

Mrs. Vina Wells
Interview 34a
June 28, 1984, Diboll, Texas
Becky Bailey, Interviewer
Dorothy Farley and Becky Donahoe, Transcribers
Retyped by Samantha Johnson

ABSTRACT: Born in Sabine County, Texas, in 1899, Vina Wells recalls life in East Texas forest communities during the early twentieth century. The daughter of lumberman Louis “Pop” Jordan and Mellie Willis, she describes living conditions at the Southern Pine Lumber Company logging camps at White City (in San Augustine County) and Fastrill (in Cherokee County) from the 1910s through the 1930s. She worked at boarding houses at both of these camp towns. Her husband was Ritchie Wells, a Southern Pine Lumber Company woods foreman.

Becky Bailey (hereafter BB): I’m interviewing Mrs. Vina Wells at her home in Diboll Texas. Today’s Date is June 28, 1984. With me is Mrs. Burkhalter and my name is Becky Bailey. Mrs. Wells, Where were you born?

Vina Wells (hereafter VW): I’m not going to tell you – I was born in Sabine County at the nearest town, I think it was about seven miles and it was Brookeland.

BB: Okay, Sabine County, now where is that?

VW: Sabine, that is, this company has a, like here and it is Pineland. Well, Pineland is in Sabine County and then Hemphill is, I don’t know if it is, I believe it is.

Beatrice Burkhalter (hereafter BEA): I think it is the county seat, I think Hemphill is the county seat.

VW: And Jasper on down the other way. But Jasper was, let’s see, what was that, somebody came there and worked a while, they thought they ought to do better and they left and he said something about, I can’t think now but it was a real funny thing. But he said something about going to Jasper and Juet got over the line because he didn’t want to live in Sabine County. He got a house that was just on the line.

BB: Do you mind telling us when you were born?

VW: No, if I know. I was born February 14, 1899.

BB: On Valentine? Almost a new century kid.

VW: Yes, because of that, you see.

BB: What kind of occupation did your dad have, what did he do for a living?

VW: Oh, then we were on a farm. My mother's parents died, well, the father died before, just before my mother was born and her uncle came and got her and raised her and he lived at Gum Bottom and that is really where we lived. He had, I guess it was like a – He had a big farm and he had a big, a whole lot of children of his own, had 12, and then took my mother and her brother. But when Mamma grew up, of course, and my father's people lived over at Pineland, you know. But what I was going to say about what my father did, when one of them married, well, they would give them a house to live in and they just stayed on and that's, my mother got her place and I meant it was everybody this way.

BB: You mean he built homes for all 12 of his kids?

VW: Yes, no, some of them, if they were girls who married boys, well, they had places—

BB: They would move out, huh?

VW: Yes, and what I was going to say the name of that farm was in a big creek bottom and it was bottom land, they called it, and that's why it was called Gum Bottom. That was the funniest thing, somebody asked me, well, I guess it was a pretty long time ago, and he said "where were you raised?" I said, "Oh, it was somebody at Gum Bottom that asked me this, or at Pineland that asked me and, of course, they knew about it but it was through the woods over there about ten miles."

BB: Were there a lot of Gum Trees; is that why they called it that?

VW: Yes, Sweet Gum and there were a lot of fruit trees on that farm and it was up near their house and they had every kind of tree, even cherry trees, pear, peach, plum, just every kind and that's where we stayed most of the time.

BB: What kind of crops did your dad raise?

VW: They had cotton and corn and, well, this is the funny part. I thought it was, he had a big, what did they call it—This old thing of water out in the pasture and around that he raised rice and they would, they didn't pipe it out, they dug ditches out around and, you know, it takes a lot of water to raise rice. I didn't remember that much myself but mamma said they did it. And also he had a big log, I think it was, it wasn't a pine log because that wouldn't have been good but Uncle Jim had that great big tree and they made a log thing to pan the row and they would get out the rice. Mamma said that it was the best rice.

BB: I'll bet it was a lot different than our milled. By the time they get through with it it's not all that good.

