

RHODA FAYE CHANDLER
Interview 6b
August 14, 1985, Diboll, Texas
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ABSTRACT: In this interview with Becky Bailey, Rhoda Faye Chandler, and her brother O'Hara Chandler recall life during the Depression and how Southern Pine Lumber Company took care of its employees and their families when times were hard. Miss Chandler describes going to the homes of Diboll residents in need to assess their situations so that the company could help them out after an accident or death, or when hard times made feeding and clothing a family difficult. She describes the care the company took to ensure that everyone had a home and enough food to eat, and how they worked with local churches and other citizens to care for each other.

Becky Bailey (hereafter BB): Today's date is August 14, 1985 and I am meeting in the Temple Memorial Library with Miss Rhoda Faye Chandler and her brother, O'Hara Chandler. Miss Chandler, I have heard that the company tried to take care of a lot of its employees during the '30s. Could you tell me something about how this started and what your role was in it, what you did?

Rhoda Chandler (hereafter RC): Well, I interviewed the people and visited in their homes to see if they actually needed help. We had a Coke fund and all of our surplus money went into this fund and, of course, the company helped if we didn't have any money. We would visit these people, see what they needed and help them with groceries. Doctor bills and even clothing.

BB: What was one of the reasons these people would get into trouble, what were some of the causes?

RC: Because it was during the Depression, there was no work.

BB: So these were mainly mill people?

RC: Former employees or the families of former employees. And the company seemed to always take care of who had taken care of them all these many years.

BB: So it was kind of – what about rent, would the company still charge the family rent on the company house at that time, or would they -?

RC: If they were working they did and they didn't always collect because the people just didn't have the money but they didn't move the people out. At that time the company owned the light company and they furnished them with light and water.

BB: And they wouldn't cut those services off either?

RC: No.

BB: Even if they couldn't afford to pay?

RC: No.

BB: About how many people do you think they were helping, maybe a year or a month?

RC: Oh, I would imagine they were helping an average of 25 families at one time.

BB: At one time?

RC: At one time.

BB: Just off and on.

RC: And if they needed to go to Lufkin to the doctor, well, the company would see that they got there and – but usually the people would go to the company doctor.

BB: I was wondering about that, I know that they paid the insurance, what - \$1.50?

RC: Oh, at one time they did.

BB: What would happen if they couldn't afford to pay the insurance? Did they get held out automatically out of their check?

RC: It was – the company would just carry it on until later on, maybe they could pay it back, they didn't cancel the insurance.

BB: Well, when people would get behind in their rent or behind in their water or electric bills, did the company just write it off or did they try to collect later or how did they handle that part of it?

RC: Well, if they got too far behind they would write it off but usually the people, if they could possibly afford to pay it, they just went ahead and paid it. It was – see, at that time your lights and your rent was taken out of your paycheck.

BB: Oh, really? I didn't realize that, I thought you went up and paid it.

RC: No, no, it was taken out of your paycheck.

BB: And your groceries, too?

RC: Yes.

BB: Then whatever you had charged at the store they took that out of your check, too was that the way it worked?

RC: Yes, at that time and then the company would help them work extra.

BB: What would happen when someone would get hurt at the mill?

RC: Well, they had compensation insurance and they drew a small weekly check but the company took care of their families to see that they were taken care of.

BB: You were kind of young to be going into these homes and checking up and making sure they actually needed it. Did someone tell you how to do it or did they just ---?

RC: They just told me to go see about it so I would and I would just explain to them. At that time everyone knew everyone else regardless of whether they were white, colored and that was about the only people here then. We were all friends. I'd been born and raised here.

BB: Did you ever have anybody who tried to pull one over on you?

RC: Oh yes, but somebody higher up in the company knew about them and they could take care of them.

BB: Oh, okay. What sort of things would you ask them when you went in the homes?

RC: What they needed and how long they had been sick and how many were in the family, usually I already knew. That's about it.

BB: Did the churches help out, too?

RC: Oh, yes.

BB: How would you work it, would both the company and the church take care of them or would just the company or just the church?

RC: No, the churches and the company worked together on it, used to we were recognized as one big family and color didn't make any difference. If one person was in trouble we were all in trouble.

BB: How were the groceries handled and that sort of thing? Would it just be a matter of letting them know that a line of credit was available at the store or would they actually carry food? How would you handle that?

RC: Both ways. If they wouldn't go get it somebody would go in the home and find out what they actually needed and take it to them.

BB: Did this mostly happen like when the breadwinner was the one who had been ill?

