**JG:** I thought it was interesting that you had several ancestors that were all surveyors and then you became an engineer.

**JB:** Yes, my grandfather was county surveyor for Somervell County out in Central Texas for years but, he was also like a lot of people he sold real estate and he raised cows and he farmed and all that sort of stuff. He acquired about I think three or four thousand acres of pasture land. He was an interesting man. A very good man, everybody liked him. Uncle George was his name. Everybody knew Uncle George, a fine man, but I didn't get to know him well.

**JG:** You had mentioned Dave Kenley and that is who I guess your father interviewed with and got the job. Sitting here looking at photographs that your daughter had and there is quite a few. I have got some print outs here we are looking at. Dave Kenley is in there and I guess your mom and your dad.

**JB:** I guess, I can't recognize them.

**JG:** Did you know Mr. Kenley?

**JB:** Yes, I met him even after I came to work. This is my mother here.

**JG:** Your mother lived in Manning for awhile right?

**JB:** Yes, she was raised in Manning.

**JG:** Raised in Manning, okay.

**JB:** And when the mill burned in Manning they moved to Diboll.

**JG:** Okay. Let's talk a little bit about your mom then. What do you remember her talking about of Manning?

**JB:** Well they loved Manning. They always had a great thoughts of Manning or great remembrances of Manning. Her mother ran the boarding house.

**JG:** And what were their names again?

**JB:** Wood.

**JG:** Wood, and your mother's first name was Ila?

**JB:** Ila, no middle name.

**JG:** And her mother's name, her mother's first name?

**JB:** My mother's first name?

**JG:** Ila's...

**JB:** Ila's mother.

**JG:** Your grandmother?

**JB:** My grandmother, Laura.

**JG:** Laura and they had the boarding house?

**JB:** Yes, yes, that is right. And I don't think they did any of that in Diboll but she ran the boarding house in Manning until the mill burned which was, I don't remember, '38 or so.

**JG:** Yes, about '35 I believe.

**JB:** Yes, somewhere back in there.

**JG:** So, your father then was working in Diboll and your mother grew up in Manning. How did they meet?

**JB:** Well when, they moved to Diboll by then.

**JG:** Oh, she had moved to Diboll, okay.

**JB:** I think no wait a minute...the mill burned in Manning when?

**JG:** Well the last time it burned in '35 but there were other fires.

**JB:** Yes, there was another fire because they...

**JG:** So, it was an earlier fire they moved then.

**JB:** Mother was born in 1900 so.

**JG:** And you were born in '21 so it would have been before.

**JB:** They got married when she was eighteen, 1918 that is when they got married.

**JG:** Okay, so they had moved to Diboll then and that is how your father...

**JB:** Yes, and that is how he met her.

**JG:** So, he was a good bit older then wasn't he?

**JB:** Yes. He was too old for World War I. Yes, there was quite an age difference.

**JG:** 1884 and 1900 I guess, okay.

**JB:** Yes, I don't...they had a great marriage. It worked out fine.

**JG:** And so, your father I guess worked at Diboll until about 1920, from something your daughter gave us.

**JB:** I was born in Lufkin.

**JG:** Oh, you were actually born in Lufkin okay.

**JB:** I was born right behind the Lufkin High School where the foundry had their main office. That's been gone for years and years but they had an apartment there and that is where I was born in that apartment.

**JG:** Did you go to school in Lufkin?

**JB:** Went to school in Lufkin. I went to elementary in Kurth Ward as they called it and I graduated from Lufkin High School in 1938.

**JG:** '38. Did you play athletics?

**JB:** No, I did track for awhile but I got a job, had two jobs, so I was more interested in making a buck or two a week than I was in athletics. That is...besides that I wasn't a very large boy and didn't care too much for it.

**JG:** So what was the decision that got your father that got him into being the county engineer? Was there any particular reason why he left the company?

**JB:** No my father was the city engineer in Lufkin.

**JG:** City engineer, I'm sorry.

**JB:** In Lufkin. Yes, a better job.

**JG:** Just a better job, okay.

**JB:** Yes, he was there for a number of years and then he opened his own business. He was a consulting engineer and did a lot of work in Diboll, Huntington and small towns doing water, streets, sewer and that type of stuff.

**JG:** Now the John Booker that we sometimes see that laid out roads out at Boggy Slough was that you or your father?

**JB:** That was me.

**JG:** That was you, okay. Well we will get to that maybe here a little later. Just some general memories of growing up in Lufkin did you have brothers and sisters?

**JB:** I had one brother and I was seven years older than him, so we were not close enough to...he was kind of a little stranger to me, I mean there was too big of a gap. We got closer as the years went by of course. In fact I just returned from visiting out there, stayed a week so, it was just the two of us. Had a very nice childhood and had good neighbors so I have no bad memories at all of growing up. It was of course during the Depression. We didn't know it was the Depression as far as a kid. Of course you had to wear patched up clothes every now and then.

**JG:** But your father had a steady job the whole time?

**JB:** Yes, he was city engineer, like the WPA and the government agencies came up with a lot of money to build infrastructure. So, he worked, he was actually very busy during that time and...

**JG:** So, did he facilitate or work with a lot of the WPA projects then?

**JB:** Yes, and there were several other of those government agencies. I don't recall just which ones.

**JG:** Any of the CCC's, the Civilian Conservation Corp?

**JB:** No, he didn't do the CCC's. They had their own people for that. They had the army did all their engineering for them. But it was a good program; that is the way all the streets and the sewer lines really got laid. They put a lot of people to work. I don't know whether you could do it today because they dug ditches by hand just to make work you know. You start digging five to ten foot ditches with a shovel you are doing some hard

work. But anyway people had to scratch by. The Depression was an interesting period in America. In a way a real happy period and people had a lot of fun but there was no...it was mostly just conversation, people gathering and cut a watermelon and do something like that. The kids were all playing, no toys, a swing was about the biggest toy you could have, make a swing up in a tree. But people got along real well and took care of each other. It was an interesting period.

**JG:** Who were some of your neighbors? You mentioned earlier you had good neighbors. Were there any that you care to share in your neighborhood there?

**JB:** Well we had the Thompson's, which they had the drugstore in Lufkin, Thompson's Drug. Then we had a couple of guys that worked for the foundry, one of them was named Nixon and then the Cardwells and the Carrolltons and the Gandys. Dr. Gandy was in our neighborhood. They were the ones that had kids. The rest of them are people that didn't. There was a Texas Ranger that lived two houses down from us for a long time. I never saw him, but it was a nice neighborhood. We all got along good and played together. It was all right.

**JG:** So, what did you do after high school?

**JB:** I went to A&M. That was it. I went to A&M for three years and then the war came along.

**JG:** Where were you when you got news of Pearl Harbor bombing?

**JB:** I was in the Army Air Corps.

**JG:** You were already in the Army Air Corp.

**JB:** Yes. I was...at the end of my junior year...I never made good grades in college. I made...I got by. I didn't have any trouble getting by but I didn't...really couldn't get into it to well, but I was going to graduate okay. I was fine as far as that is concerned, but the war was getting pretty interesting in the beginning of 1941. First thing I got involved in I was going to join the Royal Canadian Air Force and I did all the paperwork and another friend of mine and I.

**JG:** Why that?

**JB:** Just to get in. They were recruiting people to get into it and I just...

**JG:** Looking for some adventure I guess.

**JG:** I was a little tired of college I guess, so we did that and about the same time all the services, Army and Navy and Marines, everybody came to A&M seeking...you had to have two years of college unless you had commission. They were taking everybody that would volunteer; it was strictly volunteer. And so, the Army Air Corps set up an

interview station, so the Navy had them. They all had them. We said well we will go interview at the Army Air Corps and then we will also go around to the Navy and whichever one accepts us first we will go. So, typically I liked the Armed Forces. I was interested in the Navy and he was interested in the Army. It just reversed. He went in the Navy and I went into the Army Air Corps. So, that was in May of 1941. I had to wait until they could appropriate some money to start up. It was still broke then, the government was, to start a new class of Aviation Cadets. My first assignment was down at...up in Vernon, Texas, primary flying school. That is where I was when World War II broke out and Pearl Harbor.

**JG:** Do you remember that particular moment?

**JB:** Oh yes!

**JG:** Talk about it a little bit.

**JB:** They of course... we didn't hear it over the radio for awhile, but it was they came and got us all up and we were issued side arms and they put a perimeter guard out around the air field and then the hangars and all that sort of thing. Nobody knew anything and we were extremely nervous and then as time went by well, we realized, or they realized, that there was no immediate danger to anything. Then we concentrated then on...but we didn't know a whole lot about it. I've learned more about it after the war. It was not much that we had. We didn't have access to newspapers and radio very much in flight school and of course no TV. So all we heard was from the military side and one of the main things that was shocking was of course the Philippines, losing the Philippines and Bataan and the Death March and all of that. They were anxious to crank us out and get us into action.

