

GEORGE CRYER, SR.

Interview 266a

February 18, 2014, at his home in Zavalla, Texas

Jonathan Gerland, Interviewer

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ABSTRACT: In this interview with Jonathan Gerland and Richard Donovan, Zavalla, Angelina County native George Cryer reminisces about growing up in southern Angelina County. He talks about his father's peckerwood sawmill, making crossties, working in the woods cutting timber, and the changes in the lumber industry for small producers in the middle of the 20th century. He talks about growing up in the Zavalla area, working for his father, hunting and fishing, the coming of the dams, the switch to chain saws, and working construction in the Beaumont area.

Jonathan Gerland (hereafter JG): Okay, today's date is February 18, 2014 and my name is Jonathan Gerland and I'm in the home of Mr. George Cryer in Zavalla today. We are going to do an oral history interview with Mr. Cryer. And also with us is Richard Donovan and he is going to give us an introduction before we begin.

Richard Donovan (hereafter RD): Well this isn't much of an introduction, but I would like to say to begin with that George is the son of Menyard Cryer and Menyard Cryer, back in the fifties and sixties was a well known and well respected peckerwood sawmiller. I don't mean the word peckerwood to be any way uncomplimentary, that was a term used in those days to describe the numerous small mills that were located through the East Texas region. Menyard had one of the most successful mills in this area and operated it for a long time because most of these quote unquote "peckerwood mills" were very short lived, but Menyard operated his mill for probably a couple of decades. And George grew up in that environment and probably knows sawmilling in that vein better than probably anyone living in East Texas today. So we have a real opportunity to learn about that thing from Mr. Cryer.

JG: Okay, Mr. Cryer, maybe just begin talk a little bit about who your parents were and how the family came to Zavalla, and maybe just some of your earliest memories growing up.

George Cryer (hereafter GC): Well, I don't know. My daddy was born and raised here in Zavalla and so was his daddy and mother. As far as I know that is where they were raised at. In his younger days he cut crossties and hewed them out with a broad axe and then he got a little sawmill started.

JG: In about what years would those have been?

GC: Well I imagine in the years, well he was making crossties when I was born, along about in the early forties.

JG: And when were you born?

GC: In '40, 1940.

JG: 1940.

GC: And Daddy was hewing crossties back then.

JG: Hand hewing crossties?

GC: Hand hewing, yes.

JG: And would sell those to the railroad?

GC: Yes, sell them to the railroad.

RD: Jonathan, I can remember when hand hewn crossties were stacked up there beside the railroad track and men loaded them by hand by putting a crosstie on their shoulders and walking up a plank in the boxcars and dropping them off in the boxcars.

GC: Yes sir, I've seen that happen a lot. It looked like maybe a 2x12, it was mostly black people that would come down and load them ties inside of a boxcar. They would put one on their shoulder and you would see them walk up that board and it would just be bouncing with them walking up that board and stacking them. Later on they started stacking them in what they called gondola cars. They would bring a fork lift or something down there and pick them up and just dump them over in the open top cars.

JG: Now, I understand how they would hand hew the ties. How did they get to already be cut to cross tie length?

GC: With a crosscut [saw].

JG: Was that done on the site?

GC: Yes, they would hew them right there in the woods and then load them on the truck and haul them over to the railroad siding some place. One that we had was a big siding in Zavalla and the other close one was down in Rockland, where they brought their ties at.

JG: So did your dad also run the mill that cut the lengths, or was he just doing the hewing?

GC: No, there wasn't no mill that cut the lengths. They done that with a crosscut. Do you know what a crosscut is?

JG: Okay, okay, with a hand saw, crosscut saw, okay.

GC: Yes, that is the way they would cut their timber back then. They would cut it down in eight foot lengths or ten foot, ever what size the order was for the ties, they would cut it and then hew it out by hand and then load them up on a truck. Back then the trucks wouldn't haul but maybe 25 or 30 ties, because trucks were a lot smaller back then than they are now.

RD: Single axle.

GC: Yes, but they would haul them out to the railroad crossing and then what we called tie yards. Then there would be a tie inspector come down and inspect them, measure them and see if they were the right dimensions and everything and then they would pay them for them.

JG: Were these hardwood logs?

GC: Hardwood and pine, mostly pine back then.

JG: Mostly pine, okay. And those would have been treated I guess, huh or not?

GC: Yes, I guess they would treat them. I don't really know, but I'm pretty sure they were, because all the... might near all the railroad ties have been treated.

JG: Yes.

GC: They would carry them from there to, I guess a creosote plant somewhere, and treat them. Then later on, probably in the early...Daddy had a little peckerwood mill back sometime in the forties but it was just pulled with, I think he told me, I don't remember it myself, but he pulled it with a little Buick motor.

RD: That was the preferred power source in those days was a Buick straight A motor.

JG: Why was that?

GC: Well it was about the biggest engine that was in cars back then.

JG: Okay.

GC: That is what they would pull the saws and everything with, run the mill with that Buick engine.

JG: A straight eight?

GC: Yes, a straight eight.

RD: It didn't build up RPM's very fast but it got momentum and it would go. Later on, I guess in the late forties or early fifties, it got on up to bigger tie mills. Tie mills, crossties

was his business. He didn't, he cut lumber but it was just lumber that come off the cross ties. It wasn't really a lumber mill it was a tie mill.

JG: So he went from hewing them to actually running them through a circular saw mill.

GC: A sawmill, yes.

JG: And cutting the ties, okay.

GC: Yes, and we called them that we hauled down here on the railroad track, we called them standard ties because they stayed in the United States, but Daddy got a big order, it was for several years he cut what they called an export tie, which was hauled into Beaumont and shipped overseas. That was mainly the type of ties that he cut back all through the fifties and sixties.

JG: Now when your father was hewing ties, was people already making sawmill ties as well?

GC: Very few if any. I don't know if there were any tie mills around then. They hewed them on up into the fifties, a few people did, but very few.

JG: That is what I was going to ask you do you know if the railroads paid more for hewed ties than sawmill?

GC: They was the same, as far as I know they were the same price.

JG: So was your father one of the first ones to have a tie mill in this part?

GC: That I knew about, he was.

JG: Okay, and when did you start working doing that line of work?

GC: Well I started, my first job Daddy gave me fifty cents a day, I was about ten years old and my job was shoveling sawdust, you know, when the sawdust would pile up I would have to go up there and shovel it down where some more could pile up and have room. He would pay me fifty cents a day through the summer when I was out of school.

JG: What did y'all do with it, just spread it out?

GC: Just spread it out.

JG: There wasn't any other use for it huh?

GC: No, wasn't no use for it back then.

JG: That was before Donovan came along and made wood flour out of it.

GC: They would have huge sawdust piles.

JG: Just spread it around huh?

GC: Yes, just spread it out where it could make more and every once in awhile when the pile got bigger they would put some more sawdust chain on it and move it up higher on the pile and then it would just keep getting bigger and bigger.

RD: You would get a pretty good cone.

JG: Yes, yes. Did the mill move around or was it pretty much stationary in one spot?

GC: No, the one Daddy had after the fifties was pretty well stationary. He had... the biggest one he had was out here on 69 about a mile and a half out of Zavalla on the right. It was back up in behind a big shop building there now, that was the biggest one, but it was built up off the ground and had conveyors in it where your slabs would go out it. Before that, before the mills had conveyors to burn the slabs and stuff that came off the logs, a lot of them would push them down...well they would peel a pine pole or something and push them off down it, you know. Then they came up with what they called the slab kicker and it was a drum that was about 16 or 18 inches around with teeth all on it and you had a motor that pulled it. When the slabs would come down the roller bed, he would pick them up and throw them on it and it would kick them down a hundred to hundred fifty foot down.

RD: Menyard had a guy named Dan Wright that worked for him. Dan, his job was to drop them on the slab kicker and he unfortunately made a bad toss one day and this kicker came back and hit him in his voice [box] and he couldn't talk very much after that.

GC: Well sawmills were pretty dangerous back then.

RD: Oh man!

JG: Now what, you mentioned they would burn the slabs, just burn his waste or would you burn them for fuel?

GC: They was waste, no just pure waste back then.

