

**CLAUDE WELCH, SR.**  
**Interview 27a**  
**January 5, 1983**  
**Becky Bailey, Interviewer**  
**Daniel Guerrero, Transcriber**

**ABSTRACT:** In this interview with Becky Bailey, Claude Welch, Sr. describes his life during the Great Depression. A native of Trinity County, Texas, his family worked for Southern Pine Lumber Company for three generations. During the 1930's, Mr. Welch fished, hunted, traded, and picked cotton to survive. In the latter part of the decade he joined the CCC and worked in a camp in Arizona. He describes life in the CCC camp and explains how the county came out of the Depression in the 1940's.

I am interviewing Mr. Claude Welch in Diboll, Texas. His address is box 611, and today's date is January 5, 1983. My name is Becky Bailey.

**Becky Bailey (hereafter BB):** Mr. Welch, where were you born? In what year?

**Claude Welch, Sr. (hereafter CW):** I was born on April 7, 1913, in Trinity County. My daddy was a section foreman in a place they called Neff, on the Texas Southeastern Railroad, which is in Trinity County, now it's in Boggy Slough.

**BB:** Is that part of Temple's?

**CW:** Part of Temple's... yes, ma'am.

**BB:** I thought I recognized the name of the railroad, then. So he worked for Temple.

**CW:** Yes, ma'am, he worked for.....

**BB:** He worked for Temple in a way, then?

**CW:** My grandfather started out with Arthur's grandfather. My daddy came on with Arthur's daddy. And I came on with Arthur. A generation of Welches ever since time started with Temple, Southern Pine Lumber Company. Whatever you want to call it. There sure have.

**BB:** What were your parents' names?

**CW:** My daddy was named Tom Welch. My mother's name was Maggie Welch Brown. She was a Brown.

**BB:** Where were they from originally?

**CW:** My grandmother and grandfather... my grandmother was a Conner before she married W.G. Welch. They all came out of Sabine County, as far as I know. There is still some of them over there, but we don't claim kin folks. In other words we don't claim them because we can't reckon it up, back so far, yes ma'am.

**BB:** Do you have any brothers and sisters?

**CW:** I have two half sisters. Mrs. Gladys Rector from Diboll. You know her? And Mrs. .... She's Billie ... Billie Jean, she is married to... oh, I can't think of that old boy's name, now.

**BB:** Your dad worked for the railroad then – what kind of work did he do?

**CW:** He was section foreman.

**BB:** What does that mean?

**CW:** Well, that maintains the railroad.

**BB:** In charge of the tracks?

**CW:** Yes, ma'am. In charge of the tracks. Sure was.

**BB:** Do you remember what kind of hours he worked or any of that sort of thing?

**CW:** Well, I would say of course, in summertime he would go out early and get off early because it was so hot. Generally around six o'clock, seven o'clock in the morning they would go out and work eight hours a day. Take an hour off for lunch... or thirty minutes. Whatever the men wanted to do, and they would come in. Most of the time they were in about three thirty or four o'clock. Sure was.

**BB:** What kind of housing did ya'll live in at this time? Working for the company, did you have a company house?

**CW:** My daddy did, yes ma'am. He sure did. Yes ma'am, he sure did. We lived in the first company house in Copestown. I bought a house up there in what they call Copestown. My daddy....coming down that street there, my daddy lived in the first house. A company house. Lee Vaughn lived in the next one and so on down the street. The motor car houses was right close to the track there. All you had to do was to work out of the back yard and there was the motor car houses. The men went out of there and went to work.

**BB:** Oh, I didn't know about that. What kind of education did you have?

**CW:** Well, I imagine I got about a third or fourth grade education.

**BB:** And then at that time you went to work?

**CW:** Well, that's right; I had to go to work. Well, you had to work if you ate. Well, back when I was younger, I would say about fifteen or sixteen years old, before I went to CC camp, I had some good friends at what we called the Whitlock place by the name of Landrum. Well, when the crops were laid by ....well, you had to do something to make a living, to eat. So we built us a little ol' house on the river where ... called the McCarty campground. We stayed in and out of that house for about three years and fished. We killed hogs regardless of whose they was, because we was going to eat. And we come out at Burke up there. Burke was a pretty nice little place. There was two or three stores and everything. Why we'd swap them fish for meal, if I wanted.... there at the store. We'd swap fish for syrup. Anything to get something to eat, because it was rough. I've eaten corn... taken the corn off the cob and run it down one of them things that cut it off. I've eaten corn and syrup, and glad to get it, several meals in my life.

