

FENNER ROTH, HERBERT WEEKS, O'HARA CHANDLER

Interview 44a

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ABSTRACT: Early Dibollians Fenner Roth, Herbert Weeks, and O'Hara Chandler, each born in or about 1908, tell of life in Diboll during the 1910s and 1920s during a 1984 interview by leaders of the Diboll Historical Society. The men recall railroad travel, eateries, childhood entertainments, early automobiles, alligators in the mill pond, school teachers, yard work, bitter weeds, and the communities of Emporia and Copestown. Persons discussed include Frank Farrington, Watson Walker, George Johnson, and John Oliver.

O'Hara Chandler: There were two Sunday afternoon passenger trains. One that came from Houston and the other one came from Lufkin. And we would meet down at the depot and they had candy that you couldn't buy at the store. It was called Johnny Cook, and it was real tough, it cost a nickel. But it would last all day. The kids would line up, for the ... him to sell his wares. Or else he would get off with his basket. Sometimes there would be twenty-five or thirty kids up there buying his wares, because we thought it was good because it came out of Houston or Shreveport.

Teena Kellam: Why would you make these trips to Lufkin? What was there in Lufkin that there wasn't in Diboll?

Fenner Roth: Hamburger joints.

Chandler: Hamburger joints and chili. You could buy chili for a dime.

Roth: You could get a bowl of red for a dime, crackers and catsup. Hamburger was a nickel, soda water was a nickel.

Kellam: Now when was this? About what year?

Roth: Oh, back in the twenties. I would say '21, '22, '23.

Chandler: And one of the tricks of the Diboll boys in the Ruby Café was a lot of flies. They would get the chili down to a pretty low ebb in the bowl and they would snitch a fly to put in it and then call the waitress and say, "Look what I've been eating off of."

Becky Bailey: Then they wouldn't have to pay for it.

Chandler: Then they wouldn't have to pay for it. They would apologize and say they were sorry and give you another bowl of chili if you wanted it. Although it makes me sick at my stomach now.

Bailey: You weren't in on that.

Roth: I remember that Ruby Café. It was quite a place. Stayed open all night.

Chandler: You know, one way to get money was to go around and gather up soda water bottles. They would throw them away and you could get three cents apiece for them. If you could get a dozen, that was twenty-four cents. And you would have a pretty good day on twenty-four cents. You could go to Lufkin. Could go to the show for a dime, coke was a nickel, popcorn was a nickel, hamburger was a dime. You could have a pretty good day with an hour of collecting soda water bottles. And one way that we made money was going and picking blackberries. Sell them by the gallon, ten cents a gallon.

Bailey: Ten cents?

Chandler: That was a lot of picking, but ten cents was a lot of money in those days.

Roth: One summer I was going to get rich and pick cotton. They were paying fifty cents a hundred, I think. And I picked till noon and I had less than twenty-five pounds. I quit. I decided that wasn't any way to make money. It was just across the road over here, I think the Powell's had a big farm over there, didn't they? Wasn't it the Powell's?

Chandler: Powell's and the Green's.

Roth: Yes.

Chandler: The Greens had a lot of [audio is indiscernible here].

Weeks: Another thing Lufkin had that Diboll didn't have, you couldn't buy anything except from the company store.

Roth: That's the only place.

Weeks: The first other business in Diboll, that I know anything about, was Lee Estes' Garage.

Roth: Well, Homer Rogers had a wagon that he and Bill Rogers sold soda water. And I guess that's about all that they had to sell. They were these old bottles that you pushed the top in. You didn't throw it away like you do now. You would push it in and send it back to the factory and they could pop that thing out and use it again.

Chandler: However there were two stores in Copestown. And we would walk up there to Holliways and Mr. Reily. It was out of Diboll. But ... It was up there where the Baptist Church was. But you were considered out of town when you went to Copestown. But they did a lot of charging. They would take a check.

Davis: Emporia was already gone?

