

Vernon Burkhalter
Interview 85a
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Becky Bailey, Interviewer
Dorothy Farley, Transcriber
Retyped by Elaine Lawrence

Abstract: Longtime Temple employee Vernon Burkhalter reminisces about life in Diboll through the years. After growing up in Diboll as the son of a local teacher, Mr. Burkhalter worked his way up through the Company ranks to Personnel Director. He talks about growing up and starting work and then recalls all of the changes that have occurred in the company and the lumber industry. He is very complimentary of Arthur Temple, Jr. and Joe Denman and other company executives and credits the company's culture and management for balancing the respect for longtime employees and their knowledge with the need to mechanize and change processes and mentalities with the times.

Becky Bailey (hereafter BB): Today's date is December 31, 1985. I am interviewing Vernon Burkhalter who is Personnel Director for Temple Industries. My name is Becky Bailey. Mr. Burkhalter I would like to start out by asking you where you were born and when and tell me a little about where you grew up and that sort of thing.

Vernon Burkhalter (hereafter VB): Oh – July 15, 1928 in Frierson, Louisiana. I was two or three years old, mother brought me to Diboll. I grew up in Diboll, been here all my life.

BB: Do you remember very much about the school or anything like that?

VB: Well, I went to school the first year in Bald Hill, Texas. My mother was a schoolteacher and she taught school there. Fowler Burris who used to be with First State Bank and Trust was one of the other teachers. I think there were three or four teachers, about a four-room schoolhouse. I went the first two years, I believe, in Bald Hill and then came to Diboll.

BB: Did you commute?

VB: No we lived over there. We lived in a farmhouse with an old farmer, Johnny Henson, just across the creek from the Methodist Church and the state owned, or state run cannery. You wouldn't know what a cannery is. It's where people used to go and can their vegetables, you could put them up, they would put up canneries and you could go and cook your vegetables in these pressure pots and then can them and take them home.

BB: And they were state owned?

VB: Well, the state put them together, that was part of Franklin Roosevelt's program, which was a good thing. I read about a month ago where the last cannery in Texas closed down, somewhere around west Texas. But it was quite a deal and people could come there and can their vegetables for the winter. We lived in their house. It was about half a mile, three quarters of a mile from the school. And didn't have any money, didn't have anything else but we ate good. The guy farmed, raised cotton and he raised his own cows and hogs and stuff, always had a big meal on the table. I remember that. Then we came back to Diboll and lived with my grandmother after my grandfather died, so I went to school in Diboll from about the third grade on.

BB: What was the length of school by that time, they had all the way through the twelfth grade?

VB: Oh yes.

BB: Yes, all the kind of stuff. That was in the early '30's and '40's?

VB: I remember some of the people, you might have interviewed them, like Wilbur Pate and they had a guy that was Superintendent of Schools, a Mr. Speer; I don't remember who was superintendent before him. I remember him and I remember Wilbur Pate. Wilbur Pate was here after I got up in grammar school until I graduated and then for years thereafter.

BB: Yes, he was here for a long, long time. Did you work for the Company during the summer, or anything like that?

VB: Yes, every summer – Mr. Henry Temple was running the Company. He was the General Manager, or whatever you call it. Mr. Arthur Temple, Sr. was the head of the Company and they lived in Texarkana. They had an operation in Pineland and one in Diboll. Henry Temple, he is a cousin, I think, was running the operation here at Diboll. Every summer the boys that really tried could work, cut weeds in the alleys. In Diboll, in those days, you had fences around all the houses and you had alleys where you could get through...people would pick up trash. They had a trash man that picked up trash, but everybody had a fence around their garden and around their house and you had to cut all these weeds out of the ditches and out of the alleys. Diboll was a clean town, now I don't care what anybody says about it. One summer we worked pouring oil, old burnt lube oil in all the ditches to kill the mosquitoes – had a whole crew of schoolboys that did that. Then the war came along and a lot of the men were gone and one summer we spent the entire summer painting as many houses as we could paint. Worked for Beeder Glass and W. W. Jackson. Mr. Jackson was over the dwellings, they called it then, because the Company owned all the houses, and Beeder Glass was paint foreman. In one crew there was myself, Harold Breashear, Buck Weisinger, oh, right off hand, that's the main two that I painted with that I can remember. We spent the whole summer painting houses. We also painted Mr. Snelson's prize bird dog with a can of green and we also had a can of red paint.

BB: I was going to ask if you were really serious or if you were making out here.

VB: No, not really, we had a good time but we really worked. When you worked for Beeder Glass you worked and W. W. Jackson. Back then the ones that worked were the ones that got to work. If you went out and played around and fooled around, you didn't get to work. They didn't fool with you. We also worked on the yards, picking up stacking sticks. Back then a lot of the area that you see in the plants now that are green grass and whatever, they had the old dolly runs and they had stacks and stacks and stacks of lumber. I worked for Eddie Farley who was the Shipping Superintendent and later Mill Superintendent. I remember Eddie Farley and Bruce Christian, Walter Broker. I was very fortunate when I first started working. I got to come into the lumber industry, the sawmill industry, with the old timers who were some of the best sawmill people that ever existed. And being involved in the change from the old sawmill ways to the new lumber products operation, the forest products, what we call it now, the forest products industry. I was involved in all of that, I got to know all those old timers that built what we've got now and now I guess I'm reaching the point that I'm getting to that stage that we have built in giving to the younger generation coming on. What they've got to go forward with. I always hoped that we did as good a job as the old timers before us. The Marvin Hamners, the Paul Durhams, Walter Purdys and Bruce Christian and Eddie Farley and guys like that. A. D. Dean and Ben Donahue, as they did. That we would do as good a job as they did and I hope the guys who get it from us just keep going. I don't see why they won't.