RC: Yes, yes.

BB: So there were no sick days that the company allowed per se, where they were paid?

RC: No, we didn't have that kind of insurance in the beginning. Later on, of course, we did.

BB: So it was the accident compensation? What happened if a man was permanently disabled because of an accident that he'd had at the mill. What would happen then?

RC: Well, the insurance company would take care of it. He had coverage by the insurance company and they would be paid so many weeks disability but I never did know of anybody being paid everything they had coming and then starve to death in Diboll.

BB: So the company just took over where the insurance company left off?

RC: Yes.

BB: What was the difference in black or white, were there more blacks that needed this sort of help or more whites, or about even, what would you think in looking back on it?

RC: I would imagine it was about 50/50.

BB: One thing I have been interested in is about retirement. When a man was older what would happen to him before there was social security and that sort of thing?

RC: Well, they worked as long as they possibly could and there was no retirement for years.

BB: So the company had no private...?

RC: No.

BB: What would happen when these people got too old to work?

RC: Well, they either – they usually moved in the home with their children and the children took over. If the man couldn't work, the woman usually kept boarders or something like that, to take care of the family and the children worked, as much as they could.

BB: What would happen, I know nearly everybody had kids back then, but what would happen if a family, you know, if a man and wife didn't have children, would the company move them out of their company house or what?

RC: I never did know of them moving anybody out.

BB: Even if they just didn't have anywhere else to go?

RC: No, because usually there was somebody who would take care of them.

BB: Even if they weren't related or something like that? What would happen?

RC: Yes, no, Aunt Annie Dial, remember her?

O'hara Chandler (hereafter OC): She visited a week with us and a week with Mrs. Allday, a month, she was an old woman, she would move about, just visit for a month.

BB: And just never had a place of her own?

OC: Yes, she had no money of her own and people were very generous because everybody was poor and –

BB: Do you think we have lost some of that here in this town?

RC: Oh, goodness, yes.

BB: A long time ago Mrs. Bea was telling me about the pea farm. Do you know anything about that?

RC: The what?

BB: The pea farm, she said from Angelina County, it was like an old folk's home.

RC: I don't remember anything about it.

OC: There was an old folk's home in all counties; there was an old folk's home.

BB: That was run by the county?

OC: Run by the county and they just gave them a sustenance, a place to live – don't you remember the poor folk's home?

RC: I can remember the word but I never did remember poor folk's going.

OC: They called it the "poor house".

RC: Not around here.

OC: There was one in Lufkin.

RC: Yes.

OC: There was one in Orange because I went there and they still had it. That was in 1944, they still had a poor house.

RC: And if people had a surplus of vegetables or anything like that they would divide. People used to divide.

OC: Well, they had a garden for them to work in. That was what she was talking about, a pea farm, you know, one of those places for people to work and raise vegetables and can. Kind of like the Mormons in their storehouse.

BB: Do you remember any specific cases of people who where on – I don't call it welfare because it really is not, on subsistence for just a long period of time? How long would you say most people were on this kind of help?

RC: Oh, say if the man was sick or couldn't take care of his family they would take care of them as long as they were, but usually it didn't last too awfully long.

BB: They were glad to get back?

RC: Yes, because – used to, the children worked as soon as they were able.

OC: I started working when I was 14 years of age in the sawmill, in the summertime.

RC: Didn't Dewey Ballenger and them start working at 12 at the sawmill?

OC: I worked in the summertime and then worked in the evening, you know, to make money. Made \$2.50, you know 25¢ an hour and we thought that was pretty good.

BB: Did you automatically turn some of it over to your mother, that sort of thing?

OC: I helped, like we all helped. When we made money we all pitched in.

RC: Because we had a large family and we usually had from one to four living with us outside of our family.

OC: What she is talking about, they had no homes and mother took them in.

BB: And they just came around? Well, you know, back then men died at an earlier age and left families. What would happen to some of these widows that was left here?

RC: Well, Granny was left, wasn't she, when she was real young and she started keeping boarders.

BB: Was this company affiliated, would she keep boarders for the company, or was this...?

RC: Oh no, no, but the company would see that she got her money.

BB: Oh, how would that work?

RC: These people would work for the company and they would see that Granny got her money for keeping these people or they didn't stay.

OC: Mr. Watson Walker let Granny have a big old house for \$4.00 a month and if you made \$4.00 extra –pay me, if you don't well, don't pay me anything.

BB: Oh, my word.

(O'Hara talked too low)

BB: Oh, and that was in the Buzzsaw?