Chandler: It was already gone. The old sawmill site was there and the pond was there. We used the pond for baptizing. I remember one time; over a hundred people were baptized at one time. We did a lot of fishing there.

Roth: You know one Sunday they was going to have a big baptizing, someone almost drown. Do you remember who that was? Someone... that really created chaos there for a few minutes.

Weeks: That's where we all learned to swim. That was the only deep water around, unless it rained. The millpond, they put alligators in there to keep us out.

Bailey: Are you serious? Were there really alligators?

Weeks: They were trying to protect us kids, but we took it the other way. We killed at least one of them, I know. I was in on that. An old boy... somebody had a 22 rifle and shot that thing and kind of addled him and he was on top of the water splashing. And they kept shooting him, and I was too small and they wouldn't let me shoot. Finally, one old boy by the name of Randy Pruitt went out there and got the alligator by the tail and drug him in. And it seemed to me like it was a hundred yards, or more out there where he was. It was a long ways. I saw that old boy the first Sunday in June, this year. The first time I've seen him since. But I had visions of that alligator getting him on the way in, you know. But he didn't. We all nailed him up on a tree. That alligator, head down. One old boy, Peter Reily, the tallest one in the crowd. Peter nailed his tail to the tree, up there. We left him for Mr. Watson Walker to find.

Chandler: You know you asked about Emporia. My mother told about when they came to Diboll. They came on the train. It was a narrow gauge train. The train wasn't supposed to stop in Diboll. It wasn't completed at that time, and it was suppose to stop at Emporia. The reason they stopped at Diboll, my Grandmother, Annie Chandler, had a son with some kind of fever, in fact, he died soon after... But they stopped here because, what we called the Library. You could get rooms there. And they stopped off here. They got off the train at that old Library. And the cane was over their heads. You know, the cattails and all. Carmona was still, I mean, Emporia was still a town. That was by Carter. The same people that have Camden. Emporia.

Davis: It probably went away, burned in 1907.

Chandler: Something like that.

Davis: You know after that the records. You know, of the Methodist Church records, after 1907 there is no mention of Emporia again.

Roth: Who owned Emporia back in those days?

Chandler: Carter, Carter Brothers.

Roth: Carter. How did Conn, A. J. Conn end up with it?

Chandler: A. J. Conn was a lawyer from Lufkin....

Roth: Yes.

Chandler: And he bought that from Carter.

Roth: I see.

Chandler: He bought that. You know, the Conn house was one of those old sawmill houses. I still remember some of the houses. But I never did hear anything about Emporia. Did you all? Nobody ever talked to me.

Roth: No, I never heard even of a mill being there. I just thought it was just the pond where we went swimming and fishing and baptized the Baptists.

Davis: Mrs. Wright was telling me that she and her father used to go through the woods and cut sugar cane down in there. [Audio indiscernible here.]

Chandler: I remember people would get most of their fresh vegetables and would get it out of the garden. They would have a buggy. They would come by the house, you know, selling vegetables. One old man was the justice of the peace up at Burke.

Roth: Steve Carter?

Chandler: Carter. He was one of the main ones that sold vegetables and milk.

Weeks: He and Mark Anthony used.... Of course...he lived out in the country.

Megan Lambert: It was out in the country.

Chandler: I mean, he lived a mile or two out in the country. The only times we had store bought ice cream was on July the Fourth at the Lodge Hall from the ice cream man. The Odd Fellows and maybe the Jaycees would all go together and have a big ice cream party for the children. They would bring the ice cream up from Houston. That was the only time we had ice cream.

Roth: Do you remember back in those days, Juneteenth was a big day in Diboll, too, 'cause they would shut the mill down and they would furnish meat and all the groceries to the negroes for a big barbecue. And of course, all the whites would go over and help them eat it even though we were not desegregated in those days.

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Chandler: ...you know, would pull a cord and it was an air cord of some kind, and the engineer would stop and pick up the people along the road.