BB: Tell me a little more about cutting weeds in the summer. What did you use? I know you didn't use a riding mower.

VB: A weed cutter. A weed cutter, there wasn't any such thing as a riding mower. We had about sixteen boys and break them up into small crews and we had weed cutters and you cut them by hand.

BB: I'll bet that was hot work in the summer time.

VB: You're not joking. It was hot work and they kept you busy, too. I did that and I worked later in the woods, cutting what we called firewood. You see, everybody had wood heaters and all the scraps and cutoffs from the planer and the slabs from the mill were used for firewood. And then we would also cut wood outside and sell it, I don't know, about \$3.00 a load, if you could get it; it was almost a cord. And now – you get – turn it off and let me do this – and we'd deliver firewood and you would charge, I think, \$1.50 for a load of planer wood and \$3.00 for a load of oak. And it was almost a cord of oak. You know, you buy a cord of oak now a days, it cost you eighty bucks, eighty to a hundred dollars. But \$3.00 was a pretty good price then.

BB: How old were you when you first started working?

VB: Fourteen, I believe – fifteen, I had to get a minors release and do all that to work in the summer time. But a lot of guys were off working in the shipyard and what-have-you. They needed people, somebody to cut the grass and do, clean out those ditches and to

paint and do stuff like that, things that kids could do. That's okay – let it ring. They needed somebody to do that and we did it. I couldn't tell you what we got for an hour, \$.28, something like that, I don't remember. I know I spent mine on clothes. You know, mother was a schoolteacher, you look at what they pay them now and you can figure what –

BB: What they paid them then, it doesn't go any further.

VB: It was ridiculous. When I first started in personnel I can remember hiring secretaries and paying them more money than mother was making and she was Assistant Principal or something like that, in the school system. It's bad. Oh we – Diboll was a good town, it really was. I've read where a few people talked about the goats running in the streets, and that is not really a true picture. To me it was always a pretty town, that's the way I remember it. I am sure there were areas where we had a few goats running the streets, a few chickens all over the place because they would get out of people's chicken yard. But that was –

BB: That was the exception?

VB: Yes, they raised those chickens for the eggs and they would eat those chickens. Used to when we had chicken for Sunday dinner, my grandmother would go out in the backyard, she'd catch a chicken and ring its neck, dunk it and pluck it and clean it and cook it right then.

BB: Be ready –

VB: Yes, you just, you didn't go to the store and buy a fryer; that was ridiculous. Everybody went to the store once a day, to buy the meat that they were going to cook that day, if they were going to cook any meat. Now my Aunt Effie Weeks used to live right down here. Oh, I don't know the name of that street over there. But anyhow, she would walk up here to where –right across the street from here was where the market was, where that telephone complex, old ice house is, and that used to be the market. Old Butch Cruthirds – she'd spend half an hour picking out the kind of steak she wanted because, you know, you were very careful what you bought. She would go back home and cook it. You didn't keep stuff in the deep freeze and things you do now. You'd come to the store and buy your stuff that day for dinner.

BB: Then the housewife was full time because of all that kind of stuff?

VB: That's right, and I agree with Ray Rector, the biscuit whistle was at 5:30 in the morning and the 11:15 was the cornbread whistle... that's the way I remember it.

BB: The 5:15?

VB: The 5:30 whistle was the time to get the biscuits in the oven right quick because they were fixing to go to work. They blew a whistle at 5:30 every morning.

BB: And then at 6 o'clock they had to be at work?

VB: Well, at 6 or 7, whatever time they were going. But you got up at 5:30.

BB: Because nobody had an alarm clock?

VB: That's right. I guarantee my Aunt Nettie Weeks, used to live over by the old box factory, which burned in 1946, they cooked the biscuits, you know, you're talking about something four inches across.

BB: Yes, the good stuff.

VB: That's right. You could put a slab of salt pork bacon in there and pour syrup on it and you had a good sandwich. I think, of course, times – you know people talk about the good old times, I'm like Clyde Thompson, we are living in the good old times right now. I think we had a good life. I think the Company cared about the people, I really do. I've heard my grandmother say that when times were tough during the Depression, '28, '29, and '30, she knew the Company rotated the work so the men could get a little bit of work so they could buy staples, you know, flour, salt, sugar, those kind of things you had to have because they raised their own vegetables, their own meat and their own eggs. If they could get those things they could get by. My mother and them lived on a farm outside of Diboll but I've heard Mamma say many times that the Company spread the work around so that everybody could get some of the work so that everybody would be able to survive. And that was what it was all about. These were their people. I read a comment the other day that lead you to believe the people were kind of captured here and couldn't go anywhere else and stuff like that. I don't believe that, a lot of people left and went and did other things. I think people stayed here for security and they liked living here. You didn't lock your doors when you went anywhere. You left your house open; nobody really stole anything. Men took their lunches to work and they all set them out. People didn't steal them; they didn't do that kind of thing. I can remember leaving our house – we used to leave the house open, you know. The neighbor might need to borrow some sugar, you know, they'd come in and get it and would pay it back. It is, you know, they'd come in and get it and would pay it back. It is a totally different atmosphere. Everybody knew everybody and everybody was concerned with everybody. I was happy to grow up in Diboll. I don't think I could have found a better place.

BB: When you went on for your education where did you go?

VB: High School and that's it.

BB: That's all you have been to?

