

DEWEY BALLENGER

Interview 32a

June 20, 1984

Becky Bailey, Interviewer (Also present: Bea Burkhalter)

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Retyped by Daniel Guerrero

ABSTRACT: Dewey Ballenger reminisces about life in Burke and Diboll from the beginning of the 20th century. He remembers Diboll's saloons, his mother's boarding house, riding the train, Emporia, Ryan's Chapel, the Calaboose, the Jail, and Jay Boren. He worked for Southern Pine Lumber Company for his entire career and watched as Diboll and the company changed. He also recalls the Methodist and Baptist churches, Clyde Thompson, and Mr. H.G. Temple.

Becky Bailey: I'm interviewing Mr. Dewey Ballenger at the South Meadows nursing home. Today's date is June 20, 1984. My name is Becky Bailey. Okay, Mr. Ballenger, when did you first come to Diboll?

Dewey Ballenger: Well, I don't know just what – it's in December 1903. Yeah, 1903.

BB: Where were you born?

DB: I was born on Week's Place between Burke and Ryan's Chapel.

BB: What year was that?

DB: In 1898. I was born May 11.

BB: So you lived on a farm in Burke then?

DB: Yes, my father was a – he rented land every year.

BB: Was he a farmer then?

DB: He was a farmer. He got in bad health though and wasn't able to work and he got to be Justice of the Peace and he moved to Diboll in 1903.

BB: Was this a county job?

DB: Yes, it was a county job but it paid by the work he did by- it didn't pay a salary. It might pay a salary now. It's a whole bigger job now than it was then.

BB: What kind of cases did he have?

DB: Oh just mostly...uh...just...gambling, I guess you'd call 'em, just...just...

BB: Just things like that.

DB: Things like that.

BB: Did he ever have to try any moonshiners from around here?

DB: Moon shiners?

BB: Uh, huh.

DB: Well, when we moved to Diboll, at that time, there was two saloons here in Diboll.

BB: Oh, really?

DB: Yes, ma'am.

BB: Oh, I didn't know that.

DB: Seems to me like they was three. I know where they was all located; the third saloon didn't last too long.

BB: Uh, huh.

DB: And uh, my father died when I was ten years old. My mother was keeping boarders. We moved...first, moved there where Rat Johnson's, there were, well, I believe it's named Ballenger Street now. I didn't know it was a Ballenger Street out the edge of town just this side of the pump station. I don't know – there was a little school I went to. It burned. It was across the street from Dick Hendricks, isn't that what they call him, Dick?

Bea Burkhalter: That school that burned was over there near where Temple's office is now. Right in there.

DB: Well, it wasn't back in them woods there, that was all woods, you couldn't see.

BeaB: Yes, but it was there across the highway.

DB: Well, it was on the west side of the highway, used to be a public road there, dirt road then. Dirt road that run down, I believe it's what is called Saxton Street. And there – that was School Street, or Ballenger Street. It run down – out there where that – I can't think, uh, Nichols, and Mrs.... her sister lives. We had that in a garden. I remember Daddy and I was out there in the garden and a fellow came up and said they'd found a baby out by the river.

BB: What? Did you say they found a baby?

DB: Yes, they'd found Avery. I don't know if you remember Avery Thomas or not. My sister adopted him. Found him down this side of the river.

BB: You mean he'd just been abandoned?

DB: Uh, huh.

BB: Just found a baby out by the river?

DB: Just side the railroad, on the railroad.

BB: How old was he?

DB: Oh, he was a right young baby. He wasn't but a day or two old, I guess, I don't even know if he was a day old or not.

BB: So your sister adopted him?

DB: My sister didn't have no children, her husband married my wife and I. We'd been married 64 years, would have been 65 if she'd a lived, she died, uh—

BB: Yes, I know she died—

DB: Uh---

BB: How many other brothers and sisters did you have growing up?

DB: Well, there was ten of us. I had a brother that died before we moved to Diboll. We lived on what they called the old Belote place, too many people don't know where that Belote place was, kind of like they talk, don't know where the Powell Place was. They know about the Hobbs Kelly place. Powell, he moved out to the other side of the Massingill place and built out there.

BeaB: Willis Jordan lived there the last time.

