

Wilk Peters
Interview 19f
November 28, 1984, at 4901 The Alameda, Baltimore, Maryland
Self-Interview, Interviewer
Dorothy Farley, Transcriber
Retyped by Courtney Lawrence

ABSTRACT: Wilk Peters was born in Trinity County, Texas, in 1900, and lived in the Southern Pine Lumber Company company town of Diboll, Angelina County, between 1919 and 1924. He became a college librarian and in this 1984 self-interview vividly recounts his life as a young black man in Diboll during the early 1920s. With much insight he describes working, living, and racial conditions in great detail. More on his fascinating life can be found on pages 2 through 5 of our July 2000 issue of the Pine Bough magazine.

Wilk Peters (hereafter WP): My name is Wilk Peters and I am making this tape at 4901 The Alameda, Baltimore, Maryland, 21239, on November 28, 1984. I am trying to answer sample questions from the Diboll Historical Society. There are twelve of them.

Number 1: Dates of your stay in Diboll. What age, stage of life were you?

WP: I went to Diboll in the spring of 1919 and left in September, 1923, to enter Texas College. I came back the next summer and worked with the car loading...loaders. However, during the following summers I worked at a book store in Dallas. I was an upper teenager of eighteen years with very little formal training. My experiences had been limited to farming and turpentine work. I had never lived in a city and had visited Houston only once for a two day stay. My grammar and speech were at very low levels and I am still trying to improve.

Number 2: Your work in Diboll, all phases of it:

WP: For about two years I worked in the shipping service. Lumber was bought by people who lived outside of Diboll and we had to load it into box cars to be shipped to them. These shipments went to points in Texas and other states. The number of loading teams varied, but there were usually about ten to twelve. Each team was composed of four people. Two men had the order for each car and loaded lumber from the dressed lumber yards. That is lumber which had been planed by the planer mill, lumber from moulding sheds, flooring shed and the lathe shed.

The man with the order loaded the lumber on a two-wheeled dolly or truck. As the other man reached it to him and helped him to pull it onto the truck. One end of the truck rested on a small bench which resembled a sawhorse. The lumber was so loaded that the end on the...end of the truck which had the bench under it, jugged out farther than on the end of the truck without a bench. This prevented the end of the truck without a bench from dropping to the floor and spilling the lumber.

The other two men of the team loaded the lumber into the boxcars. They had two small benches on which the truck rested. One in front and one with a slanted top for a rear side of the truck. The bench with the slanted top placed tightly under the truck to prevent it from moving. They placed a roll inside of the two door frames of the car and tightened it by a screw in the shaft. They also had a small stand, I'm not sure of the name, which was a four by four about three feet high with four short legs, one on each side. One man pivoted the lumber from the truck to the roller and rolled it to the man who was putting the lumber into its proper place in the boxcar. The roller was raised two or three times to adjust to the height of the lumber in the car.

There were two checkers who checked the lumber from time to time as the car was filled. Each checker had a different colored marker so as to know who had checked what. Sometimes when a longer unit of lumber was to be put on top of a shorter unit, the checkers were called immediately so that they would not face the difficulty of trying to reach under long lumber to check short lumber. Longer lumber was usually loaded first to prevent this problem.

The order or amount of lumber which was to be put into each car was listed on a sheet of paper attached to a board a little larger than a letter-size sheet of paper.

Each team had two trucks. While one was being loaded, the other was being loaded into the car. The men who loaded the lumber from the yards and sheds carried it to the car. When the car was filled or the order was finished, the team received another order from Mr. W. Warner, who was an official in the shipping service. We loaded one to three cars per day depending on the lumber and the distance. If an order called for rough, heavy timbers, we loaded them directly from the timber platform at Mill No.1. Orders for dressed timbers were loaded directly from the sizer machine in the planing mill. Other types of lumber were also loaded directly from planing machines. We also loaded car loads of...or partial car loads of lathes. The men who loaded the timber in the cars always wore leather aprons and leather pieces over their right hand gloves for the lumber to slide on. The other men of each crew also wore leather aprons depending on the lumber and its location. Local orders for people who were picking up their lumber were delivered to the south end of the south dressed lumber yard. We loaded it on to their trucks or wagons. When there were only a few orders; this rarely was the case, we repaired runways with three inch lumber and heavy floor joists. Once we laid a new pipeline and I learned enough about plumbing to do all of my plumbing work in the homes which we have owned.

