

LELA WEEKS

Interview 031a

Date unknown

Becky Bailey & Megan Lambert, Interviewers

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ABSTRACT: In this interview with Megan Lambert and Becky Bailey, Lela Weeks recalls growing up in East Texas (Nacogdoches, Diboll, Lufkin, and Wells). She also reminisces about the Depression, living near the Box Factory in Diboll, and making ends meet in hard times.

Megan Lambert (hereafter ML): Okay, well we need to test our tape by asking you to tell us your name and some other things.

Lela Weeks (hereafter LW): Where I was born?

ML: Yes, where you were born and when, if you don't mind?

LW: My name is Lela Low, and I was born in 1915 in Nacogdoches County at an old place called Frost Johnson Mill. And we lived there until about 1920 and my dad came back to Diboll and he got him a job at the planer mill. We couldn't find a house to rent then, so we had to move out to what they call Pine Valley. And he rented an old place from...they called it the old Hudson place. Our neighbors were Wesley Ashworth and his family. I have all his things down here if you want them.

Becky Bailey (hereafter BB): Oh good, that would be very useful for us.

ML: Let me check and see how this is recording for us. Okay, I guess we are ready to start.

LW: The Ashworth's came, the father's name was J.A. Ashworth. He had five sons, Jim, Harrington, Delbert, Wesley, Millie and he had two sisters, Cynthia and Lela. Then in those times we had to wait for a house here because the sawmill houses, all these people working here were renting them. And we got one and came back. And then I started to school in 1922. We were here and that was when we had the old commissary. I remember that very much. It was a huge building on the left hand side. As you go in across the track was the icehouse, then you came to the meat market, then you came on to the commissary. On the left hand side when you went in was the grocery department and in the center was the shoe department, and over on the right side was the dry good department. An old lady, Mrs. Fannie Farrington, took care of that. And then there was a place upstairs that was the men's department. Let me see if I can find the name of that. Wesley give it to me I know. Bud Rutland was the postmaster here at that time. And we had old Dr. Cook that was here. He came...I don't know how long he was here but he delivered many a baby here in Diboll. His name was something Harrison. And that is where my husband got his name, Harrison. He had a grandson named James Harrison;

my husband is John Harrison. And then we...going back to the commissary though, after you leave that you go into the drug store and then you went on down to the post office. And the doctor's office was upstairs over the post office. And then the old commissary, they cut it out about 1954, and we always went to the commissary, you know. If you had money to get things we could too. Then Dr. Dale, when he was here was up over the old post office. I'm quite sure Dr. Cook did too. They said Dr. Cook passed away about 1916. I know he delivered a cousin of mine in April 1916 and then when we came back in 1920, Dr. Dale was here. Then about 1922 we moved to Lufkin, up that way.

ML: What was your husband doing?

LW: My husband, when we moved away?

ML: Yes.

LW: I didn't have no husband, that was my dad.

ML: I see, I'm sorry.

LW: We moved to Lufkin and lived there about a year and a half. Then my daddy decided on the farm. So we moved out to the Fenley place out about 3 or 4 miles, it was 14 miles north of Lufkin. We farmed up there for three years and moved back on the old Diboll highway on what we called the Beene's place. Daddy raised crops there, then we went back to the Fenley place for a year and then we went to Wells.

ML: What was the main crop you were raising?

LW: Cotton.

ML: Cotton, I was pretty sure it was that.

LW: Oh my goodness girl, my Daddy would plant at least fifty acres. And it was cold, cold, cold all the time. And then he quit and we went to picking cotton in August. He would pick that cotton; I have chopped cotton in March.

ML: Oh my goodness.

LW: That is true.

ML: You and your brothers and sisters?

LW: Well my brothers were half brothers. The first year we were there, both of them stayed with us, but the next year my younger brother came back to Lufkin and my older brother stayed with us two years. He was killed in Texas City.