**JG:** What kind of planes did you train in?

**JB:** The first one was called a PT-19 and it was a low wing. It was a tandem type pilot with two seats in it in tandem and a nice airplane. It did all the acrobatics and all that sort of stuff. It was fine as far as a primary trainer. When we mastered that we went to San Angelo to basic and it was just a bigger engine but it had retractable landing gear which you had to learn not to forget. (laughter)

**JG:** What was the army's main plane then? Was it the P-40?

**JB:** The P-40, yes.

**JG:** When did you fly those?

**JB:** I did not fly a P-40. I flew a P-39 in the last advanced flying school I went to. They...it was the one just before the P-40. It was not, I don't think it ever got in combat. They let us fly a bunch of them. They had a bunch of them around but we were flying AT-6's then which was a nice, nice flying airplane to train in. It would do all...

**JG:** Was that the Texan? Is that what they called the Texan?

**JB:** Yes, it could do anything in the way of acrobatics with it and gunnery, we went through gunnery. And I graduated in May of 1942 and was commissioned Second Lieutenant. It was interesting and I didn't know if for years and years and years, and I still don't know why but I was commissioned in the Officers Reserve Corps. Okay, that doesn't sound like much but all through my service it was the Army of United States is what you put after your name or Army Air Corps or something like that. So, I often wondered about that and then I got out of the service after the war was over and I found out. They said that I could get paid \$500 a year for every year that I was called on active duty as a reserve officer so I collected my money and I still don't know why I got commissioned as a reserve. None of the rest of them did. It was the only thing I could figure was going to A&M for three years. But anyway we got out of school, out of advance flying school and that was the fun part. The first two primary and basic were not fun, they were hard. The wash out rate was about probably six percent in primary and about forty percent in basic and very few in advanced, so they were still holding very strict to their requirements. Later as the war went by it got easier and easier and easier of course. They had to, they ran out of people, so I was...got out of there and we were trained to be fighter pilots. I was so disappointed when I was assigned to a photo recon group in Colorado Springs and I didn't want to fly and take pictures. I wanted to shoot somebody.

**JG:** Wanted to shoot bullets huh?

**JB:** We got up there and anyway it was not...I didn't see how I could get out of it so I was satisfied. We were flying P-38's which was kind of a fun deal. It was one that no guns or armor on it so it would really scat. It would really go. But, also they had a mapping squadron there that had...

**JG:** Was it a single cock pit, single seat?

**JB:** Yes, twin engine.

**JG:** P-38, was it equipped with the cameras?

**JB:** Yes.

**JG:** Okay.

**JB:** And that is hard work. It doesn't sound like it is but you're taking these pictures and they come out in strips, long strips, and they are about the size of this. They had a table as long as this entire room here, a little wider than this, and they lay these strips on there after they take them and they are taking pictures from around twenty thousand feet, twenty to twenty five thousand. So, if you were not flying straight and level, of course the wind was trying to push you, then your strip would look like a snake. (laughter) So, that

called for some pretty heated discussions. You got ripped up on that so, you learned to fly. It really was a benefit because I learned to fly an airplane like it was on instruments because you had to sit there and stay with it I mean or you would get that snake.

**JG:** Get blown off. And, that was in Colorado Springs you said?

**JB:** Colorado Springs. So, I got to fly the B-17 and the B-25, they had one of those. But I fell in love with that B-17. It was something else. I could just...big old four engines on there.

**JG:** Big old tail fin.

**JB:** But, I couldn't...I was still stuck over there flying the 38's so, about that time they came out seeking pilots for the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force in England and there was a priority so I said I just believe I'll sign up for that flying B-17's. That is what I wanted to do so, I just...they couldn't turn you down. You fly for it and you got it. I made the rounds of the various airports learning about the B-17 and all that. I went through it very quick. I didn't have any trouble flying it at all and getting ready to go overseas. They had a place where you picked up your crew; they had two places actually to pick up part of your crew. One in one place and one at another and then you get your crew together and you go to where they made the airplanes. We went to Seattle to the Boeing Factory and picked up a brand new airplane there. It was a modified B-17 that they put gun turrets; two additional gun turrets and the single guns on a regular B-17 were converted to twin guns. It was just a gun shell with the idea that it would fly along with the regular formation of the B-17's and it would be some protection for them. They had guns everywhere. That was called a W-B-40. Well they sent the command staff from England. These people had already been in combat, a major and a couple of captains and a couple of first lieutenants, 327 Squadron in the 92<sup>nd</sup> group. They came over and picked us up. We were the Squadron. There was 13 airplanes in a squadron, kind of an odd number. Nobody was superstitious I don't guess. But we were the other three groups in a squadron just flew at the ship as a bomber. So, we had to fly the Atlantic in the winter time. That was kind of an adventure. We flew all the way...we stopped in Newfoundland and I believe that was our last stop.

**JG:** And what year would this have been?

**JB:** This was...started in January of 1943 when we started over.

**JG:** Okay.

**JB:** And, it took us an awful long time. The weather was so bad. We had big delays. We started in Florida actually. That was another strange thing. We had been sent to Florida to go to the Escape and Evasion School for the Pacific Theater. We were not in the B-40's. We got down to Florida and there we were out in the booney docks and going out in the woods and camping out and all that sort of stuff. This director came down and we had all summer clothes and everything that we were going to go do this B-40 thing. I got a little ahead of myself over there so they packed us up and flew us up to Kansas. What was the

name of that field? It was Kansas, a field in Kansas and that is where we got organized and then we went and got our airplanes and picked up the crew. So, we flew the ocean and I had a wonderful navigator. We flew from Newfoundland all the way to Greenland and there is a place called Bluie West One. It's where the air field was, the stopover and it was a field and it was one of those...it was no return. The airbase was at the end of the field and it either landed and of course the big high walls and all that, you either landed it safely or you crashed. You couldn't turn around. It wasn't big enough to turn around. But, anyway he got us in there and actually all of them did. We got all thirteen airplanes out of there and then we went to Iceland to Reykjavik and all this time flying mostly instruments. The weather was just horrible and we got to landfall in Ireland and we flew over Scotland and there they gave us a ferry pilot to take us down to our base and you had to have somebody that knew how to fly in England because there is large balloons everywhere and anti aircraft guns and you had to fly little paths to get somewhere and we would have never found it without this guide. So, we got down there and that was probably all this time was probably about middle of February before we got down to what we called home.

**JG:** And what base was it?

**JB:** It was a base called Alconbury in England. So, we got to Alconbury and then we had about a month of flying and learning all the procedures. It was quite a complicated affair just to get ready to fight the war. We thought we were trained but we weren't. We had to learn an awful lot. We started flying the first of May flying combat and we flew those YB-40's and of course they put you in what they call tail end Charlie. That is the most vulnerable spot in the formation so we flew. We put one of those in each group. You didn't fly with our home group. I did once or twice but you go you have to fly the day before down to another group and you'd be their tail end Charlie. It was not a very desirable spot to be. It was...

**JG:** Did you ever have any fighter escorts?

**JB:** No fighter escorts. You would have fighter escorts about mid channel.

**JG:** Would it be American planes or British planes?

**JB:** Mostly British.

**JG:** British, spitfires and hurricanes.

**JB:** Spitfires and hurricanes, yes. The Germans ruled the sky. Those spitfires and hurricanes were very short, you know, they had a two hour max I think as far as air time so they couldn't do very much. They couldn't go very far in fighter fights.

**JG:** I guess it was mainly for defense.

**JB:** Mainly for defense yes, which they did a very good job of that. That was the idea of building this airplane; it would do all of this.

**JG:** Yes, because you weren't going to have the fighters...

**JB:** It didn't work out. It did a good job but it was so heavy with all those guns and extra ammunition it carried. We carried more weight than a regular bomb load.

**JG:** Just from bullets huh?

**JB:** Just from bullets and guns. We had nearly twice as many guns, but the airplane didn't...it was not able to stand up under the firing of all that. A fifty caliber machine gun you are firing five or six of them at a time in an airplane you'll shake it all to pieces. So, after seven missions they had to retire them. All the rivets were loose in them and everything, what had survived. I think we lost about half of them.

**JG:** Oh man, golly!

**JB:** So anyway boy, it was sure a relief to get out of that.

**JG:** Were you ever shot pretty good? I mean...

**JB:** Oh yes, we got shot at every time we went over there. Oh yes, the Germans didn't...

**JG:** But, I mean were you hit pretty good?

**JB:** Yes, yes, they managed some pretty good blows.

**JG:** Did you lose any planes in your group?

**JB:** Yes, we lost, oh yes your life cycle was very short. We were running in this July and August and part of September we really took a licking over there. We lost most of our airplanes. We only had a tour was 25 missions and we only had one crew that made the cut while I was there and it was a pretty bad deal. It was really bad. We really got shot up but then I got promoted as a lead crew, lead pilot so that helped some. I didn't have to fly as frequently as I was flying. We were getting along pretty good and we were on our next to the last mission and I drew the worst mission that there was during the war, was over the Ruhr Valley.