We bought a home in Cleveland, Ohio, which had no thermostat in the hot water tank. The lowest price asked by a plumber to install one was twenty-five dollars plus price of thermostat. I bought two pipe wrenches, one threader with three dies, a pipe vise, a pipe cutter, and a thermostat for less than the twenty-five dollars. The cutter alone now costs near fifty dollars. I have been able to help myself and friends through the years as a result of what I learned at Diboll. I tried to learn as I worked.

After about two years with the loading teams, Mr. Warner shifted me to the flooring shed to sort and stack flooring from the Flooring planing machine. I considered this as a real promotion. I did not have to work in the weather, nor walk on damp runways. However the planing mill and shipping service did not work much during rains. So as not to load wet lumber on...or stack high grade flooring or other high grade lumber into the sheds which had been brought through the rain. Mr. Warner's nephew, George

Wilmoth, trucked the lumber to me in the shed. As I remember, this was his first employment. He was one of the cleanest young men in Diboll. He used no profanity, and was always pleasant. He showed no signs of being prejudiced and was fair in all of his dealing. He and I have been friends since then. I insisted that he go to college. I lost track of him for several years, but the Reader's Digest article brought us together again. He has a nice home in Dallas and a grand wife. He finished from Texas A & M and became an executive of the Humble and then the Exxon Oil Companies.

His wife was an army nurse and retired from a Dallas hospital where she was head nurse on the operating floor. George has also retired. I hope that he will contribute to the oral history of Diboll. He knows far more than I do about Diboll and its people.

The flooring shed was diagonally behind the main business area, including the general store or commissary, post office, drug store, general office with doctor's office, and almost directly opposite the H. E. & W. T. railroad station, ice house, meat market and main boarding house which was on the east side of the tracks. The others, as first named, were on the west side of the H. E. & W. T. tracks. The initials H. E. & W. T. are for Houston, East, and West Texas Railroad, but many people said that H. E. & W. T. meant "hell, either way taken" or "hell either way one takes it!"

There were two passenger trains each day on the H. E. & W. T. and three or four or more freight trains. We worked...we who worked in the dressed lumber and flooring shed and some in the shipping service saw each train which came and went. And we were very excited to see them and the passengers and train crews. Engineers, firemen, brakemen, conductors, railway mail clerk, porters and the depot clerk. The following...the blowing of whistles when passenger trains approached and the puffing of the locomotive before, during, and after the whistling made me yearn to go to far and near places. Mostly far away places. Each time a passenger train approached it blew one long whistle, four medium longs and two shorts. When the depot clerk lowered the signal on a pole in front of the depot which probably indicated that there were passengers, mail, express, items, so forth, to be picked up. These were the old steam engines which I have always liked very much the H. E. & W. T. railroad and the T. S. E. R. R., Texas and Southeastern Railroad, transported the lumber as sold by Southern Pine Lumber Company to points throughout the United States. The T. S. E. R. R. did most of the local switching. It did the switching during the noon hour, after six p.m. and before seven a.m. and as depot was about two blocks north of the planing mill and just behind the lathe shed.

The cars were loaded in front of, and to the north and south of the planing mill.

Number Three: Describe the conditions, wages, daily life in and around your work. Example: mules, T-Models, noise, payment in scrip, details.

WP: My wages during four years ranged from two dollars to two dollars and fifty cents per day. And I worked ten hours each day during six days of each week.

There was only one mule which was used to move lumber in my area. Several mules and T-Models were used in the moving of green and rough lumber from the mills to the yards. And mules and T-Models brought rough, dry lumber to the planing mill. The one mule on our side of the planing mill was used to move dressed lumber and molding from the planing machines to the dressed lumber yards and to the molding shed. He was

driven by a man who was crippled and probably could not push a load of lumber, nor walk frequently from planing mill to the yards. I drove the mule a few times when the driver was ill.