VW: Yes, that that you don't have to cook, just pour some hot water over it.

BB: Did you have many brothers and sisters?

VW: There was, how many of us were there? There was one boy and three girls.

BB: Were you the oldest?

VW: I was the very first one and, you know, me being born in 1899, that was the coldest winter that they ever had and here, you know, we had a real bad one, winter, last winter but before that, -- do you remember that one before that one? I can't think which year it was, but everybody, all older people, said this is the coldest winter we have had since 1899. And I want to tell you this, Mamma, of course, got pregnant and this is it and poppa, everybody raised their hogs, you know, and I remember our place where we had to smoke it, you know. We had this smoke house and Poppa and Mamma were going to save a ham on the hog. They were going to save a ham. They just put it up there with the other and smoked it and they would take that down and put it in big clean boxes, you know, with the shucks off the corn and it kept real good. They had to pick cotton and Mamma picked with Poppa, just like the men did, all of them did that. Uncle Jim you know, had, I don't know whether his was just, it wasn't just boys, I think it was six boys and six girls but, anyway, there were twelve children. But mamma said she – two or three times she had been tempted to take that ham down and use it but she wanted to have it there because when she wanted to have it there because when she would come in home, they would have it there and she wouldn't have to cook so much. And she said, sure enough, they got ready when the cotton got ready and said she came to the house and poppa cut it down and it didn't – wasn't a thing but that skin and the worms had eaten all of it. They said that whole thing was just hanging up there.

BEA: They called those “skippers” that ate the meat up.

VW: Whatever it was got in there, they got in there and they ate it up.

BEA: But they called them skippers.

VW: Bugs, they were some kind of a bug.

BEA: They were big and were called skippers.

VW: I'll tell you something else they did up there. Now, Uncle Jim, we all called him, of course Mamma's uncle. He, you know, he got a part of what they all made and he got kind of money mad and he went to Brookeland and, oh, there's something else I got to tell you, too, but this didn't have a thing to do with Diboll.

BB: That's fine – tell up about this.

VW: And he put in a big store down at Brookeland, but I was going to tell you everything leads to another and I can't quit but it is not a thing about Diboll, how it has grown.

BEA: This is your childhood we are talking about now.

BB: Did you have a lot of chores to do as a child?

VW: Not then, not till we, I think we left Brookeland and moved to Pineland, maybe. I don't think – we didn't live in Brookeland then. But he built that store there and they were just building a track, the choo choos, they were coming from Beaumont, or was it – where was it? It wasn't Houston, it was Beaumont, I think. And it would come through Brookeland and going on to somewhere, I don't know where else. But when it got to Brookeland, you see now, Uncle Jim had built his house down there and moved his family, what he had left, of course, they were all grown up and married and everything else. But this, they got that part of the railroad up that far and they were going to run one and everybody that wanted to could ride down to Beaumont or was it Galveston? I guess, I don't know where it was, somewhere down there. But we didn't that, it didn't run down there then, but it went down to Kirbyville and I was little but Ora was already born and she was about two and a half years younger than me and we still lived up there but we got up in the wagon and went down to Brookeland and there were a lot of people gathered up there and here comes this train, it wasn't, it wasn't for people. It was the work train, but I remember they had the feet, this plank nailed up around for us to step on that's when I found out that I was going to vomit, all my life and remember Poppa, I'll tell you he did a wonderful thing, he got a big sack full of candy and it was all colors, pink and blue and yellow and all like that and I ate it and I And you know, 'til this day I can't ride in the front seat of the car with anybody else driving. I can't stand it in the back, I just don't go, you know. I don't drive a car any more now and I turn down so many times because who wants me to climb up there in the front seat and their wives in the back seat? That was the awfulest thing. But we got on that train, I don't even remember getting back and getting up in that wagon, but I know we did because here I am. But I just, I'll tell you something else about me, you know, everybody nearly that had children had a swing, a rope, there was always a rope and a limb to put it on, a great big old limb and I couldn't swing in that. They would all go way up and have the best time and I would go out there and sit down and watch because I couldn't stand it. And I'm not able to this day, I can't stand to look at anybody swinging.