Now, let's see here, here is some of the old things I have. We talked about the commissary. Mr. Kirk Drew was the supervisor for all that when we first came back here. I told you already about Mrs. Farrington. Bud Rutland was the postmaster, and I told you about Dr. Cook and Dr. Dale. And then, Mr. Frederick was here, he had something to do with the mill. Martin Handler was the foreman over there a long time and also, Sage Ward. Then P.H. Strauss was the bookkeeper and Watson Walker was the manager. Hyman Wiese worked in the office too. Then Wesley Ashworth and then a fellow by the name of Charles Willowbee was manager of the men's department over at the commissary. We had a George Johnson that worked in everything, and we have...let me look back over here. Wesley Ashworth told me that Byrd Wylie was the first butcher that we had here. When he retired, well they haven't gotten that on here.

Anyhow, when we were here a man by the name of Cruthirds took care of the market. Mr. Drew was over the commissary and then a guy named...oh my goodness, why didn't I write that down. Cut that off and let me think. Let me see.

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LW: And then he left and went down to Texas City and one of our dearest friends, Aden (Lefty) Vaughn took that over. We still had Mrs. Farrington in the dry goods department and Erma Ashworth, Wesley Ashworth's wife, worked in there a lot with her.

My grandmother had four grown daughters when she came here and a son about 14 years old. The oldest daughter, as I said, married Bassett Cook. And then my mother...in 1904 Simon Henderson at Kelty's come and got my grandmother and moved her to Kelty's to run the boarding house there. And at the time my mother married a man named Will Hanks and another of the daughters married a man named Ed Simmons. Everybody here in Diboll knows him. And the other daughter married a man named Arthur Wilson, and at the time they were courting in that picture.

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ML: If there is ever anything that you don't want to be on the tape, just tell us and we will erase it or say that this is restricted. Okay could you tell us what your very first memory is of your childhood?

LW: Well yes, I must have been getting close to three years old, and we lived out there by that old Frost mill and I remember they cut my hair. And I got them to hold me up in front of the mirror to see myself, but I can't remember how I looked. I know the night my sister was born, October 14, 1918. I remember being in the kitchen by momma's door with my grandmother and I wanted to go back in there and she said "no you can't go back in there, put some wood in the stove." And that little 'ole door, I remember punching wood in there.

ML: And you were two years old?

LW: I was about three years old. And then I remember Daddy bought a place in Nacogdoches, out from Nacogdoches, sometime in 1918 because my uncle married before he went overseas. Mr. Hayman married before he went overseas, and Anna was born and she named the baby Harty Evans after my Uncle Hart and his wife Evie, I know that. And then we moved back to the sawmill in what we called sawmill houses, in front of Frost Johnson's mill. I remember us living there. I remember, like our house here on this side, and there was an old man that was night watchman named Overstreet. And he just raised the devil about us young un's out there in the yard playing, walking the fence. You know that kind of fence – you put a board up there, and we would walk that fence. And he went to the authorities and they told him “there is not anything I can do if they are in their own yard.” And when we left there we came to Diboll.

Let me tell you about the old Hudson place, you know I told you about it. We didn't have drinking water; we had to carry our drinking water if we needed it from Wesley Ashworth's home or his brother Harrison that lived there.

ML: They had wells?

LW: They had cisterns.

ML: They had cisterns.

LW: Momma would get the branch water to do her cooking and washing. She would boil the water before she used it. Unless you've drank boiled water you don't know how nasty it tastes.

ML: It does taste very nasty.

LW: We would drink the water then. And Momma boiled that branch water to do her cooking and things like that. Then I remember us moving back to Diboll down there...cut it just a minute let me get this straight.

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LW: There was a branch that run through at that time and we lived just across the branch on the right going down the street toward the old Diboll highway. Ed Day and his wife and children lived right behind us. And on the left side over there lived Arthur Sturrock and his wife and family. Ruth and Sage Ward and Flava lived right there too at that time. Stella Faye Jones, she was then, and her family. One time Stella Faye's brothers went fishing and they brought in some little old alligators.

ML: Oh my goodness.

LW: I remember they put them in a pond of water there by the house and I remember going down there and seeing those. I guess I was about six or seven years old.

ML: They got them out of the creek?

LW: They got them out of the river fishing. And then we had a neighbor...well I can't think...Mr. Cook and his wife and they had several children.