DB: Yes, Willis Jordan lived there in that house, Kelly – that was all woods... I joined the church here when I was ten, well; I was about 8 years old. I was ten when my daddy died, and I'd joined a long time before he died. He belonged to the Baptist Church and my mother belonged to the Methodist Church. That's my Grandpa Ryan up there. That's John Ryan, he Daddy and an uncle was Isaac Ryan, Methodist preacher. They settled out here before there was ever a railroad through here. They set it out on the old Ryan's fields. Franklin Weeks said his wife, she went to the county and she looked it up and there was a deed made to the place. I didn't know that, and, uh – he married a Ryan. I didn't know he married a Ryan. His wife was a little kin to me, she was on – no, her uncle owned...uh. I understand it – as I understand it she was an Isaac Ryan's.

BeaB: Yes, Isaac Ryan's granddaughter, I believe she was –

BB: When you joined the Methodist Church, it was the one down there, the First Methodist, wasn't it?

DB: When I joined the church it was there where Wesley Ashworth's place, the woodman's odd fellows, and K.C.'s met overhead and they had the Baptist and the Methodists preached one Sunday and on the next.

BB: So everybody went to the same church?

DB: Yes, and the Baptists moved up to Copestown, there wasn't no depot here then and they tried to get the depot up in Copestown but I guess the company had more say so than anybody else. Used to be a big stretch of woods between here and Copestown. Up there when I was, aw, thirteen or fourteen years old.

BB: By yourself?

DB: My mother, she, like they say had – uh, you asked that a while ago and I forgot all about it. When my father died there was two younger than me and two older than me besides Luella, Mr. Austin, when Mr. Austin died and left her with two babies, Frank and Edgar, and they were here with us, we moved then, well we moved then and were there in the Averitt's place. Averitt was Constable; my daddy was Justice of the Peace. The Calaboose was behind, behind about where Mr. Nathan's house was between there and over where we lived. The Averitt's house and there was a colored fellow burned up one day, one night, in it.

BB: Did what now? Did you say someone burned up in it?

DB: Yes, there was a colored fellow burned up in the Calaboose. The courthouse was there where the vacant house was. There was a sweet gum tree that was right even with the window of the courthouse, used to be an alley that run down between our garden and where the Brokers lived but the company finally built a house there. We had a garden there where the Hudson's and Nichol's and Mrs. Jordan, about half of what's Mrs. Jordan's. Moses Pruitt lives up there in that house that the Tatum's lived in at the time we moved there. They'd come over to the house and uh, Mr. Hunter had put us a hydrant there where George Johnson lives, Rat Johnson, and they'd come over to get water.

BB: This was an outside hydrant?

DB: Outside, yes ma'am

BB: How long was there a jail here in Diboll?

DB: Oh, well, there have been two. They finally built a Calaboose over here on the west side of town. Jay Boren went over there one evening, one night, and killed a colored

fellow. I don't know what they had him in there for, being drunk or something. I think, I don't know, he might of had a right to shoot the fellow, colored fellow, seemed like a mighty good fellow to me, I knew the fellow.

BeaB: I don't know either; they said he came at him with a knife or something.

DB: Well, he might have come at him, I didn't hear that. I knew Jay was quick on the trigger and didn't have much respect for the colored fellow. I went to work for the company when I was 14 years old. They don't hire them that way now, it's against the law. Went to school a lot of evenings, maybe Saturdays. I picked up sticks on the hardwood yard for ten cents an hour, that's what they paid me.

BB: Who would teach you at night? You said you went to school at night? No? Did you quit school then, at 14?

DB: Yes, well, my mother tried to keep me going but I thought I was grown and had to work and I quit school when I was 14 years old, I guess. Made a crop the year before I went to work maybe out there on the old Warner place by Jeff Jayroe. Bought it from uh, I know his name, I can't think of it, he married a Weisinger and he had a good job where they treated lumber and he went to Mississippi up that way somewhere. Well, I went to work for the company when I was 14.

BB: Did you make any money at your cotton crop?

DB: Oh, we made a bale or two of cotton. Cotton sold for around four or five cents a pound.

BB: How much did that weigh, about two hundred pounds?

DB: Oh, a bale weighed five hundred pounds, that's what a bale of cotton weighed.

BB: Did you have to pay to use the land, was it a share cropping?

DB: Yes, I farmed on the halves.