JG: Of course the mill itself was gasoline powered I guess.

GC: Diesel.

JG: Diesel.

RD: Jonathan at the end of World War II there was a great influx of diesel engines available to people.

JG: Is this still that inline Buick?

RD: No, no, they had gone to diesel.

GC: No that was gasoline.

JG: That was gasoline, okay.

RD: This is army stuff they are getting now.

JG: Okay, so this isn't the Buick one you are talking about.

GC: No, no.

JG: This is a diesel powered okay.

GC: No, this is a bigger mill. Well, I had gotten to where I could do anything around a sawmill. A lot of times I would have to stay out of school if a man didn't show up. The main sawmill hands were what they called the blocksetter, he rode the carriage and the sawyer was the next most important man in the...if either one of them didn't show up that day I would have to stay out of school and take over their job.

JG: What size saw blade? Do you remember what size? It would be circle saw I guess?

GC: Yes, circle saws and he run a sixty inch most of the time, inserted saw and then later on he started running solid tooth saws. They got more popular in the early sixties and late fifties. More people started using what they called the solid tooth saw but before that it was inserted and you could change the teeth in them.

JG: Each individual tooth could be changed?

GC: Yes, change each individual tooth in it.

JG: How often would you have to sharpen saws?

GC: Well, the inserted saw you usually shut down around ten o'clock and sharpen it.

JG: What time would you have started?

GC: You started at seven.

JG: Seven.

GC: About every three hours you would stop and sharpen it and swage it. They had what they called a swage and it was a tool that would fit over the tooth of that and you would

hit it with a hammer and it would spread the tooth out right on the cutting edge of it. That was to make sure the saw didn't bind, you know, it would cut a little bit wider gap than the saw blade was.

RD: The saw kerf would be wider.

JG: The kerf right, right. That is like in those crosscut saws they had those Rayford teeth that cleaned out the sawdust some. How long would it take to sharpen a blade do you remember?

GC: About fifteen minutes.

JG: Fifteen minutes. Yes, I guess you could really tell when it was time to sharpen huh?

GC: Well yes you had saw guides that would hold it in place but it would still start running where you wouldn't be cutting a true line.

JG: Okay. What was a typical day as far as if there was work to be done how long would your day be?

GC: Eight hours a day is what we usually run, yes.

JG: Eight hours, okay.

GC: Of course there were some men stayed over and cleaned up around the mill after that. You had to keep it pretty clean on account of fire, you know, sawdust and stuff had to be cleaned out in places because you always had a fire going burning the slabs, and you had to watch that real close. There was a many a mill burnt down back in them days.

JG: Did y'all have a roof over it?

GC: Yes.

JG: You had a roof over it, okay. And you mentioned that most of the work was for ties, for railroad ties?

GC: Yes, railroad ties.

JG: How would you, I know that was a Southern Pacific[Railroad] that came through there, Texas and New Orleans [Railroad], did y'all do work for some of the other railroad companies? You mentioned some of the export stuff.

GC: The export, we would haul them, they loaded them on a ship down there. We hauled them by truck to Beaumont to the docks down there.

JG: How did you learn about that job I guess, or how did your dad learn about that?

GC: Well I don't know, he was pretty well known in the sawmill business and the one that was buying them down at Beaumont was Leon Finegold and he and Daddy became good friends and he was the one buying the export ties. He bought them from other mills too, but Daddy's mill cut the most of them. It was the biggest tie mill around.

JG: So this Mr. Finegold may have kind of traveled around to some of the area mills and do business and stuff.

GC: Oh yes, I've met him several times.

JG: Were there any others like that you can think of?

GC: No that was the only export dealer that I knew.

JG: Okay.

GC: The rest of them down here, they just shipped what we called standard ties, they had tie inspectors. Well, Herbert Lowery was one that was an inspector one time, you knew him.

JG: So these are employees of the railroad?

RD: No, Herbert was from up here at Huntington, Herbert Lowery.

JG: Okay, so he worked for the railroad to make sure they were...

GC: Well he would buy ties, he didn't actually spend money.

JG: Buy for the railroad, he was their agent.

GC: He would inspect the ties and then he would tell them how many ties was this grade and different grade and then they would send a check in to Daddy for the ties.

RD: See the Lowery's were peckerwood millers as well.

GC: Yes, they were too.

JG: Any other prominent people doing the same line of work?

GC: Yes, Marshall Ivy was an inspector for years and years. He was a preacher. You've probably seen the signs between here and Huntington: Marshall Ivy Road.

JG: Yes, right, right.

GC: That is where he lived at, back in there, and he was a tie buyer.

RD: Mentioning those other mills, you remember Hardy Beard?

GC: Oh yes, Hardy.

RD: Hardy Beard was a big peckerwood miller and so was Nap Boykin.

GC: Yes, Daddy and Nap was in business together at one time, they were partners.

JG: So I know in the early days the big mills used to make a lot of the railroad ties and all that was a big part of their business, so something happened along in there where there was a shift I guess, because by the forties and fifties you don't really see the Temple's and Kurth's and people like that, at least at their big mills, doing that line of work anymore. So, I guess it was going toward more these types of mills huh? I mean do you...

GC: Well no, they were all going together about the same time, tie mills and big mills like Temple. Temple was a lumber mill, they cut lumber. They didn't mess with ties as far as I know.

JG: They did in the very early days but not...

GC: They might have in the early days, but as far back as I can remember, they were just lumber mills just like Camden.

JG: Yes, just dimensional stuff.

GC: Yes they logged all over Angelina County down here and crossed the river and hauled them into Camden by train. There were railroad tracks all over this river bottom down here.

JG: So where would y'all get your timber from? Who owned the timber and the land?

GC: Private people, private land. Then when this dam came in we got a lot of that timber.

JG: Was it the corps of engineers you were getting it from or the National Forest or what?

GC: Yes, they would put so many acres out for bid and you would bid on it and get so many acres of timber there for a certain amount of money.

JG: Okay, that would have been in the fifties then huh, late fifties?

GC: Sixties, early sixties.

RD: Jonathan by the fifties most of the tie mills had gone to almost solid hardwood. There wasn't much pine being cut.

GC: Yes, you couldn't hardly sell pine ties back then.

RD: Yes, so they had gone to pretty well hardwood by that time.

JG: Yes, pine didn't last long at all.

GC: When the hewed ties, most of the majority of them was pine back then, but when the sawmills came in and started, most of them was hardwood.

JG: So, the lakes going in had a big influence on that line?

GC: Yes on the hardwood timber, yes when it went in that is where a lot of the hardwood timber came from, out of this Sam Rayburn Lake.

JG: Was there any cypress? Did y'all ever cut much cypress?

GC: Daddy bought a tract of timber over around Brookeland one time, a big tract, and it was wrote up in the contract that all commercial hardwood was sold, you know, that didn't include pine timber, so we cut the hardwood out of there and there was some big sloughs in there that had some big cypress standing there. We went in there and cut the cypress and they, the ones that sold us the property tried to stop us from cutting the cypress and we had to prove that cypress went either way as pine or a hardwood.

JG: It's actually a soft wood, it's considered a hardwood but it is a soft wood.

GC: Yes, in fact this is what this house is built out of.

JG: Cypress, yes.

GC: We got the cypress trees from over there and hauled them over here to this mill and cut them up and I took the lumber and took it to different places and had it planed and dressed and built this house in...I built this house in '58 or '59.

JG: That is what the History Center, our paneling and stuff inside is cypress. That is what we used. Did the railroad accept cypress for tie material?

GC: No, I don't know that they ever cut many ties out of cypress.

JG: Because that is pretty soft isn't it.

GC: Yes.

JG: Those old rails and plates just ate right through that...

GC: But some of the logs we got over there out of Brookeland, we would have to take the saw and split them open, cut them on both side and take wedges and bust them. They was so big they wouldn't go under the mill shed up here. The mill shed was higher than your head. It was I would say seven foot high.

JG: That was all in that river bottom.

GC: We cut a bunch of lumber out of that thing and I had a bunch of it for a long time and finally got rid of all of it. It was 1x24 inches wide, which that is a wide board.