All other movements of lumber were done by men who pushed two-wheeled dollies or trucks, one and two men to each.

Due to noises in and near the planing mill, workers developed a sign language because the planing machines made a terrific noise which made it impossible to hear human voices. We also used a sign...signs for long distance communications on the lumber yard and in the sheds.

There were two paydays each month. On the first and the fifteenth, as I remember. However, between paydays a worker could go to the office and draw money on the basis of the time which he had put in. But this money was made of heavy paper or cardboard. Round and all denominations were the same size, which was about the size of a silver dollar. They were sewed all around the edges and dipped into shellac. They were in denominations of five cents, ten cents, twenty-five cents, fifty cents and one dollar. And probably a five dollar denomination. Each denomination had a different color. "Scrip" was probably the correct name, but we called them "Checks." They were accepted in the general store and all establishments of the Southern Pine Lumber Company. Also they were accepted by local businesses. It was said that the Southern Pine Lumber Company would give local businesses U.S. dollars for them when they found themselves in need. The company paid in U. S. dollars each payday. However, I know...I knew men who never saw any U. S. dollars because they had no paydays, which was due to the fact that they always drew out their money in checks or scrip before payday.

There was always a friendly attitude between all workers. There were three main ethnic groups: Whites, Italians, and Blacks. And I know of no friction. There were only very few Italians, probably less than twenty. The good relations probably emanated from Mr. T. L. L. Temple, whose philosophy was to respect every man, regardless of his station in life. There were no ethnic slurs but before coming to Diboll, I had heard many and especially the vulgarization of "negro."

Each did his work well and went home, many with bundles of wood on their shoulders. This was waste material as the cut-offs of the bad ends of lumber at the planing machines. Not many from the mills carried wood because it was green, wet and heavy. The cut offs of these mills were carried to huge incinerators which burned every day, every night and holidays. I have a suspicion that now that most of this is ground into small chips and sold for mulch rather than burned.

For those who did not carry wood, or could not carry enough, the company had a wood yard south of the molding shed. And this wood was sold for one dollar per load. The company had a wagon drawn by two mules and with a regular driver. The bed of the wagon was about two feet deep, about twelve feet long and a probably six feet wide, which means that one received quite a bit for one dollar. This wood was hauled from the planing machines by one of the workers and dumped into this wood yard. Very small pieces of wood, splinters, sawdust and shavings from the planing machines were blown or sucked through huge galvanized pipes to planing mill power house and to the power house of Mill #1 and probably to Mill #2 and burned as fuel. I do not know what was done with the huge amount of ashes that was produced by these power houses and the

huge incinerators which burned at the mills. I feel that farmers would have welcomed them by the wagon or truck loads.

Every afternoon a young boy would come to us by selling ice cream, hot dogs or hot tamales. We enjoyed these items and he always sold out.

Number Four: What were living conditions like for whites, for blacks. What part of town did you live in? Describe your house.

WP: For blacks living conditions were fair. We had electric lights, running water and there was a picket fence around each house. The electricity was turned off each Saturday night at ten p.m. in order to repair dynamos. There were no telephones, nor radios. The streets were not paved. Some people had second hand cars. A few had new ones and most were "T" Model Fords. There were several flats due to sharp objects hidden in the sand of the unpaved streets. The school was fair, but I do not think there was ever a grade higher than the eighth and there was only two teachers. As I remember it was the principal that helped me do some skills in grammar, do some geography, physical geography and math books which I studied religiously during my stay in Diboll.

Some few young people had studied at Texas College, Bishop College, Conroe College and Mary Allen Seminary. This was my first time to meet blacks other than teachers who had studied in colleges. And this had a positive influence on me. Most of the people, however, were dropouts who never returned to school.