Weeks: Just apply the air brakes and the engineer would cut the power off.

Lambert: And you would pay by how long you were on the train?

Chandler: No, the conductor would write them a ticket. You see they didn't have to have a ticket, the conductor would write them up a ticket, and they would pay for it.

Weeks: One of the best train stories that I... My mother's family, there was only fourteen of them, and they moved to Arkansas one time from down here somewhere. And of course, it was on a train. And when they finally made a failure up there, they came back. They had their lunch all packed and every kid had a job, you know. The bigger ones looking after the little ones, and all those things. My Granddaddy had the lunch in a great big basket. And somehow in all the confusion, everyone got on the train but him. The train pulled off a little ways, and they finally missed Grandpa and that train backed up and got him.

Chandler: You know, one thing about Diboll, every house had a picket fence around it and there was a reason for having a picket fence. Because cows ran out, hogs ran out and horses ran out. And to protect your home, you almost had to have a picket fence. But the company would furnish you the lumber and you could build your own fence. You didn't have to buy your lumber. But another thing I remember, we did not have lawn mowers. And you judged a beautiful yard by how clean they were. You know, all the grass scraped off. We would go out and get brush brooms, usually dogwoods, and sweep the yards. And you judged the beauty of the yards by how clean it was, and free of grass.

Lambert: Were they interested in growing bushes on that?

Chandler: They'd grow flowers.

Roth: You dare have any grass in the yard, or my mother would have you out there digging it up if you did. We had to sweep that yard every Saturday and get the china berries and leaves out of it.

Chandler: But there was a purpose for that. You had no way of keeping the grass cut.

Roth: In fact, I'm not sure there was any such thing as a lawn mower in those days.

Chandler: Yes, and the only grass we had that I remember, was Bermuda grass. I don't remember any....

Roth: No.

Chandler: San Augustine grass.

Weeks: That was before San Augustine. No such thing.

Chandler: And our most prevalent flower was the bitter weed. And that's true. And every bitter weed had a jillion red bugs in it.

Roth: Do you remember how milk used to taste when we would turn the cows alose and they would eat those bitter weeds? There was no way to get that bitter taste out of your milk.

Chandler: You would just have to throw it away or give it to the hogs.

Weeks: That would be true today.

Roth: But what happened to bitter weeds, you don't see them any more?

Chandler: And you couldn't cut them because it made a stub and when I first started teaching school, the first two days, the kids got out there and pulled the bitter weeds up because you dare not cut them with a hoe, because, you know, all the children were barefooted in those days. And those little old prongs would stick in their feet, so we would have to pull them up.

Weeks: That's about what happened to the bitter weeds.

Roth: I'm afraid so.

Lambert: What did those look like?

Roth: Oh, they would get up about that high. And have a...it wasn't a big flower, it was a small flower, but there might be several on the same stem.

Chandler: And they had a terrible odor.

Roth: They were really bitter.

Lambert: White or yellow flower?

Chandler: They were yellow.

Roth: Yellow.

Chandler: But if you touched one, you would have to take a bar of soap to get the odor off your hands.

Lambert: [indiscernible audio].

Chandler: There is still a lot of them around.

Bailey: They are still around.

Roth: You say you still have them?

Davis: Oh, yes.

Roth: I haven't seen one in years.

Chandler: Just look going home and you'll see some this afternoon. Going back home.

Weeks: Not just here, but in Tyler County, too.

Lambert: There probably are. I just don't know what I'm looking for.

Chandler: They are real green. And drought evidently doesn't hurt them. And they are a very healthy plant. They have a little yellow flower. Even bees won't fool with them.

Davis: I'll bring one of them to show you.

Chandler: Would make their honey bitter, I imagine.

Lambert: You know, I missed the name of the man whose barn you put the buggy on top of.

Weeks: It was George Johnson.

Chandler: George was later J. P. [justice of the peace] here. Wasn't he or something?