RD: What species was that mostly George was that oak or what?

GC: Cypress.

RD: Cypress.

GC: Yes, we had done cut all the oak timber out of there and then went back and got the cypress and that is when they tried to stop us from getting it, but they had to prove that cypress would go either as hardwood or pine.

JG: Did y'all do any logging near where the old tram road was, the one that went to White City there through Monterey there at the lake? Did y'all do any logging around there?

GC: Yes, Daddy had a sawmill, before he built this big one up here, he had a sawmill over around Brookeland, that was around White City, out from White City over in there.

JG: Okay.

GC: That is where we cut a lot of that timber out of the dam. Well, it set up right close to the Ayish Bayou.

JG: Which one?

GC: Ayish Bayou

RD: Ayish.

JG: Ayish, A-y-i-s-h.

RD: Yes.

GC: Yes, I always called it Irish but some people call it Ash. But he had a big mill set up over there.

JG: Okay, okay, but did y'all log any closer back on this side of the river? I'm just trying to see if you remembered that old tram road that used to go through there. Actually it wasn't, a lot of people called it the tram road but it was the main line that went from Huntington on out to Broaddus and then back down to White City. It was the old Cotton Belt road actually.

GC: No, I don't remember that.

JG: And there was a little town called Warsaw that was just on the other side of the river. It is where the Attoyac and the Angelina came in together there. There was a little mill on the Attoyac called Warsaw that was started, actually I. D. Fairchild started that mill in 1910's.

GC: Well the Attoyac from Brookeland would, where it hit the Angelina would have been quite a bit up north.

JG: Alright, okay. What did the woods look like back then? Did y'all do much out in the woods as well?

GC: Yes.

JG: So y'all did the harvesting, felling the trees.

GC: Yes I actually had the log truck and I hauled logs for a few years.

JG: What did the woods look like back then compared to now?

GC: They were open, right now they aren't nothing but a thicket. You can't hardly walk through them anymore.

JG: What did those bottoms look like with cypress trees that big?

GC: Oh most of your river bottoms...

JG: We haven't seen that today.

GC: Most of the river bottoms was clean, you could see 100 to 200 yards up through there.

JG: Wow!

GC: There wasn't no underbrush much back then.

JG: Again cypress trees as big around as your arms were...

GC: Oh yes, and oak trees too. There is lots of the oak trees that two people couldn't reach around them.

JG: Could y'all handle logs that big?

GC: Oh yes, yes. Like I say he run a sixty inch saw so it would cut 30 inches.

JG: How did y'all load them up onto your trucks and trailers?

GC: When we first started they loaded them with mules, what they called, well they called it loading on the chain. They would put skid poles, what they called skid poles up on the bolsters of the truck and had a little small chain they run down there and they drove the log up on it and they had another chain they called a cross haul would hook to this chain and it would roll that log up on the truck. And that is the way they logged. Oh it started changing up in the late fifties. Then they had log loaders and I loaded some of them with mules, but later on I got a fork lift and I was loading them with a fork lift.

JG: I guess the terrain from where you were getting the logs had a lot to do with how you loaded them too, if it was wet or boggy?

GC: Yes, well back then you didn't drag the logs because you had mules. They couldn't drag them no long ways, you know, they would just run out of breathe. You had to get your truck down in amongst the timber and where you could just a lot of them you could just turn the logs around and load them if you couldn't drag them nowhere.

RD: It didn't take a lot of logs to load a truck either Jonathan.

GC: No.

JG: Well I imagine some of those big cypress like you were talking about you would get one log per truck.

GC: Yes, maybe three would be the most if you could get two of them to bed down. You usually had about 8 foot wide bolsters and if you got two logs on that then you would put another one on top of it.

JG: Was there much negotiation for the price of timber back then or was it a seller's market, a buyer's market or?

GC: No, you would just go out here usually to some private landowner and just have a negotiation of what you would buy that timber for and that is usually the way you bought it.

JG: Were y'all ever in competition with like the Lowery's and some of these other people?

GC: Not really, they were about 14 miles from here, which they log more up there around the Attoyac and then they did build a bridge across the Neches River too down here in Saron and they went over in there and cut a bunch of timber. I think it was Kirby's land they cut off of over there.

RD: Your daddy and your uncle built a bridge across the Neches too, because I saw it. I happened upon that one day and just surprised the fool out of me.

JG: Now where was that? I've heard about that, where was that?

GC: Well the one that the Lowery boys built, was up there around what we called the Pickard Log Landing.

RD: Close to Fort Teran, well actually...

GC: A pretty good ways up from Fort Teran.

RD: Yes, closer to Shawnee Creek or somewhere in there, Jonathan. You know where that pipeline goes across there, Jonathan?

JG: Yes, well those pilings are still there.

RD: Okay.

JG: Remember we went by them a few times.

RD: I don't know if that is the one he's talking about or not.

GC: No, they built another one further up.

JG: Now what pilings are those that are near that pipeline in Fort Teran? Was that a railroad bridge?

GC: That was a railroad bridge, yes.

JG: Railroad bridge, okay, but you are talking about a different one than that?

GC: Yes.

JG: So Lowery's built one up river or down river from that one?

GC: Upriver from there it was just an old place called the Pickard Log Landing.

JG: Pickard or Pickering?

GC: Pickard. I don't know how it got its name but...

JG: And that was to get logs that were over in Polk County up to Angelina County?

GC: Yes.

JG: To get logs on the south side of the river to the north.

GC: Yes.

JG: Okay. And, where was y'all's bridge?

GC: It was down in there close to where my camp is.

JG: The railroad bridge you were talking about it, would be below that one?

GC: It would be below Shawnee Creek.

JG: Below Shawnee Creek, okay. Now what time of year did y'all put that bridge in?

GC: Well I didn't put it in.

JG: Oh okay, it was your daddy.

RD: George was real young then.

JG: Oh okay, but I mean was it something that lasted several years or just a season or what?

GC: Just a season.

JG: Just a season.

GC: Just get over there and...

JG: Just enough to get the logs out.

RD: But they used big logs. I mean, the logs underneath the super structure of that thing were probably twenty inches in diameter, it looked like Jonathan.

JG: And they would have built it during a time of low water right?

GC: Oh yes, low water crossing, yes.

RD: Oh yes, but it was, I would say the bridge was six or eight feet above the water, so it wasn't just a little low flat bridge.

JG: Oh yes! That would have been pretty risky driving a log truck across there I would imagine.

RD: It was just wide enough for a truck.

GC: Yes, I tell you all these bridges, back even when I was logging, on all these here county roads [it was] was risky to drive over with a load of logs. They would crack and pop and snap. You didn't know if you were going to fall in or not with a big load of logs on.

JG: Did you ever have any that did kind of crack on you, I mean bog you down?

GC: No, never did. I had them cracking but I never had one break in.

JG: Not stop you? Did you ever have any that cracked enough that you didn't, that you took a different way the next time?

GC: No, you would just make the load a little lighter the next time. But people used to load these little single axle trucks way...well they would be so heavy that a tandem truck wouldn't even weigh out with them.

RD: Oh yes, they would just put on there everything they could.

GC: Yes, they would stack them up there just as high as you could get them stacked on just a single axle truck and haul them and it was...I don't know what one of them would weigh. If I was guessing you would be looking at fifty thousand pounds or more on a single axle truck.

JG: Did you have to change tires often?

GC: Yes, tires weren't as good back then as they are now. Yes, you were constantly blowing out tires.

RD: Had a man named Frank Mott, had a service station and everything, and his business really existed on changing tires and washing log trucks and that sort of thing. I mean, it was hard work.

JG: Just keeping the log trucks going.

GC: Most of your tires back then in the early fifties were what you called a rayon tire. Nylon hadn't come out with any tires.

JG: Did it have tubes?

GC: Yes.

JG: This was before tubeless tires.

RD: And you put a hot patch on it. If you had a flat you could buff it down and put a hot patch on it.

GC: Yes, all these little service stations had a little thing you could put a hot patch with a lever you pulled down and pressed it down you would light it and it would seal that hole off.

JG: So any special tubes or anything y'all had?

GC: No.

JG: Just regular old tools.