VB: I've been to a lot of schools, at A & M and SFA and American Management Association, Training schools and this type of stuff. I was too busy working, making a living. Had an opportunity and didn't go but I would advise everybody to go. The job that

I've gotten to and the things I was able to do, you can't get those kind of opportunities any more. The world is too technical, there is too much technology and you need the education, along with the willingness to work and to understand what it is all about. I – the education is not the total answer, you know, you can educate somebody and they get a degree and they don't have a damn lick of sense. Unfortunately there are some like that but everyone that can should get a good education, get a college degree, I've pushed Susie and Lisa to do it. I didn't push my first three children to do it but I did them because, you see, the change that's coming in the world and you've got to have it to make it. And then the workplace, it is getting more technical everyday. I remember things that when Mr. Temple came here, Arthur, Jr., things he wanted to do with the town and the Company, to bring it into the modern day world, so to speak. And people, some people thought he was off his rocker, and you know, he was just going to ruin everything. But he didn't, he actually, in my mind, he and people like him and Joe Denman, they salvaged this – not salvaged, but made the Company what it is by changing, being willing to change, being willing to do things different. Everybody in the world said that automatic sorter that they designed and put out there would never work, that you couldn't do that with lumber.

BB: They had to be hand done?

VB: That's right, but they did and it worked. Little things like drying lumber all in the same kiln, each, you know, 1 x 4, 1 x 6, 1 x 10 in the same package. You see, in the old days you separated them, you got all your 1 x 4's, all your 1 x 10's all your certain grades together and you get ingrained into doing things that way. I'll tell you they revolutionized the whole place. Joe Denman played a big part in it, so did John Booker, people like Eddie Farley and Dred Devereaux, who were willing to try new things. It made difference because a lot of the old timers didn't want to try new stuff. They just said, you know, "Hell, it ain't gonna work" they were against it and that's wrong.

BB: How did they deal with those sorts of people?

VB: Well, you did your best to persuade them, cajole, coerce them, force them, and go on and do it. If you finally had to you just went around them and did it. Ed Strickland was one of the best kiln men that ever lived, but he was just totally dead set against it and had to be forced into doing it.

BB: They just said, "Do it, I'm the boss?"

VB: Yes, and he finally did it and then he began to see it worked and he began to get good at that. And Ben Donahue, a good mill foreman. When I first went to work here he was running the Mill I, which was the big pine mill. They resisted a lot of change, but Marvin retired and died. Ben Donahue went through a bunch of those changes. He and A.D. Dean both and you appreciate old timers even if they don't pitch in but they'll tolerate you making all these changes, and doing things different. You really have an appreciation for people like that, "Well, I don't think this will work but if you want to try it, we will try it." If you can't get anything else that's good enough. And those guys are

what brought this place to where it is, for the new breed of experts to run it. And we are doing things different, totally computerizing the sawmill. When I first started, if somebody had even told me that in 1986 you would have computerization of your sawmill and stuff like that, I would have wondered. But it is out there. Everything used to be done by hand. The block setters sat on the carriage and set the dials that moved the logs, all that was done by hand. All the lumber was handled by hand and now it is not. It is handled mechanically, electronically in bundles, etc. and it's better.

BB: Was it ever a resistance because people felt they would lose their jobs? If you went in mechanization?

VB: Oh, they might have had a little bit to do with it but the more you change into technology and mechanization the more support people you have to have. You may eliminate, one of the great things about this company, what it did always, up to now, and I'm sure it may continue to do this. Every time we mechanized and improved an operation and cut out a bunch of people, we started up something else and had a place to move those people to, to keep the people working. I remember we had a big change one time, we – right at the same time we were going into the treating plant operation and building it and a lot of people went up there. When we cut out the logging crews and went to contractors, we brought those people into the plants and put them to work. That was a big change, take a guy that has always gone to work at 4:30 and got home at 2:30 in the afternoon out of those log woods and put him on at 7 to 5 shift at the sawmill, that was pretty tough. He was used to just working as hard as he could go for about seven hours and being through. And you put him out there for a steady straight 10-hour shift and it was a tremendous change. The biggest change, one of the biggest changes was up at the fiberboard plant. These people had never really worked rotation shift work and, boy, that was something else. I have had certain people tell me “Why, man, I never work on Saturday and Sunday. Saturday and Sunday are always my day to do what I want to”. But they changed.

BB: Yes, I still hear a lot of people cussing and discussing that rotating shift work, it's not fun.

VB: Yes, They will always do that, but these people had never done that and it was totally foreign to them, and they'd say, “My God, this is awful”. But, you know, change, continuous change for the better has been part of Diboll and the operation ever since Mr. Temple came down here.

BB: One thing I wanted to know, I know that Mr. Temple didn't always work out in the mill like some of the others growing up, did he?

VB: Yeah, Now he –

BB: I mean, did he know the industry from the inside out?