I did not know the conditions of the whites, however, the houses which I could see, were superior to those for blacks. And were painted, but the houses for blacks were not. The blacks and Italians lived on the other side of the tracks, or the west side. The businesses, planing mill, the lumber yard and shed and two mills were also on this side. Plus the mule barn and team and garage. As I remember my house, and all houses for blacks and Italians were very inferior. I think that many were built with one by four...twelve lumber with weather stripping. However, drop siding might have been used, I'm not sure. The inside walls were shiplapped. And as I remember, there were no bathrooms, as I remember. There were no bathrooms and water faucets were used outside by the side of the porch where there was a shelf with washpan and soap. We used outhouses which were cleaned and limed periodically. This was the same at the mills, planing mills and the yards. We had wood stoves and wood heaters and kerosene lamps that was used when the electricity was cut off each Saturday night.

The number of rooms varied from four to six, as I remember, in the houses. And the rest was...and the rent was moderate, from five to eight dollars per month. We had ice boxes instead of refrigerators. I made ours and some for other people. There were no grass lawns, as I remember. There was a boarding house for blacks and some families accepted one, two or three boarders and usually they all stayed in one room. I boarded with three such families during a period of nearly two years.

Two of my sisters who had lost their husbands came to Diboll, also two brothers. To help my two sisters I rented a company house and we started housekeeping. We were lucky enough to get a new house that had just been built. One of my sisters soon married again and left us to live with her husband in another area of the neighborhood. Soon thereafter I was employed by the white boarding house to wash dishes for my board. This was a tremendous help to me because I could save more to enter school. This was a very

short distance from the flooring shed where I worked, maybe the distance of one block. Please turn to the other side. (end of side one)

Questions Number Five: Specific memories you might have about life in Diboll. Anecdotes, examples.

WP: I do not know any anecdotes, but people told many jokes, many are not repeatable. There was a baseball team on both sides of the tracks. There were no leagues in which they played, but each team played nearby teams. And as I remember, the majority were sawmill teams. At one time the black team had an outstanding pitcher, Ted Pearson. Some felt that he could have pitched in the major leagues. He moved to California and a few years later died on his way back to California after a visit to Diboll.

Two of his brothers were piano players and many enjoyed hearing them as they played in the dance hall and in small domino parlors. I'm not sure of the names of these establishments. There was one player who came to Diboll occasionally. Most of the young people were around to dance and hear him.

Occasionally carnivals came to town and they warmed the hearts of many who went and participated. They usually set up in the area of the baseball grounds for blacks. I slightly disabled my right shoulder throwing too hard trying to knock down dolls in the wintertime. It seemed that most of the carnivals and small shows came during the autumns and winters.

Blacks celebrated the nineteenth of June with barbeques and sometimes a baseball game. This was the date in Texas when blacks learned of being freed from slavery. There were many outdoor stands in the summer, spring and autumn when the weather was warm enough. It was usually warm. Winters were not severe. I do not remember seeing snow the four years that I was there, but there were several freezes.

The blacks had a band of twelve pieces, but it was not playing well when I left. I tried to play a clarinet when I was there. Sometimes we took four or five instruments and formed an orchestra to play for dances. We paraded through the streets on some occasions in Diboll, Camp #1 and one in New Willard. We always drew a crowd because it was rare when people heard a band. A Mr. Jackson, who lived in Nacogdoches, was our teacher. And he had one rehearsal with us each week. He finally moved to Diboll and I think that we increased the rehearsals to two each week.

Prostitution and bootlegging presented some problems. I feel that some of the prostitution was due to the fact that there were very few work opportunities for women. And that part of the liquor traffic was due to the fact that the country was dry at that time. If there were any alcoholics, I do not know about them. Another negative was gambling and the murder of one of the two blacks while I was there was done as a result of a gambling mixup.

On November 11th the veterans of World War I would march in the streets. And we would enjoy their performances and were pleased that they had survived the war. One veteran, Wilburn Livingston, was one of the few in his company that had survived The Battle of Rattlesnake Hill. Where the Germans and the rattlesnakes annihilated most of his unit. And he was the only survivor after his company went over the top. He was scheduled to go over the top a second time, but the peace treaty came a few hours before he and his unit were scheduled to go.

Some workers left Diboll and went to Houston and other places, but returned within a few weeks or a few months which indicated that Diboll had more to offer to them than the other places.

Number Six: Did your educational background help at all in Diboll?