**BB:** On the river who all lived there?

**CW:** Oh, it was about three of us ol' boys, three of us boys.

**BB:** It was almost like camping out.

**CW:** Well, it was camping out. We dug a well and everything. I'll go show you the hole still there where we had the well. It's still there.

**BB:** And this was where? On the Angelina? No, Neches River.

**CW:** No, it was the Neches River which is in Ryan's Lake Club well, now where we went to ... course I still go back there and fish. Walk back to that old well that I drank many a drop of water out of.

**BB:** And you lived there almost three years?

**CW:** Three years.

**BB:** Until you were about what....eighteen?

**CW:** Yes ma'am, until I was about that age I sure was, I sure was. Sometimes you get out and make a little money picking cotton or working on a farm for somebody. You had to buy you some clothes. I paid sixty-three cents for a pair of overalls that I am paying \$25 for today for the same overalls.

**BB:** Right!

**CW:** Thirty-five cents for a shirt that I pay....

**BB:** Money would go a long ways.

**CW:** Sometimes I pay eighteen and twenty dollars for today.

**BB:** What kind of work, now you said you picked cotton? Where, just around in Angelina County?

**CW:** Yes, around this...Angelina County. Now, I went to West Texas one time. Then I got out there in that boll weevil cotton and I never rode a freight train in my life and we quit that cotton patch, me and a fellow named O.B. Parker, who is deceased now. And we come back to Lufkin. We made more money picking cotton around here. That cotton was bad up there that year.

**BB:** What year was that? Do you remember?

**CW:** Oh, I'd say 1931, something like that. The freight train stopped there. That decided us on going. We got on one of those gondolas. We was gonna ride to Jacksonville or somewhere down the road there. About the time we got in there; there was a nigger brakeman. He crawled over there and said, "You ain't gonna ride this train. Get off now." So we got off that train and walked out there on the highway, and I believe to tell you the truth, we walked two thirds of the way or more from Dallas to Lufkin, Texas. We would get in the woods and walk all day. Wouldn't nobody come along and if they did it was an ol' "T" model, "A" model. They wouldn't pick you up. We finally got back and what cotton we picked, we picked it around Angelina County.

**BB:** You stayed home after that.

**CW:** I said no more cotton pickin', not in my lifetime. No ma'am.

**BB:** Was there a lot of cotton raised around here at that time?

**CW:** Yes ma'am. That's what the farmers raised. Not too many cattle. All these places where they got cattle now, in my life time, I drive back through Peavy Switch and all those places, I still got some old friends over in there, look out there and say well, I plowed out there and raised cotton. Now it's got pine saplings and pretty good size pine trees on it, old pines. The old chimney is still there, the old cistern still there. Oh, I lived with those people, worked for them. I'll say this much, somebody is gonna have to go back out there and work it again for a living, I think. I may be wrong. That's what's in my mind. I've enjoyed it. I have made a lot of friends. There's never been a place where I have not made a friend. I've enjoyed my life. It's been a rough one...

**BB:** It sounds like it's been rough.

**CW:** But I have enjoyed it.

**BB:** What was it like to pick cotton? Did you carry a big sack?

**CW:** Yes, ma'am. You tried to get about sixty, seventy pounds in there. I never was a real good cotton-picker. If I picked 200, 250 pounds I was doing real good.

**BB:** And that was a day?

**CW:** Yes, ma'am. Now some of these... I know an old boy one time that could pick, of course he is deceased now, he would pick four and five hundred pounds while I was picking just two.

**BB:** Oh, that's working fast and hard.

**CW:** That were a lot of people that could do that. But my back would go to hurting and he would be picking cotton while I was standing up stretching, trying to get my back to quit hurting. Maybe I would roll up a Bull Durham cigarette and smoke and he would be way on down the row.

