

Mrs. Sidney Walters Kenley
Interview 39a&b
1984
Megan Lambert & Linda Maxey, Interviewers
Retyped by Courtney Lawrence

Abstract: Born in Leesville, Texas, in 1884, Sidney Walters Kenley discusses life in Diboll from 1918 to the 1980's. She talks about the long hours the men worked, the Klu Klux Klan, and a whiskey still. A teacher by profession, she never worked in Diboll's schools, but stayed home to raise her children. Her family was one of the few who owned a telephone, because of her husband's job. Some people also mentioned are: Mrs. Estes, Mr. Thompson, Chester Willis, and Watson Walker.

Sidney Walters Kenley interviewed by Megan Lambert and Linda Maxey.

Megan Lambert (hereafter ML): We'll just start by asking you to say your name.

Sidney Walters Kenley (hereafter SK): Sidney Walters Kenley.

ML: And can you tell us when you were born?

SK: In the year 1884. In a little town in Leesville, Texas.

ML: And what was your main occupation in your life?

SK: Teacher.

ML: Did you teach at Diboll or somewhere else?

SK: I never taught at Diboll, I taught before –

ML: What were you doing in Diboll?

SK: I married Mr. Kenley in 1918, and he was employed by the Southern Pine people, and lived in Diboll and so that's where, that's how I came to go to Diboll.

ML: Continue on, do you have any particular topic to start with, or would you like to start with your earliest memory as a child?

SK: I have a special – my earliest memories are in the little town of Leesville and my mother was a pianist, also a teacher, and my father was a teacher, and they lived there in this little town, and finally my dad decided that was not a very good place to raise children, and we moved out into the country, and lived in the country until, what year? By that time I was planning to teach and I had a private school when I was sixteen. I

began teaching in Coburn County, Upshur County, Gonzales County, until I married Mr. Kenley. We married in San Antonio, August 19, 1918. Also I could ride, we were in ranching, and we enjoyed going through Diboll after the ranch on weekends, and we had a camp house out there. Mr. Robert Manton had a camp house near us, and the Temples, maybe went to hunt. We spent a good bit of time hunting, fishing. The camp was twelve miles west of Lufkin. I really, the children were old enough to enjoy the hunting and we all had children, and all went together from Diboll to Lufkin and in 1936 by that time, the children were grown, didn't care for the camp any more; they became interested in things in Lufkin, and schools, and they completed their courses in the high schools there. David became, he was an instructor at Texas University. They sent someone to train the boys in the service, the Air Force, also they trained David as a teacher, and he went to Collemar and he instructed the boys in flying, and went to Kansas City, spent years with Trans World Airlines and we – leave it off just a minute. –

ML: Mr. Watson Walker, did you say?

SK: Mr. Watson Walker. When I went to Diboll in 1918, he was Superintendent of Southern Pine. Mr. O'Hara was over the city of Diboll and Mr. Strauss was over the timber, over all of the timberlands, and seeing that the timber was properly cared for and properly gathered. They had tram tracks out in the woods and led them to the marks, and they saw the tram tracks and they went into the train, and then it was taken control of by the machinery and sawed into the different kinds of lumber.

ML: When they brought it to the train, was that with oxen and mules?

SK: Yes, they brought it with mules. The mules, the teams, were kept out in the woods by a man who knew about that, and who operated the trucks that the timber was loaded on. The mules brought it to the train tracks.

ML: What were those men called, did they have a special name?

SK: I don't know if they did.

ML: I live on my grandfather's old farm near Woodville, Texas. We found the skeleton of a logging mule on our land. Of course, it's grown up now and we had no idea there had been lumbering on there a long time ago, but obviously there was, because here was this huge big skeleton of a mule. They say that these logging mules were enormous. Did you remember them being bigger than ordinary mules?

SK: In the buildings where the lumber was placed, mules were kept inside of those buildings to carry the lumber and those mules became blind, because it was so dark inside there where they had to stay. They took them out just to feed them.

ML: What was the name of the job that your husband did?

SK: Timber and land purchasing.

ML: Did he do that his whole working career?

SK: Yes, after he was promoted to it: in the beginning he just worked right in the woods. The women, they got up at six o'clock and prepared the lunch and got the men off to work. They women would clean their houses and a little later get out and visit and they did a great deal of this, and so the city then decided to have an eleven o'clock whistle to tell the women to get home to cook dinner. And then we had the twelve o'clock, another whistle at twelve and then at six, to tell everybody to go home, but the men who worked in the office often went back at nine and often worked until ten o'clock. That was not very pleasing to the family: they didn't get to be with the family very much.

ML: Wonder why they had to work such long hours, the office workers?

SK: I don't know. I used to think they sat talking.