BB: What kind of school did you go to?

VW: Well, up there, at Gum Bottom, well, they had a schoolhouse at Lone Star. They had that there after I was grown and had moved away and everything, but I reckon on some time they must have done it different, but it was just one big room with one big chimney to put a fire in if it was cold weather.

BB: Was it a regular fireplace?

VW: Yes, a regular fireplace, we didn't have no stoves, not when I first started to school.

BB: Did they have all the grades together?

VW: Yes, and then when it came Sunday we had church there and we weren't too close to that, I think it was three miles and we had – now when I started school, oh, Uncle Andrew had a big family like Uncle Jim and their land, you know, it met and he was Poppa's uncle and Uncle Jim was Mamma's uncle – but they lived on one hill and the other lived on the other hill and Poppa-

BB: Well, would they take a wagon and take all the kids to school then?

VW: No, we walked, but what I was going to say – I started, of course, and Uncle Andrew's children, Uncle Jim had already moved away and they walked, well, I was supposed to walk with them. Well, they were grown and their legs were long and my legs were short and I felt sick and Mamma said it was because of walking and running and trying to keep up. Poppa got, well, Mamma, one of Mamma's cousins, one of Uncle Jim's daughters, had married and – there's something about that but I'm not going to tell that because it is too long – that girl that married, any – they had a house over there and it wasn't close, it was about a mile and a half, but on Monday mornings Poppa would carry me to school with a little bundle under my arm and I would go home with these boys, they had two boys and I'd go, then on Friday he would come and get me from school. And we did that until Mamma got tired of that, me being away and I did, too. They started Ora, she wasn't as old as I was. I don't reckon they did anything about paying for it. I don't remember anything about it. But we would be dark getting home because we would stop and play and one time- a tree there, just a little way up, pretty high, but it was stooped over and I said, “ Now, Ora, you hold this and I'm going to walk out on it”, crawl out and I did and she turned it loose and bang, but the scariest thing if I had had any sense, was while we were playing out beside the road there was a snake there and it would round up, but we didn't have anything and wouldn't know how to do it but do you know, we carried rocks and big sticks and covered that thing up. You know sometimes they would come and hunt us. I think they were trying to rid of us. Well, there is too much more, let's go on to Diboll.

BB: To Fastrill? How did you get to Fastrill? Did you marry?

VW: Listen, Hon, we - they never did mention about us being at White City..

BEA: That was another camp that they had before Fastrill.

VW: We got, we just went and – I had my babies then and ...

BB: Well, when did you marry?

VW: I don't know, I have forgot, I got my marriage license in there, but I don't know.

BB: About how old were you?

VW: I was sixteen, that was about the age girls married then.

BB: Seems awfully young.

VW: Yes, it does to me now. But – what was I going to say?

BB: What did your husband do?

VW: Oh yes, when we got there why he had just come back from the army and I've got to tell this, or you all won't understand. I'd been married before and my husband, Richie, he knew about it and he also knew that I had children, but he just loved the children. And, of course, he would, play like it anyway. Anyhow, I wanted to tell you about that place over there. We, my baby was eight months old and we were going to take it over to the place to eat, the boarding house and ...

BB: Was this in White City now, the boarding house in White City?

VW: Uh huh, and that was really something, there were a whole lot of Negroes, of course, and a lot of them on, ...it was big farm and there was a whole lot of stuff all around the road like, if there was a road. Poppa had a car and nobody else did.

BB: You were still living with your parents when you lived in White City?

VW: Yes, just forget the other...

BB: Oh, Okay and then he went to work for Temple or Southern Pine?

VW: He was working for them when he had to go to the war, this is World War I. But we all made out, too, of course, we made out with... but we didn't stay there for about two years 'til they cut out and they moved us in our cars, in the cars and we cooked on the way and I was having....You know, they just about got us on their train and the Negroes was on one part of it and we had to cook for the Negroes going on, they were cutting the timber as they went through it. I think they were building the track, too, because we didn't just get up and go on over there, we had...