BB: So that was one bale for him and one for you.

DB: Yes, this colored fellow, old Henry "Shug" Smith, I think he's dead. There were two brothers and they lived up there on the hill where the café, about where the road goes to Ryan's Chapel. I worked a day for Henry and his boys'd work a day for me. We swapped work, his mother could cook cornbread that you could smell half a mile, sure was good. That's about when – we moved then over on Ballenger Street and, oh, I joined the church before we moved there, I had to deed the place over to the chaps – the children.

BB: Now, your mother kept a rooming house?

DB: No, Beanery, what they called the “Beanery”. There were two boardings, what they called the Star Hotel and the Beanery. She was up there four years and lived up there when the mill 3 burned. Well, we were living in the old beanery at the time. I never did go to the army. I got classed A-one; I believe it was, I’ve got the old card now, up there at the house.

BB: What is your very first memory as a child?

DB: First thing? Well, you’re gonna laugh. Before we moved to Diboll I remember we had a pot of hog slop, warm vegetables and all, and I sat down in it. (Laughter) That was when we lived at the old Belote place.

BB: As a child, did you have any chores to do?

DB: Well, no more than peddle buttermilk and vegetables in the quarters. We didn’t have an allowance at that time and every time we made a nickel we turned it over to our mother. And, uh, every day we’d peddle buttermilk and my mother had milk cows and she tended them outside and always had a hog or two to kill every winter.

BB: Did you have to help with the hog killing?

DB: I was too young.

BeaB: Honey Weiss, remember Honey Weiss? He married an Ashford, he’s dead. Mother always made hogshead cheese and Honey Weiss would always buy what she didn’t use. I remember, they tore the old planer down, I remember before it ever turned a wheel. We lived at Burke and I’d come down with my daddy down the railroad. I tried to walk around the bull nettles but I’d always get into them. He’d take a chew of tobacco, he always chewed tobacco, and wipe my feet with it and that’d kill the sting.

BB: What other sort of work did you do at the mill as you got older?

DB: When I got old enough they put me on the yard doing common labor. I did everything on the hardwood yard but stack lumber. I never did ask for a promotion, never did ask but for one raise and Henry Temple gave it to me. How come me to ask for the raise, Jayro, my sister and her husband bought butane. They put a butane system in and my wife wanted one and I asked Mr. Temple for a dollar raise and he gave it to me.

BB: Do you remember how much you were making then?

DB: Well, I don’t know just what I was making; the company had me on a salary ever since 1903 or 4. They put me, when the hardwood mill burned; Ernest Rutland was regular at the mill. He didn’t want them cutting hardwood at night on mill two. They put me out there, I didn’t know one from the other, but they put me out there to marking lumber anyway. I stayed out there for four years and finally they pulled me to put me out on the yard, inspecting lumber. I wasn’t there long before old man Cleveland; he was in

charge of hardwood sales. He lived over there just beside the Methodist Church. They tore that old building down and he sent me to Kountze, over to a little lumberyard. They had advanced some money on a man's lumber if he'd cut it. I stayed down there about nine months and I got mad and walked off and it learned me a lesson – not to walk off another job, not unless I had one.

BB: Did you come back here then, and go to work?

DB: I came back here finally and went to work at the planer and went to work a few months for Bob Weeks. Your Uncle Teets was yard foreman at the time. He was inspector when I quit. They'd shut the hardwood down, it got so dull. He'd been inspector and took me off the planer and on to the hardwood yard. I worked there until they cut out. And they made me a job looking after take-down at night the last four, five, six months. I just walked around. They had uh, sent that Cook boy well, sent Sweeny to Pineland as manager and the Cook boy was the shipping clerk. He and Sweeny couldn't get along. The Cook boy, they brought him back to Diboll, gave him my job. They didn't cut my salary, they let me walk around and they kept me on salary. I went down to the old office to get me a drink of water. Old Teich was in there asking old man Walker to put me on a salary in 1903 or 4 and they kept me on a salary up 'til then.

BB: When did you retire? Did you retire from Temple?

DB: I worked fifty years for Mr. Temple.

BB: What year did you retire?

DB: I couldn't tell you that. I retired when I got 65. I worked from May to the first of the year after I was 65 in order to be in the Temple Retirement Plan. I liked to have been too old for that! (Laughs) I worked until I was 65 and I'm 86 now. That's been –

BB: About twenty years ago now.