Linda Maxey (hereafter LM): You think the wives needed another whistle to call them home?

ML: I'm intrigued with this whistle business. I didn't think the lumber companies had everybody so organized. Is that the one, the eleven o'clock one, that they refer to as the cornbread whistle?

SK: Yes.

ML: When you were going to school as a young person, did you have any idea that you were going to be a teacher, and that was why you were going to school? What did you expect from your education?

SK: Well, when I was, early in my life I began to think that, of course, my mother and my dad taught and that I could teach. Well, when I grew up, I taught two years and made my beginning in Huntsville. I met Mr. Kenley there. When he was through with Huntsville he was employed by the Temples and he never really liked the Temples and their business, but I used to say that he was married to the Southern Pine.

ML: Strong words there. Can you tell us about a typical day? You told us about the whistles, but can you tell us what else would be involved in your day and your husband's day?

SK: Do you want me to say something about the hotel? It was kept by Mrs. Estes, and the men in the office who were single, ate at the hotel, and it was a big hotel...well served and the place was neat, and there was never any confusion. There was never any noises, unusual noises. Mrs. Estes was a wonderful hotel lady.

ML: Was that the name of the hotel? Estes?

SK: I don't really remember hearing it called anything but "the hotel."

ML: So she was really a boarding housekeeper, too, since she served meals?

SK: That's right, she served meals, splendid meals.

ML: How many men would you say could stay there at one time?

SK: I would say about twelve.

ML: Could you tell anything about churches or social events?

SK: They had two churches, the Methodist which was in the southern part of town and the Baptist was in the northern part of town. They had preachers to come from different places. They had services every Sunday, Sunday school every Sunday morning, prayer meeting every Wednesday night, and there was still a good feeling among the church members.

ML: The impression I get of this Diboll community is one of incredible harmony, partly due to the company and partly the good will of the people who were living there.

SK: Yes, it was a very peaceable sort of town, seldom ever had any trouble. Occasionally, but we didn't have too much to-do. The children of the town had no place to go and there was no swimming pools or playgrounds, no amusement for them. Then about '34 they had the picture show, that was the only amusement they had for the children. And they used to – the main trouble they had, the little children when they were about six – eight years old: they began to try to play with matches. Nothing else to do, so --

ML: That's about the way it is in Woodville now. How about any special home recipes from those days?

SK: We put up Mayhaw Jelly, well, we didn't seem to raise too many gardens, I don't know why but they didn't.

ML: What did you mostly eat, most of the time?

SK: Well, we mostly had meat, two vegetables, and a dessert, and sometimes a salad with it. And they had vegetables, a good grocery store and I suppose the good vegetables came out of Houston. They had so many fresh vegetables. We had a man from Lufkin who ran the dairy down there and sold milk.

ML: There was one dairy that supplied Diboll?

SK: That's the only one I know of, but there were people who lived in the country and sold it.

ML: How did they keep it cold when they brought it in from the country?

SK: Well, I wonder. They had regular customers, I remember the first – we had an ice factory there. We had an ice... Do you know what an old fashioned icebox is? Well, we had those, that's the way we kept it chilled, until electric refrigerators came in.

ML: Do you remember what year you switched over from iceboxes, that makes a big difference.

SK: It must have been in about '32, when we had an electric refrigerator, when we personally did.

ML: How did you get your meat?

SK: I don't know where it came from but we had goat meat at the market, and the things that markets keep today in the way of meat.

ML: What I'm impressed with is that these years you are describing were very hard Depression years, for the rest of the country, and maybe Diboll wasn't so hard hit.

SK: Of course, it didn't last always, and Roosevelt closed all the banks and all the businesses all over the United States for the three days, and that changed the course of events, and business came to life. Before that we really had a Depression, and people didn't really have what they really should have had for their welfare.

ML: Even in Diboll?

SK: Even in Diboll.

ML: What did you think of President Hoover?

SK: I thought he was-- my husband had a good salary, they gave him \$150.00 a month, that's all we were going to have. We had a maid and a cook and a yard man. So Mr. Kenley came home and he –

ML: Becky Bailey told me that Mr. Thompson told her that he thought the company might have given you one of your milk cows. Is that true?

SK: No, Mr. Kenley – milk cow, she was a Jersey, the first one they had. Then the family was getting too big.

ML: I have another question to ask you. Mr. Thompson told Becky that you might possibly know a story about a still?

SK: I do, a still where they made whiskey, out across the creek about a quarter of a mile from the main part of town and they made whiskey and they had gotten a light from – they'd turn on the light so people in Diboll knew there was whiskey there.

ML: How come the prohibitionists didn't come down on them when they saw the revolving light?

SK: Oh, they had the sheriff...he'd walk up and down the railroad track so everybody could see him and then he'd go home. He didn't want to get mixed up with that.