BB: It was kind of like camping out on the way?

VW: Yes, they would work just like they always did and we had to feed them. I never saw such.... You know, with the Negroes and they sawed with saws, not like now... and they ate, too.

BB: Were most of them single men or did they have (families)?

VW: No, they didn't have... we didn't take no families to cook for but –

BB: What did White City look like, what do you remember about it?

VW: Well, I'll tell you, we had a big mud hole right out in the middle, and you know, we were on the sidetrack and when the passenger train came it came there and it turned around there to go back and that is as far as it went. But the funny part was, there were some of the Negroes and some the white people that – they made whiskey, you know, and they would bring it in their wagons in big jugs and things and sell it. If you wanted to buy a drink or if you wanted to buy a gallon, they did that – that was during...

BEA: That was during prohibition.

BB: Prohibition or what?

VW: Uh huh, I guess so, I don't know why they did it but they did.

BB: Well, did the law ever come and try to stop them?

VW: No, no.

BB: They didn't care what you all did out in the woods?

VW: No, we had a justice there, but he shut his eyes, I guess.

BB: So you had the law in the camp, huh? How many people lived in White City?

VW: Well, not nothing like...

BB: In Fastrill?

VW: No, but they lived, the ones that they could move, the houses on wheels.

BEA: Boxcars?

VW: Yeah.

BB: What did the house look like?

BEA: They looked like a box car.

VW: I'll tell you, it had to be straight in the road.

BB: You had a hall all the – you had to go through rooms to get to the next room?

VW: Uh huh, no, you didn't, but the - some men who didn't have their families living there well, they had some that was down on the ground, you know, of course they had to go stay there but when they moved, well, they put them back on the track.

BB: What did your house look like, was it a boxcar, too?

VW: It was, and it was the awfulest thing but that woman, she had killed that man, or it was something she done and they were getting rid of her, I don't know, I forgot what happened. At any rate, and if I could think I'd tell you who had it before she did, but I can't think now. But anyway, she, you know they had a great big stove, a nice stove and, they had a - what was the thing they called, the stove had a -

BEA: Reservoir? Where you heat your water?

VW: Yeah.

BEA: On one end of it was a reservoir.

VW: But that stove, the grease was dripping off of it, it was all so - I didn't think we would ever get it cleaned up and it didn't look like the same place when we did because we got Negroes and we washed and scrubbed that place like everything. The first night that we had, there was already some - over there when we went, you know, and that night we just hadn't had time to cook much and Mamma just made biscuits and we had home made syrup and butter and everything like that and those men just ate and they said that other woman like to have starved them to death.

BB: How many would you feed?

VW: As many as was there. And you know, now they had the what did he do, well, anyway we had a good many, just men that didn't have wives.

BB: Were you the only boarding house?

VW: Yes, that's what we were for. And then the sewing machine man came out there on a train and he, of course, had to spend the night because the train went off and left him. But Mamma bought a machine and the way she paid for it was for him to eat and stay, sometimes he would stay two or three days. Anyway, she got that machine from that man. I don't know what made him this way because he had his hair up here and he plaited it back there and kind of pinned it up. He - it was his religion somehow or other but he was real nice, talked, but I just always thought what about that? Oh, and we would have little shows coming out there, what was that show?

BB: Minstrel show, that kind - medicine shows?

VW: Medicine shows.

BEE: Medicine shows used to come around.

VW: We had – we always went and this little town up – Now I never will think of it, now they had a mill up there and it was about two to three miles, if it was that far up there. I think we walked up there sometimes on Sunday. I know we walked a good piece. There was something between the places that had something else, and I can't think of that, made staves or something, you know, I don't know what they called it.

BEA: Called it a stave mill?

VW: Yes, that's what it was, I know we walked up there, it was about a mile and a half, something like that, but this other place was a pretty good little town.

