

RHODA FAYE CHANDLER

Interview 6a

September 7, 1982, Lufkin, Texas

Becky Bailey, Interviewer

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ABSTRACT: Diboll native Rhoda Faye Chandler tells interviewer Becky Bailey about growing up in Diboll and working for Southern Pine Lumber Company as a young woman. Miss Chandler started working in the accounting office during the Depression for \$35/week but was laid off after three months. She was rehired to work by the day (at \$3.50/day) and ended up making more money that way than when she was on salary. She recalls the early days of electric service in Diboll, recreation for young people, going to Lufkin for the movies, Depression-era programs like the CCC and the WPA, and the SPLCo. payroll system.

Becky Bailey (hereafter BB): I am interviewing Miss Rhoda Faye Chandler. She lives in Diboll, Texas, and her address is 612 South Temple Drive. I am interviewing her at her home and today's date is September 7, 1982. My name is Becky Bailey. Miss Chandler, when were you born?

Rhoda Chandler (hereafter RC): July 4, 1910.

BB: Independence Day baby, huh?

RC: Yes.

BB: Whereabouts?

RC: Diboll.

BB: Where?

RC: Diboll.

BB: Oh, you were born here too?

RC: Yes.

BB: I see. Did your dad work at the mill?

RC: Yes.

BB: I mean Temple. (laugh)

RC: It was Southern Pine Lumber Company at that time.

BB: When did you start to work? How old were you?

RC: I was, ah, 20 when I started to work, then it was during the Depression. I was laid off after three months, but then I worked more steady and made more money at the time I was laid off, by working extra than I did when I worked for 35 dollars a month.

BB: Oh, they'd call you in if they needed you? Is that what it was...sort of thing?

RC: Yes.

BB: What kind of education did you have?

RC: High school and Business College.

BB: Where did you go to business school?

RC: In Lufkin at Satterwhite Commercial College.

BB: Oh, I didn't know they had one there.

RC: Yeah.

BB: Did you go all the way through high school at Diboll at that time?

RC: Yes.

BB: I know Miss Bea said she was the first class.

RC: Yes. She was the first class.

BB: But you were after her?

RC: Yes. I graduated in 1928.

BB: They had already done that for six years then because I think she graduated in '22 or something like that. Can you remember, you said you worked three months for the company right at first, what were your hours? Your regular hours then?

RC: From eight until we got through. Sometimes it would be six and sometime it would be seven, but we were supposed to have gotten off at five.

BB: Oh, you just had to stay until you were through. What type of accounting work was it? Was it book work or did you....?

RC: Book work.

BB: And you got paid 35 dollars a month?

RC: Yes.

BB: Okay, when they called you back in to do extra work after you were laid off, how much did you get paid?

RC: I made three and one-half a day.

BB: Three dollars and fifty cents a day. That's more than some of the guys out in the plant were making.

RC: Yes.

BB: My grandmother said my grandfather made a dollar and one-half a day. (laugh) So you made quite a bit more.

RC: Yeah. You see we got everything we bought from the store cost plus ten percent. So that was a big reduction there.

BB: Was this everybody or just office personnel?

RC: No, just the office personnel.

BB: What kind of housing did you live in at that time?

RC: We lived in the company house, which was quite comfortable, and, however, all of them were not painted, but ours happened to be painted, we didn't have any bathroom. I was a pretty good sized child when they put in a bathroom.

BB: And an ice box I'm quite sure. Did you have electricity?

RC: I was a good sized child when we had electricity. They'd turn it on just at night, and mama would have to do all her ironing at night, ironed with electricity.

BB: Someone said they'd turn it off on the weekends? I heard that. Do you remember that?

RC: No. They turned it off during the day.

BB: During the day you didn't have any, but at night you had lights?

RC: Yes.

BB: When do you remember getting a refrigerator?

RC: (pause) I imagine it was about 1920.

BB: Really?

RC: Oh, you mean electric refrigerator? Oh, it was after then, because, see, we would have electricity all day.

BB: So it was what? Probably in the '40s huh?

RC: No. It wasn't that late. I was still in high school when we got an electric refrigerator.