**BB:** Down the row from you. And you would get 15 cents a pound?

**CW:** Yes, ma'am. Fifteen cents a hundred pounds.

**BB:** So you picked all day and get thirty cents?

**CW:** I have picked cotton for thirty cents. Pick all day and get thirty cents. Of course, I get my board and washing. That was a whole lot. Back then when you went out and picked for an individual like that and he gave you your lunch. Some of them did and some of them didn't. You would get around thirty, thirty-five cents a hundred. As the price of cotton changed. You know a bale of cotton back in that day.... one time I worked for a man named Alan Alsbrook, made a crop over at Peavy Switch. He gave me a bale of cotton to help him make that crop. That was to start from the first day you plow it until the last day it was ended. And he gave me a bale of cotton to do it. And I think a bail of cotton weighs right close to five hundred. It weighs five hundred. And the best I remember, I got \$22.50 for...

**BB:** For that bale of hay...I mean, cotton.

**CW:** For that bale of cotton. Which took well, from the time we got started in February till we got along about June or July. That period of time for twenty dollars and fifty...however, I got my meals, I got my washing.

**BB:** And they found a place for you to sleep?

**CW:** Oh, yes ma'am. I lived with them. Just like I moved in with you and your husband and live there with you. That was that way it was. That was under the conditions....when they hired you, you would be taken care of you.

**BB:** And all this time when you worked for them you still had your house on the river?

**CW:** No, ma'am. That was very much in the past.

**BB:** What other kind of work did you do? Did you do any sawmill work?

**CW:** I hauled a lot of logs in my life. I hauled logs and worked up there oh, all my thirty eight years in Diboll. I never worked up in the mill. But I would go up there and double over during the war if there was a shortage. I would to that. But I worked on the log ponds; unloading logs, is what I done. I operated the crane over there. After thirty-eight years working for the company, I done a little bit of it all.

**BB:** Well, in 1931-32, what were you doing in that time period?

**CW:** Well, I would think ....about the same thing I was doing then, I'm sure. I don't remember what year the East Texas oil fields broke out. I've forgotten what year. But I worked quite a bit for a man by the name of Jim Spears hauling gasoline. He had about twenty something stations. I worked for him a year or two.

**BB:** And this was all before you joined the C.C.C.?

**CW:** Yes, ma'am. This was all before I got in the C.C. Camp. And I just happened by luck to be going down the street and this fellow, I'm not going to call his name or anything like that. I just walked over and this old boy walked away and I walked over and this lady asked me what she could do for me. I told her I wanted to join the C.C. camp. And she, like you got, had a sheet of paper and asked me my age, like you have. And she said sign here and I was in it.

**BB:** And you were in it. What year was this?

**CW:** Well, I'll see. I don't know what year it was. I got out. I stayed in it about eighteen months. I believe I got out in April of '39.

**BB:** So that would have made it about '37? Sometime in '37?

**CW:** Yes, ma'am. It would be sometime in '37; it sure would be.

**BB:** Okay. Where did you sign up? Where were you walking?

**CW:** I was coming down, I don't know what the name of the... I guess it would be Third Street, yes, ma'am, in Lufkin. Right about where City Hall is at now in Lufkin. Sure was.

**BB:** And they were signing people up?

**CW:** Yes, signing young boys up. Sure was. Oh, I think it was about 2:00 in the evening, 2:30, something like that. And I didn't have any idea where I was going.

**BB:** But you didn't have any trouble getting in?

**CW:** Not a bit in the world.

**BB:** Just sign up and they took you on?

**CW:** They took me out there to the Lufkin camp, they examined us. The doctors examined us. They fed us. We got in a truck and we went to Weches. We stayed there that night. The next morning they carried us to Crockett, Texas. The train come along there. Shortly after we got there, they did unloaded us in El Paso and let us get a little exercise. Those trains, lot of trains at that time, had a long walk, concrete walkway. So that people could walk... course, it didn't have a shed or anything over it. Well, they unloaded us there and let us get a little exercise there. And give us a couple of "Jam" sandwiches, piece of bologna and two pieces of bread jammed together.