VB: Yes, how much time he spent out there, I don't know. Because I – when he was that age I was not here but he spent a lot of time in the retail yards, see, he ran the retail yard in Lufkin and he has worked out in the plant and he has been acquainted with it and around it and everything else. Say, I'll tell you a little secret about him. He was doing a good job, and he wasn't jumping up and down to come down here and run this mill. They didn't pay him enough damn money in the first place to get him to do it. He was making more money, I think, in his own business and he was very successful in what he was doing. He is a "Wheeler-Dealer" and a "Get it done". He believes in getting it done but has a deep, deep feeling for people, effort and for loyalty. If you will try and stick with it, you know, he has a deep appreciation for that. I understand the family had to put a little pressure on him to get him to come down here and take this thing. They, too, you can understand, here is a bright young guy that can make his own place in the world, all of a sudden you ask him to come down here and take this whole operation, and it had gotten kind of old by that time, and run it. They are going to sit up there with their hands on him and tell him what he can and can't do. And that's kind of, you know, that kind of chokes a fellow's spine. But, and I feel sure he fought many a battle with what was called the Board of Directors, but I guess, basically were family members because the family owned the thing, over what to do with this place. I would imagine that Arthur, Sr. scratched his head a many a time over where he was going, you know. To sell the people the houses, to get out of the housing business, to not be a Company owned town. See, Arthur, Jr. could see down the road to what this should eventually come to, I think, the minute he got here he started working in that direction. The thing you appreciate about him, it maybe seemed so at the time, but he didn't try to do it all over night. He did it, giving the people time to adjust to it and time to cope with it. Rather than just coming in here and doing the whole thing – Bam – he went through stages of getting these things done and I'm sure there were plenty of times when he was very patient but –

BB: I'll bet he was chomping at the bit at the time then.

VB: True, but he had the foresight to see where he was going to eventually be and just, the thing is to take the time to get there. And he could build the most tremendously loyal team to him and to what he wanted to do that anybody had ever – there's never been anybody totally like him. I think, myself and Joe Denman and John Booker, oh, let me see, out of the management group, are about the only ones left that were with him through all that.

BB: When it first started?

VB: Yes, I can't right off hand, think of anybody else, well, Jimmy Nelson was involved in a lot of things, but Joe, myself, John Booker, Jimmy Nelson – are some of the oldest.

BB: When did you actually start working for the Company full time?

VB: 1949 – I lost three – I worked three years prior to that, went down and took a shot at railroading and I didn't like that. I came back to Diboll and went to work. That's when I

went to driving the ambulance, working in the First Aid Department with old Dr. Dale and working in the store.

BB: Well, you will have to tell me another time about that. Those adventures, there have been lots of people saying “Oh, ask Vernon, he knows”.

VB: Oh, we delivered babies and we did a lot of things.

BB: Well, how did you already hit management by the time Arthur came here then?

VB: I was driving the ambulance and working extra in the Personnel Department with Jake Durham and Marty Kennely was secretary and running errands and then I used to drive Mr. Temple everywhere. We didn't have airplanes then, everywhere you went you had to drive. Since I drove the ambulance, ran errands and did things like that, then I fell heir to driving him wherever he wanted to go.

BB: Oh, chauffeur for a while, huh?

VB: Actually yes, and was pretty damn good at it, I thought. Of course, as he said, if he dozed off and went to sleep, I tried to make a rac track out of it. But showing a willingness to work and to learn that's what got you ahead then. I worked into the Personnel job, went to Pineland and spent three years, and came back here and have been here ever since. I started the first real Personnel Office they ever had in Pineland. Eck Prudhomme was there. See, I got to know all those old fellows, Eck Prudhomme, M.A. Sloan, O.K. Smith, Pratt Hines and Mr. Raspberry, all those people over there. See, I had been involved, too, in some of the basic changes they were making in Diboll, like when they went from the semi-monthly to weekly payrolls and when they stopped draw day and you got your whole payday. When I got to Pineland, Pineland was like Diboll used to be. So I helped make those changes over there. Some of those people in Pineland had never drawn a payday.

BB: They just had draw day?

VB: You would come in and draw. When it came payday they were even-steven and in the hole. And everything in the world was charged through the payroll, your lights, your gas, your rent, your water, your doctor bills, your drug bills, your furniture store bill, the whole shebang. I worked in payroll over there some, too, and went through changing a lot of that.

BB: And that was late, I thought draw days stopped long before that.

VB: No, I went over there in 1953 and it was still going on.

BB: When did it stop in Diboll?

VB: Oh, gosh, before, let's see, '49 – '40, maybe in 1950.

BB: That late?

VB: Yes, you could still, I'm not sure about that, in Diboll, I don't remember. Yes, remember when I was working, you could draw maybe once a half but they paid you every two weeks and I remember when we went to weekly pay over here.

BB: Uh huh, trying to get people caught up. Boy, I'll bet that first couple of weeks was bad on people, wasn't it?

VB: Oh, yes, it was disastrous but it worked and everybody predicted we would go broke, and now we are going back the other way.

BB: Yes, I started to say you just changed back.

VB: We are fixing to put the salary on every two weeks. It is a tremendous savings in payroll cost, and I think they will put the hourly back on it. Also, it's just a matter of adjusting, the same outline. You just spread it over fourteen days instead of seven. It will work the same way. The first initial move is the problem.

BB: Well, if you give everybody time to adjust to it and all that kind of stuff. Whenever you started the personnel office, was it mainly putting people to work who had been here always, like the younger people coming up or did you have a lot of outside people come in?

VB: No, it was mostly putting the guys to work who grew up here, and people's uncles and cousins and what have you. When we first started the thing, we really weren't doing the hiring. Excuse me, the supervisors were still hiring people that they wanted. We were turning in time and we did a lot of other things. Safety, first-aid, and some hiring. We slowly evolved into hiring because then you have a central clearing office, to clear these people. So that we have come full circle, at one time the personnel department had total say – so over who was hired and who wasn't. Well, that worked good for that time but the things have changed like we wanted them to and we tried to involve the superintendents and supervisors that are going to work the people, more in the hiring process. We want that guy involved in who we are sending out there, too. We get the people together. I've got to hire a mechanic for the fiberboard, fine. They may send three or four that they know and I may find two or three and we will go through them and when we get down to one or two we want them to talk to them, too. Between the two of us we'll decide which of these are the best. So that makes us both involved in the decision. He's got to work with them so he needs a say – so in what we do. Then we check him for prior injuries, prior problems, things that would adversely affect his working relationship because that is our responsibility. So you might say now again, that it is a mutual deal. We both look at them, especially skilled people.