**JG:** The which valley?

**JB:** The Ruhr Valley, that is where all the industrial might of Germany was located.

**JG:** And, how do you spell that?

**JB:** R-u-h-r. That was a bad deal, anyway we got shot down.

**JG:** Now you were in a B-17 again right?

**JB:** Yes, we were back in the B-17.

**JG:** And, a gunship version?

**JB:** No, it was gone. I flew seven missions in it and the balance of them, up to twenty four, were in the B-17. I liked one mission coming home.

**JG:** Liked one mission and you were shot down?

**JB:** Yes, well you know, you have...when you get into such a bloody affair that you get into that your first thing is well maybe if I could lose a leg or an arm or a leg I would get out of this. And, I mean getting wounded was about the only way you were going to get out unless you could fly 25 missions and that was practically impossible. So, the other was to be shot down and captured and that was not a cinch anyway. It was if you were shot down over Germany then you had to be exposed to the German population which was not real happy with you being over there dropping bombs on them. There were so many of the boys were killed or hung if they were over at Germany. Your hope then was to be in an occupied country like France or Holland or Belgium. Fortunately we fought our way out of that mess until we got to Holland and we were just under such an intense attack that I had to quit. I had to call it quits and got everybody out with some scratches and minor things.

**JG:** Now are you saying you were still in the plane?

**JB:** Yes.

**JG:** So, you were hit?

**JB:** Oh yes.

**JG:** The engine was hit bad, the wing or...?

**JB:** I had one engine hit and couldn't feel the prop and you lost that air speed because you couldn't do that and then it was just gasoline coming out everywhere and it was a...we lost our oxygen and we lost all the hydraulics were shot out but, I was still flying it.

**JG:** And you said everybody got out so everybody jumped with shoots?

**JB:** Yes.

**JG:** And, how did you get out? Describe there at the last before?

**JB:** Well I waited until I felt sure everybody was out. I hated to quit, but you know, you just can't stay in a burning airplane and one engine was really burning. It was going to

blow any minute I felt and it did. But, so everybody got out and I...there was a door down at the bottom so I crawled down in there and found my parachute. You didn't wear a parachute it was a chest type. I finally found it and got it on. I was a little scared there for a minute and jumped out. That is the one and only parachute, it was nothing to it.

**JG:** Do you know about what altitude you were?

**JB:** Yes, we were...I had to get down below 10,000 feet so we could breathe. We had lost our oxygen and had to get down real fast. I made a power dive but you don't last long.

**JG:** What altitude were you when you were bombing?

**JB:** Twenty five thousand.

**JG:** Twenty five.

**JB:** Yes, you'll dive pretty quick if you lose your oxygen. So, I had to do that and get us all down there and we were hit by fighter planes. They just...the Germans just absolutely... if you got out of the formation you were dead duck. That happened all through the war. As long as you stayed in the formation you might have a chance, but if you ever got out they would get you. Just so many of them you couldn't fight them off. We did pretty good for awhile until...

**JG:** Were you able to join up? Did everybody parachute okay?

**JB:** Yes, we were scattered out.

**JG:** Scattered all over. What was your first thought after you landed? Were you okay? Did you hurt yourself?

**JB:** Well I had been hit in the back and in the head.

**JG:** With a bullet?

**JB:** Yes, flak from a twenty mill...from the fighter planes they shoot a twenty mil shell that explodes when it hits and that hit me all over. I didn't...I was kind of numb I guess because it didn't bother me too much at first. Then I was floating down that parachute and I knew the war was over for me and I just...nothing but uncertainty ahead of you. I was pretty sure we was over Holland and we were. You know, it was just, "boy this is it." The only thing good about it I'm still alive, you know, so I hit the ground and when I hit the ground the ground was real hard. It was like it was frozen. I don't know if it was frozen or not. That was in November of 1943, but I don't know I didn't break my ankle but I may have cracked it or something. Of course, I never knew what really happened to it, but I couldn't walk very well. I couldn't walk hardly at all. These people came out and

picked me up and they said they were with the resistance and that they would put me in a safe hiding place, so everything begins to blur at that time. I was tired and I was hurt.

**JG:** What language were they speaking?

**JB:** They spoke broken English. Most everybody in Europe you would find somebody that would speak English. The communication was not a real problem. So, they carried me to a place and I spent the night and then they carried me to...the next night they carried me to a doctor and he looked me all over and cleaned me up. I hadn't even been cleaned up but he cleaned me up and all he had was soap. Didn't have any antiseptics or tetanus shot or nothing, didn't even have any bandages. So, he patched me up as best he could and cleaned me up and hoped for the best and so I stayed with these people five days and they turned me over to a guy that was supposed to carry me to start the trip to France. This was the route you'd have to go to get to Belgium first and then to France and then contact the French underground and maybe hopefully get on out through Spain. But, that guy said, "Follow me" and he had a bicycle. He was on one and I was on the other and he said, "Follow me."

**JG:** So, you were riding a bicycle then?

**JB:** Yes, I couldn't ride it very good but I had to get by. My leg was still just really giving me a fit and that son of a gun drove me right straight to the Gestapo Headquarters. My navigator, they picked him up and he escaped. He was the only one. The rest of them all got picked up.

**JG:** Now, you say escaped, he escaped right off the bat or...?

**JB:** No, it took him about a year before he got back.

**JG:** Oh okay.

**JB:** He went all the way through France and Belgium. He has quit an interesting story. He wrote a little book about it.

**JG:** What was his name?

**JB:** Bradley, he was my navigator and they were looking for me because he apparently was next to the last in jumping out of the airplane so, he felt like I was close. Then they heard about me. He was with this underground group and they heard about me being with this other underground group, so the rush was to get me picked up because these guys were the main ones that he was with. They were just a day late in finding me but they did shoot the guy that turned me in. They shot him. That was about the only consolation I had out of that deal. So, then we...

**JG:** So, you were a second lieutenant?

**JB:** I was a captain at that time.

**JG:** Oh, you were a captain at that time, okay. So, what did they do once they...of course that is a whole story in and of itself I guess but, I'm just curious, what was the first thing they did once they got a hold of you?

**JB:** Well the first thing they did was carry me out to an air base and put me in a cell out there until they had to ship me to Amsterdam. That was the place they sent you first, but anyway they went out there and that was the guy that said he shot me down, I have no idea of knowing it was. The German he came out to see me. He got me out of the cell and carried me into the mess hall and we had a nice dinner and a bottle of wine and they put me back in jail and carried me down to Amsterdam which was the interrogation center down there.

**JG:** Is that because you were a captain, an officer?

**JB:** No, they carried all the officers through there.

**JG:** No, I meant having dinner?

**JB:** I don't know; that was his idea. He was...he didn't speak very good English but spoke enough that we could communicate. But he was...I don't know why, what his motives were other than he just felt sorry for me I guess I don't know, but he was very kind and he wasn't trying to beat up on me or anything. I don't know. I sure did enjoy the meal. That was the last good one I had until the war was over. But, you go through the interrogation center and that is where they try to find out what knowledge you might have and all that. They had interrogators that spoke very good English. Then they had...people don't believe this but they have...I thought it was just me but after I got in the prison camps talking with other people it was the same story. They had a resume on me in their files and they could tell you about what I've told you up until now almost, where I went to school and all that stuff. That is the truth.

**JG:** Really, wow!

**JB:** How they got all that information I don't know but I later found out they had people in the United States that followed when they would have commissioning exercises for the various armed forces they would take these clippings out. All newspapers had it, like Lufkin Daily and when I graduated and they had a picture of me and all this stuff. Well these people cut this stuff out and somehow got it over to Germany. So most of it, I don't know about the Army but on the Air Force, they had a pretty good file on me. They asked me where I was born, you know, you are only suppose to say name rank and serial numbers so, I started that and he said, "Well let's see what I've got here is you were born in Lufkin Texas in 1921." It was amazing what they had. So we went through that and then they started trying to find out about some stuff I knew nothing about. They knew what group I was in and what squadron I was in and everything. But we were just developing some radar type bombing systems where we fly in the overcast, over the

overcast and drop through it without sight. The old Norden bombsight was based on sight. I was not involved in it. It was another squadron in the group that was getting the first one. All I knew was such a thing existed. It was called H2SN at that time I believe. I knew it existed but that was it. Well they kept hounding me because I was a lead pilot. "You bound to know something about it." They thought I was being stubborn but I didn't know anything about it. They didn't use any force or anything like that, but they made life uncomfortable for you.

**JG:** How is that?

**JB:** Well, you know, it's not a good place to be and two meals a day of sorry food and lights go off or leave them on. They would leave the light on you couldn't get to it. They had a cage on it. It was just, you know.