BB: Do you remember any of the C.C.C. Projects or W.P.A. Projects?

RC: No. The C.C.C. was in Lufkin but we didn't have any here. But we did have some W.P.A. Projects, uh, like cleaning the woods and cutting down scrub timber and things like that.

BB: They let them work on company land? Or did they...?

RC: They did work on company land but most of it was out in the country.

BB: Oh, just out from town?

RC: Yes.

BB: Did you think those were good projects?

RC: I did. Because they made a living for some people. Children couldn't go away to school, well, they might have gone hungry if it hadn't been for those.

BB: Were you voting by this time? Did you vote for Hoover? No, you would have been too young.

RC: No. I was too young to vote for Hoover.

BB: Do you remember what was said about him (laugh)?

RC: He wasn't liked. I do know that, and I know my daddy was against him, I do remember that.

BB: What happened when Mr. Roosevelt came up for election? Did he have a lot of support around here?

RC: He had an awful lot of support. At that time almost everyone here was Democrat, and we were real happy for him.

BB: Did you vote for him in '32?

RC: Yeah. When I first started voting.

BB: As soon as you could start voting, anyway, huh (laugh)?

RC: Yes.

BB: Do you remember any union activities or socialist activities in this area at all?

RC: At one time they tried to bring the union in here, but the people that did were more or less boycotted. And we never did have too awfully much union activity. They tried to come in here but they didn't make it. They did one plant, the box factory, but it didn't last long. Anyhow, something happened to the box factory.

BB: Do you remember the year that all that was going on, the date of it?

RC: No. I sure don't.

BB: Did everybody raise a garden? Around your place too?

RC: Oh yes. Uh-huh.

BB: Did they have livestock, too, in town?

RC: Yeah. Even when I was small, if anyone couldn't afford to buy a cow, well, I remember that the company would buy it and let the men pay it out by the month. Everyone had a cow and hogs and chickens.

BB: Oh, hogs and chickens and all. It is hard for me to visualize all this in town. What did they have fences around their house...?

RC: Had a fence around their house...

BB: Did they keep the livestock contained or did they wander around?

RC: No! They wandered around town.

BB: Oh. The cows did and the chickens, too?

RC: Yeah. And they'd come up...you see at that time all this was in the woods. So the cows would come up at night and they'd have a pen they'd put them in at night, milk them, keep them in during the night and let them out during the day.

BB: They just wandered around town?

RC: Yes. But they usually went to the woods.

BB: But were the gardens pretty large then?

RC: Oh yes. The gardens were large.

BB: How did people put their food up? Or did they..?

RC: In cans.

BB: In cans?

RC: Not in cans, in jars.

BB: In jars?

RC: Yes.

BB: Was anything in short supply during the Depression that you remember like...?

RC: Sugar, all sugar was.

BB: Sugar was?

RC: Sugar was what we had more trouble with than anything else. We used syrup.

BB: The cane syrup?

RC: Yes.

BB: Did you raise any sugar cane or did you have to get from...

RC: No. No, we bought it from the country. People around here raised sugar cane and made the syrup and I can remember daddy buying oh, 10 or 12 gallons, you know, when it was first made and we'd eat on it all winter.

BB: And so sugar was...you couldn't buy, oh, you just couldn't. They just didn't have it available?

RC: Yeah. Uh-huh.

BB: What about clothing? Did everybody have it or did y'all just make do?

RC: We made do and, you see at the time, my mother made all our clothes, and it was just handed down from one child to the next and from neighbors. I know one of our old albums, well, I have two older sisters than me and all three of us had on the same dress, but Mama had fixed it where you wouldn't recognize it being the same dress. She re-trimmed it. It had scallops when it belonged to my oldest sister and I know that Mama took those scallops off an, by the time I got it, she had made kind of loops at the bottom of it so you couldn't even recognize it being the same dress. And, of course, that was always a joke in the family.

BB: All came down.

RC: But we wouldn't mind being handed down because...

BB: It was just – it was done?

RC: Well, everybody was doing it and, being four girls in my family, well, by the time the youngest one got them well, they were pretty well worn out.

BB: When you worked for the company you were saying something to me the other day about making out the checks that people got. How...?