OC: Yes, it was in the Buzzsaw.

BB: Okay, that is interesting. The company managed to take care of them and yet it wasn't charity?

RC: It wasn't charity, no.

OC: People didn't want charity. I remember when Granny became eligible for old age pension, she would get \$30.00 a month and I told her and she said "Shaw, that's not my money." I didn't – and it took us a year to convince her that it was her money, that's when - she was so independent. She didn't want to take money that she didn't earn.

BB: That is interesting. When did some of these welfare programs start? When did the company stop taking care of people?

RC: Well, when I retired we still had a coke fund where we took care of emergencies and that was in '75. And I guess they still have a coke fund over at the office to take care of emergencies.

BB: What would qualify as an emergency?

RC: If anybody really needed help.

BB: And not just that they had spent over their budget that month?

RC: Yes, it's just if they were down and out and needed help. I don't know if they still have a fund like that or not.

OC: When the old age pension went into effect they stopped a lot of it.

RC: Yes.

BB: Was there a way that you helped people who were just coming through town, who needed a little extra aid? You know, how people do now, they stop at all the churches, you know.

OC: We called them hobos.

RC: No, we used to – I can remember Mama used to feed hobos but that was just one meal and they would go on.

OC: They would chop wood for us.

BB: And they would work for you, so it wasn't – what about a man that came to town and just didn't seem to work out much out at the mill, but yet he had a family and children to feed and all that? Would the company ever keep anyone who just wasn't much count?

RC: I'm sure they have, I feel sure they have, just on account of their family.

BB: But you don't know any particular case of it?

RC: Yes, but I had rather not mention it.

BB: Well, no, don't tell me their names, I just wanted to know. Who would take care of that, I mean, who would get them to work the guy even though – would it be Mr. Walker, would he have to make that decision?

RC: Well, now, I don't know too much about Mr. Walker because he was a little bit before my time.

BB: Who was superintendent then when you were – Mr. Temple, right?

RC: Right, Mr. Henry Temple.

BB: And he would be the one to make those sort of decisions?

RC: Yes.

BB: When things got real bad here and they weren't working, did people move off to look for something better somewhere else or did they stay and take help?

RC: They stayed but things never did get so bad here that the people didn't work over two or three days a week, enough to buy food and so then the company, the rent was real low and the company had the lights and the light bill wasn't very much and the company more or less took care of them and they saw that they were fed.

BB: So nobody moved much?

RC: No.

BB: If a man had been hurt on the job and if he was disabled to some extent because I'm sure that happened around the sawmill, you know a certain amount. Would the company try to keep him on and work him in a different capacity?

RC: If he was able to, they sure would.

BB: Do you remember some times, or some --?

RC: Oh sure.

BB: Tell me about them.

RC: Quite a few times, but...

OC: They would make a night watchman out of him or...

RC: Usually it was a night watchman, or give them some light job where they could draw a payday.

BB: What about women working, if the men were hurt would they give his wife a job, was there any of that?

RC: Well, in later years.

BB: But not right at first. They stayed at home anyway?

RC: Yes, and took care of the family.

OC: In World War I they did allow, you know, when so many men were recruited away, I do remember women working in the saw mill.

RC: World War I?

OC: I believe it was World War I because the women were criticized so for wearing blue jeans.

BB: Oh, really?

OC: Oh, yes, but I think, I'm sure it was World War I.

RC: I don't remember that.

OC: Well, you wouldn't remember that but I do, I was a pretty good size boy. But women did work at the sawmill but when the men came back they laid the women off.

BB: Oh, just right away.

RC: Yes, the women had to take care of their families. But, now, in World War II it was when women really started to work.

BB: Do you ever remember women being hurt on the job out here?

RC: Oh, yes.

BB: Really? What would happen, what sort of jobs did they do?

RC: Well, they worked, they weren't around hazardous machines, I remember that and oh, they would pull lumber and things like that, and stack lumber.

BB: But never became a sawyer or anything like that?

RC: Oh, no.

BB: Okay, tell me some more about the things you did in the office, I mean, after they – do you remember when they quit issuing the checks? And draw days and that sort of thing?

RC: I don't remember the date, but see, I never did issue checks.

BB: You just helped make them?

RC: That was before I ever started to work for the company, when I dipped the checks and, but oh, none, I sure don't know when they quit issuing the checks and started using – what was it – no, those money checks were before hand, weren't they?

OC: No, I don't think so; they were old cardboard checks at first.

END OF INTERVIEW