**JG:** But, nothing, I mean they didn't physically break your arm or fingers or anything?

**JB:** No, but they nearly every day around ten o'clock they would have a firing squad and shoot people. That kind of gets your attention.

**JG:** You probably didn't know where you were at the time, but where were you?

**JB:** In Amsterdam, I knew where I was.

**JG:** Oh, you were in Amsterdam, the whole time?

**JB:** At that time. No, I stayed there...they kept me for...oh I lost track of time in those...probably...they kept me probably at least three weeks there, normally it would be about three days but, they just had it in their mind that I knew something and I just wasn't telling them.

**JG:** So, that is what you were saying. Amsterdam was mostly the interrogation part of it, okay.

**JB:** That was it. Once you got through that then you were through with it. They had gotten all that they could get out of you.

**JG:** Then where did they send you?

**JB:** They sent me up to what they called Stalag Luft One, which was a prison camp that had British, non-commissioned officers and Czech, Polish all those countries like that, non-commissioned pilots. All the other armed forces but the United States had non-commissioned pilots, sergeant pilots. They sent us up there, sent me, I didn't see anybody. Well, my co-pilot came. He ended up there but the rest of them I never saw until after the war. We got up there and it was a brand new...it had been a Hitler youth camp. It was decent, but it was kind of a holding place and then they decided to ship all these guys there. It was a pretty interesting deal getting acquainted with all those different

nationalities up there. I ran the...I got the job of running the kitchen which we fixed one meal a day and it was a bunch of Czechs. It was five or six of them that helped. They did the cooking.

**JG:** Czechoslovakians?

**JB:** Yes, Czechoslovakians. They were all sergeants and master sergeants, high ranking sergeants. One of them could speak very good English. The rest of them couldn't but such good people, I mean they were fine guys. The Germans treated them like dirt, they were rough on them. They slapped them around. They never laid a hand on Americans unless some guy lost his cool, but they were really rough on those guys so.

**JG:** Did y'all do any labor?

**JB:** No, no labor. They did, they did but American sergeants didn't have to do any labor.

**JG:** Okay.

**JB:** The English sergeants didn't but these Czechs did. That was part of the Geneva Convention was written where officers and sergeants and above didn't have to do manual labor unless they volunteered, unless somebody volunteered.

**JG:** What labor did the regulars do?

**JB:** Just what ever needed to be done, cleaning up and emptying the cess pools.

**JG:** So, just stuff around the camp, not anything productive?

**JB:** No, the Russians did that. The Russians did all the farming and the road building and stuff. They had millions of them, I mean gee. That work force would go out and it would stretch for a mile, off with their little shovels on their shoulder.

**JG:** Were they stationed where y'all were?

**JB:** No, they were close to us. They just happened to go by where we could see them. No, they were not with us.

**JG:** So, when you weren't doing the cook stuff in the kitchen and that kind of thing what was you're day and night composed of?

**JB:** It wasn't much. We didn't have anything to read for awhile and of course no radio or newspapers or nothing.

**JG:** When you slept were you in a room by yourself?

**JB:** No, there were eight to a room.

**JG:** Eight?

**JB:** Yes, the room wasn't quite as big as this I don't believe.

**JG:** Did you have enough cover, bedding, blankets?

**JB:** You had one blanket and the beds had side boards on them about this high and it was filled up with hay and you slept on that and cover up with that blanket. It was cold.

**JG:** I bet it was.

**JB:** I slept on the Baltic Sea.

**JG:** You just had one blanket, huh?

**JB:** One blanket. It was cold. We finally got another blanket when these got pretty tattered and you could put that on top of the hay. I don't remember losing any sleep, you know, you are young, but it was pretty primitive conditions. You were locked up every night. Had shutters on the outside and they would lock all them up and you couldn't see out. Just like being in jail only we didn't have the privileges that our...

**JG:** The prisoners have huh?

**JB:** We walked a lot, trying to stay in shape. Everybody tried to stay in shape as best you could because you started out your energy levels were good, but as time went by and the food got scarcer and scarcer you couldn't walk very far. Played games and finally got some books through the Red Cross in there and started getting Red Cross packages which saved our lives. We would have never made it without them.

**JG:** What would the packages have consisted of?

**JB:** Well it would have food, chocolate and cigarettes and coffee, tea, salt and pepper, just a package about like that. It was crammed full of stuff. They were not all the same but...

**JG:** Were they pretty much gone through? Did the guards go through them pretty well?

**JB:** No, they never touched them. The Germans are funny people. They delivered them to us and we kept them in the back of the kitchen there in the warehouses, twice as big as this whole building, this part of the building. And I had a guy that I put over it and he was the one that issued them out and he was a sharp cat and if nobody could get to he could remember all of that. The Germans gave them to us. They brought them and sent them out there. We had to unload them, but other than that they did not bother them. I'm surprised because, I don't know whether you've seen any of these movies about POW's or not, but we had the only way to get anything out of the Germans would be trading

parts of our food parcels with them, the chocolate or the cigarettes or something very valuable in Germany. So, the first thing that was done was create a kind of inner-counsel with very few people three or four that knew what was going on everywhere. But they had...it's amazing what an American can do when you get a young group of Americans together. They can build anything and these guys, I was not involved directly in, I had another job to do but I was not involved directly with what you call the quarter master. They were appointed and these guys you tell them I need a tube for a radio or some certain size wire and you say okay. They would get them a pack of cigarettes and they would bribe the guards. Everything came through these guards and you could bribe them and get anything you wanted. After we got the radios going we knew more about what was happening than the Germans did. We could get the BBC and...

**JG:** All from chocolate and cigarettes.

**JB:** Chocolate and cigarettes. You could get anything you wanted. They put out...they made a printing press where they could print one copy at a time, all kind of stuff. I mean...and we had an escape committee and take a uniform and make it look like civilian clothes and they could forge documents. We would get...they had documents and they would get a copy from the Germans and they could forge it. It was amazing, absolutely amazing what these guys could do. Of course we had tunnels a system, a tunnel group that would dig tunnels but being that close to the ocean it would always cave in and so we had really no way to get out. You would have to go all the way through Germany to get out and it was too north of Berlin right on the...just no way to get out. They had two British guys that escaped from there but they had found a row boat and they rowed to Sweden. But, that happened before I got there. So, it was kind of, you know, we were just stuck. We realized it but our Colonel says we are not going to sit here we are going to harass them so, they kept digging those tunnels and making them work to find them. Oh those Germans would get so mad about that. They would threaten us and because if you escaped from one of their prisons somebody has got to take the rap and their rap was pretty hard, but we had none get out. Now further south or something around Poland or places like that they had some escapes that made it. Of course the British had the great escape.

**JG:** What about the guards that maybe the ones that were getting the chocolates and coffee knew about it but, was there ever an occasion where they confiscated your radios and things like that?

**JB:** They couldn't find them.

**JG:** They couldn't find them.

**JB:** They couldn't find them, no. They couldn't find any of that stuff. They couldn't find the tunnel, how they got into the tunnels. I'm telling you those young...of course everybody is in their early twenties, just how genius they were on stuff like that. It will boggle your mind looking back on it how they could go through that floor and get into that tunnel. These people, the Germans, had dogs and lots of dogs and they could find the

tunnel eventually but they couldn't find it until it got way out there. Most of the time when the ground started sinking they would know it and then they would come in sometimes with a heavy vehicle and drive around all over the place looking for them.

**JG:** Now did you ever try to go through a tunnel?

**JB:** No, fortunately I didn't get involved with that. I don't see how anybody could do it. From what I saw the tunnel itself was just a rat hole. They made an air system and had the pumps, they make it out of cans that dried milk came out of and they could pump air in there to those guys and then they hooked it up to the lights in the barracks. I tell you those guys were real ingenious, just as clever as they could be, but most of that was just to harass the Germans.

**JG:** So, did y'all have radios? Did y'all know the end of the war was approaching?

**JB:** Oh yes.

**JG:** When were you freed?

**JB:** When the Russians came in.

**JG:** The Russians.

**JB:** They were the first ones there. The first thing the Russians did was pen us all back up, and they were bad. We were quite nervous about the Russians. We didn't know they were...

**JG:** How many...were there Americans and British there?

**JB:** No, the Brits were all gone. They shipped out the Brits earlier. The Brits were actually the ones that told us about the tunnel deal. They had been through that too, but they had shipped them out, shipped all of those noncommissioned officers out. We think they shot the Czechs. The rumor was that they shot the Czechs and but I don't know if that was ever confirmed or not.

**JG:** So was it just Americans then when the Russians came?

**JB:** Yes, ten thousand ended up there, air officers and air crew. That represents lots of B-17's.

**JG:** Ten thousand were at your camp?

**JB:** Yes.

**JG:** Wow.

**JB:** We had a general and I guess five or six full colonels, group commanders. We had the two leading aces in the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force, Gabreski and Zemke, they were the two leading aces in the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force. We got shot down.