RC: The ah...we paid off in cash.

BB: In cash?

RC: Yeah, and we put it in a little envelope and there's about six of us that put up the payroll every two weeks.

BB: They got paid every two weeks not every week?

RC: Yes. They got paid every two weeks.

BB: What did these checks look like? Mr. Turner was telling me something about them being dipped in wax.

RC: That was my first job.

BB: Okay.

RC: It was a just a little cardboard check, different colors for different amounts and there was a lady here that sewed them around the edges and they were signed and...

BB: Who signed them? Like...?

RC: Mr. Strauss, he was the general manager at that time, and then Clyde Thompson started signing them. That was my first job...was dipping them in this wax and we had trays and we'd stand them up and let them dry on the trays.

BB: Why did you do this? Is that just a protection or...?

RC: It was just protect them so that they would last longer because you take a little cardboard check and move them around as much as those checks were, well, the checks wouldn't last anytime. But dipping it in paraffin and sewing it, that would strengthen the check and they'd last for months.

BB: What, would the company just take them up as they got worn up?

RC: Yes, and we'd reissue them.

BB: Someone else said something about sometime instead of giving the checks they would just give you so much credit at the store? Did they do that too? Or did they just issue their pay in the checks?

RC: Oh no. You see at one time the company didn't have the money to pay the employees off and we'd have to pay them with these checks but they would credit you at the office with any amount you wanted to leave in there and you could draw it out at any time and draw cash out.

BB: So you could draw money if you needed?

RC: Right. If you had an amount of money in there and, like the office employees, they always left their money in there because the company needed the money.

BB: And this is when you first started working there?

RC: Yes.

BB: Did Temple lay people off? Or did they just cut back on the workweek or what?

RC: What do you mean lay them off?

BB: Well, you know, how they are doing right now...during the Depression?

RC: During the Depression? Well, they just worked, oh, I'd say two days a week and they didn't lay them off. They tried to find something for them to do but see because we just didn't have the money.

BB: Right. But they didn't actually just terminate?

RC: No. At that time they didn't have any benefits, just your pay.

BB: Boy that could be hard on people.

RC: Yes, it would be. Yes, it was (laugh).

BB: At least now they have six weeks of unemployment, but they didn't have that.

RC: Didn't have anything like that.

BB: Do you remember any banks failing in this area as far as shutting down and never reopening?

RC: No, I don't because all our banks were in Lufkin at that time. And all around here that's the only place there were any banks. I can remember the banks closing for a day or two at a time but not any of them failing.

BB: Why would they close?

RC: Well, I don't (know) whether they ran out of money or...

BB: Or just what...?

RC: Or just kind of getting things together.

BB: Kind of just like maybe, do you remember ever hearing about a run on them like people all going and deciding to take their money out at the same time?

RC: Yes. I have, but not in Lufkin.

BB: But not in Lufkin. When do you think things started becoming a little easier around this area in Diboll? When did the business start picking back up?

RC: In the late '30s.

BB: Like '38 or...after the C.C.C. Projects and all started or?

RC: Yes. That's about it.

BB: When did the, let's see, did the company start using the social security system as soon as it was enacted? Were you...

RC: Yes, in fact I was the first one to have a social security number.

BB: Oh really!

RC: In Diboll.

BB: In Diboll. How about that.

RC: Working for the company we had to apply at the office. I was going to make out the applications so I made mine first.

BB: You just made yours first. I assume by that you like the idea of the system?

RC: Oh yes.

BB: Still, do that's what you... (laugh). Do you think the Depression such as happened in '29 can happen again?

RC: I really don't and I hope not.

BB: Why don't you think it could?

RC: Well, I just think because people have prepared for it. I don't think everybody has spent everything they had because you know we had it kind of rough there for a while and I think there's still enough people my age that can remember things and don't want to get in that position again.

BB: In other words keep a little money tucked back instead of spending everything you've got?

RC: Yes.

BB: Just supposing that it did happen again, do you think people would react the same way as ya'll did then? Or do you think...?

RC: No. I don't. I'm afraid it would be different; I'm afraid so many people have insurance now that they didn't have then that too many lives would be taken.