ML: What kind of chores did you have to do when you were young?

LW: Well around the house before we moved out, my sister and I didn't do much of anything, only go to school. She wasn't old enough to go to school. When we lived there in Lufkin on Moody Street, I walked back to that old Kurth Grammar School. That is where I went to school. We had a fellow living close to us next door – his name was Jim Gallagher. He run that old saddle shop there in Lufkin at that time, repaired shoes. And then on the other side we had a family lived by us named Harper. And they had two children.

ML: Can you describe your education and what your expectations were of your education?

LW: Well I'm gonna tell you honey, I was scattered around so many different times I didn't know. We moved from Lufkin out there to the Handley place and my sister and I had to walk three miles to school. Well, we went on through that three years there. We moved back to the Fenley place and went to school at the old Boles School that was down there. After we left there, back to the Fenley place and we moved to Wells and went to Wells school and I finished the eighth grade. That is when the Depression came on and we didn't have a coat or clothes to wear to school. And that is pretty much...

ML: That is when you stopped and went to work?

LW: Yes, at sixteen.

ML: At sixteen. Well, tell me again what year it was that you got married and where you lived first?

LW: We married in 1934 and we lived at the box factory. We first rented a room from Mrs.I can't think of her name now. We had two rooms with her and then a house came vacant at the old box factory and we moved back over there.

ML: At box town?

LW: We called it old box factory, box town now. And my mother lived there, her and my dad, and my half brother. Then my half brother...Harrison and I married in April or May of '34 and my brother and his wife married October of '34. And then Harrison's mother and dad lived just the other side of my mother. There was an old man there named Russell Dykes, I remember him. And, there comes Harrison now. That is where Laverne was born.

ML: I see. How about you're church that your family went too, did you have many church activities?

LW: No we didn't. No we didn't. We didn't have no church activities. We come back here and they started an old church in an old saloon building over there by [unintelligible] back over that way. And Harrison and I went to that church. And Harrison lost a brother along about that time who was killed on the highway, his name was Hubbard Weeks, we called him Hub. And then we got to where we didn't go to church at all. And Laverne was baptized the day she was ten years old at the First Baptist Church over there and that is where she's been ever since. And I mean we [unintelligible] and we would come up and [unintelligible]. I said, "yes we do." [unintelligible]

ML: Okay, do you think that you would like to talk to us about the Depression and about the difficulties you had in making ends meet at that time?

LW: I sure will.

ML: Okay.

LW: My brother worked at the box factory and then we moved over there at box factory housing. We had enough to eat, such as it was, we didn't have very many clothes to wear. We enjoyed it. We didn't have anything.

(Visitors arrive) Come in. This is Mrs. Lambert. This is my college friend. This is Becky Bailey. She knows Polly, she teaches school. I'm going down and visit with Jeb.

ML: We are not going to be too much longer. We won't hold her too much longer. We were talking about the Depression and how it was to make ends meet.

LW: Yes, well my brother came and got us oh, I'll say October of 1931 and brought us back to Diboll. And, I went on back to school for a year and then I went to school two years here and then I quit, and then I went to work. But I'm gonna tell you those times were hard. But let me tell you one good thing though, if you had as much as five dollars, you could go to Lufkin and buy a truckload. You could get that old timey salt pork for eight cents a pound. And 24-pound sack of flour was seventy-nine cents and five pounds of sugar was a quarter. And then you buy this can milk two cents a can at that time. And we lived pretty well I guess with what we had.

ML: So you don't feel like at that time you were terribly worried that your family was going to starve or anything like that?

LW: No I do not. I tell you, we were always close. My mother and dad were close and Harrison's family were too. And we just didn't pay much attention to it.

ML: I guess when you have a close family you have a little bit of insurance in bad times.

LW: You sure do, you share what ever you need to share.

ML: Yea and everybody helps.

LW: You see at that time we went back to the box factory, I wasn't dating then, I wasn't old enough to date. But now after I went to work at the box factory, I said, "I am."

ML: If I can work, I can date, huh?