**JG:** What did they fly P-51's?

**JB:** One of them flew a P-51 the other one flew a P-47.

**JG:** P-47.

**JB:** We had a lot of aces, you know if you stay very long you were going to get it. There was no way around it.

**JG:** So the Russians put you back, huh?

**JB:** Yes, but they were...they tore up the town. They all got drunk and they were raping and looting in that town, little town. I don't know how big it was probably the size maybe about the size of Diboll. It had one big church in it. So, several of us decided we would make our way out and try to go south and hit the British and that is what my co-pilot and I did. We escaped.

**JG:** Now that is after the Russians were there?

**JB:** Yes.

**JG:** So, were there any Germans there when the Russians got there or they had already left?

**JB:** Oh no, they had all left. (laughter)

**JG:** I figured so.

**JB:** Listen, they were scared of those Russians.

**JG:** So, how many days were ya'll there by yourselves?

**JB:** They left in the night and then when we got up the next morning the Russians were coming.

**JG:** The Russians were there, okay.

**JB:** You could hear them coming.

**JG:** So y'all weren't there like two or three days or anything?

**JB:** No, no, they came through and there was a big battle about a quarter of a mile from us and they had cornered up a bunch of SS Troops and they killed all of them. They were

killing machines, they were drunk. Bad, bad, bad, people, they really were. They just...they hung a lot of the civilians. They were just, the Russians I didn't have any...they were bad folks.

**JG:** And when was that when the Russians got there? What time of year?

**JB:** About April. Well when was the war over April or May? A little before the war was over. The war, it ended, well it ended about the same time because they flew and the war was over about then, our war, the Americans' part. They flew everybody out of there. There was an air base close to us and they flew everybody out, all ten thousand. All the B-17's came in and picked everybody up and flew them back to France.

**JG:** But you had already left though right?

**JB:** I had already left which was not a smart thing to do.

**JG:** But you left after the Russians came?

**JB:** After the Russians came in.

**JG:** You left how many days after?

**JB:** Oh, I left pretty quick because I could see...

**JG:** The first day?

**JB:** Probably the second or third day maybe. I know I went before we were still kind of lucid I went to a concentration camp. They had a little concentration camp there and we went over there to see what we could do to help them. There wasn't anything we could do to help them. They were all...what wasn't dead, was dying and then the Russians came and I don't know what they did about it. It was about probably two or three hundred of us left. The concern was the Russians... their intent was not to send us back real quick. They were going to send us back through Russia all the way across the town on the north of Japan over there. They were going to make us go all the way over there to get out and man, we didn't want to do that.

**JG:** We were still at war with Japan.

**JB:** Yes, that didn't make much sense.

**JG:** That didn't make sense did it? So you were going to take your chances on your own.

**JB:** Take my chances, yes. It turned out okay.

**JG:** So, how did you finally get rescued so to speak?

**JB:** Well we finally ran into some British advanced troops. The whole country, it was unbelievable how chaotic it was. It was...you would think just being an American and I was still wearing my leather...

**JG:** Yes, I was going to ask you what you were wearing.

**JB:** Right in the midst of all this people were going and people were coming. Most of them were running away from the Russians, civilians. The whole road was just masses of people in transit and all these Germans had hundreds of thousands of French, Polish and all those people up there working. They were all just cut loose too.

**JG:** Everybody was displaced huh?

**JB:** People going and coming, mostly going. All you had to do was get in there and go with them, you know.

**JG:** So what were you wearing, your flight jacket?

**JB:** Yes, yes, the German soldiers were going too. Some of them were running away and some were going to fight the Germans [Russians]. You would just get out of the road and let them go by and not pay any attention to you. It was just mass confusion, just mass confusion. Then American airplanes would come over and start strafing the Germans and it was the biggest mess you ever saw.

**JG:** So you were free but not really.

**JB:** Yes, it was not a good idea but they didn't kill many people strafing. They were mainly strafing the armored columns. It was still kind of spooky. But then it was all hunky dory after we got with the Brits and went down to France to a place called Lucky Strike. The camp was called Lucky Strike and they started processing us to come back to the states.

**JG:** Well that was quite an experience I bet.

**JB:** Yes, it was. It was all in all not a very pleasant experience. It was not something you would want to do again but, it was better than being dead. But, I ...

**JG:** I guess you reconnected with your family and everything.

**JB:** Oh yes, it took a while to do all that. It...I don't know about young people now days but that whole group we had not one informer or anybody that ever did anything bad like that and we were all together as one and we would defy the Germans every now and then. We would plan it and bring them almost to the brink and bring out machine guns before we would do what they wanted done just to aggravate them. That is what you're supposed to do. That is what your instructions were, what you swore to do. It was such an admirable group of young men. I mean they never gave up. We always knew we were

going to win the war and everything was going to be all right. We never gave up and everybody cooperated. Just like being in the army we had our own...

**JG:** Now, you mentioned your co-pilot, you and your co-pilot left together. Were y'all more or less together the whole time y'all were there?

**JB:** Yes, yes. He died shortly after the war. His son and I ...

**JG:** What was his name?

**JB:** McElvoy.

**JG:** McElvoy, where was he from?

**JB:** Washington, the State of Washington.

**JG:** Washington State.

**JB:** He had a son that I didn't know anything about. He was an unusual guy. He had been in the Army before he joined the Air Corps. He had this boy, married and I was with him you might say two and half years and just about as close as you could be and I never knew he was married. He never told me and he never told me about the boy. About two or three years ago, maybe three now, this guy called me up and he had traced me down as being the pilot and told me he was the son of my co-pilot. That stunned me. So, we corresponded and then he and his wife came over to see me year before last and we...I told him all I could. He had never seen his father. He was born after his father went overseas and his mother would never tell him anything about it. Apparently it was an unhappy marriage of some kind. He didn't know either. He was raised by his grandmother, but he didn't know a thing about his father until he found me. He was pretty diligent. I guess he got on the computer and found me. He was a real bright man and of course he was retired.

**JG:** Where was he living?

**JB:** In New Braunfels.

**JG:** New Braunfels okay.

**JB:** Very nice family, very nice wife. But he was...I'm telling you, his version of German interrogators he...

**JG:** He wanted to know huh?

**JB:** He wanted to know everything he could about his father and I told him all I could tell. I hated to tell him I didn't know, he never told me about you. That is what I told him.

I said, "I had no idea that he had a son." So, I don't know what the deal was, of course he didn't either. His mother was dead.

**JG:** Wow!

**JB:** Kind of odd in situations like that. You never know.

**JG:** Right. Well I appreciate you telling me all of that. That is a very interesting part of your life and one that stayed with you all these years I'm sure.

**JB:** Well yes, I can't remember. I guess your mind, you have to use it a lot, you know, not having books and television and all that sort of stuff. From daylight to dark you are pinned up more or less you just don't remember well what...well nothing happened to remember I guess is what it is. It just all kind of seems like a dream to you.

**JG:** How were you able to mark the days?

**JB:** Oh, we had calendars.

**JG:** I mean calendars that you made or that people sent in the care packages?

**JB:** Oh yes, they could make anything.

**JG:** You had some way of keeping up with time?

**JB:** Oh yes, yes, we had clocks and mostly everybody had lost their wrist watches, of course they were government issued so you didn't have them. But we had a clock. We had a special...there was a special group present, not a very large group that did the bartering with the Germans and their identity was kept as quiet as it could or as confidential as it could. They did all this bartering and you'd furnish them cigarettes, cigarettes and chocolate was the big item, and coffee. And, they would just about get anything you would want. Of course they had certain guards that they were real close to or had something on them and they would get anything. They even had cameras.

**JG:** Now, how did you cope or what kept you going?

**JB:** I don't know. I had plenty to do what I was doing. I had plenty to do.

**JG:** So just staying busy.

**JB:** Just staying busy. And then we had poker games going and all.

**JG:** What about some of your buddies around you were there some that had difficulty? You know, was it more difficult for some?

**JB:** We had none that I was close to or...but we had some, yes we had some people that just couldn't take it and they disappeared. I don't know what happened to them, but they couldn't take it and they kind of went off their rocker and the Germans would take them out of the camp. We had a doctor but he was a veterinarian, he was captured in Africa right at the beginning of the African campaign down there, he was a veterinarian and the Brits had a lot of horse and mule drawn equipment so he was our doctor. Pretty good too! The Germans would...they were funny they...sometimes they were real good with their medical attention to people and so many a large percentage of these guys had been wounded and the Germans had patched them up but, not much follow up to it or any plastic surgery or bones were not healed. Guys had crooked arms on them and burns on their faces and stuff that they didn't do any cosmetic surgery of any kind but they fixed you where you could function, but there were so many of them were battered and bruised up.