ML: Can you tell us about differences between back then and now? Do you think things were better when Diboll was a small company town versus how things are now?

SK: Arthur and his mother surveyed the town, and -- they looked it over. She said "Now, the poor people here are living in old gray-colored houses, and the rich people are living in white painted houses. There should not be that difference and we will paint all the houses white. And very few of the people have indoor bathrooms. So we will destroy all these pit-type bathrooms. And they did that.

ML: How long did it take them to accomplish this?

SK: Nine months or a year.

ML: Not bad at all.

SK: Diboll wasn't too large. Pretty good living then, with good pecans out in those woods.

ML: It gives a marvelous impression.

SK: It has churches, it looks like a progressive town.

ML: Quite different from other East Texas towns.

SK: And so much has been done for the aged.

Second interview continues with Linda Maxey as Interviewer –

SK: I'm one hundred years old: I'm never ill, I never take medicine, but I have to stay in a wheelchair because I have no cartilage in my left knee. Now the Diboll country store, upstairs, adjoining it was a room where they kept coffins. It was always kept dark. A man named Chester Willis, he was the head porter of the town – stories about him. He came upstairs, to the coffin room, on the pretense of getting something but they had someone in the coffin, and Chester walked in and put the lights on, and this person raise up in the coffin and said "Chester, Chester, the Lord wants you." Chester just ran downstairs as

hard as he could go and didn't stop on the porch, he didn't stop until he got out in the yard.

LM: Scared him half to death, didn't it?

SK: Diboll had a nice East Texas hotel. And a Mrs. Estes and her daughter, Mrs. Pickle, operated the hotel. And another daughter, Sadie, used to smile and make people feel better when they came in. They kept the house very neat and everyone came to this place to eat if they were traveling through. One night a man came over from Groveton and he had been ordered out of Groveton by the KKK. He had to come to Diboll to catch the train and he was very anxious to be awakened at eleven so he could get on the train at twelve because he knew he had to leave the country. He was so uneasy about it that he borrowed not one but two alarm clocks. And set those two alarm clocks so he could catch his train.

LM: The KKK?

SK: The KKK were busy in years past in Diboll and one night while we were having a church meeting, they marched under the arbor, and asked if they could have charge of the services. They conducted a very good evenings program and then they marched out. They were also active at trying to help intruders and people that were not acceptable from entering the town. There was one lady came visiting and they knew she was not acceptable. They went to the house where she was visiting after dark, and they slipped a little note under the door and said "You have a guest in your house that is not acceptable to the town, and she'll have to be out by 12 o'clock tonight." So she got on the 12 o'clock train, but when the train started off, she came out on the little back porch and fired a pistol.

LM: Well, was the KKK very violent?

SK: No, they did things quietly. They never had to do anything. They just scared us all to death.

LM: You have Chester Willis down next.

SK: I believe I've already told enough about Chester.

LM: Then you have something about free water and light.

SK: The town was very fortunate in being provided free water and free light, and free firewood, which was the slabs from the sawmill, and you paid one dollar for the load of slabs and that's how they kept the town warm.

LM: Was this during the Depression, or –

SK: This was all the time.

LM: How about the night watchman?

SK: The town was provided with a night watchman and he paraded up and down the railroad tracks which was the main street of the town and he looked after the office buildings every hour. This kept the town from feeling that intruders may come in.

LM: What would he do if there was an intruder?

SK: He had a dog with him always, in order that the dog maybe would scare them. If there had been an intruder, it probably would have stopped them but I don't think they ever had one. I think he came every hour.

LM: You said there used to be a market in Diboll. Where?

SK: The market was adjoining the grocery store. There was good meat; we were well provided for, we had good meat. The groceries were always very abundant and very well supplied in number and different kinds of groceries and the groceries were delivered to your door.

LM: I remember when I moved to Diboll, one of the groceries still delivered.

SK: It's a different time now, everybody rushes here and there and they don't ever have time to stop and talk to their friends.

LM: Did you feel like, in Diboll if you needed anything, you could call on your neighbors and they'd help you?

SK: Oh yes, on one side there was Mr. and Mrs. Weise, and they were always out on their sleeping porch at night and I was on my sleeping porch and all I had to do was just call. And on the other side was Mrs. Farrington, and she had her sleeping porch up at the back and I could hear her talking at night on her sleeping porch and they were both good neighbors.

LM: What about telephones?

SK: There were very few telephones in the town, but we happened to have one because my husband bought timber and the land and he needed to carry on business, but there were few in the town.

LM: Your stories are very interesting; they were fun stories. Do you know any more?

SK: I've tried to think of some more today, but I couldn't. If I do think of something, you can put that thing to the telephone and it will record, won't it?