BB: When were you talking about that you did it –

VB: “Totally” Oh, in the ‘60’s and ‘70’s. Supervisors were busy with other things and they just requested people and we sent them to them. We are trying –

BB: No, it’s gone right along with it. In fact, it is better than some.

VB: Well, you see, I’ve been fortunate to grow up and be around Clyde Thompson, Dred Devereaux, Marvin Hamner, Eddie Farley, Bob Cook, Paul Durham’s Daddy, the old log train operators and to know those people and to work – Arthur Porter, E.P. Ramsey, you know, you can’t name them all, you just have to set and think about it. And to see these guys and to know and learn some of the things, get them to teach you some of the things they know and then pick up on the new stuff, it makes all the difference in the world. I’ve had a wonderful education from those guys. I just – I had always, Mr. Temple always taught us to be respectful of the older employees, the things they have accomplished, the things they had done. We’ve got to go on and do what we got to do but you never, you should never lose respect for what they have done and what they have been. And I’ve tried to do that, it may not always seem that way but I’ve tried. And it’s worth while, it really is, I’ll tell you what – Clyde Thompson, I learned a great deal from him, about politics, about insurance, about law, about a lot of things. Ward Burke, for instance, these guys have meant a lot to me in my working life, the things that I was able to pick up and the help that I got from them. The old timers can really help you if you let them, but you adapt your new thinking, you pick up what you get from them and put the new stuff with it and go on from there. And it bothers me when you see old timers that won’t accept the new system, or the change and try to work with it. It really does. I try to do it, I’ll tell you, the older you get the harder it is to accept all this change but –

BB: It seems to come faster and faster. You don’t have the time to adjust to the new thinking.

VB: And you forget – you think, “God, this is a big change”. You know, just wham – but you forget. When you were 28 – 32 years old, this was a big change to those guys and did I have the patience and understanding that you hope that the new managers that are coming on are supposed to understand. But a lot of times older people will just bow their neck and you know, “Hell, I ain’t gonna do it” and “I don’t like this” and you just have to go around those guys and do whatever you gotta do. They usually retire or just get out of the mainstream. It is sad because every one of them has a storehouse of knowledge and things that have been done in the past and a lot of times they can help you.

BB: Help you with human relations if nothing else. One thing Megan wanted to know was why Temple Industries had been so successful socially in that there’s not, there hasn’t been a lot of union activity or strikes or –

VB: Well, there has been a lot of union activity.

BB: Well, it wasn’t a long time ago.

VB: Yes, it was, that’s when it was.

BB: Okay, tell me about it because we haven't been able to hear anything about that.

VB: That's something you don't talk a lot about. I think the Company was always able to do for its employees as much or more than any union could ever offer, and I'm not at all anti-union. I am anti-union management, I got no quarrel with a fellow belonging to the union, you know, I worked for the railroad and that's why I quit was because of the union and the Company fighting each other. I don't mind telling you, I'll tell anybody that I loved the railroad. But here's the Company who has to survive and the union who are the people totally at each others throat and that's not a good atmosphere, it's not worth a damn. And I blame the union and I blame the Company. One of the things I always wondered, "Well, if you really cared so much about these people where have you been for thirty years?" You know? I think when unions began they were badly needed, they did a good thing, there were a lot of companies, most of them up east, I think, that took advantage of people. You can read the industrial revolution – you know, people are not stupid. But then the union becomes what it accuses the company of. You just got to look at it. Why can't I do for myself what they are saying they can do for me? We had – Mr. Temple was the salvation of that, he had an open door policy. Oh, God, it would run you nuts sometimes. Anybody that wanted to could go in there and see him. And if it was just some crackpot or somebody who just wanted to bitch and gripe, they'd get a lot of results and you could pretty well stand your ground but, boy, if you had mistreated somebody, if you had goofed, you got your tail tore up. And nobody wants to go in there and get their hide peeled off their back right in front of somebody else because they had abused them or mistreated them. And that's happened. This old guy would go in there and he had been here twenty years, Mr. Temple is going to hear him. Joe Denman is the same way. That happens today. Oh, yes ma'am – it hasn't been six or eight months ago that somebody got to Joe and the whole bunch because he got fired. Thankfully it was totally justified, he caused the whole thing, he was totally wrong but it took several days to make sure that that was the way it really was. And that defeats the union. If you've got a voice, if the Company is going to listen to you, if I, as just a regular employee on the lower end of the ladder, can get to the president of the Company and have my say and be heard, and something done about it, even if I'm not 100% right, what the hell do I want with a union I have to pay dues to tell me what I can and can't say to the Company. You know, and I can talk about unions all day long, there's a lot of disadvantages to them, your lines of progression, your seniority, they have tendency to standardize stuff where this is what happens. We've got a bright young guy down there and you need him up there and you can't move him up there. People see this, I'll tell you what, they are not stupid, they are smart and they never saw an advantage to having a union and that's why they never had one.

BB: Which kind tried to organize in here?