**JG:** Did your ankle heal okay?

**JB:** Yes, it got to...it took a while but it's always been weak, but it gave me a fit for awhile. The worst part was, I don't know what it is about if you crack a bone like that the pain is absolutely intense. You wouldn't think it would be, just a crack and I'm sure that is what it was because but boy it hurt, hurt bad!

**JG:** Well let's jump if you're still...I see we have gone about an hour and twenty minutes. I don't want to exhaust you, but if we could let's jump up to how...I know we are probably skipping over some stuff, but how did you get involved working for Southern Pine Lumber or Temple Lumber?

**JB:** Well I graduated from school, from A&M in 1950 and my dad was laying out some subdivisions in Lufkin so I came and I was going to visit him. I was really planning on going to the University of Colorado and get a teaching job up there. Anyway, I came home to see my dad and he said before you do anything I think you ought to go down and talk to Arthur Temple. I had never even heard of him. And he said he is a bright young guy and he was doing some subdivision work for him. So, I said okay and he called him up and I went down and he really impressed me.

**JG:** Now, he was down here in Diboll at the time right?

**JB:** Yes, he was running the mill here. So, he said well I've got this program and I'm going to do and I'm going to hire three engineers. I want a civil, a construction and an electrical engineer. This was on the advice of a consulting firm that he was using for their work. So, he said you the civil engineer and I'm going to hire Joe Denman, he is going to be the construction engineer or architectural engineer and Bobby Musslewhite, who was the electrical engineer. Joe went to A&M and Musslewhite went to Texas. So, I went back and I pondered on it and I said well maybe I'm making a big mistake. I was really interested in staying in the Air Force but that didn't work out because my wife couldn't drive and you couldn't be in the service with a wife not being able to make the drives. So, anyway I said well I believe I'll give it a try. So I talked to him and we made a trade and

he hired all three of us about the same time and that was around August of 1950, right along there. His master plan was to rebuild the town of Diboll. The company owned everything, everything, all the buildings and all the businesses and everything. So, his plan was to make it a modern little city and that was my job was to do the roads and the streets and the water and the sewer and that type stuff, all the infrastructure type thing. That is what I was hired to do and that is what I started out doing.

**JG:** What was one of the biggest challenges in doing that?

**JB:** Well it was all kind of a challenge because he didn't furnish you much help. He expected you to do a lot of things that I was not accustomed to doing. I would sit down at night sometime and take a piece of paper like this and lay out a street or water line or sewer line or something like that then, no fancy drawings or nothing and get out there the next morning we had a survey crew that I could use and we would stake all that stuff out and I dealt with contractors on rebuilding all the streets and things like that.

**JG:** Was Dred Devereaux still around then?

**JB:** Yes.

**JG:** Did he get involved any?

**JB:** No, no, he didn't get involved any. He had a lot of say about everything. (laughter)

**JG:** He had a lot to say but not involved. (laughter)

**JB:** He was quite a character. He...

**JG:** He might have wanted to huh?

**JB:** He was a sight when he threw a fit. That is what we all...everybody...most of them were pretty frightened of him, but I think his bark was worse than his bite. But he would throw these fits and slam his hat on the ground and all that sort of stuff but he treated us pretty good.

**JG:** Yes, I wondered how he felt seeing all you young college grads going around town.

**JB:** It took him awhile but, he got into it. I did that for...we got it all going and then they had Temple Associates, the construction company. What made it doable for me was they could do all this and we didn't have to have a whole lot of drawings and specifications and contracts and stuff. We just say we are going to run a water line here and they could go do it more or less. Or, sewer plant, I built a little sewer plant. They didn't have any of that. They had water in town.

**JG:** Where were they getting their water from?

**JB:** From the plant. We got it all going pretty good and that is when they decided to convert from train logging to building you know, running trucks on the road.

**JG:** Log roads.

**JB:** So, I got involved in that. At the same time I was working on this and the plant to.

**JG:** Now were you actually working for Southern Pine Lumber or Arthur Temple Jr. and Associates?

**JB:** Southern Pine Lumber.

**JG:** Southern Pine Lumber, okay.

**JB:** So, I did that and we built over a hundred miles of road, or my crew did. I didn't stay with them all the time, but I had a good crew.

**JG:** So, this is logging roads on company lands?

**JB:** Yes, we had to have pretty good roads. They are still there, they are all pretty good roads.

**JG:** The ones over in what is now called Boggy Slough, in Trinity and Houston counties.

**JB:** That is where we started but we went all the way to the state railroad in Rusk. We followed the main. TSE used to connect with them up there and just wandered through the woods all the way up the Neches River and building roads and...

**JG:** How much surveying did you do along there? You mentioned some of the logging roads but I mean the railroads.

**JB:** No surveying, I tried to find where they had built these railroads before because they were relatively close together.

**JG:** So, you were looking at a topographical map?

**JB:** No.

**JG:** No.

**JB:** No, they didn't show too well on that. I had some yes, but the main thing is you could pretty well, no trouble identifying once you got used to it but you could find these old main lines through the woods and there was really no roads at all except close to the railroads. I would flag them out with flagging. I rode a horse.

**JG:** You rode a horse, okay.

**JB:** I could flag out six or seven miles easy in a day and I'd make notes of where culverts were and what size culvert I thought was needed there. We had a concrete plant here in Diboll and we had forms to make concrete culverts, so they turned that over to me too. So, I would get all the culvert material there and so, we would have to drain the roads. You can't build roads without draining them. Anyway, that was quite an experience doing that.

**JG:** What kind of heavy equipment did you have?

**JB:** We had a bulldozer, a DA bulldozer which in those days was a big one. It's not too big now, but and we had four dump trucks.

**JG:** Those caterpillar bulldozers?

**JB:** Yes.

**JG:** What about graders like a road grader?

**JB:** We had two graders, two big graders and a loader and let's see what all we had. A grader, a bulldozer and we had a dynamite crew we removed all...the bulldozer wasn't big enough to push stumps so we had to blow them out.

**JG:** With dynamite?

**JB:** We had a three man dynamite crew. We had a service truck and a bus we used to travel back and forth and I had a pick up. Once these guys got started they didn't need any supervision much so I was free to tend to my business here in Diboll. Then I got involved in the plant out there doing, they put in the first debarker and log processor built in the pond back there on piling and I did all that. Then I started helping in Pineland and with some of their little problems. They were in a quandary with what to do with their mill over there. It was a steam mill. It had no electric motors or anything to it, so I got involved with trying to figure out what to do there and their hardwood operation needed a lot of thought put into it. So, I was going back and forth and I guess in about '57... '56 I was messing with them over there and I went to work for them. I went to work for Mr. Temple Webber. He was the president of Temple Lumber Company so I was on their pay. I went to work for them actually and they paid me and then they decided the best thing to do was just move me over there. So, I moved over in 1958 and my title was Plant Engineer, but then again I got over there and they wanted to do the same thing in Pineland they did in Diboll as far as the town. So, I got involved with that. They had previously done the square over there. Joe Denman got involved in that. That was before I went over. The square was there but this company owned all the houses and that. Had a twenty man dwelling crew to keep up the town, so I inherited that crew.

**JG:** Those are the ones that kept up the houses?

**JB:** Kept up the houses and everything and...

**JG:** We have got some of those records. Sometime we will have to set up some time when you can come over and look through some of that. We have got some records of some little index files who like the disposition of the houses and who is living in it and the address even and some maps and stuff. You might have drawn those maps.

**JB:** Some of them I did. It was interesting to see the phasing out of the 19<sup>th</sup> century operation into a 20<sup>th</sup>. The houses of course you had a record of it but one person move it created a chain of events. If it was a good house then seemed like the whole neighborhood moved up one house. It was the craziest thing you ever saw.

**JG:** Everybody moved up.

**JB:** Anyway, they had them all appraised in Pineland, the house and lot and they were for sale. I handled that. If they either met the price or no negotiations but they were so cheap, two to four thousand dollars at the most so, we got rid of all of them.

**JG:** Now, Pineland was a city before Diboll.

**JB:** Yes, 1946.

**JG:** 1946 yes. So, Pineland was already a city when you went there.

**JB:** It was already a city. I had to work for the city too. Mr. Temple could find more for you to do. I had to be the city engineer too.

**JG:** City engineer and all. Did you get a paycheck from the city as well?

**JB:** No, no, they were paying me \$25 a month to attend the council meeting and report on it.

**JG:** Now, how did Pineland become a city so early, relatively early when Diboll was relatively late?

**JB:** I don't know why they did.

**JG:** I know in the old days, I'm talking 1900-1910 a lot of sawmill towns the people wanted to incorporate thinking they could have some say over, you know, like you said the company town that owns everything, every aspect of your life and the companies always opposed it. The workers were for it and the company was against it.

**JB:** It wasn't that-away over there.

**JG:** Then with Diboll it was the opposite. When the election came time, in fact as you probably know, there was an earlier election and the people voted no. Mr. Temple got upset. I've talked to Ward Burke about that and he said Mr. Temple said whatever it takes

you get another election and make sure it passes this time. But, again the roles completely reversed. Then you got Pineland right there in the middle.