DB: That's right.

BB: When did you meet Mrs. Ballenger?

DB: Oh, her brother came down here, my brother-in-law. He was the Methodist preacher, living at Gary and we had five, six little churches he preached at. I met her brother. I'd go up there; he preached at Gary, my wife was raised at Blair.

BB: How far is that from here?

DB: About sixty miles away.

BB: Did you go by train?

DB: Well, yes, I went by train at the time, and the first time I saw my wife, they had a fair at Timpson and I went home with her folks to spend the night, seeing as how I knew her brother. The first time I saw her she was setting on an old fence and an old colored woman was milking a cow. I say cow, maybe there were more than one. She was watching for her folks to come home. I didn't know at that time she would ever be my wife. She was small. I thought she was too small for me to look at (Laugh).

BB: How old was she at the time?

DB: She was fifteen when we married, she would have been 16 on the first of August. You can figure how old she was.

BB: When did you see her first, what year was that?

DB: Well, I don't know what year it was, but I know – you're going to laugh – the old man, her daddy, was out at the woodpile. They lived in a – wasn't many farmhouses then painted but their house was painted. He was out chopping wood and I went and told him me and my wife was figuring on getting married. He said, "Well, he guess so, go tell my wife, tell her mother." Well, their house was two big rooms with a fireplace in each room. It was getting late, my sister lived in Timpson. It was getting late. I had hired a taxi out there and I was gonna walk back to Timpson. I went in and told my wife's mother, her mother, her oldest brother and his wife and her younger brother that I already knew and his grandmother. I went in and told them that we were figuring on getting married. She talked around. Her oldest brother said, "Well, you never did answer his question," her brother, younger brother, had just got back from the navy. I remember when we got married her daddy said, "Now, Dewey, now a sawmill's no place to raise a family. You come on up here and go to farming." He had seven, all seven of his chaps living at the time and all living there on his place. As they married, all married, they were all married except my wife and her younger brother. And they were all living on the place. As they'd marry, well, he'd build them a little house and give them the land. That is, give them the land to work. He still owned the land at his death.

BB: You decided the sawmill was a better place, huh?

DB: That was all I knew – was the sawmill, and I didn't pay him any mind.

BB: What kind of house did you live in when you first set up housekeeping?

DB: Well, we lived with my mother.

BB: At the Beanery?

DB: No, she'd moved down --- her family offered to sell me the place for thirty-two hundred dollars, I believe. I offered them twenty five, and old man Anthony said he'd have to talk to little Arthur. Come back and he said then little Arthur said all right. I got to figuring it would cost a thousand dollars to tear the old place down and lumber for

building, the studs, some of them were four feet apart, so I went back and told old man Anthony I'd pay one thousand dollars for the lot and he said he'd have to talk to little Arthur. He went and saw little Arthur and Arthur said "All right he'd take a thousand dollars." So I gave him a thousand dollars, at the time my youngest brother was uh, he was living in the old house. They cut it in two and made two houses. I know where the two houses are now, one of them they moved kind of behind the new doctor's office, clinic and the other one is over there on that first street there, behind uh, they made two houses. Anthony told me later that the company came out pretty good on the deal.

BB: So, this was on Ballenger Street, where you and your wife lived?

DB: It wasn't no street at all, at the time. It wasn't incorporated at the time.

BB: Okay.

DB: Wasn't incorporated, there weren't any streets or anything.

BB: Okay, but it was a company house over there.

DB: The Company owned everything, everything was under fence. Company would build you a chicken house or a cow pen, but they wouldn't build you a car house. (Laugh) They'd loan you money to buy these things but they wouldn't loan you money to buy a car.

BB: Oh really? They loaned you money for chickens? And cows?

DB: And cows, and build you a garden, they kept fences and everything. Company owned everything. Used to be a sawmill here, W.T. Carter owned a sawmill here when we moved to Diboll. And the Baptists, when the weather got warm enough, they'd come down and baptize in the Emporia pond.

BB: Do you remember Emporia?

DB: Yes, I remember Emporia. I've been on the Old Emporia tram. Carter finally cut out and moved to mill town, cut out there and he moved to Manning and Camden.

BB: Uh huh. They just moved their mill when all the lumber was gone – when the trees were gone?