Davis: Custodian of the school for a long time.

Chandler: He was veterinarian. He was town veterinarian. He never did go to school, but he read books. And if you had a sick horse or a sick cow, I remember one time, an old cow ate some butterbeans down there in the lower part of town. Butterbeans would, I mean the vines, would make a cow swell. And his cure was.... He stuck a knife in that cow's stomach to let the air out. And the cow got all right.

Bailey: And it works. I've heard of that before.

Weeks: They still use a knife in treating cattle.

Chandler: And George Johnson also had four horses, and he rented horses and buggies. And he had a real pretty surrey with a top over it and people who needed to go to Lufkin or Nacogdoches, they would rent his horses. They were pretty horses.

Weeks: That's not the one we put up. It didn't have a top on it. We would have torn it up if we had.

Chandler: It would carry six people.

Roth: You remember who owned the first car in Diboll?

Chandler: Mr. Farrington, I think.

Roth: Yes, I'll never forget, he wanted to take me riding. I had never been in a car, in fact, I had never seen one before. And he was going to take my mother and daddy and myself riding. And he said, "You get up here in the front seat with me." And it had those, what do you call those? You know where, he didn't have the cover on it, and it would spark. You could see it jump....

Chandler: Coils.

Roth: Coils. I said, "I'm not going to get up there." I got in the back seat and let my dad ride up in front. I wasn't about to get up there with that electricity jumping across there like that.

Weeks: That was a Ford.

Chandler: It was one of those old cars you would have to It wasn't self-starting, you know. You had to have a crank. And those coils were very important for starting a car. They were the same as spark plugs. And the boys from Lufkin would come down here and court the Diboll girls. We boys, we Diboll boys, didn't like that. And one way you could keep them from starting the car was to pick those coils up. And it was just a block, an oblong, you know, about six inches by what, two inches? You pick them up and put some paper, you know, so they couldn't get contact. Or else, jack the back wheel up and they couldn't start the car. They couldn't understand what...

Roth: There was many a broken arm cranking those old model "T" cars.

Chandler: I had mine broken.

Roth: You stood out in front and turned it. I guess you'll have seen that though, haven't you.

Lambert: You actually had your arm broken that way?

Chandler: Yes. Down in Moscow. We had gone down to play basketball. We were in Rat Johnson's model "T" and it stopped on us. Rat was out there trying to crank it and I said, "Get back and let a strong guy get ahold of it." And I turned it about twice and all of a sudden I had my arm. Oh, it was broken real bad. And I had to ride all the way to Diboll to get it fixed. We had a doctor here that, he didn't care much about hurtin' people, his name was Dale. And he put it on a board and he pulled on it and pulled on it, and felt of it. Put it on a board and then put a board on top of it. Sent me home. No sedative or anything in those days. You just suffered. I didn't even know what an aspirin was I guess.

Lambert: You didn't have a splint or a sling or anything?

Chandler: Yes. He had a board. Two boards and he would wrap it up.

Roth: See, you would start cranking that thing this way and sometimes it would backfire and it would go back the other way on you and that is when it broke your arm. It was the only way to start one, too. There was no other way. Batteries were not known in those days.

Weeks: We lived right behind Mr. Farrington. When he got this car he took his cow lot and stall for a garage. And he took that car apart out there, so he would know how to fix it when something went wrong with it, because the only mechanic in this county was somebody in Lufkin. And he let me watch him provided I keep my hands in my pockets. But he laid those parts out just as he took them off, you know. And he put them back together in reverse order. And I remember that just as well. It took him days to do it. Later he bought an Oldsmobile, big car. Jump seats, seven passenger, and all that stuff. And he did that same thing to that Oldsmobile. And I watched him do that.

Chandler: I think he would cause a lot of excitement though, when he would go by the store. You know, people would have their wagons there with their mules and horses. And some of those horses would break through their reins and run. You know they didn't know what that car was. But I'll tell you

Davis: Were the Chandlers here almost from the beginning?