**JB:** It was 1946 right after the war they incorporated.

**JG:** Now, was Mr. Prud'homme there then?

**JB:** Yes, he was the first mayor. He was there when I...

**JG:** Now did he have something to do with the town becoming a city? I mean he was the first mayor but I mean was he partly organizing all that?

**JB:** Yes, I think he was yes. I think he was but, it was just like even though it was done in '46 when I moved over there in '58 it was just like Diboll was then. They owned everything but the square had been just finished. They owned all the houses and all that sort of stuff.

**JG:** The Company still owned the houses?

**JB:** Yes.

**JG:** Did the city have any utilities?

**JB:** Very few, very few. We had to do that.

**JG:** Like water?

**JB:** Water.

**JG:** Any sewer?

**JB:** We had to do all of that. But fortunately we hired a consulting engineering firm to do all of that. I didn't have to worry with that except I was involved in seeing that it was done, but I didn't have to do like I did in Diboll all together. So, we put in new water systems and new sewer systems and of course the electric was a problem. We started out coming off the plant but they didn't have a big enough generator. That was a real battle all through the years was getting sufficient electricity to run that plant over there. For a period of time we had our own generators, 5,000 KW generator. It supplied the plant and the town.

**JG:** Who owned it?

**JB:** We did.

**JG:** The Company?

**JB:** We owned it. It was second hand of course like everything else.

**JG:** So, you sold it to the city, sold power to the city?

**JB:** Yes, sure did. That was a...I was over the power plant too. I couldn't...that old turbine had to run all the time. I would sweat it out, but, finally we made a deal with Texas Power and Light to furnish us power and the Deep East Texas Electric Co-op built a main power line across the lake and everything to Pineland, so then we had plenty of power. We couldn't make enough power with that to expand.

**JG:** Now in your road building you mentioned about logging, the Diboll mill, you weren't involved with any of the Pineland roads were you, the logging?

**JB:** No, they were doing that when I got over there. They were doing their own logging of course, but they were doing their own road building. The only roads I had anything to do with over there were the roads to Scrappin' Valley. They wanted good roads out there and there were roads there, not much clearing to be done, but just widening and drainage work. In fact, when I moved over there in '58 they put me over the Scrappin' Valley and I was responsible for it until I retired.

**JG:** Like the manager, managing it?

**JB:** Yes, that was another one of my weekend jobs.

**JG:** Yes, I bet at certain times of the year that was a full time job in itself.

**JB:** I enjoyed it though, it was fun. Pineland was a fun...I really enjoyed my work at Pineland. It is such an interesting complex. We had the sawmill and the furniture parts plant and the toilet seat plant. We had a little treating plant and we had a plant that made coca cola boxes. We had two big flooring units. It was just real interesting.

**JG:** Now, the toilet seats that were made there those weren't the molded wood?

**JB:** Yes.

**JG:** The solid wood?

**JB:** No, molded wood.

**JG:** Molded wood, okay but you actually made laminate before that right?

**JB:** Yes, but that is before they discovered they could grind that wood flour up and put glue with it and mold it.

**JG:** I think at one time some of the advertisements anyway said 93 colors. I didn't know there was 93 colors.

**JB:** I didn't either. We finally when we got with Sears they were not interested in colors. Colors cost a few pennies more than white. So, all they wanted was white, well that was a good time to...that was a nightmare keeping up with all those colors, particularly when you change colors. And, then you always have to run enough to be sure you have enough in case they say "hey." It was a nightmare with that many colors. It was stupid to do it. There was no way. We should have just bowed our neck with our customers but we ended up just making all white.

**JG:** That was better huh?

**JB:** Yes, well colored toilet seats were something for a house not a...some woman wants it.

**JG:** Now there is a good bit of business over there too was the flooring right?

**JB:** Yes, we had two really good flooring units. They...

**JG:** A lot of hardwoods were milled over there.

**JB:** It was all hardwood.

**JG:** That was all hardwood right?

**JB:** Yes, we ran the mill there two shifts, one on pine and one on hardwood until we cut out all of Rayburn and Toledo came in and then we cut all of that hardwood that we owned and then when it ran out we shut down the hardwood mill.

**JG:** What all types of flooring did you make, the species of wood?

**JB:** Just oak, red and white.

**JG:** Red and white oak.

**JB:** Yes.

**JG:** What did y'all do with the other species of hardwoods?

**JB:** It went into...all the soft woods went into the furniture parts plant making furniture.

**JG:** Was there much cypress still around then?

**JB:** Yes, we cut cypress once a week.

**JG:** What did y'all do with it just cut dimension stuff?

**JB:** Made boards out of it.

**JG:** Just dimension boards?

**JB:** Yes, it was...cypress is a very desirable item. You can sell all you cut.

**JG:** Y'all just did that once a week?

**JB:** Once a week. All that cypress bark would clog up all the conveyors. It took all weekend to clean the mill up so we could run next week. It was a mess but anyway it was so profitable.

**JG:** I don't think Diboll ever cut cypress.

**JB:** No.

**JG:** There is a lot around Pineland.

**JB:** We cut a lot of it, but you have got some of it here that we shipped over. I guess it's still here.

**JG:** Supposedly that trim and stuff there all this came from there.

**JB:** Yes, that is cypress.

**JG:** Now, I was later told that they ran out and so we had to get it from somewhere else.

**JB:** Is that right?

**JG:** But, I don't know how much.

**JB:** Well when we shut it down we had two million feet in inventory and Arthur Temple came over and said "I want you to lock that up and nobody can take one piece of it without my permission." So, he took control of the cypress inventory.

**JG:** Yes, that is what I was told.

**JB:** You got a lot of it here.

**JG:** Yes, all of the trim is cypress and the ceiling and the walls out there are cypress and then out there wherever the cypress, most of the trim is pine, you know where the walls and ceilings are cypress the trim is pine.

**JB:** So, we made lots of it. A lot of it sold and a lot of it went to various places.

**JG:** Did you know Mr. Eck Prud'homme?

**JB:** Oh yes.

**JG:** Okay.

**JB:** Oh yes.

**JG:** Talk about him a little bit.

**JB:** I worked with him. He was an interesting man. I don't want to say anything bad about him, but I guess the best way to describe him he differed with Arthur Temple. They had a difference of opinion on just about everything. He was a good mill manager, I mean, there was nothing wrong with his ability to run the mill. I was impressed with him. He was very knowledgeable about lumber and all that sort of stuff. But, he wasn't knowledgeable at all about the engineering part of mechanical and all that of the sawmill, so a lot of the disagreements were from what our future plans were. He wanted to keep the mill a steam mill. It's okay but you have no versatility whatsoever. It's just not the way you do it. So many bad things about it that...but anyway that was an argument. Then we got into how to store and handle hardwood lumber. Hardwood lumber has to be kept air dried for seven to twelve months so you have got to have some way to handle it. He wanted to build a system of railroads all through. It takes about twenty acres to store this lumber and build these railroads and put all the lumber on little railcars.

**JG:** Now is this out in the open with covers or no cover?

**JB:** No cover.

**JG:** No cover.

**JB:** No, out in the open. Well, you know we got to looking at it and if it rained it wouldn't fit that. It would be downhill. He said no he wanted them all level of course because you can't roll that stuff around. So much slope to it, it would run away with you. Anyway, we got into that and he was very much against building one on the ground where you go out and put the lumber on blocks on the ground. But we never could convince him how simple that was and we had found the people that built those big straddles. They pick up that whole package of hardwood lumber and take it out there and sit it down on the ground. It stayed there until time to unstack it and bring it in. Very simple, two rigs that is all and the ground was...you didn't have to worry about whether the ground was up and down. Anyway, we had a big fuss about that. So, finally I guess an accumulation of these things they moved him over here to Diboll to be Joe Denman's assistant. And Jack Sweeny, old Jack Sweeny, had been made mill manager over there. But, Mr. Prud'homme was an interesting man. He had the heart of the community and he was very thoughtful with his people and well, well liked with the working folks. But he just couldn't get himself...all he had to do was do what Mr. Temple wanted done.

**JG:** Do you think part of it was generational thing?

**JB:** Probably, yes probably and he and Mr. Webber....

**JG:** Arthur wanted to do a little more progressive things and him wanting to do it the old way.

**JB:** Mr. Webber wasn't enthusiastic about some of this, but he would do it because he knew Arthur was better at that than he was and then I suspect that Mr. Prud'homme thought that Mr. Webber would probably take his side but he didn't, he went with Arthur of course, which was the right thing to do. So it was the right thing to do. It was a little bit of an unpleasant situation for awhile. But, anyway I guess Arthur got him a job running the mill out at Flagstaff, Arizona which was a big mill out there, it was a heck of a good job too. That was his pay out. In fact Joe Denman and I went out there to visit with him one time and he wanted us to give him some ideas on shipping. They were not shipping the waste out there then. He was very cordial and we had a nice trip. But that happens when you shift from one philosophy to another and from one generation to another like that. But, it worked out good and then Jack...Joe got promoted up over here and Sweeny got moved to run the mill. Joe was running the mill then and Sweeny got moved over and I took his place over there.