GC: Well, back then say in the fifties the tubes were a lot better that came from red rubber, we made sling shots out of them. I had to think before I called it a sling shot. (laughter) But then the tubes came out and it had a synthetic rubber and they weren't near as tough. They weren't as good.

JG: So, the real rubber ones were the best.

GC: It was what we called red rubber.

JG: Was it red?

GC: Yes, it was red inner tubes.

RD: George, tell us a little bit about life around a mill, what the men did and that sort of thing.

GC: Well it was a pretty simple life, you know, they didn't make much money back then. I guess in a year's time working around a sawmill you probably didn't make \$2,000 in a year. Life was simple. They didn't have no real nice homes to live in.

RD: I remember that skid-way out in front where the mill was in the logging yard. In the summer time they were constantly dragging those logs around and the trucks coming in and out the dust would get six or eight inches thick on the ground out there. And those old horses pulling those, or mules, pulling those things up on the skid-way, they would just be dirty and sweaty and the men of course walking behind them you couldn't tell who they were they would be so dirty and sweaty.

GC: Well back, you know, everything was done with mules back then a long time ago.

JG: Muscle and sweat huh?

GC: Nowadays you don't even see mules the size they used to be. Used to these old logging mules, what you logged with, they would be around anywhere from fifteen to eighteen hundred pounds apiece.

JG: Where would you get your mules from?

GC: Well they had over here around Kirbyville, they had what they called a mule barn over there and I can't remember the fellow's name, but he, I guess he just bought them from farmers and things and kept them and sold them to loggers mostly.

JG: What was a good logging mule? Describe a good logging mule compared to one that wasn't any good for logging work.

GC: Well nowadays the size of them, you don't see no big mules no more.

JG: So, they needed to be big.

GC: Yes, because you would pull big logs with them and you would usually work them either two together or sometimes four.

JG: Did you ever have any green mules or were the mules that y'all got already working in logging business?

GC: No some of them you would have to break.

JG: How would you do that?

GC: You usually put them with a mule that was done broke when you were working two of them together. If you had one that didn't know what was going on you would put him beside what you called your lead mule. He would jerk him around and make him do what he was supposed to. A lot of time they would run up to a tree or something and one would want to go on one side and one the other, well that good mule he would just pull that other one across there and that is the way they usually broke them up against a mule that already knew what he was doing.

JG: How many mules would y'all have usually on a logging job?

GC: Usually, well when I was logging, I had four head of mules.

JG: Working two teams?

GC: Two teams.

JG: You never did work all four together?

GC: Yes, sometimes we would put them all four together if we got into some big timber or two if you were working in boggy ground. Like in the winter time you would hook four of them together and hook them in front of your truck.

JG: Pull your truck by them.

GC: They called them the chain gang.

JG: Now did you yourself buy some mules?

GC: Yes, like I said, I owned four head of them.

JG: So sometimes you would go to Kirbyville and pick some out down there.

GC: Yes that is where you would pick them out.

JG: And these would be...what age would they might have been?

GC: Oh you would want a young one, four or five years old, something like that.

JG: Okay, so maybe they had done a little bit of work on a farm or something already?

GC: Yes.

JG: I know when I was doing that state railroad book, Mr. Donovan, that was a big thing in the correspondence when they were building that state railroad between Rusk and Palestine, was trying to get good mules. And they would go all over the state trying to find good mules for that type of work.

GC: Some of these old farmers would raise them and sell them, but Kirbyville had the biggest place. They called it the mule barn. It was a big old barn over there that he usually kept lots of mules.

RD: I remember one time I was there in Zavalla and they were loading pilings there close to the depot and they had mules hooked up and they had a big A-frame sticking out over it with poles and had mules hooked up and pulling those logs up the skid pole over into this open top hopper that George referred to earlier and those mules, one of those mules got hot, too hot and started bleeding at the nose and they had to pull him out and replace him with another mule. But it was hard, hard work.

GC: Oh yes, it was. Anybody would be surprised that hasn't never seen mules work at how big a load they could move, pull. They could pull something I imagine three or four times their weight.

JG: What did y'all do with a mule that got too old or for whatever reason you were replacing a mule?

GC: Well, I don't know. I sold them that I had before they were getting old.

JG: Okay, just sold them.

GC: I don't know what they done with them.

JG: How long would a mule last doing logging work like that? I mean would you have...not last before they die but how long did you keep them?

GC: I logged in the woods probably for five or six years with the same four head of mules.

JG: Okay, but I imagine that would be an essential part of the operation was having good mules.

GC: Yes, it was. They were good...a good team of mules you would have what they called a log set. That is where they would drag a bunch of logs up, while the truck was gone hauling a load, you would have mule skimmers in there pulling the logs and getting them in place and a good pair of mules you could hook him onto a log and just turn him a loose and he would come back to that set and he would stop that log within three or four inches of the other one to be straight without anybody even being there to tell him to stop.

JG: Really? Wow, three or four inches that is pretty good.

GC: Yes.

JG: They would do that routinely.

GC: They were smart, if you got a hold of a good set of mules.

JG: So, they would kind of skid a log, just tie the chain toward the end and skid it?

GC: Well you had what they called grabs that went around it. Well, I don't know how to explain it but they were in a U shape and pointed sharp on each end and you just drop them over the log and they stuck in it and that is the way you pulled it.

RD: When they pulled it those grabs sat tighter in there.

JG: But it would pull the log like lengthwise, right?

GC: Yes.

JG: So, you would just have a team here and they would pull the log like that.

GC: If you got a log that was too big for them to drag you would cut a pole and make them pull that log sideways like that to get it up on that pole and then straighten them out and it would slide on that pole. That is the way you would get your big logs out.

RD: Then you would have to move your pole.

GC: Yes, move it again.

JG: So, they were strong enough that if it started bogging down they could just pull it on through or is that what you are talking about?

GC: Where you would have to put a pole in there and drag it sideways and get it up on that pole because a real big log, say something the size of this countertop here would kind of dig in the ground and they couldn't move it.

JG: Right, did you ever use any of those high wheeled skidder carts?

GC: No, I didn't.

JG: That was a pretty neat invention I thought.

GC: Yes, they used a lot of them up here in the Saron Community.

JG: Those slip tongues.

GC: That is the way they bunched a lot of their logs and brought them up to the railroad.

JG: The way that slip tongue would pick that front end up and just drag it.

GC: Yes.

JG: But hardly anyone was doing that during this time though right?

GC: No, that was a little bit earlier when they were doing that.

JG: Yes, but you said you would sometimes use a loader.

GC: Yes, I had a fork lift. It was built on a truck and I would load logs with it.

JG: Now how would it be propelled, the fork-lift?

GC: Just like an old truck, you would take the cab off of it and everything and build forks on the back of it that slide up and down the rail.

JG: Okay.

GC: Your winch pulled it up.

JG: So tires it was on tires. It wasn't caterpillar or anything.

GC: No.

RD: It wasn't hydraulics either Jonathan. It had a cable that raised the forks up and down.

JG: Oh okay, okay. So how many people, I guess your dad was still working?

GC: Yes.

JG: So, your dad and you. How many people would have been working in the woods and at the mill?

GC: Well around the woods, at the mill he usually worked around normally fifteen people in the mill.

JG: Fifteen. That is a pretty good number.

GC: Counting the woods there were usually four or five crews that worked in the woods, which there was three or four to each crew working there, the sawyer, the mule skinner, the truck drivers. So, before he shut down and cutting the exports and he would cut as many, well the highest we ever cut in an eight hour period was 700 ties.

JG: Seven hundred a day.

GC: So, it took a lot of logs to log it and they liable to be four or five log contractors, you know, hauling logs into that mill.

JG: How long would you try to get your logs out in the woods to haul them in, what lengths?

GC: Most of them then were eight to nine foot, some of them nine foot and some of them eight-six, they were different lengths.

JG: So, you would cut them to lengths in the woods?

GC: Yes.

JG: Okay, you cut them to length in the woods and then haul them in.

GC: Yes.

JG: Would they be stacked lengthwise on the trailer or...?

GC: Yes stacked in line with the truck lengthwise.