BB: You mean like suicide and that sort of thing.

RC: Yes.

BB: That's hard to think about.

RC: Yes. But as a rule people didn't have any insurance, no company insurance at all and they didn't have anything to leave their family and now there's so many people if they do take their own lives can leave their families pretty well taken care of.

BB: Yes. That's a thought. Miss Chandler, can you tell me something about the working conditions in the office, what it was like when you first started working there?

RC: We was just one big happy family, and if one person had extra work to do well, we all pitched in and helped, and you didn't have many specific things, well we had specific things we had to do but if we were overloaded well, but we all, everybody, helped.

BB: About how many people worked in, like in the one office you were in? I mean, like, was purchasing in there? Accounting and...

RC: Yes. Purchasing and accounting and well, it was just one building that took care of all of it and we all worked together. And time keeping, see we had a man that all he did was to keep the time and he brought the time in from the plant and at that time he'd issue you checks and the check office would stay open a certain number of hours. And if one person was in trouble, we all stayed and helped.

BB: Were there very many women that worked or was it mostly..?

RC: There was three.

BB: Just three?

RC: Yes. When I started work there was three women that worked in the office, one man in the timber department and I worked downstairs, which was the purchasing and bookkeeping and all.

BB: When you were laid off after that first three months of work were the other ladies laid off too?

RC: No. But...

BB: You were just the low man on the totem pole... (laugh).

RC: I was the low man on the totem pole. But, as I said, I made more by working by the day than I did at thirty-five dollars a month.

BB: Right. Plus more vacation time too.

RC: Well, we didn't have vacation time.

BB: Oh, no vacation? None at all?

RC: We worked 6 days a weeks.

BB: Six days...ten hours days, generally?

RC: Yes...supposed to have worked for eight but it was usually ten hours, no vacation time.

BB: Did they have any medical benefits of any kind?

RC: No benefits at all.

BB: Okay. That was a company doctor. Did you have to pay for him?

RC: We paid...I think it was \$1.50 a month for the entire family. He took care of the entire family. He came to your house if you had anybody in bed sick.

BB: Where did he keep his office? He had that too, didn't he?

RC: He had an office.

BB: Do you remember about where it was in town?

RC: Yes, at one time it was where Dr. Eddin's office is now. And it was across the street, where the two-story building is. It was in there, too.

BB: The old office that is shut down now, it was the commissary, too.

RC: It was the commissary, the doctor's office, the drug store, the barbershop.

BB: Your office building was where?

RC: Our office building was the little building at the end of that building.

BB: Where Love Wood Products is now?

RC: No....it was between the office and Love Wood.

BB: What was the name of the street?

RC: It wasn't named.

BB: It wasn't named?

RC: No.

BB: I thought you said something about the kids calling it...

RC: Silk stocking row?

BB: That's just what the kids called it?

RC: That's what the kids called it, yes.

BB: That was the main highway?

RC: That was the main drag. From Love Wood on down there were houses. Two rows of houses.

BB: Why did the kids call it, silk stocking row?

RC: The manager and all lived there.

BB: Were those houses company houses too or were...

RC: Yes, they were company houses.

BB: Were they a lot bigger than the other ones?

RC: Yes, they were larger. The office manager lived along on that row. He had a big family and he had a two-story house there. There were two more two-story houses on the other side of the street. They were facing each other.

BB: Are any of those houses still there? I think the Thompson house is one.

RC: The Thompson's is one along there and then across the street, by the railroad track; there were some houses that were there. In fact, I lived in one of those houses that is still there.

BB: Oh, really. Was that road paved?

RC: No, no. I don't guess that road was paved until after the war.

BB: Oh, really?

RC: Yes.

BB: Was it oiled or anything like that until then?

RC: Not all the time. It was later oiled. It was just a regular road.

BB: I know something else I wanted to ask you. Were there many hobos around town in the '30s?

RC: Yes, we had an awfully lot. I know Mama used to feed them. And we had some that came there every winter. Mama had gotten to where she would invite them into the kitchen and feed them.

BB: Would they do odd jobs around?

RC: Yes.

BB: Just for a meal?