BB: How many families lived in White City?

VW: I don't know, but there were a whole lot and we had a doctor, you know, they always had a doctor, the company did. They did until after we married.

BEA: You had a commissary where everybody bought their groceries.

VW: Uh huh. And the shoes, I remember so well about that, when I said that big mud hole, the Post Office was over there and the drugstore, they – it was all in the same thing, and this baby of mine, he could walk when he was eight months old, but he didn't do this kind of walking like I – he came, he would get out and go the Post Office, to the drugstore and the doctor, it was Dr. Turner, Harold's daddy, and he would, everybody, all of them, they just worshipped that baby, you know, but he got a ... and he would go, walk across over there and take – he had a pocket in his little apron and they didn't have boys clothes then either, and he'd get the lids off of the, you know, the drinks and he used that for money, he would go over there and Dr. Turner ate breakfast every morning, his wife lived there, but she didn't get up and he ate breakfast there and he, of course, he ate. You know, we had – we didn't just have little stuff, we had steak, ham or baked ham and everything like that, and he would give my boys a thing that followed him all his days. He says, "What are you going to eat this morning?" He said, "I'm going to eat what you are going eat." He said, "I'm going to eat syrup and bread. I want syrup and bread," he'd say and I said, "Dr. Turner, you are making that baby crazy." Whatever he said he was doing, he wasn't doing it, he was doing the other way and he'd say, "Oh, isn't this good cornbread and syrup?"

BB: And he was eating steak and ham, huh? Oh, goodness.

VW: That was Dr. Turner. You know, he went on with us to Fastrill.

BB: Would you feed those guys three meals a day, your mother would set three meals a day for them?

VW: Yes sir, we had – there was a girl there at White City, she had lived over in Brookeland where we lived and she wasn't married then but she did marry later and he died, he had measles – No, what was that awful thing – just like we have now only –

BEA: Flu?

VW: Flu, but then they didn't have anything to do with it, and they had a lot of deaths, you know, and her husband, but he was with us there and he went on over there with us. But, of course, they had, when we pulled into Diboll, well, I was up then and, they had, the farmers around, they would bring in eggs and milk, you – Did you know you didn't buy milk then? Do you remember when you didn't buy it, didn't even have any, nor canned milk either? Nobody had milk.

BEA: Except the farmers, if you had your own cow, we always had a cow.

VW: Yes, we had our own cow, but we didn't have enough cows at first – But what I was going to say, somebody had killed a goat and brought – had it- this girl came in here and she says, “Mrs. Jordan, there is a man out there with a whole goat and he said he just wanted \$2.00 for it.” And Mamma says, “Well, get it.” A lot of people, they do eat it.

BB: Yeah, barbecue it outside?

VW: And we – one time we went out to get eggs and Mamma, well, we had water buckets, you know, and she had that bucket full of eggs and stumped her toe and fell down, she put her foot down and mashed them.

BEA: Had scrambled eggs right there.

BB: Right there on the floor?

VW: Honey, it wasn't on the floor, it was out in the yard.

BB: Oh me. Well, you were older by the time they had the boarding house. You were helping by that time?

VW: Oh my lands, I was helping her all the time over there.

BB: Well, was your dad working out in the woods or did he help in the house?

VW: No, he measured, what do you call it? He was measuring, measured the...

BB: But your mom did all the cooking and all the ?

VW: Well, not – yeah, I helped, too. I had my job, I cooked for the ... - What we had to do was fix the – make the food for them to carry to the woods with them.

BB: Oh, lunches, huh?

VW: Yes, we had to get up at 4 o'clock and fix – we had buckets, you know, lard buckets and things like that, syrup buckets and we cooked some kind of vegetable, beans or whatever they liked best, and meat and I cooked something to put in there.

BB: So it wasn't sandwiches, it was really some –

VW: No, gosh, no. They would have killed us if we had given them a sandwich.

BB: How many lunches would you make, about six?