DB: I remember when Carter used to live down here where, uh – I was in Henry Temple's office one morning when Clyde Thompson came in there, I might have told you about it before. He said, Conn lived in the old house, I thought Conn was getting a lot of accommodations out of the company. He said, "We're going to have to give a hundred dollars to Anthony, he's suing the company, claims he got hurt out there." He said, "He went and hired Musslewhite, now we're going to have to do something about him." So Conn told me, Conn was just taking the fellows money and doing nothing

either. The company got busy and settled with Anthony. Anthony wasn't over these houses; it was a different set of Anthony's. Anthony married into the Temple family. Married into the, oh – uh – he didn't marry a Temple, oh, him and Durham married sisters. You remember E. C. Durham, used to be over at T.S.E., he married a sister of them. She died down here where, oh, the house just below where Poulard, uh – oh –

BeaB: Where Vernon's office was.

DB: Yes, I got sweet gum lumber to make a dressing table in the bathroom for old man Anthony.

BB: Mr. Ballenger, how many children did you and your wife have?

DB: We had four girls and one boy, the boy was in the middle. And uh – I had...my wife died, you said you knew when my wife died, she died the twenty-fourth of January. I had a daughter; she married and was working in Oklahoma City. She died in the Houston Hospital. We found out she was diabetic when she was eleven years old. She was nearly dead, the doctors didn't know much about it and we didn't know anything at all. Took her to Houston hospital to a specialist down there. I had a daughter living down there. I have a daughter living in Houston now, she's sixty two, she's retired. I have another one living, they pay Houston tax. She's living on the lake down there, what's that? Lake Houston. Ain't that the name? She lives eleven miles from Humble. They get their mail at some little place. You can see their place when you cross the bridge if you know where to look. They have a nice place down there, pair for. He pays everything cash. He never did work for anybody but Hughes Tool. He retired from them. I've got...and my daughter that's dead, her husband, a boy in his fifty's, crowding sixty, he had all kind of sense, he carried her to Houston. He finally got his oil company to transfer him to Humble Oil Company there in Houston, they gave him a little job there in the office and he hasn't worked though. He retired, he's on a pension now, I think he is. I don't know where he's at now. Over in Louisiana, he sent me a shirt for Father's Day.

BB: Where do your other children live? Where does your son live now?

DB: My son lives at...uh, he lives at Granberry. Lives on the lake there, he's retired, he's not sixty years old. He's got a Baskin Robbins ice cream store in Fort Worth, he's got a son and his wife was teaching school at Austin at the time, and they quit their jobs, he was teaching school and she was, too. They've got three boys. Aw...he's got a son-in-law that's a Christian preacher, they're in Tennessee right now, he made a doctor outta his self. Preached in Oklahoma City and then made a doctor, and one of his professors, one of his teachers, wanted him to put in his application to go up there to Tennessee to his hometown. But he's to move to Houston next month, I believe, the church down there paid for him and his wife and his boy and girl, their two children, paid their plane fare to come to Houston. He's got the job down there, so he's to move there the first of July.

BB: Is Lester Bruce, now, is that your youngest daughter's son?

DB: No, uh...

BB: (Shouting) Lester.

DB: Lester, yeah, he's the only, she's the only one of the chaps I ever whipped.

BB: (Laughing) Why'd you do that?