**BB:** Is that the word "Jam Sandwiches"?

**CW:** That's right.

**BB:** Well now, did this all happen in one day? You didn't go home?

**CW:** To tell somebody I was gone? No, ma'am. I didn't tell nobody where I was at.

**BB:** You just took off, huh?

**CW:** If that thing wasn't on, I'd tell you. I didn't have anybody who cared where I was at.

**BB:** Oh, okay. So the same day that you signed up, you went out to Weches and or went out... they examined you?

**CW:** To Weches. Yes. That night I went out to Weches, the Lufkin camp and I was examined there and I passed, and they loaded us up in a truck and went to Weches, which is in Houston County. Out from... I'm going to say it's out of Alto. I'm pretty sure it is.

**BB:** It is. It's out of Alto.

**CW:** And the next morning we looked like a bunch of cattle in a cattle truck. Course we was in an old G.I. truck and they carried us to Crockett and put us on those trains. And here we go to San Antonio. It was three or four months before anyone knew where I was at. I finally ... I don't know, I finally, some little old gal back here I wrote a letter to.

**BB:** And told them where you were.

**CW:** And everybody was wondering, "Where was that rascal at?"

**BB:** Well, did they have barracks at Weches that you stayed in?

**CW:** Yes, ma'am. Now they had barracks. Now at the camp in Arizona, we slept in tents.

**BB:** Oh, okay. Was there any kind of training or anything that the CCC put you through or did you just go to work?

**CW:** No, ma'am. I got to be assistant mailer for six months, see. As the census went down and the war was going on, the leaders and assistant leaders, a lot of them, got busted because there wasn't enough personnel there. And at one time, I think we had about two hundred and, oh, I would say thirty or forty boys and I have seen it go down to approximately fifty boys. It wouldn't be long and we would get a bunch of more boys in.

**BB:** What would they come in on six months rotations?

**CW:** They would be new boys coming in, getting into the CCC's. A lot of boys would go on; they were tired of it and everything like that. Of course, I have seen a lot of boys go home. They'd go A.W.O.L. but of course, that was their business. Not too many, but I've seen some of them do that. You know, sometimes we got in these Spanish boys. What really happened mostly, they sent these Texas boys away from home and sent these Yankees down here. One time we got about a hundred Yankees in our camp. And that caused problems. And all the time I stayed in there I never had a cross word with no man and I only seen one fight.

**BB:** Oh, well that was good considering how many different people were there.

**CW:** You see lots of people, you meet a lot of boys, you sure do.

**BB:** What kind of situation... you said you slept in tents. Now was there mess tents too? And this sort of thing? Was it run like an Army camp?

**CW:** Yes, ma'am. It was altogether Army.

**BB:** Okay. Did it have Army personnel over the camp?

**CW:** Yes, ma'am. See, all this time I spent in the hospital I was transferred into the Army.

**BB:** Oh really?

**CW:** Yes, ma'am. But see they carried us out there. We had tents, four men to a tent. And we slept head to foot. And in the middle, they had a little...oh; I don't know what kind of heater you'd call it. It burns coal. I'd call it a little old Wigam heater. I mean it was made in that type. A little old bitty heater – it just come up like a funnel. And that's



what we had. In the daytime, I guess it would hit sixty or seventy. At night you would have to have three or four blankets on. It would get cold, cold at night there.

**BB:** And this was in Santa Fe?

**CW:** No, that was in Springerville, Arizona. When we were at Tucson, we were in barracks. And in Holbrook.

**BB:** You were in barracks there?

**CW:** In barracks there. Sand was so bad there you could wipe it off of the table with your hand. They would set that table and that wind would go to blowing and grit, grit, grit. It was bad.

**BB:** All to do over again.

**CW:** Yes, ma'am.

**BB:** Well, what type of projects did you work on there in the eighteen months?

**CW:** Well, I done some of it all. I drove a truck. I used a shovel. I got ...several different times I night watched. Mostly what you done then is you made sandwiches at night for the men to take out the next morning. They had sandwiches. I done that for a while and then go back out in the field. But most of the time I drove a truck.