RD: There weren't any trailers Jonathan, all bob tail trucks.

JG: No trailers, okay.

GC: Yes.

JG: So, not a trailer. I was thinking a trailer.

GC: No, some of them that would haul piling, they would have a trailer.

RD: Kit Crain, they used trailers. I can't remember who else.

JG: How long would the pilings be? Just varied?

GC: Well some of them would be up seventy, eighty feet you know. They would cut them as long as the tree was.

RD: But the trailers, they were single axle too; there were no tandem axle trailers anywhere.

GC: The trailers weren't stretched out. The way they would haul them pilings they would back up in there and they would drop their trailer, unhook it, and pull their truck up the length however the piling was going to be and they would load a bed load of piling on it and then raise the tongue of that trailer up and tie it to the logs.

JG: And hook the piling onto the truck huh?

GC: Yes it would be sitting on the bolsters on the truck, but the trailer wouldn't actually be hooked to the truck, it would be hooked to the piling.

JG: Yes.

RD: Pretty ingenious people to do something with nothing.

GC: That is the way they would get their lengths out of their trailers. Well, back then you couldn't have even gotten a long trailer around in the woods, because like I was telling you awhile ago, people had to get down in there next to the timber they was hauling because they didn't have no skidders to drag them a long ways.

RD: And the county roads back in those days wouldn't have accommodated the kind of equipment they used today so.

GC: No.

JG: So, did you have to register your trailer and stuff with the highway department?

GC: Yes.

JG: Did anybody ever pull people over for hauling trailers?

GC: No.

JG: I mean today they would.

GC: Oh yes, today they would, but a lot of them wouldn't even register them back then. They just didn't even bother you that much.

RD: George who was the best blocksetter you ever had around the mill? Who was the best at that?

GC: Well Eli Boykin used to set blocks more for Daddy than anybody else.

RD: That was a really high skilled job Jonathan.

GC: Yes.

JG: Describe what that job did, setting blocks.

GC: Well, you had a big lever up there and you would pull it back and shove it to head and that usually set the log out, one or one and a half inches, either what you...you could set this lever for however many inches you wanted it to go out in one stroke. But they usually had it set for about one.

JG: That would gauge how much that slab would cut into the...

GC: Yes, they had signals that the sawyer would go by, and back then if you were cutting ties you had to have so much of what they called the face on it that was without any bark. Say if you was cutting a 6x10 then it may have had to have a seven or eight inch face on it. It would have to be a flat surface without any bark. Well your sawyer, he would have signals that he would give the blocksetter and just give them on his hands, and that blocksetter would know how far to set it out to cut the tie and get the right, what they called the face on it.

RD: And it was fast because that sawyer brought that log back past that saw that far you know.

GC: Yes six inches and it was right back in it again.

RD: He was back in it again and that blocksetter had to be moving really fast. It was hard work.

JG: So you would pretty much get one tie out of one log so it would be that hard or you would get more than one?

GC: No, sometimes you would get...well about the most a big log you would get seven or eight ties out of it.

JG: Now was any of those ties any better than any other one, you know, the multiple or was getting the heart one the best one? Or did it depend on the tree?

GC: Well as long as it was cut to the right size they took it.

JG: Okay.

GC: Hickory used to be pretty hard to get rid of. I don't know why but it was hard to sell a hickory tie there for a long time.

JG: Hickory is pretty hard isn't it? I mean it is a hardwood.

GC: It is.

JG: But the railroads wouldn't...

GC: They didn't want hickory back then for some reason. I don't know why. Every once in awhile I would haul a load over to the tie buyer over there in San Augustine that would take a load of hickory every once in awhile and Daddy would always stack the hickory back.

JG: Now you mentioned hauling them to a buyer in San Augustine. How much of taking the product to the buyer did you have to do? Was it all that or like the railroads would they just take delivery of them at Zavalla?

GC: No they would take delivery of them from the tie yard, ever what tie yard you hauled them into.

JG: Oh okay so you took them to a tie yard. So, you didn't...well I guess I'm confused because you were describing that they would load some up on the railroads themselves there in town.

GC: They did, yes.

JG: So, you did both then?

GC: Yes, well later on they first started like we talked about awhile ago, they loaded them on their shoulders and walked them into boxcars. But, later on they got away from that and Daddy had that mill there and he would bring a fork lift down after the tie man bought them and pick them up and just dump them over into this gondola car.

JG: Gondola cars, yes.

RD: Jonathan, I don't know what the mechanics of this were but I remember when I was a kid that...and Zavalla went through two or three different stages, but at one time it was just cross ties stacked up the whole length of that area through town where the railroad went through there. And, then...

JG: And did you do most of them?

GC: Yes.

JG: Y'all did most of them?

GC: The biggest part of them.

JG: What he is describing?

GC: Yes.

RD: And they stacked those cross ties just like you were building a pig pen.

GC: Yes, a crib. You would turn two of them on each end on their age because they would be an inch or so taller the flat way, you would put two of them end ways...I mean age ways and then eight of them would be flat ways and that way an inspector could slide them a little bit to look and see if you had any rotten spots or something like that.

JG: So you put the tall ends up on the ends and put them short wise in between.

GC: Yes, there would be ten to the layer and just keep coming up.

JG: Just keep crisscrossing.

GC: I know they got the old Ivy, Marshall Ivy, he was a tie buyer back then and he brought colored people down and they were loading them in those box cars. On account of room you had to stack them real high, because you would run out of room, they wasn't down there every week hauling them off. So, I would haul them down there. I remember Daddy, I was still going to school and he would give me five cents a tie to haul them down there and stack them at the mill and I would haul them down there and I would stack them up and they would be as high as this roof just about it.

JG: Five cents a tie, man that was better than fifty cents a day wasn't it?

GC: Oh yes. But that was hard work too, them ties you are looking at two to three hundred pounds, is what one of them ties weigh.

RD: And Jonathan you think about putting one of those on your shoulders and walking up a bouncing plank into a box car.

GC: Yes, but anyhow them colored men got to griping about...they would have to put a man up on top of that stack of ties to get them down where they could put other ones on their shoulder and haul them up into the boxcar. They got to griping about that and old Marshall Ivy told them, said "y'all need to see the boy that put them ties up there and ya'll won't never gripe no more," because I didn't weight 150 pounds. I was stacking them up that high.

JG: Putting them way up over your head huh?

GC: Yes, he said "y'all need to see the boy that put them ties up there."

RD: And then at the other end of that saw you had, what was the name of that guy called that came off?

GC: Saw-tailer.

JG: The saw what?

GC: The saw-tailer.

JG: Tailer.

GC: He would grab the slabs as they come off and flip them where the flat way would be down and then they would run down a roller bed or either if you had a conveyor he would just flip them over into that conveyor and that conveyor hauled them out to the other end, at the end of the mill where it would be burnt.

RD: He was working about six or eight inches from that saw blade.

GC: Yes, I mean he had his hands right up against that saw blade. And then you had another man that was in that same space with him run what they called the edger. When they cut a board off he would get it and run it through that edger and make a 1x6 or 1x8, whatever the face of the slab would be he would age it down to that.

JG: Let's see...can you think of any more questions about the sawmilling?

RD: Well George, this is kind of local color or something but, did you ever see very many fights around the sawmill?

GC: No, not too many. You would see some arguments. I used to get tickled...of course I was young and I worked around older men all the time, you know. I never did hardly work around people my own age because it was on account of daddy owned that mill and I was just right there at the mill working.

RD: They would get in those arguments at the sawmill and George's daddy would go over there. George's daddy wasn't one to be fooled with too much and he would go over there and be a peace maker but I saw one or two fights. The only job that my parents...and I did it on George's daddy's mill is the only one I ever worked at but, I did...and you better cover this because this is really important John (laughter) but, I drove the S-iron's into the cross ties because those hardwood logs...

JG: Keep it from splitting.

RD: ...those hardwood logs would split and you had an s-iron you would take a sledge hammer and drive into each one at each end of it.

GC: That was what they called the export ties. They didn't do that to the standard ties that stayed here in the United States but all the exports had to be s-ironed.

JG: And just for the recording it was a band of steel made in an S.