Chandler: Yes, my granddaddy blew the first whistle ever blown. I used to hear Granny tell that. They moved here in 1893. The mill started up ... The mill started in 1894. One of these circle mills. And Mr. Temple brought in a bunch of people from the East down here. In the beginning you know, to help run the mill.

Davis: I wonder if any of them stayed?

Chandler: Well, the Ashworths stayed. And the Walkers, Mr. Walker was from Virginia, wasn't he?

Weeks: Well, I think....

Chandler: I remember everything he'd say was, "su su," "su su." And Mrs. Farrington was one of the originals....

Roth: She was from Virginia.

Chandler: Most of them I think were from Virginia.

Roth: I don't know where Mr. Walker was from.

Chandler: He was from Virginia.

Weeks: Everyone I knew here, they learned what they knew right here. So they had to have somebody to teach them.

Chandler: I thought the Walkers were rich. When I was walking ... and they were rich by our standards in those days, I guess. I was going to school one day, and Mrs. Walker... They lived over here in ...

Roth: Clyde Thompson lives now.

Chandler: Yes, where Clyde Thompson lives now. And she said, "O'Hara, I want you to do something for me." And I said, "Yes, Ma'am." She said, "I want you to cut a turkey's head off." I said, "Sure." It was just a real pleasure for me to cut a turkey's head off. I went back there and I cut that turkey's head off and she gave me a quarter. And I thought I was rich. That was a lot of money.

Roth: Who Do ya'll remember the superintendent of schools that died while school was going on?

Chandler: Yes.

Roth: What was his name?

Chandler: Benton. Mr. Benton.

Roth: I don't remember his name, but I remember I was either in the first or second grade and he was staying in what we called the library, at that time. And I think he got the flu or pneumonia and died during the school year.

Chandler: He was tough.

Roth: And that was a real tragedy in this town. He didn't have any foolishness at the school all right. You did it his way.

Weeks: You used to have discipline in these schools here, I guarantee you that. No problems with kids. We had some bad kids.

Davis: Mr. Gaines, was he just a teacher or a superintendent? I've heard people talk about him.

Chandler: No, he was superintendent.

Roth: Who?

Chandler: Mr. Gaines. I remember Mr. Gaines. He was before...

Roth: I don't remember him.

Chandler: Steagall. I remember Mr. Gaines.

Weeks: Mr. Steagall is the first one that I remember, you know, to really know.

Roth: Well, there was a Davis and a Renfro.

Chandler: Well now Davis was principal.

Roth: Principal, yes.

Chandler: And Renfro was principal.

Roth: Well, they didn't have superintendents in those days. I think they just had the principal at that time.

Chandler: But I remember when Mr. Steagall came, we had an unaccredited school. You know, if you wanted to go to college, if you graduated from tenth grade, you would have take an examination. Mr. Steagall began accrediting the school. In 1923 was the first year that it was accredited. I remember that weone fellow...

Roth: Mrs. Kellum, that was another reason that we went to Lufkin. I finished grammar school here and then moved to Lufkin because it was not an accredited school.

Chandler: Of the twenty-two though, that graduated in 1926, there is only four of us left.

Bailey: Will ya'll have a reunion on Diboll Day?

Roth: Only four?

Chandler: Well, one of them lives here. Mr. Turner's wife.

Bailey: Oh, yes, I know her. Hazel.

Chandler: Yes, Hazel. She was in my class. And then Ruby Chandler, who is my sister-in-law, lives in Baytown. She is still living. And a boy by the name of John Henry. John Henry from Groveton. He lives in Beaumont. I mean he lives.....

Roth: He is in Groveton.

Weeks: He is in a wheelchair.

Chandler: But there is only four left out of that group.