VB: Oh, we have had every kind, AFL, CIO, Woodworkers, the old CIO Woodworkers; the Boiler Makers in Lufkin tried us. There have been a bunch of them. And you know, they came down here and tried to tell these people one time that they were going to pay them the same wages they were paying at the paper mill. Anybody that's got two cents

worth of brain knows better than that. You know, there's a difference in margin, a difference in profit and the paper mill is different. It don't pay, they never would pay the same wages. It wouldn't make any difference if they had nine unions up there. And the guys saw that and you don't con them. These people out here are smarter than most people think they are. They are sharp. The last time they brought in a union, and this is one thing I would want to read over before they printed this – they tried one of our plants that had a pretty heavy Mexican group in it and several of the Mexicans that moved up here when we started that program, just looked at them and said – “hey, if these guys were really interested in you, why didn't they come to the valley and offer you jobs and move you up here?” And that was the end of that so nobody has tried it since. You can't, if you can't offer something better with some foundation to it, then what can you do? I think the people believed in the Company, they believed in Mr. Temple, they believed in Joe and the people under them were going to do what they were supposed to do and there was no point in having one. But I think that is what has made the difference. Socially, it's been tough. We believe, and I say “We” because Mr. Temple preaches this and most of us that worked under him accepted it and believed it, I grew up believing it, everybody ought to have a fair shot, doesn't make any difference whether you are black, brown or white or what, male or female, if you can do the job you ought to be paid the money that the job carries and you ought to be given the opportunity to do it. Now a lot of people didn't believe that and you talk about East Texas, in 1946 and '47, '48 and '49. They gave me that award, Andrew High School Award, basically for the program we worked with the American-Mexicans out of the migrant stream, but I'll – If I can find it I'll give you a copy of my acceptance speech. I felt that the things we did socially involved the Negroes, the blacks, in that we saw that they had opportunities at whatever jobs they were able to do. I've had people tell me – “Oh, you can't put him up there on that job, that's always been a white man's job.” I say – “what difference does it make.” The man can do the job and that's the way the management of the Company felt. That's not been an easy thing to pursue but change your color of skin or your national origin from Mexico and see where you stand. You've got to look at it that way. I realized a long time ago that if I were black that I wouldn't have probably lived very long. I'm serious, or if I was a Mexican that I would not have lived very long. I'd caused a hell of a lot of trouble. Now, I don't believe in demonstrations, and all that junk, I think you get more done simply by doing what you do. James Rhone is a good example. The blacks, themselves, are guilty of penalizing their own people and exploiting their own people, just like the whites do the whites, but you ought to give a person an opportunity if they are capable, willing and they want to do it and they have the brains to do it. Doesn't make any difference whether they are black, brown, white, male or female. It doesn't bother me. I, (you probably can't print this) too many men are threatened by women who are intelligent, aggressive and can do things. It threatens their male superiority and that's the biggest bunch of crap that has ever been perpetrated on the human race. You know, why does that threaten anybody? The smarter, the tougher, the better, I don't care. I'd hate to be a woman for that reason. Now, I don't like a smart aleck woman that is just going to be tough because she's a woman and it's time to be tough. Well, you don't like a man that way either, see, so what's the difference. But the Company management, Mr. Temple, Joe, the people with them have always, in the background, been very active in social change. Look how easy we integrated the schools; the whole town did it. Oh, some of the schoolteachers like to

have had a conniption fit when we brought those Mexicans up here, why didn't we get it approved by – I said, "If we had tried to get it approved by the town and the City Council and you darn teachers, we'd still be talking because you don't want to jack with them." You know, my mother was a teacher; I caused her a lot of problems.

BB: I'll bet –

VB: But that changed, that's social change, you've got to grow, we couldn't always be a closed little town, there was always going to be – I can remember Diboll when you get out of the midnight show at 12:45 at night, so help me this is true, and be a fourteen year old girl and walk all the way through town and through, what was then called the negro quarters, to the house without being scared. Nobody would bother you. And there were some of them – white's lived over there behind the Negro quarters where they owned land, the Bells, the Weeks, some of them and they'd do that. They never thought anything about being out on the streets at night. Wasn't anybody going to knock me in the head, the blacks didn't do it, and it's just beautiful to a grown up at a time like that. It's harder to see it the way it changes. You do that now and somebody will throw a beer bottle at you. We are still a good town, we have never had any real racial problems here, this town has never really had any bad troubles or problems. I think the top management of the Company has had a great influence on that, on keeping the town like it is. But we couldn't always remain a little bitty town, we had to grow and when you are growing you have to do all these other things. A lot of it, I don't like. I'd like to see Diboll, people wise, socially, like it was, I don't know, in 1955 or '57 – '60, but you can't do that, you can't stay still. You got to grow.

BB: It's either that or die, one or the other.

VB: Yeah, you adapt or die, it's like the armadillo. And it's – what else?

BB: Was there a difference in loyalty, do you think, between the workers now that you hire than from whenever you started?

VB: I think so. I don't know how to define it and I don't want to be critical of people we hire now because they are bright young people and they have different values and they are brought up differently from us. I was brought up to work. And a lot of the people, you know, it was a kind of stigma, if you didn't work. People would look at you – "Oh, he won't work" and "That guy had four or five different jobs, what is wrong with him?" Well, it's a little different now, our kids have grown up, you know, I get aggravated at mine sometimes. They have been grown up easy, and all that, they have had plenty, cars, money – when I went to school in Diboll, oh, there might have been three cars at the school and now you got to have a big parking lot, every kid in school has a car, or a car and a half, or a pickup. And that's good, you know, I'm not knocking them having it, that's great. But I think we have lost some of the values for friendship and for jobs and for security and belonging that we used to have. Of course, we've gotten a lot more independence, maybe, I don't know. I really don't know how to tell you about the loyalty because a lot of the young people have done good jobs, been loyal and stuck with the

Company and accepted changes. You know, we've grown a new set of supervisors since I've been here, I've lived through two sets of foremen, more or less, and I think the guys now are smarter. They are more independent in their thinking, in a way. I don't know, it may be better. I totally admire loyalty to your town, to your Company and to the people you work for. I think it will get that way again. I think thirty or forty years from now somebody sitting in this job will say the same thing about this group of people that I'm saying about the older ones. We're bigger, we've grown bigger, we're part of an international operation, you know, we're not just Diboll and Southern Pine Lumber Company any more. We are on the national market; we've got to be different. We got to think different and be smarter. I would guess that that loyalty is still there if you got down to it and had to call on it and need it.