**BB:** What kind of projects was the CCC doing at that time? Were they building roads or what?

**CW:** Well, they build roads. Yes, ma'am. They sure did. They built roads. And they built a lot of water tanks.

**BB:** By "Water Tanks" you mean ponds?

**CW:** Well, they built some ponds. But they... a lot of times you take concrete and pour concrete trough, you see, and run pipe up on the side of those hills and the water would free flow. They would dam up some of those places up there where cattle couldn't get to hardly. And when it snowed, more or less or whatever. Or course, sometimes the pipe would freeze, and cut down on water but that was those ranchers' problems. It wasn't ours. That was mostly what we done. We done a lot of time out there with the CCC. All we done, we helped the Arizona ranchers. Let's just make it in plain words, that's just what we did.

**BB:** Did... not having a family at home did you get paid? Or did they hold out?

**CW:** Yes, ma'am. I got paid eight dollars a month. And twenty-two dollars a month in finance office and when I got out, I had a little money.

**BB:** I see. Whenever you got out of the C.C.C. in April of '39, I think you said, what type of work...did you come right back to Diboll or this area? To Lufkin?

**CW:** Yes, ma'am, I got off the train in Lufkin, the first man I met was my daddy. He didn't know... nobody knew I was coming back or very much about where I was at. The trains at that time met in Lufkin. One going to Shreveport and one going to Houston. Well, I came out of Houston. I came out of Dallas to Houston. When I come to Lufkin and I got off, my daddy was fixing to catch a train to go back to Diboll. It was on a Sunday, I'll never forget. I went home with him and stayed home one night. I never stayed home with my daddy, maybe twenty-five nights of my life. Sure didn't.

**BB:** Were things easier in this neck of the woods by this time or was...?

**CW:** It was lightening up. It sure was. It sure was.

**BB:** Did you have any trouble finding employment then?

**CW:** Yes, ma'am. I did. I sure did. I went to work for the highway department down at Cold Springs; and I worked for a while. And I worked at Hoshall, at that mill for a while. I got married. And I finally got on with Temple Industries right after I got married.

**BB:** What year was this?

**CW:** June 18, 1940 when I went to work for Temple Industries.

**BB:** Whenever you got back, whenever you were working for the sawmill and for the highway department, what sort of wages did you get at that time? Do you remember?

**CW:** I believe about either twenty-five or thirty cents an hour.

**BB:** What about the sawmill?

**CW:** About the same. About twenty-five cents an hour. Sure was. About twenty-five, sure was. In the neighborhood of twenty-five cents an hour.

**BB:** Mr. Welch, you were too young to know much about Mr. Hoover as president, then but what did you think of Mr. Roosevelt as president?

**CW:** He was like everybody else. He was just like Reagan up there. All of them have their hands tied to a certain extent. Some of them...they're not for...there's never been a Republican in my book for the poor man, the working man. It's a proven fact. To my way of seeing it. The Republicans have never been for a working class of people.

**BB:** Well, did people think Roosevelt would be able to do something then where Hoover hadn't been able to?

**CW:** He did do things. He did do things. He sure did. Whenever you work forty hours, you give another man a job. I know because I have been out there say at 2:00 in the day, and my forty hours would be up, and I had to go to the house and another man would take my place. Otherwise, I could worked on and that man wouldn't of had no job.

**BB:** And this was the NRA then that instituted this.

**CW:** Yes, ma'am. I think President Roosevelt...we haven't had but two presidents in my life. That's Roosevelt and Kennedy.

**BB:** All the rest of them were just there.

**CW:** All the rest of them were just there, that's right. Johnson got five hundred something thousand American boys killed; you couldn't call him a good president.

**BB:** Was there anything Roosevelt did that you didn't approve of?

**CW:** The only thing I didn't approve of, I never have believed in destroying things.

**BB:** And by this you mean ...?

**CW:** I don't think... that might have been the right thing... that could have been the right thing for him to do, but I didn't see it that way.

**BB:** And this was the plowing under of ...

**CW:** Plowing up cotton, killing cows, leaving them laying in the fields. Drag them up in a pile and burn them, whatever. They opened up a cannery. Picked out some of them and canned them and people got that. I never have believed in destroying nothing. I'm against this clear cut out here, but they own it.