VW: We would make about 30 or something like that. Sometimes – when Mr. ? What's his name, who was the old man lived up there, I can't think of his name, he built a bridge.

BEA: Devereaux?

VW: Devereaux.

BEA: Dred Devereaux.

VW: Well, you know he would come out there and bring men and they had to make the bridges and the railroad, you know, and sometimes – when he would come and bring men that was another however men it took for him.

BB: You had to fix for them, too, huh?

VW: Yeah.

BB: In speaking of the boarding house, were you responsible for the men's sheets and towels and the washing?

VW: Yeah.

BB: [indiscernible]

VW: Well, we had somebody to do that, there were Negroes there as many as white people nearly, and the Mexicans were there. We didn't have very many, they all came up here when we came. You know, it was Rosa and a whole lot of them.

BEA: You need to see Rosa Miranda, too, that's one you need to get.

BB: Yes, whenever White City folded, what did it look like when you left, this White City? Was there much left there?

VW: The houses, wasn't. There were a few houses, had their house.

BB: Did they own the land or did the company just let them live there?

VW: I don't know how that was.

BB: How long did it take you to travel from White City?

VW: I don't remember just how many, but I know we were several days because they had, too. They didn't have everything, they didn't have that boarding house finished when we moved in and Cullen, you knew Cullen, didn't you?

BEA: Uh huh, I knew Cullen.

VW: Well, he was – had, was going to have the barber shop there, well, they didn't have his right and he had it in there where we were going to be. It was a big place and he had it up in the corner there. Just going - but they got it fixed pretty quick.

BB: Did they add a lot more buildings to it, to Fastrill than had been at White City? Was it a bigger town?

VW: Oh yeah, it was a two story thing.

BB: Oh, a permanent house, it wasn't a boxcar?

VW: No, we didn't have a sign of a car house there at Fastrill and it was built, you know, they used to just have the best of lumber and they don't even do it now like they did then. And it was, the one thing they didn't do was to paint them, there wasn't a painted house there but they did that because there – they didn't aim to stay and you know, we stayed there twenty years. They had plenty of time but –

BB: Do you have any idea how many people lived there?

VW: No, I don't, but we had – I tried the other night, in my mind, you know, to say how many houses, I don't know whether it - I couldn't, but there were a good many of them.

BB: Was there running water in those houses, electricity?

VW: No, we had electricity, we had it from – let's see. It was 4 o'clock 'til 8, something like that at night and then in the morning they'd come on at 4 because that was the time we –

BB: You had to get up?

VW: Cullen was good to come every morning at 4 and help us. He would fry the bacon or the steak or anything. He was pretty good.

BB: How did the boarding house operate? Did you work for the Temple's? Did they send all the supplies or did you have to buy them?

VW: No sir. They furnished all of that stuff. We paid rent though.

BB: Oh, you paid rent to live in their boarding house?

VW: But it was, I think nearly about nothing.

BB: Well, did your mother get paid in addition to your father?

VW: Well, you see, they got their – every time we got a boarder, well, that was ours. We'd turn that in...

BB: Oh, they would pay you?

VW: Uh huh.

BB: And that was like your salary for – but yet the company furnished all the food?

VW: No, not food, food, we furnished the food. And the, you know, we charged by the day when it was that way, it was - for a day it was something like, it was less than a dollar, the best that I can ever think about, it was 60 cents a day but it was good money and Mamma, - Richie wanted us to – me (Mr.) Hill, no, yes, Mr. Hill, he died, didn't he? And he, I don't know. Let's see what was that he called me? It wasn't my name and he called me and he said – like June, but it wasn't June, but he'd say, "Joan, I'm going to build you and Richie a house, if you want it, out there in the woods, then you could look after the horses." Richie said he would tend to the horses if he would build us a house. And he had that spell and died.

BB: And what did your husband do?

VW: That's Richie Wells, he – I can't think what he did. He worked in the woods, he was woods foreman.

BEE: Woods foreman.

VW: I was about to forget my husband's name.

END OF INTERVIEW