RC: And I had brothers and they had to entertain them.

BB: I bet! After the W.P.A. Projects, when so many people were working again, did the hobos still come or do you remember?

RC: Yes, the hobos still came. Now these W.P.A. took care of the younger men.

BB: Did they have an age limit on the W.P.A.?

RC: I don't remember.

BB: But you just remember...

RC: I just remember it was the younger ones. I think they did have an age limit. But I wouldn't say for sure.

BB: Where did your father work during this time?

RC: He worked for the company...in the boiler rooms.

BB: And that was a six-day a week job, too?

RC: Seven-day-a-week because he had to wash the boiler out on Sunday and that took just about half a day. We would just see daddy on Sunday afternoon.

BB: What did he work? Ten-hour days usually?

RC: Yes, at least ten.

BB: At least ten?

RC: Yes.

BB: Your brothers...when they grew up and finished high school, did they leave here right away or did they work around?

RC: The oldest one worked here. He married here and he worked and when the foundry in Baytown started up, well he got a job down there and moved and lived down there. Now my second brother, he went to high school and went to college.

BB: He was the one that was a teacher? Where did he go? To Sam Houston or S.F.A.?

RC: He went to Sam Houston. He didn't get his degree at first. He would teach awhile and then go back to school. He went every summer until he got his degree.

BB: Oh, you didn't have to have a degree then?

RC: No, you had a certificate.

BB: Then you just went back in the summers until you got it?

RC: Until you got your degree.

BB: How long did you have to go...like two years and get a certificate or something like that?

RC: He started off going to school in the summer time and taught in the fall.

BB: With your father working so many hours and all, did he do any hunting or trapping around here...?

RC: No he didn't have a chance. Our recreation was, they would carry us fishing. We'd get a wagon and go out to the lake out here and spend several days and my daddy and other men would come out there and spend the night and we'd just camp out.

BB: And ya'll would just camp out?

RC: Yes.

BB: All the women and kids?

RC: Yes.

BB: Would you get several families together to do that?

RC: Yes.

BB: Which lake is that?

RC: Ryan Lake.

BB: Oh, out at Ryan's Lake. Yes, I think I know where that is. What else did ya'll do for...?

RC: Recreation?

BB: Recreation?

RC: Well, whatever we did, we did it together and we would have parties just like...and, but I never was one to spend the night away from home. A lot would have slumber parties but...

BB: It would get dark and you'd want to go home?

RC: Yes.

BB: Did kids have bicycles and that sort of thing?

RC: No. Very few bicycles. We couldn't afford them with seven children and we always had cousins and people living with us all of our lives. Used to, the men died awfully early in life. He would leave a woman and a bunch of children. A lot of them would keep boarders; do washing or things like that to support the family. See, we didn't have social security or anything like that then. And the women would really have to work.

BB: And that is why you would have cousins and all, like you did.

RC: Yes.

BB: Miss Chandler did you...We were talking about recreation, what other kind of things did you do as teenagers?

RC: Oh, as teenagers?

BB: Yes.

RC: Well, we all got together and had parties and usually ten on Saturday afternoon, we would go to spend the afternoon in Lufkin. We had to go to Lufkin to the picture show at that time. We would go at night to the picture show in Lufkin.

BB: Did they have it on Main Street?

RC: Yes.

BB: And that's where nearly everything was?

RC: Yes, on the old Main Street.

BB: That is surely not the same picture show that is there on Main Street, is it?

RC: Yes.

BB: It's the same one?

RC: Yes, that was a beautiful picture show at that time. The best drug stores and cafes were on that street.

BB: Was Lufkin a lot different from Diboll?

RC: Oh yes. Lufkin was a city there and Diboll was just a country town.

BB: Did they have paved streets and all that stuff by this time?

RC: Yes, I can't ever remember Lufkin not having the Main Street paved there.

BB: It was very different in the '30s. It was a lot nicer.

RC: It was a county seat, and if they had any business at all you would go there. See Diboll didn't have the cafes that Lufkin had. Diboll had the "Believe it or not Café".

BB: That was the name of it? The "Believe It Or Not"?

RC: And we would all meet there.

END OF INTERVIEW