GC: Yes, about six or eight inches long or so and made an s.

RD: It was about an inch and a half long and inch and a half wide.

JG: And it was kind of more oblong than it was spread out.

RD: Yes.

JG: And, you just hammered into the butts of the ties to keep it from splitting.

RD: It is pretty easy to do first thing in the morning but toward the end of the day that hammer got heavier and heavier.

GC: It was a good finger masher.

RD: Yes it was.

GC: Because you had to hold them to start them and usually use about a ten pound sledge hammer to drive them with.

JG: I guess the only good thing is the logs were still kind of green.

RD: That is right.

JG: Green and wet, because y'all pretty much did, or I don't know I assume y'all wouldn't have a big stockpile of logs there would you.

GC: Oh yes!

JG: You did okay, so they might, some of them might have dried out a little bit I guess.

GC: Not too much.

JG: They would still be pretty green.

GC: Yes, they would still be pretty green.

JG: So, y'all did just like the big mills. When the weather was good you better get in there and get the logs stacked up, huh?

GC: That is right.

JG: Because you didn't not want to have logs when the weather was bad.

GC: Yes.

JG: So y'all did in many ways just like the big mills did only a smaller scale.

GC: Yes, just a smaller scale. The logs would come in and we would stack them up with a fork lift, ten or twelve foot high and have a big long row of them.

JG: And again every one of them was cut to length so all the mill did was just square it up.

GC: Yes, it was usually within six inches of length and you had to trim them on what we called the back of the mill, where the ties came off and they stacked them. You had to trim them to the right length then.

JG: Oh okay, so there would be a little bit of trimming.

GC: Yes in the woods.

JG: And, how was that done?

GC: With power saws.

JG: Just chain saws?

GC: Yes.

RD: How old were you when you sawed your first chain saw George?

GC: I was probably 13 years old, something like that, 12 or 13. The first one Daddy bought was a Mall, was the name of it.

JG: How do you spell that do you know?

GC: M-a-l-l I believe.

JG: M-a-l-l. I'm not familiar with that.

GC: The first power saw I ever seen, one man. Now before that they made what they called a two man. You've seen them haven't you Dick?

JG: Yes.

GC: It had like handle bars on it and then had a long blade and chain on it that long probably and had a handle on the other end. It took two men to operate that.

JG: Heavy, heavy.

GC: Yes.

JG: They have them at the Forestry Museum, all the different ones now.

GC: You would cut a tree down and then you would have to loosen the band on the transmission and turn that blade sideways to cut a tree down and then you would have to loosen it and turn it up this way to saw the logs up.

JG: And the guy on the end had to hold it steady huh?

GC: Yes.

JG: I imagine it would be a lot of vibration down there wasn't there?

GC: No, but they would kick you backwards if that chain, they was powerful, if that chain happened to hang, you know, the log you would be cutting it in two and maybe it would pinch a little bit it would kick that saw back and knock you down. I was over at an old store in Louisiana, I was trying to think of the name of the town, but, it was an old hardware store a few years back, me and Mary Lou was in there, and I seen one of them old Mall power saws then.

JG: Was that gas and oil mixed or not, just regular gas?

GC: Yes.

JG: Oh it was mixed.

GC: Yes you had to mix your gas, but back then they just mixed it with what we called two-bit oil. It was the cheapest oil you could get to mix in with your gas.

RD: It was motor oil you know.

JG: Just regular old motor oil.

GC: Yes, just regular motor oil, you didn't go up here and get something like you would put in your outboard motor now.

JG: Right. Y'all didn't have any ethanol treatment.

GC: No.

JG: No ethanol. (laughter)

GC: But, Daddy had that little old store out there in the early fifties, he had a Gulf Station first and it burned down. He was selling Gulf gasoline and I could remember regular was eleven cents and the upper grade, they called it ethel and it was twelve cents a gallon.

JG: Eleven and twelve cents huh?

GC: Yes.

JG: Where would your dad buy gasoline from?

GC: They would have trucks come down, well it was out of Lufkin, most of it would come down from Gresham Temple, was the one that serviced the sawmills a lot.

JG: Sinclair, was that it?

GC: Yes, Sinclair.

JG: How many filling stations were there in Zavalla?

GC: I imagine four maybe five, might near every one of them sold gasoline. The old bus station sold gas didn't it?

RD: Mobile Station.

GC: Grubbs up there and then the Sinclair where Ray Oliver built that one out there. There were five or six gas stations in Zavalla at that time.

JG: So, your dad sold gas to the general public then?

GC: Yes.

JG: What else did he sell?

GC: Groceries, a few little groceries.

JG: Where did the groceries come from?

GC: Well the grocery truck come by and you would put your order in and when it came back by there it would bring you?

JG: Did it come out of Lufkin or Beaumont?

GC: Lufkin I imagine.

JG: Was Brookshire Brothers involved with that?

GC: No, I don't think, not then.

JG: Some other suppliers.

GC: Most all your grocery stores was just little stores, well Aaron Barge probably had about the biggest one down here.

RD: Yes, him and Tisdale.

GC: Yes, his had a little more stuff than Tisdale because he would cut up meat. If you came in there and wanted a steak cut off well, he would go back there and cut you...drag that ham out or something and saw you off what you wanted.

RD: What was interested about that Jonathan...triggered a thought...Herman Barker was the big meat producer here and he would go out and buy a steer and take him out to his slaughter house outside of town and he would quarter the beef and everything and he would hang the meat on hooks in the back of his pick-up and he would drive back into town with that meat hanging out...

JG: Just raw meat not dried or anything.

RD: ...just hanging out on the back of his pickup frame.

GC: Freshly butchered.

RD: And, he would drive up to one, and there were about five meat markets in town and he would stop at this market and go in and asked them what they wanted and go back and carry it in and then take it back and hang it on that same hook and drive on back up. What I'm saying is all open air and no sanitation or anything and swirling up off the bottom of the bed of the truck you know. That is just the way life was.

GC: Well Herman had the biggest slaughter house and then Aaron he had old Luke, he slaughtered a lot for Aaron Barge.

RD: But nowadays they would put you in prison for life.

GC: Life was so much different back then.

JG: Talk a little bit about life in general. We have talked a little bit about the sawmills and all that and I know when the lake came through that supplied the mills with the timber and everything, but talk a little bit about the lake, just your own views or feelings or just what the thoughts of the time were when y'all got news there was going to be Lake Sam Rayburn coming in.

GC: Well most of the people in the little old community down here, what we call Concord was the main ones closest to Zavalla, they didn't want the lake because they had farms and that is the way they made their living back in there. But they took the land away from them and a lot of them didn't have enough money to go buy another piece of land to live on for what the government give them. (**RD:** That is exactly right.) It was kind of a sad thing the way they lost their property on account of the lake.

JG: Did y'all have friends or relatives that lived on this direction, some of these older communities along the river?

GC: Oh yes, yes. I used to know, when I was a kid growing up I knew might near everybody within a fifteen twenty mile radius around here. There was a lot of people didn't want to see that lake come in. Like I say, it hurt a lot of people because a lot of these people may have a hundred acres out there that they have made their living off of it, farmed it. They would sell that hundred acres and wouldn't get enough money from the government somewhere to buy ten acres.

RD: That is true!

JG: Did y'all have any land, any family land that was taken in by the lake?

GC: No, didn't have none took in by the lake.

JG: What was some of your early memories when the lake started filling in and you started getting outsiders coming in, if there were such a thing?

GC: Well, there was quite a bit of work around here then. I had done quit messing with sawmills mostly when the lake came in.

JG: You'd have been in your upper twenties then huh?

GC: Yes, I went down to Beaumont and went to work with A. F. Jones and Son's in the construction business. Paul Hardeman had done all the earth work on this dam over here and A. F. Jones, he got the contract of putting the base and the asphalt over it so I came up here and I was foreman over that, putting the base and asphalt over this dam down here. That would have been in '65 or '66, somewhere along in there.

JG: So they had a contract with the Corps I guess, the Federal Government, Corp of Engineers?