DB: Well, I don't remember, I 'member my mother always whipping me. And I was...I worked and turned my pay over to my mother. I married on the twentieth of the month, and they paid off twice a month. I given my money on the fifteenth to my mother, and she give part of it back, and she kept part of it. I had seven or eight hundred dollars in the bank, I guess when I married, if she hadn't a been strict on me, I guess I'd a spent the money and it would a been gone. We was setting on the porch out there where Deans is across the street from where my mother lived, and the chap...I don't know where the other four was, they had went to a show or something, and the chap was cutting up, I guess she wanted to do something and I told her if she didn't shut up, well I was gonna get me a switch after her. I was gonna run a bluff on her. And she met me at the door when I was coming in with the switch and told me I didn't know who I was fooling with. I took the switch away then; I had to tan her little legs. (Laughter) My boy, he was in the middle, there was two girls then a boy, and then two girls. He peddled the Beaumont Enterprise. He worked for Rat Johnson and his brother. They had the Houston Post and the Chronicle here at the time and they paid him so much a month to deliver papers. They both delivered, Rat and his brother Aden, they both delivered papers. He finally saved his money and bought him a bicycle. He bought him a girl bicycle so his sisters could ride it, too. I remember Glen Hines...he'd have Glen tote a load of wood, then they'd ride around the house. Him and Glen would fight, they'd play together. I learned one thing though, since I got married, don't accuse someone of something if you don't know. I accused a colored woman that was doing our washing of getting two one dollar bills outa my pocket. She come and get the dirty clothes and wash 'em. I come in at dinner and asked my wife if she'd got the money out of my pocket, she had sent them trousers to the pressing shop. She said, "Naw, I didn't feel anything." So I just knowed the colored woman that went through my pockets, she come in and get the clothes, you know, and take 'em out and wash 'em. She went through my pockets and got them two dollar bills. I went down to the clothing shop and asked them if they'd found any money in my trouser. They said naw, but they'd go back and see, they was hanging on the line. And they went back and brought back my two one dollar bills, wet. And I'd accused the old Nigra woman.

Well, when we lived there beside of Rat Johnson, we had the same old Nigra woman helping my wife clean house. I'd give my boy a dime bank and every time I'd get a dime, I'd give it to him. And I'd told my boy not to be playing with the bank, and to keep it put up. Well, I got a dime, wanted to put it in the bank, and I couldn't find the dime bank. I just knowed that the same Nigra woman that had the run of the house and had got the bank. But George Stovall..., my wife, there was an old lady died, and she

was going to the funeral and she found the bank. George was working down at the Box Factory over across the pond at the time, and I went over there and told him, told him I was satisfied the old negro woman had got the – he told me to come over to the house, wanted to know how much there was in the bank, wasn't much in there. I told him it wasn't much, twenty cents, I thought. He told me to come to the house after work time; I think we got your bank. And that taught me not to accuse somebody of something I didn't know.

BB: What did you all do at night? Did everybody visit back and forth at night?

DB: Well, my mother she always knew where I was when I went to work at night. Sometimes I'd slip off and come swimming down here at Emporia pond. Look like here about where Maynard Street crosses the pond that used to be under water. Baptists came down here on the banks and baptized. My father, he belonged to the Baptist church, my mother belonged to the Methodist. She was a Ryan, she moved to this country when she was four years old.

BB: To this country? What country was she from?

DB: She was from Mississippi. My wife's folks were from Alabama. They moved from Alabama and went out to California for the Gold Rush, stayed out there a year, I think. Then they moved back...they had...aw, I never did, well, I did meet some of them, but not many of them knights. Uncle Dick Knight, he was at our wedding, him and his wife. He lived up there; he sold that Lufkin land they built the mill on up there. He had a brother that lived out here at Huntington. I never did meet them.

BB: Did the church ever have any special events that you can think about?

DB: Well, I went to Sunday school. I remember when they built the one they tore down and built the one that's here now. This is the third Methodist Church, since I was a member.

BB: What did the first one look like?

DB: The first one was just a big old two story building the K.C.'s and Odd Fellows and Woodsmen met in. There weren't but two churches at the time and the Baptists and Methodists met downstairs and...they formed Copestown up here, it's all Diboll now, and the Baptists bought a lot up there and built where the congregational Methodist is. They built there. Used to be a bunch of woods between here and there.

BB: Then the Methodists went and built a church. What did it look like?

DB: I think I got a picture of it there in that book. See if that ain't a book down there. Lon Smith, Clyde Thompson and I were on the board when they built this new church and they met up here at Lee Estes' one night and decided to bring it to a vote at church. Smith, myself and Clyde Thompson, he had business away from town and he was going

to make a speech about building a new church. Pate was against it but Bob Byerly, he used to be saw filer here, he appointed Pate to make a speech for it. Pate told me afterwards that he hated to make a speech for it and then vote against it. So they voted for a new church and it's a good thing they did.

BB: So that's the one that's standing now?

DB: Yes, there used to be a drilling house between the parsonage and the church. I understand Byerly and Clark bought the place and gave it to the church. I remember when the pecan trees were set out there. Old brother McCain set them out. Dr. McCain, he was.

BB: Well, I'm about out of tape.

END OF INTERVIEW