**BB:** When did you think things seemed to get better? The economy in this part of the county seem to get better?

**CW:** The only time was when World War II started.

**BB:** So it was almost a full ten years of depression around here.

**CW:** It sure was. When World War II started, everything commenced to blooming out. It was beginning to get better, but I'm talking about the demand was so great when World War II started; it just gradually went on and went on.

**BB:** I see. And this was the demand for wood products?

**CW:** Yes, ma'am. Wood products. It sure was a big demand.

**BB:** Do you think a depression like '29 and '30 can happen again?

**CW:** Yes, ma'am. I don't think that we have a man smart enough to pull this thing out now. What has ruined the American people in the first place, they priced themselves out of a job. That's true. The automobiles, they've priced themselves out of a job. A lot of other people... I'm not against a union, I'm not for a union, 'cause I don't know anything about. That's something I don't know anything about. I'm not for or against, 'cause I don't know. According to the newspaper and all, these people have priced themselves out of a job. Some of them want fifty dollars an hour. There isn't a man under the sun worth fifty dollars an hour. Not in my book. My son charges seventy-five dollars an hour. I don't believe in that money. He's a lawyer and that's what he get.

**BB:** That is a lot.

**CW:** That's a lot, it sure is. About like a doctor.

**BB:** Just about. Do you think people would accept it now like you did back then?

**CW:** No, ma'am. These young people couldn't take it.

**BB:** Is it the hard work they can't take or the...?

**CW:** You don't see none of 'em working. You know, I tell you what, Arthur Temple's a personal friend of mine and I think a lot of him. I don't know of a man under the sun I think more of than Arthur Temple. But the blacks and the whites will not work. He owned this thing and he had to bring Mexican people in here and, cuss them if they want to, but he had to keep this thing running. And you could not; and I know because I was out there, I know; we couldn't... I've seen the time that we didn't have enough of men out there on that treating plant yard to load a charge to go in those cylinders 'cause they couldn't get 'em. They wouldn't work.

**BB:** It was just the opposite in the '30s, everybody wanted to work.

**CW:** Yes, ma'am. Wanted to work. Yes, ma'am. Everybody wanted to work. I've seen it right out here in my time in Diboll. Until they brought that Mexican labor in here, they would have had to shut down.

**BB:** What? .... Did the young people go to Houston? Didn't like this sort of ...?

**CW:** Well, I tell you. Of course, I've got two boys. I've got one that's a lawyer and the other; he's just an average boy. Of course, he's paid good. He spent seven years in Vietnam. But when my boys got out of school; raised here in Diboll; they would say, "Daddy, I tell you one thing I ain't gonna do what you done." I said, "What's that?" "I ain't gonna work like you have 'cause I've seen you work awful hard." I said, "Well son, I hope not. I hope you don't have to do that." So he went to service and went to the Korean War and came back. He went to school. Went to school and I think every school

in Texas. It seemed like that. Wound up in University in Houston and got a law degree. He came here, run for county judge and was county judge one year. I mean one term. And now he's up there and got a good law practice and doing real well. But the young people are not going to get out there and blister their hands a working. They just not gonna do it.

**BB:** Think education has played a lot?

**CW:** Education has played a lot and the parents are a lot to blame with them.

**BB:** Well, they want it better than they had it.

**CW:** When a kid graduates from school today he probably has...most of them have a new car or ..... I'm not saying anything about what the parents done. Just telling the difference between then and now. And the young people is not going to work. There'll be more stealing and robbing; committing suicide there's ever been if this thing don't make a change. It's already awful bad.

**BB:** That's true.

**CW:** It's really bad, it sure is. And it's going to back that way. If we have another war and kill out bunch of these young people, that's all it is. The rich man's battle and the poor man's fight. They just getting shed of a lot of people. That's what they are doing overseas, everywhere in those countries. The population is so great, that they are just slaughtering them out.

**BB:** And that takes care of the employment problem.

**CW:** That's right. It sure is.

**END OF INTERVIEW**