GC: Yes, Hardeman did. They are the ones that did all the earth work and then well George Banes out of Tyler did all the clearing crushing the timber. He had tree crushers and he had big dozers that go in there. They used them dozers mostly to cut mostly the boat lanes, you know, to get all the stumps and stuff out of it and the rest of it they had these big tree crushers that just walked through this timber and crush it down.

RD: Had sharp razor blades built around a big wheel.

JG: So it would go into just standing timber and just mow it down kind of huh?

GC: Oh yeah, like disking a field or something.

JG: And they would just leave it laying there?

GC: Just leave it laying there. Most people would come out and set fire to it and burn it.

RD: Jonathan there were still a lot of, well a tremendous amount of hogs but there was still a lot of wild cattle in the woods about that time, well not wild just hadn't been corralled in a long time, and I was a pretty good shot and a lot of those cattle, they just simply had to go out and shoot because they couldn't pen them in any way. A couple of them asked me to go out and help them harvest those cattle that they were having trouble catching. Those cattle were just living in the woods.

GC: That is all the cattle knew, they lived and raised them in the woods.

JG: They didn't have any marks on them or anything, any brands or marks?

GC: Yes, they usually marked their ears.

JG: So, they would just shoot them to put them out of their misery before they drown or what?

RD: Well, no you would just shoot them and load them up in a truck and take them to a...

JG: Meat packing plant?

RD: What was the one in Lufkin?

GC: Sullivan.

RD: Sullivan Packing up there in Lufkin did most of them.

JG: Okay, and no regard to the mark or anything.

RD: Well the individual took it up there you know and say this is my meat, you know, and they would process it.

JG: So, you were just a hired gun. (laughter)

RD: I was just a hired gun.

GC: Yes, everybody used to mark their cattle and their hogs, ear mark them.

RD: Yes.

GC: Everybody had a different mark, a little bit of difference in it so they could recognize their stock.

JG: Did y'all have hogs as well?

GC: Yes, Daddy had a bunch of hogs and cattle.

JG: So, was the sawmilling kind of seasonal or was it year round?

GC: No, it was pretty well year round if you could find timber that was dry enough in the winter time where you could log it.

JG: Now did you have any brothers and sisters?

GC: Yes, I had a brother and two sisters.

JG: Did your brother work in the mill and logging too?

GC: Very little, I think he decided he knew more than everybody else and he moved out when he was about sixteen.

JG: Was he older or younger?

GC: He was older than me, two years.

JG: Two years older. And again Mr. Donovan said your father's name was Menyard. And, what was your mother's name?

GC: Willie Mae.

JG: Willie Mae. And what was her maiden name?

GC: She was a Herring; her last name was a Herring.

JG: Was she from around here too?

GC: Yes.

JG: And your grandfather Cryer was a George?

GC: Yes, he was George Washington was his name.

JG: And who did he marry?

GC: He married a Fancher.

JG: She was from around here too?

GC: She was from up around Bald Hill; up in that area is where all the Fancher's were from.

JG: And like I said as far as you knew, your family been here,,, would it have been your grandfather's generation, before your grandfather or your grandfather that first came to what is now Zavalla?

GC: I think my grandfathers daddy, I'm trying to think of his name. I'm bad about calling names. He was originally from around here too, but I never did know him.

JG: I don't think Zavalla was here as Zavalla, until after the railroad came after 1900. Now there was a community.

RD: Well now Betty Minchew says that the Carpenters had a store here in the 1860's. I can't verify that, but that is what she said. This was called Zavalla Prairie a long time ago.

GC: The original Zavalla is over here, what I've always heard is across the Angelina. Go across the Angelina three or four miles and go back to the left and there is an old cemetery back over in there.

JG: Right. Yes, that was the first town, yes.

GC: That was the first town.

JG: It was there in the 1850's or maybe forties.

GC: I've never been over there but maybe a couple of times and just walked through that old cemetery and seen lots of people that died back in the 1800's and all. I think it has got a little old sign up there that tells a little bit about of history about when it was a town called Zavalla.

JG: I guess you graduated from Zavalla High School?

GC: Yes.

JG: Talk a little bit about school. Did you play sports?

GC: No I didn't.

JG: Didn't play any sports.

GC: No, I was one that didn't get involved in sports too much because...

JG: Too busy working.

GC: I worked around that sawmill.

JG: Too busy working huh?

GC: Yes.

JG: Did your brother play sports?

GC: Yes, he played a little bit.

JG: Donovan, I think you played basketball didn't you?

RD: Yes, that is all they had.

GC: That was all we had was basketball.

RD: Jonathan about the school a little bit, I was four years older than George. We had wood heaters in the school up until my junior year I believe. It might have been my senior year, but that was for the gymnasium and everything. It was two wood heaters in the gymnasium so it was bitter cold in the winter time. No heat in the dressing rooms what so ever. The school houses, old man Sam Stringer was janitor when I was there and he came in every morning early and build fires in the classrooms so the classrooms would be pretty warm when the kids got to school. But, the water came out of the railroads water lines which came off the side of the hill up here and ran down in the creek. That is where the water came from.

GC: The railroad ponds right there where mother lived, where it hits 147 on the right down there. Anybody that had water they just, the railroad let them tie onto their line I guess.

RD: What was that about an eight or ten inch line that went down through there George?

GC: Yes, it went on over there across the railroad track...

RD: To the tower.

GC: ...to the water tank over there.

JG: So, the railroad was pumping it up out of the ground?

RD: No.

JG: No.

GC: No, it was gravity.

JG: But I mean, where was the railroad getting their water from?

RD: Right out here.

GC: This spring.

JG: A spring.

GC: Where this road right here hits 147 back on the right past that yellow house there, there is still a pond there right now and that is where the railroad used to get their water.

RD: See we are at a 50 to 75 foot elevation higher than the railroad track is so the gravity fed here to the railroad track and that water tower was a pretty good size tower. It just cascaded over that water tower 24 hours a day 7 days a week.

JG: They just let it fill it up huh?

GC: Yes, I've seen icicles hanging off that old tower. Of course, it leaked all over.

RD: Yes.

GC: But, I've seen icicles as big as my body hanging off that water tower. And we used to, us kids used to go up there and swim in it.

JG: And that was mainly to fuel or put water in the boilers for the locomotives, yes. And, ya'll would swim in it huh?

RD: Yes, they had a thing you know, Jonathan and the train would pull up under there and pull that thing down.

JG: The funnel down. Would you have any pictures of that time period, pictures of the sawmill or logging or anything?

GC: No, not that I know of. Daddy had some and his house burned down, his house burned where the bank is now.

JG: Oh man!

GC: All the pictures he had burned up and we don't have no pictures hardly at all of a long time ago.

JG: That is something...we are always...who was that, one of those guys that we interviewed that brought the picture of the railroad crossing in Zavalla? Remember, I forget now.

RD: Was that Cary?

JG: Yes.

RD: Cary Modisette.

JG: Yes, he had a picture of about 1940 of Zavalla, showed the old wig-wag signal they had for the train crossing and you hadn't seen those in years and years.

RD: That is when you knew you were grown Jonathan is when you could jump up there and sling that thing.

JG: That wig-wag back and forth.

RD: Yes. (laughing)

JG: Yes, you hadn't seen those wig-wags in a long, long time, that type of signal.

RD: There is a major railroad siding there and those trains switch, both north and southbound switch there a couple of times every day. A lot of logs and crossties and later pulpwood, and like I said earlier, Zavalla went through a trend that started out as a crosstie and then I suppose it went to logs, if I can get that straight in my mind, and then they disappeared and then pulpwood was the last product that was loaded out there.

GC: Well there was one company came in here back in I guess it was sometimes in the fifties and got to cutting a bunch of mining props.

RD: Yes, yes.

JG: What is that?

GC: Mining props, they used them in mines. I don't know where they were shipping them to. They were pine poles. They would cut them about say 6 inches around and they

would peel them and haul them off. I don't know where they shipped them out to, but they done that a lot. There was crews came in here and cut them mining props a lot, or that is what they called them, so I guess that was what it was for to prop up in the mines.

JG: So by the sixties you had gotten out of the sawmilling?

GC: Yes.

JG: Is that about when your dad got out of it too?

GC: He got out of it pretty well when I did.