BB: Well, maybe.

VB: We have performed, I think this Company has performed as well now as it has in the past, better, now than it has in the past. I think it has had to do some hard nose things. We had to change a lot of things, we have had to tighten down and toughen up and survive, you know. In the last three or four years survival has been the name of the game. There have been a lot of forest industries shut down, the ones that couldn't make the hard nose decisions, retire people that needed retiring, put other people to work. You know, you tear up a lot of playhouses when you do stuff like that and you do these efficiency studies. It creates a lot of problems for personnel people. You know, "what's the matter?" All of a sudden – finally you get down to saying, "well, hey, you guys, we got to get with it, we got to survive and you got to get up off your duck and go to work". We are tearing up some of these little playhouses and it effects us all. We all have to get with it and go. We can still be loyal, we can still be caring, we can still be paternal to a degree, but we got to be tough and we got to produce. If we don't, we go under. If you go under what good is all of your social feelings and trying to take care of everybody?

BB: Why, I think when they had the layoffs, when was it?

VB: Oh, at the plywood – when we shut the plywood plant down? Boy, that was tough, that's the first one I ever had to do.

BB: The first layoff that you ever had to do?

VB: The first big shutdown and I've been here thirty-six years. I've never been through anything like it. We've shut down little operations here and there and absorbed people and changed. But, you know, that was three or four or five hundred. And we couldn't place all of them. We took the oldest ones, took the best ones, and did the best we could with it. Oh, we lost supervisors – that hurts, that really hurts. I guess I'd say credibility. "What's happening to the operation?" We just had too many people and nowhere to go with them.

BB: The plywood just wasn't making it?

VB: No way, we tried everything in the world. Had a plant over in Pineland that was running like a dream, so you know – that was the oldest plywood plant in the south. That had a lot to do with it.

BB: Yes, just not efficient any more.

VB: You can't just stand there and lose money. Because see, I'm a stockholder, a lot of those little people out there are stockholders, like me. I say, little people, we don't own a great big chunk of it, but a lot of us working out there own part of it, and I want to see it make money, too. It's tough, you want to make money, well, you gotta make money, you got to produce and take care of people at the same time. I say, "Take care", by "Take care" you have to offer a decent job, produce ways, and that guy ought to produce and that way, then you take care of each other.

BB: I know that was a hard time, because that was the first time.

VB: Yes

BB: That the Company hasn't been able to take care of them?

VB: We couldn't absorb them, we couldn't put them, you know, and we just had to let them go, weed them out.

BB: And no big operations coming in?

VB: No, nothing to put them in, we were tightening down everywhere else. And it is getting tougher and tougher. You see, you got to, to stay alive you got to mechanize, you got to have all the technologies you can have, advantages that you can have, you got to put the best product on the market that's possible, or the best, to sell it. If you don't put it on there and sell it, then we don't sell it, and we don't survive or make any money. That's what it is all about.

BB: What sort of future do you see for the Company now?

VB: Fantastic, I think we'll totally survive; we are diversified. We're in good shape, I think. We have tightened up, you know, as tight as you can for the time being. We don't have any, what they call "fat," you know, we have trimmed our crews down, everybody is pitching in, everybody is trying to do their share and that's what will make us survive and we will grow, I think we will continue to grow. They bought that, bought that operation in New Hampshire and turned it around; it's a fantastic operation.

BB: The strand board?

VB: Yes, Strand board, we've got bright new young people. They are not all that new, and they've got a lot of bright ideas, a lot of vim, vigor and vitality and they want to go. And I think it's great that, I do think they respect and look at the older employees in their

experience and what they know and I think they like to use it. Now they may show impatience sometime that we are not quick to jump into something new and that type of thing. But I think they are aware and they are like we were, twenty or thirty years ago. That's good and that's what will make the Company survive, I don't think there is any question about it. Clifford Grum is one of the brightest, sharpest guys, you know, and he's got a reputation on Wall Street in New York and that's where it's at.

BB: That's where the money is?

VB: That's right and if they respect him, they respect us. You can have a good Company, I think. That's doing a good job, that maybe they don't have the respect for it they should, depending upon its leaders and I think, we have the leaders to get that. My gosh, they've diversified, they've got, you know, they put this mill up in California – Temple Inland is a pretty big operation. We're a pretty big outfit.

BB: All over.

VB: Yeah, when you look at us and realize that we could buy a lot of operations that are around here if we wanted them and they wanted to sell them and that put us in a pretty big spot. Little old Diboll has come a long way. We used to play – I'll go back a minute, where the Humble Station, Exxon Station is now, we used to play football right out there, yes, that's where the football field was, right behind it. There's a house right by the pressing shop down town. Okay, there was a row of houses there. Well, right where the highway runs now is where our football field used to be.

BB: I know there used to be a baseball field right out there.