LM: Yes, I think you have had a lot of interesting things to add for the book.

SK: We had no swimming pool, but there was a creek at the edge of town and the children would slip away to the creek.

LM: How were the schools at the time?

SK: The schools were very poor at the time.

LM: What grades did they cover?

SK: I doubt that it went beyond the 8th grade, and at this time there were only two teachers.

LM: They had their hands full.

SK: In the little towns, I taught several years in a small town. That's where I like to teach, in a small town. Everybody – but you get in a city, nobody worries about you.

LM: Well, if you can't think about anything else you'd like to add right now, we can just close it down, but we've got all the time in the world ---

SK: Diboll was a little town with early rising. We were up at 6 o'clock, and our husbands were out from that time on til 8 o'clock in the evening, and a few of them were home at noon, the ones who worked in the office were home at noon. Some of them carried their lunches with them and those who went on the log train to the woods would get back after dark. They would have to have their lunches, and their wives would have their evening meals ready for them. When they ate and took a bath, it was time to go to bed, so they had little time for their families. The train went from Diboll out into the woods. They had a caboose on the train which carried water for them and then they also had a passenger coach on the back of it and the passenger coach brought anyone who wanted it to Lufkin. But when you came up here on that train to Lufkin, you had to spend the day and go back home at 5 o'clock in the evening. If you wanted to come up here to the dentist, you planned to spend the day up here. At this time there was a dirt road from Diboll to Lufkin, and in the rainy weather, it was impassible.

LM: Did you have a doctor in Diboll?

SK: Yes, we, the company kept a doctor there, and he had to live in the town so he could be there at any time he was needed.

LM: It really sounds like the company took care of a lot of the little things.

SK: The Temples were very thoughtful of their people, and they did all they could to make them feel comfortable and safe.

LM: Diboll is continuing to grow, isn't it?

SK: Arthur and Lottie helped so much. Lottie and Arthur, when they first married, she went all around the town and tried to see what needed being done. She's been a wonderful person.

LM: Do you think all the changes that have happened in Diboll have been for the best?

SK: Oh yes, it is so much more progressive, and the wages are so much better. They have swimming pools, everything. We even had a veterinarian.

LM: Was that something the company provided?

SK: Yes, the company provided the vet for the horses and the cows.

LM: What about your laundry?

SK: Most people had wash pots and rub boards in those days. I never did see a washing machine in Diboll. But every Monday morning a laundryman would come down from Lufkin and pick up the laundry. Every Monday morning he would pick up the laundry.

LM: Was it expensive to send your laundry off?

SK: I didn't consider it extravagant, at all. They charged very little. People didn't have too much, a few shirts and dresses. Most of the dresses would go for dry-cleaning.

LM: What did your children find to do besides slip off to the creek?

SK: They never did that, but other kids did.

LM: They played ball and things like that?

SK: I believe they had a softball team, but the majority of the children had to make their own fun. Oh yes, I wanted to say this: at this time there was very little social action in the town. The main occasions were when someone was to be married, they gave the bride a shower, and then when babies were coming they gave the baby a shower and that was the main social affair.

LM: Everyone looked forward to those events?

SK: There were too many babies!

LM: Did the ladies make a lot of their own quilts? Do their own sewing?

SK: All of them did their own sewing. There was one lady in town who sewed, a Mrs. Wood, and she had very few customers. Of course they were buying ready-made at that time.

LM: With the train coming through, were there a lot of people who came through Diboll and decided to stay?

SK: No, I don't think that happened. Mostly they thought it was just a dusty little sawmill town. But when the trains came in at 12 o'clock at night, there was always a big crowd of young people at the depot to watch it come in. It was a chance of seeing each other.

LM: Did the young people have dances?

SK: If there were, I didn't know it. My children were never at the dances. When my youngest child was twelve years old, we moved to Lufkin then and they didn't have much chance for social contacts. Ed, my youngest son, was twelve years old. At the close of school, they would come from Diboll and have a dance at the hotel Angelina. My son had never dated any girl, but this one girl had a date with another boy that night and my son had a date with another girl. When the time came to go home, this girl couldn't find my son. Because this other girl had asked to go with them to some other place in town. So they just drove off, got him in the car and drove off. My son was so disturbed he didn't know what to do and the lady who worked in the hotel, she told him that this girl had gone back to Diboll with some of the others. So he came home and went to her mother's house, and when the mother came to the door, he told her what this girl and boy did to him. And asked "Is she at home and all right?" And the mother said "She's at home and all right, because she is in the bed asleep." She said "Don't worry, you can have a date with her any time you want to."

LM: Things kids can think of to do to other people. Which son was this?

SK: David, my oldest boy. I don't believe I have anything else.

LM: It's been a wonderful interview.