JG: Okay.

GC: I guess I was probably one of his main hands so, I guess when I decided to quit sawmilling he did too.

JG: Was that just because the market was going down or you wanted to do something different and thought you could make more money?

GC: I wanted to do something different and I went in the construction business and worked for A. F. Jones for about three years maybe, and then started a business of my own.

JG: What was that doing the rocks and stuff?

GC: No, construction. I worked around Beaumont for several years building parking lots and hauling...well I didn't haul, I didn't have no dump trucks back then. I didn't have dump trucks until I moved back up here to Zavalla.

JG: What parking lots did you work on? I lived in Beaumont for a few years. Is there anything there today that you would have...

GC: Well, let's see, I think it has changed names now but that...I'm trying to think of the name of that big parking lot I done. Go on out 11th past the circle and before you get to Washington, that big seafood place that was there.

RD: Oh yes, I know that. It was there for 100 years, that seafood place was.

GC: Yes, I built a parking lot around that. I can't call the name of it. I don't know if it's still there.

RD: It is not there. It is gone but it was there for years.

JG: I think the Roger's family had some developments. Did you ever work for them?

GC: No.

JG: The Rogers family, they are the ones that built that shopping mall I believe or was connected with the land.

GC: I did the dirt work in the parking lot of that Silsbee High School when it was built.

JG: Okay. I don't know if you know this, I meant to ask you to Mr. Donovan, there used to be a tung oil orchard.

RD: Oh yes, right where I lived.

GC: Yes.

RD: That is close to where I lived.

JG: What was that all about?

GC: That was right in there around y'all old house place.

RD: That was an experiment that the government did. That was when rubber and everything was so hard to get and I don't remember how that played into that but it was probably twenty rows of tung oil trees.

JG: And that is tung, t-u-n-g.

RD: The rows must have been a quarter of a mile long I guess. There were a lot of them in there. I think they just never did do anything and the pines just took them.

GC: Yes, just took them over I guess and they died out. I don't really know what happened to them.

RD: I was gone when all that finally happened, but I don't think they ever cut them. I think the pines just overcame them. It wasn't a successful deal.

JG: So they never did anything? Nothing ever amounted to it?

RD: No.

JG: You will read about it occasionally in some old sources.

RD: I think Angelina County Lumber Company were the ones that were doing that.

JG: Tung oil orchard.

RD: Yes, I've ridden my horse up through that thing a million times I guess.

JG: Anything else to ask about? Did you hunt and fish much?

GC: All the time, every chance I got.

JG: So you pretty much sawmilled and hunted and fished.

GC: Yes.

JG: Where were your favorite places to fish?

GC: In the Neches River, down there around my camp.

JG: Where your camp is now?

GC: Yes.

JG: Talk about that old cave up there. What do you remember about that growing up?

GC: Well I know at one time it might near, I guess from the top it washed down and might near stopped it up. I can't think of this old boy's name. I was telling y'all about him here while back.

JG: Yes, that he cleared it out.

GC: He went up there with a water pump and cut a ditch where you could get up in there with water.

RD: See George what all that used to be, and I can remember part of it, that cave came on out there a good bit further and they went in there and dynamited and everything.

GC: Yes, blasted the front of it off.

RD: So all that stop up was where that cave was collapsed down in there.

GC: But this old boy, I swear I can't call his name, he is dead now.

JG: Now, why did he do that?

GC: Just looking for gold. He had all kind of old books you know. I called him the gold digger. (laughter)

JG: The gold digger huh?

GC: Yes.

JG: I guess does Tyler County own that now? I know they own...it's called Tyler County Park but it is just an old picnic table and a garbage can is all that is there.

GC: I haven't been over there in years. I don't know if the county owns that or not.

JG: I think they come out once a year and empty the garbage can.

RD: Yes, maybe.

GC: Yes, getting down to it is the problem.

RD: I bet it is a pot smoking headquarters is what I bet it is.

JG: Yes, the old marker that they moved there is pretty well torn up.

GC: The last time I was in there I guess was when I hauled some asphalt down in there to that old boy that the boat ramp built up above that swift place, Athey was his last name.

JG: Athey, yes. That is the one that...

RD: Wasn't he out of Nacogdoches?

GC: Yes.

JG: Was that the highway department Athey?

RD: No.

JG: No, a different one, okay.

GC: But that road was bad, bad going in there. I don't know, surely they have done something to it now.

JG: Well when we went in there it wasn't too bad, of course it was dry.

RD: Dry yes.

JG: But, it wasn't really all that bad.

RD: That is pretty sandy country in there right on that hill and around, but there are some bad spots in there I bet.

JG: Now did you ever go under that cave when you were a kid or anything?

GC: Just a little ways. I never did go up in it very far, maybe fifteen-twenty foot.

RD: How far up and down the river did you fish?

GC: Well I would hunt it might near to Diboll.

JG: Wow that is a good ways.

GC: A lot of times I would take a boat and put in at Diboll and come down the river hunting.

JG: How far down river did you go, all the way to Graham Creek?

GC: No, down about Billiams Creek be about as far as I would ever go down hunting.

JG: Billiams is up river from the Shoals isn't it?

GC: Upriver from the bridge.

JG: From the bridge even, yes, yes.

GC: Not very far up from the bridge.

RD: Beautiful creek.

GC: Yes it is, it is.

JG: Is that the one that comes in right at the bottom of Best Bend or...no, which one is that, that comes in at the bottom of Best Bend?

RD: Out of...

JG: Go straight north.

RD: Yes, that is it.

JG: That is Billiams?

RD: Yes, I believe I'm understanding what you're saying Jonathan.

GC: I think so.

RD: But it is just real sandy and it just pushes the big sand bars out in the river.

JG: It has a big mouth.

RD: Yes, a great place to camp in there.

GC: It looks like another river coming out into it there at the mouth of it.

RD: Yes.

GC: But, you go up in there and when the river is low, probably like it is now, there is kind of a ford where people used to cross it there. Something like Rocky Ford and then it has got a little waterfall down there where it runs over them rocks, real pretty up in there. I used to hunt in there quite a bit, old Giles owned some property, Giles Lowery.

RD: I guess that family still does, don't they George?

GC: Probably does, Jason I think did own some of it upriver from the Billiams Creek, but they owned several thousand acres on up Billiams Creek on the east side.

JG: Talk a little bit about hunting back then compared to today and like the open woods and...I hear y'all's generation talk about you could hunt pretty much wherever you could walk.

GC: You could, you know, if you were local around here, you pretty well knew everybody that owned property and all you had to do was asked them and they would tell you go on and hunt on their property. They just didn't care.

JG: What about lumber companies, could you say?

GC: Well, I never did really hunt on the lumber companies' land too much, except that old game reserve when they put in that game reserve over there.

RD: There at Shawnee Prairie.

GC: Yes, that was Angelina County Lumber Company owned that.

RD: By the time George came along they started clubbing things up pretty good Jonathan, by that time see. Angelina County voted the stock law in '52 I believe, and they had already started trying to stop that by the time George came along.

GC: Yes, they did, but like I say, I knew everybody and if I wanted to hunt on somebody's private land I could go.

JG: Just ask them.

RD: Did you hunt with dogs, George?

GC: Yes, some we did. We run deer with dogs. We would kill one every once in awhile, but most of the time you just sat there and wait for the dogs to come back.

JG: I had put it on pause for that. (telephone ringing)

GC: Yes, people still always calling me about dirt and stuff. I guess I haven't been out of business long enough for them to decide I'm not doing it anymore.

JG: We need to get Mr. Cryer to put a load of dirt in there at the 69 access point.

RD: Oh yes!

JG: We can talk about that after this. Well, that is about what I had Mr. Donovan, unless you can think of anything else I haven't covered.

RD: I can't think of anything else. We covered the water front pretty well I think.

JG: Well, Mr. Cryer I sure appreciate it. Is there anything you would like to add?

GC: No, I'm glad y'all came down. I've enjoyed talking with y'all about old times. I don't run into many people now, that ain't many can remember some of them old times.

JG: Well, thank you again and I'll go ahead and stop the recorders now.

END OF INTERVIEW