LW: My first real boy friend was Nolen Hall. Harrison's older brother Hayden, married a Hall girl. And they lived right down from us for a little while. And through her we got acquainted with her family. And Nolen was my first serious boyfriend. Then I met Henry Weisinger, no he was my first, his name is Raymond, we called him "heavy" little ole bitty man. I went with him a while and then I went with Nolen, and then I started going with Harrison and I married him.

ML: He was the third one huh?

LW: Yes. I didn't have no serious affairs in my life really. I thought all of them over all right. He (unintelligible), I knew it from the start, whether he knew it or not. He was the most handsome man you ever saw. He had the prettiest head of hair, black curly hair you ever looked at. I think I married him for his hair.

ML: Did you tell him that? (laughter)

LW: I've only had one girl with really curly hair. And when she was going to high school here, her hair was the prettiest, curliest stuff you ever saw. And I never did cut her hair and after she married she got a permanent in it.

ML: Tell us about the house you lived in during the Depression. What was that like?

LW: Well, we had four rooms and a front porch and we had a little back porch. At that time, you know, we didn't have much furniture. And Momma put our brother's bed, Donald's bed, in the front room. She and I slept in the other room, and then Daddy's bed was in what we called the back room, the dining room. We had a little kitchen, we cooked on an old wood stove. And there you were.

But let me tell you, Harrison and I married in 1934, as I told you. And I told Momma the night before we left that Harrison and I was going to get married. She said, "oh no." I said, "oh yes." She said, "You go and buy you a better dress." I had five dollars and I went on and got married. Daddy said through the night he heard Momma talking and she said, "well I know it." (unintelligible)

Mr. Dixon and his wife went with us to get married. Old Uncle Frank Sullivan, here in Diboll, Justice of the Peace, married us right down here in that old green house right down here. On that same night Dottie Tull and Lois Smith married at the same place right

ahead of us. And we went on to the party, of course, you know. During the time my brother found out we had married he pitched a fit. He was going to kill Harrison and all this, so we spent the night with [unintelligible] and his wife. He didn't want me to marry Harrison. He wasn't good enough for me. Well he would have done the same thing. He was drunk too. (laughter)

Then, I was married in May and in June Harrison and I went to Campbell Furniture. We bought a bedroom suite, two chairs, an oil cook stove and kitchen cabinets. Momma asked me how much I paid for it. I said, "two hundred and nineteen dollars." "Oh My Lord, how are you going to pay for all that?" And I said, "don't you worry about it." And we had a dinner for my birthday, the second of June and Momma made room and we put that in her house and mine and Harrison's bed. We put the oil stove in the dining room and our cabinet. And we couldn't ask for any better. Me and Harrison have always been very, very, close. I don't care what you say – we have been close!

ML: That made up for some of the hard times you had.

LW: It certainly has. [unintelligible] Any problems, he came to me with it and if I had problems I went to him. And we never had any trouble with our girls. We set certain rules, and they had their limitations and they knew. And Laverne was 23 in March, married in December. And Tommy was 23 in October and married along the first of the year. Paula was 24 when she left. I'm not bragging, we were just all together and we shared our hard times. And I made all the clothes they wore. They wore lots of feed sacks too. During that war, you couldn't find material nowhere. We had a cow, and we had plenty of feed sacks. I'd wash them and starch them; they didn't care. I'm trying to think of the name...barnyard linen, I believe is what they called the feed sacks.

ML: Barnyard linen.

LW: Barnyard linen, but they were free.

ML: Well what do you think about the politics that were going on at that time?

LW: Well, I don't remember too much about it. Only I know they had them school buses. Oh, I mean they were against them school buses. You know, that is when we had the Depression that President Roosevelt, and it wasn't too long he set up this social security system. The best thing that was ever done.

ML: You think that was real good?

LW: The best thing that was ever done. Because there is my daddy about retirement age and Harrison's daddy was about retirement age. Then we paid in all those years, and see that is what we have. We live on social security. You ain't taping this are you?

ML: It is running, you want me to turn it off.

LW: Turn it off and let me tell you this.

ML: Okay.

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END OF INTERVIEW