Weeks: When I was a kid, I thought Mr. Walker and the devil were one and the same person. Partly because he put alligators in the pond, you know, and things like that. But I was afraid of him. Everybody seemed to be afraid of him. And in the summer time, he wore a white linen suit, white gloves, and he walked through every bit of this plant. And when he come out the far end of it, he had not a speck of dirt or dust, anything on him. And if everything was running right, he never spoke to a soul on that round. And if it was not running right, he'd call the foreman of that particular area... Call him. And I've been told that he watched a man ruin something one time, but he would not say a word to him, but he liked to have fired his foreman. And that thing has stuck with me about Mr. Walker and years, years later, I used some of that to a real good advantage. And it was hard for me to learn, to not take up something with the man who's doing it, but to wait and go to his supervisor and let him straighten it out. But that was... and of course, I've changed my opinion. I think Mr. Walker was a great man. And now I know some things that he did that showed he was great and had a big heart and all those things that I didn't know about then. But that was his way of dealing with it. That was the only way he could handle it. He had one old boy that he could have fired one time, and should have fired and all that other stuff, but on account of his family, he didn't do it. And he put up with that old boy for a long, long time. And it was all... his cold exterior was the only way he could handle it. But I still say he was a great man, a great manager.

Roth: I'll never forget when I came back here to teach school, I was making eighty-five dollars a month, nine months out of the year, and they still had this paper money and I was selling, I was buying, you might say, the company paper money from these boys that wanted to go to Lufkin on Saturday night and have a big time, and discounting it ten percent. You know, give them the cash. They couldn't trade that money in Lufkin. And Mr. Walker found out about it. And he sent me word to put a stop to that right away. He didn't want me making money out of his money.

Weeks: You were loan sharking weren't you?

Chandler: Well, what was the name of the old man that lived back of the quarters?

Davis: Oliver.

Chandler: Oliver. Mr. Oliver.

Roth: Mr. Oliver ran a grocery store.

Chandler: Mr. Oliver ran a grocery store and he would discount your money. That's where we would go.

Roth: He couldn't stop Mr. Oliver, but he could stop me because he could get me fired.

Chandler: I understand that during the Depression, the company borrowed money from Mr. Oliver.

Roth: Now Mr. Walker didn't come talk to me. He got Mr. Rutland to come talk to me. But it put a stop to my financial affairs right away.

Chandler: You know my daddy was a fireman. This is a good story to talk about Mr. Rutland. Wasn't he the one in the ... Farrington was the one in the

Roth: Post office.

Chandler: Post office. Mr. Farrington had a Western Union correct time watch in his window. He was a jeweler too, you know, there at the Post Office. And my daddy went to work every morning at 5:30. He had to be there at 6:00. And one morning Mr. Farrington came to work early and my dad was there setting his Ingersoll watch there by the... and he said, "Will, what are you doing?" He said, "I'm setting my watch so that I have the correct time to blow the whistle by." He said, "Well, you rascal, for the last ten years I've been setting this watch by your whistle."

(Laughter)

Chandler: He had been setting his by that old Ingersoll....whistle blowing.

Weeks: I think that's about true about a lot of this railroad time. I think they get theirs somewhere else.

Chandler: Well, are we through?

Davis: Do you remember, was I. D. Fairchild teaching here anytime you were here?

Chandler: I remember I. D. Fairchild.

Roth: He was an attorney.

Davis: And he taught...

Roth: And in the state legislature. But I didn't know he ever taught here.

Davis: My Grandmother Warner went to see Mrs. Purdy. Mrs. Purdy told me that he was her first teacher.

Chandler: That was way back I think before my time.

Roth: Yes, yes.

Davis: I just wondered if he was still teaching.

Chandler: I can remember I. D. He lived and became state senator, didn't he?

Roth: Yes.

Weeks: He was still senator when he was killed. I think...killed in a car wreck.

Roth: Well, are ya'll tired of these old tired tales?

Lambert: No, I think that this has worked out so well. We ought to do it every Saturday.

END OF INTERVIEW