WP: My knowledge of arithmetic helped when I had to figure or help figure the board feet in a piece of timber...lumber of two or more pieces. I had not had psychology, social psychology, anthropology, nor other subjects which would have helped me to better understand people. But I was able to live with and work with people in an agreeable manner.

Number Seven: Describe a typical day there.

WP: At 5:30 A.M. we were awakened by a whistle at one of the mills or the planing mill. We got up and performed a few chores, ate breakfast and were ready to start toward work when another whistle blew at 6:45 A.M. Then another whistle blew at 6:55 which meant that every worker should be at his...at or near his place of work. The last early morning whistle was at 7: 00 A.M. and all machinery at the mills and the planing mills were put into motion until whistle at noon.

Everybody began his work and I began loading lumber or sorting and putting the flooring by grades and length into the correct stalls in the flooring shed. As we loaded lumber the checkers came by from time to time or we called them when needed. When we finished an order we would get another from Mr. Warner. When we were thirsty there was a barrel of iced water with a faucet under a little shed between the planing mill and the flooring shed with two tin cups. One hanging on each side of the shed for two of the ethnic groups and so marked. However, most men carried folding cups in their pockets and the cups at the barrel were seldom used.

There was an outhouse off and away from the runway. It and all others had advertisements...and advertisement for Gonorrhoea which read H.G.C. "He got caught, he grew cheerfully after using H.G.C. for three days." One side was for blacks and the other for whites.

We worked steadily all morning. There was another whistle at 11:15 to warn housewives to start putting finishing touches to their lunches. At 11:40 the north bound passenger train arrived and all of us who could see it, gazed in admiration and we were thrilled by its whistle...for its whistle blast and the puffing of the locomotive before reaching the depot. We could always see the black passengers descend and ascend because the coach in which they rode was always next to the mail coach and locomotive, which always stopped north of the depot.

At twelve noon the whistle blew and all workers headed home, some with bundles of wood on their shoulders. Sometimes we ate lunch in a hurry and were on our way to work when the alert whistle blew at 12:45, and at work when the 12:55 whistle blew. Sometimes I was already working when the 1:00 whistle blew.

At 1:40 P.M. the passenger train going south arrived...if it was on time. And we who could see it were again gripped by excitement.

Then came the ice cream boy. At about middle afternoon or between four and five, Mr. Walker, the general manager, came and usually stopped in the shipping office between the planing mill and the flooring shed. In the summertime he was always completely dressed in white. He was a very stately looking man, tall and weighed about 230 or 250 pounds. We enjoyed seeing him.

The tennis courts for Mr. Temple and friends were near the rear end of the flooring shed. And when they were playing and when I had caught up with my work, I looked at them with great expectations from around the corner. There were no courts for workers our side of the tracks, but I became greatly involved with tennis after my school years. At 6:00 P.M. the whistles blew indicating the termination of the day. Some went directly home with bundles of wood on their shoulders, while others had to go to the general store to buy a few items of groceries.

I ate dinner at about 7:00 P.M., took a bath and began my studies, or I took a short walk after my bath, and then studied until 10:30 P.M. or 11:00 P.M. and went to bed.

Number Eight: Social events, neighborhood and entertainment.

WP: As I remember there were no social events worthy of note in my area. I did not know of any card playing groups, nor social clubs, nor fraternity or sorority associations. People in the neighborhood were congenial and seemingly honest. I never saw or heard of a fight. However, there were three murders during my stay there; two blacks and one white.

Entertainment hardly existed. There was a movie house with infrequent shows. There were piano players in the domino parlors, and course, domino playing between men. And there were baseball games.

Housing: Number Nine: Housing, sanitation, food, water.

WP: I tried to describe the housing under question No. Four; however as I remember, the housing on the west side of the tracks were very dissimilar to housing on the east side.

The sanitation was fair. There were two main problems, the outhouses and no garbage pickups. Incinerable garbage was incinerated. Glass and metal were disposed in various manners, usually in negative manners.

The foods from the general store were flour, meal, dried peas and beans, potatoes, and some fruits in season, and seemly some cabbage. The meat market had beef and pork only. There were no seafoods. Fresh vegetables were occasionally sold by some nearby farms...farmers. If one had a lettuce salad, the lettuce usually came from farmers or from Lufkin, a town twelve miles away.