**JG:** And I guess you were mayor of Pineland for quite awhile.

**JB:** Twenty-seven years.

**JG:** Twenty-seven years.

**JB:** That is another one of those Arthur Temple deals. (laughter) He was something else. I would say well I don't think I'll run again. "Oh yes you got to run." As long as he was living didn't get to...I had to...I had to wait until he passed away before I could get loose. I liked it. I enjoyed it but I really did kind of get tired of it. That is too long.

**JG:** I remember seeing you that day in your office. What was that about eleven years ago or so? I was talking to you a little bit about being mayor, twenty-seven years.

**JB:** Yes. Well, I tell you what it's an education to be in an elected office and dealing with employees is one thing and dealing with the public is entirely different. It's not the same.

**JG:** You can't fire a citizen can you? (laughter)

**JB:** You sure can't and I tell you...you get abuse that an employee would not give you. You get to really an old fashioned cussing sometime and there is nothing you can do about it. It's a real experience, it really is. I'm glad I got to do it though.

**JG:** What were some of the big issues during those twenty-seven years? What were some big...did you have plenty of water? Was water ever an issue?

**JB:** We never had any major issues. We had plenty of water, still got plenty of water. One of the last things I did was drill another well so we have two wells instead of one. So, we got water and then we...

**JG:** Were you mayor during Rita, the hurricane?

**JB:** Yes, Rita and ...

**JG:** How was that?

**JB:** Well it was not too bad. We had an emergency plan. It wasn't well written out but we had a plan of what we were going to do and how we were going to do it. It worked okay, of course we had that big overhead storage tank so we had to go get a generator, rent a generator to run the well. And, we found one and we got it running about eleven o'clock that night and I don't believe there was enough in that tank to take a bath in but of course no one was using water after we got it going until the next morning. We had plenty of water then. So that is one of your main things is water. Most of the people didn't have water and most of them didn't have electricity because the main highline from where TP&L hooked onto...I don't know what they're called now, came to Pineland there is big transformer station there so...but, that line was not damaged at all. There was electricity there at the plant and we had electricity into town. The town was hooked up to that. Originally the company sold electricity to the town and then they gave it to the city so they would have a source of income. That is what Mr. Temple wanted do. So, we came out pretty good. As far as food and stuff like that we got to working with the Sheriff, was the coordinator for our county and he allocated us okay. He went over there and we kept in close touch with him and we had all the commissioners had underground storage of gas tanks and at the plant we had plenty of gas on the plant, fuel, gasoline fuel. So, all in all it wasn't too bad except it was hot. You couldn't get all the...we had the electricity but we couldn't get all the lines repaired. The only people that could do it was the co-op. They finally got...I had electricity at my house most of the time, but most of the town was out of electricity until...it wasn't the lack of electricity it was just the poles were all down. The lines were all down.

**JG:** What about...oh I'm sorry go ahead.

**JB:** We didn't have any...I had a little concern about looting or something like that. So, I got the chief of police to finally get them two or three of these old rednecks around there and put them on four wheelers and let them patrol the town after dark, give them a badge and let them carry their guns. That is what we did and we didn't have any trouble. They fell into that. They liked that and you would hear them all night, guarding the town which was fine, which is okay.

**JG:** I was just going to ask you about some of the changes back now from the business side or the industrial side, but all the changes Pineland has gone through, you know, the mills and what it used to make and what it doesn't make anymore. What is it now solid wood only?

**JB:** Yes solid wood only, lumber only. The furniture parts plant and the flooring units went by the wayside when we ran out of hardwood lumber. You couldn't import it in. As long as we were manufacturing it...it was okay, it was profitable. So, that eliminated that and then the toilet seat plant was a very competitive industry particularly mostly through the south. There was two big plants in the south, one in Mississippi, a huge plant that was a major competitor. They were paying minimum wage and of course this is a labor intensive operation to start with so they were paying minimum wage. They, Mr. Temple started giving people increases to meet the industry standards and all that kind of thing so, the pay scale for sawmill workers went way above the minimum wage. Well, the question they first asked him was, you know, do we have to raise them up to what the other people on the plant? And, he said, "Yes all our employees are going to make the same amount of money." They said, "Well you know our competitors are paying minimum wage and that gives them a pretty distinct advantage over us." He said, "I don't care we are going to treat our people right or shut it down." So, we shut it down. They first wanted to rebuild it and modernize it then they decided which was going to take about a million and a half dollars and they decided not to do that. The particleboard was a new product that nobody knew anything about, so they shut that down and then get into the particleboard plant. So, that is the way we phased it in. We built that particleboard plant over there and then pushed all those people over there, or most of them.

**JG:** From the seat plant?

**JB:** Yes.

**JG:** From the seat plant to the particleboard.

**JB:** Yes.

**JG:** And, that was about ten years after they had done the particleboard here?

**JB:** No it was before it.

**JG:** What was that?

**JB:** That was the first one built.

**JG:** Oh the one in Pineland was before, okay.

**JB:** Yes, it was a built as a learning center. We were going to build the plant and learn how to make particleboard and also how to sell it. We didn't know much about the market and all that so that is what we did.

**JG:** They had the fiberboard here though first, here meaning Diboll and then started the particleboard in Pineland.

**JB:** Yes we ran it over there about three years, three or four years and that is where Bill Oates came from. He was running the particleboard plant for me over there and felt like the sales people had the big decisions to make. Can we sell from a big plant like they built in Diboll? So, they built the big plants and got it running and we shut that one down over there and sold it. But, it was just a training facility and a learning experience.

**JG:** Okay, well I see we are almost two hours here.

**JB:** I haven't talked so much in my life I don't believe.

**JG:** Well you did very well. I appreciate that. Anything you wanted to add?

**JB:** Oh no, except I've really enjoyed my forty years with Temple and they treated me well and my family well. I guess the biggest disappointment business wise was this sale of our timberlands. That just crushed us all. That was just terrible. I mean, I don't know what is going to be the outcome of that. It will never be the same I don't guess.

**JG:** Yes, it seemed to be more than just a business side of doing things, but it was just at the core of how everything was handled from the beginning. It was almost like the lands were the company soul in some ways.

**JB:** It was.

**JG:** I know Clyde Thompson, we have an interview with him in the fifties and then one later and of course other people have expressed it in similar ways, but oh the question I guess that was asked was you know how is Temple the Company been able to sustain through the changes and why is it still here when a lot of others have bought out and been sold out whatever and moved on and his answer was, "It's because we value the land." And, you go back and read all those company reports in the fifties and sixties and you know, even before they sold out to Time, Inc. you know and it was so much focused on the land.

**JB:** That is right.

**JG:** It was just like how they were doing business and why they were doing business and when they got the money from the lands from the lakes most of that money went right back into buying more land.

**JB:** Yes, that is right.

**JG:** Now, it's a total about face way of doing business and again it's almost like Mr. Temple saying I don't know if he actually came up with it but he certainly identified with it, "We want to be a good neighbor." It's hard to be a neighbor when you sell all your land.

**JB:** Well the land was such a valuable asset too and all we were doing was the mills and everything else was just to reap the benefits of the forest. And the Temple family did believe that and they believed in taking care of their people. It's kind of an old fashioned way of looking at business but it was a good way. And, it was a super advantage in owning your timberlands in bad times like this when you can cut land that you've already gotten paid for and the value of those trees you can cut it just to keep the mills running.

**JG:** Right or you can buy it on the open market cheaper and let your trees grow.

**JB:** Yes, they did that. That is the way he did it. He bought at one time we were buying timber in enormous quantities to let us get the growth in it. And, look at the minerals we had on the land, income of forty million dollars a year or something like that. That was given away to ForeStar. That is a whole new deal and I don't know of anybody that is happy about the deal. But, anyway except Mr. Jastrow I guess, but it certainly wasn't to our benefit. You know, I hear people all the time, you know, the whole country is not the same and small towns like Pineland and Sabine County well that was the major manufacture and the major employer of people and the major contributor to any cause and the good neighbor policy was really truly a good neighbor policy. People thought a lot of the Temple holdings and it's not the same and it won't be. I guess that is my major disappointment business wise. You work all these years so hard to do these things and then it just disappears overnight. It's really no apparent reason other than somebody making a lot of money out of it.

**JG:** Yes.

**JB:** But, that is the way the world is and there is nothing we can do to change it.

**JG:** Mr. Booker again, I sure appreciate it and in fact we are a little over two hours now.

**JB:** That is too long to talk about anything. (laughter)

**JG:** Well I thank you very much.

**END OF INTERVIEW**