VB: Yes, the old Diboll Millers, had a semi-pro baseball team here. You know, and to go back a little further, I've heard them talking about everybody in Diboll had a cow, the Company helped them buy a cow and that's true. This Company has always had a deep-seated interest in the people that work for it. It came out of the Temple family, they believed that and it got even better as the younger ones came on. Like Arthur, Jr. you know one of their most valuable assets has always been their people. You can have all the timber, all the machinery, all the equipment in the world, if you don't have good people, you don't have it all. And, I think, that family realized that and they have always been tremendously loyal. I get mad when I read things like – what did the Wall Street Journal write “Robber Baron, Timber Baron”? Something like that, like that he rode the backs of the working people, oh baloney.

BB: I don't think they feel that here.

VB: No, I don't think that –

BB: The feeling here has never been like that.

VB: It's just not that way; that guy can just walk down here and Joe Denman can do a lot of that, too. I guarantee you there are a lot of people out here tremendously loyal to Joe because Joe has stepped into that void that he left when he moved off up there. I heard a union organizer say one time "There ain't no way in hell you can organize Diboll because A. Temple lives there but if he keeps getting in that airplane and going to New York, fooling with them people up there, if you can slip in sometimes while he is gone then you might." That was made in a hotel in Houston at a meeting. And I said, "Well, he comes back enough that I don't think you could ever do it." So we are still, we are still doing something right. We just got a union decertified in Thompson, Georgia. Guys rode him out of the plant. They wanted the policies and benefits that we've got rather than the union. And they voted it out. They did it. We had nothing to do with it.

BB: Well, what happens when Temple is completely out of this organization?

VB: When he is gone, when he is dead?

BB: When he is gone, when he is dead, what do you think?

VB: It will take thirty-five years to even erode a lot of the policies, or fifty, that are in motion because of him and because of Joe. We still got Joe. When he and Joe are both gone, you'll see some changes but I think a lot of this will still remain because it's good business practice because of the things he did.

BB: I just wonder about the feeling in the town, though, as far as not having a Temple as part of it?

VB: Somebody will step in, I think somebody will step in and pick up. Not as well, not as good, in my opinion, and not as strong as he has been, or he is, but somebody will come along. Somebody will step in.

BB: This is a good place to end it but I want to ask one more thing. I have been curious as to what were the policies in motion whenever you decided to go to the valley and bring the Mexican migrant workers here?

VB: We did not have enough people in a four county area. We ran a survey on it to staff this mill. Lufkin Industries, see, they were all involved in this, too, to a degree.

BB: Oh, really, I didn't know that.

VB: Of course, I don't want to get them in hot water because they try to hide it that they were. At one point I had over seventy-five jobs open in this Company that we couldn't fill. When we made our first trip, Johnny Long had 125 jobs, I believe is the correct figure open. Texas Foundries had a bunch of jobs open. It was unreal, there were something like three or four hundred jobs in this county open. You see – stop and think how heavily industrialized we are, right here in Angelina County – all right, we pull from a three – four county area. Well, a guy had it made then, if he didn't like the ways things

went here he would just quit and went up the street to Lufkin. And he could go to four different companies up there. And if he didn't like that he could come back here because we were hurting for people. I mean we spent full time hustling people. We tried to make some decisions as to where to go for people, we looked at Louisiana, they had just shut down some mills over in Alabama, Georgia, and Louisiana. There were a lot of terrible social unrest over there.

BB: What year are we talking about now? When was this?

VB: I don't remember, I'll have to look up the exact date.

BB: Was this in the '60's?

VB: Yes, we had some Mexicans working here who had been here for years, they were good, well-oriented families, good people and good hard workers. So the migrant stream, as such, and you have to understand what that thing really is, was fading away, people were going to mechanized fruit pickers, mechanized stuff and there were more and more people out of work in the valley. The government had all these programs going down there to train people and teach them to work. We got involved in one of them and a Dr. Peregee?, a sociologist. We got to talking about it and we went down and took a look and there was just a tremendous number of people there were mechanics, there were a lot of things. But you have to understand the social change to move from down there to up here, so we dickered with that a while and we decided against going south over into Alabama. You later saw the unrest that they were having and why bring that over here.

BB: Were you thinking mainly in terms of blacks coming here at the time?

VB: From those states, but we found some reasons for not – we just didn't think it would work, so why not do it here at home. We went down there and we moved twenty-five families the first time. Very carefully picked and I think about twenty-five percent of those families are still here, or more. They bought homes, they live here, their kids go to school here and some of their children are working here, some of their grandchildren are working here.

BB: I was going to say, they've been here a long time.

VB: We went back again and got another group and that pretty well staffed us up. But the difference with us, with our Company and our town and the people in this town deserve the credit for this now. We didn't want somebody to come up here, just live out here in the woods and come to work. Now if you are going to come to Diboll, we want your kids to go to school and we want you to buy homes, want to put your roots down, want you to stay there, or we don't want you to come. Now we told them that. You've got to be part of the town. Now, don't come up there and be a separate Mexican Community, that has nothing to do with the whole town, you know, we're not going to create a little barrio like they've got in Los Angeles, you know, or somewhere else. You've got to be a part of the town of Diboll. Well, I don't know if they believed it or

not. They've been hauled off to Dallas and the different places and some of it worked and some of it didn't. But it worked here and that first group did fit in, I think, and they did a good job of fitting in. But we didn't know all the others were going to flood this place. They said "What a wonderful place to go to". "You're treated equal and decent, let's go up there and get a job". Well, they began to flood this place, well, industries around us wanted them to come in and work and get out of sight.

END OF INTERVIEW