The water came from a lake, but sometimes the lake went dry and water was pumped into it from the Neches River. The water was treated so as to kill bacteria. And it was seemingly safe to drink.

Number Ten: Opinions on leadership in the timber industry.

WP: The Southern Pine Lumber Company, in my opinion, is the leading lumber company in America. It was probably first to practice conservation of its forest by saving the young trees to produce another harvest within a few years. The two mills, one with

two carriages and the other with one carriage, were on a twenty-four hour schedule produced more lumber and more types of lumber and moldings than any mill town which I have seen. Most other places had only one mill with one carriage, which means that Diboll produced three times as much lumber. Some mills throughout the years cut all their trees, large and small, or destroyed the small ones as they harvested the large ones, and went out of business, while Diboll has continued to exist due to its large holdings and the conservation of its small timber.

Mr. Temple respected every worker and that seemed to have been the attitude of each foreman.

Number Eleven: Union activity, politics of labor.

WP: There were no unions when I was at Diboll. Politics seemingly existed in the labor force, but I was not totally aware of it, except to notice that the inhabitants on the other side of the tracks held only few high positions. There were...was a hard wood timber grader, block setters on the carriages and one became a lumber grader at a machine in the planing mill after I left Diboll.

Number Twelve: Compare work and life in Diboll with work and life elsewhere.

WP: One great advantage which I found at Diboll was that the workers did not have to work on damp, cold grounds, as on turpentine firms or on farms. Many workers worked under shelters and others worked on runways made of three inch thick lumber. When there were heavy rains the planing mill usually blew off, causing work to cease for that day. The work was not as difficult as the work in many other areas, such as working on railroad tracks, street work, turpentine work, building construction, road work, so forth.

The work was also relatively clean. Cleaner than auto mechanics, machine shop work and the areas just mentioned.

The relations between foreman and workers were much more congenial than in some areas which I knew about or had heard about.

In Diboll people worked by whistles, which related to the families, as well as to the workers.

Supplementary question areas. These could have been covered under the above headings, but I missed them. One....there are four.

Number One: What kinds of health services did Diboll have?

WP: We had one to two doctors in the medical service and there was no charge when one incurred an injury while working. There was an insurance to cover injury but I do not know what the premium was, if we paid one. We had no hospitals. When there was an injury...severe injury at the planing mill or the other mills, there was two or more short whistles to call a doctor. There was no resident dentist, but occasionally one would come to Diboll for a few weeks stay.

Number Two: What church denominations were in Diboll.

WP: I do not remember the white denominations, but there were three for blacks: Baptists, Methodists, and Christians. The membership rank was as listed: Baptists, Methodists, Christians.

Number Three: Were there any fraternal orders? If so, what were they?

WP: For blacks there were five: Knights of Table, Knights of Pythias, Masons, Odd-Fellows and Woodmen of the World. Their main services as I remember, were aiding the ill members and burying deceased members.

Number Four: Men's clothing

WP: There was no clothing store in Diboll for men. But the general store sold shoes and work clothes. There were no dress suits for men and I do not think that there were any in any of the small towns, and probably only a few in cities. In Diboll there were people who measured men and ordered their suits from Chicago or other cities. They had samples and pictures of different styles from which to choose. They usually had three...they usually had three price lists. But the customer saw only one. One was the exact price of the clothing, while the other two were higher. The amounts above real price were profits for the persons doing the ordering. Mr. Rutledge, the manager of the general store, had a clothing dealer come from time to time to measure men and take their orders. This took place on the second floor of the store. Suits were delivered to the store after two or three weeks. I ordered some clothes for men myself, but the price was never much more than the exact price list. Just a few pennies for my trouble. My company was different than those of other people who were ordering so they could not say that I was underselling them.

This terminates the questions and I hope that I have covered a few points which will be of help to the Diboll Historical Society. I was in Diboll just a little longer than four years and I worked in one area only. I did not learn much during this time about Diboll because I spent most of my time studying. This is the end and thanks for listening.

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