

PATE AND VIVIAN WARNER

Interview 57b

June 7, 1994, at 1115 Ross, Lufkin, TX

Marie Davis, Interviewer

Dorothy Farley and B. J. Capps, Transcribers

ABSTRACT: In an interview with Marie Davis, life-long Diboll residents Pate and Vivian Warner describe their lives growing up in Diboll and the people they shared their town with. Pate and Vivian recall the different ethnic groups that lived in and around Diboll and how the residents interacted with each other. From the 1920's, Pate describes his memories of Italians, Native Americans, Gypsies, Slavonians, Mexican railroad crews, and African American and White children playing and hunting together. He recalls the white oak barrel staves the Slavonians made and sold, the Native Americans' short-lived attempts at farming in the area, and the Gypsies as they traded horses, told fortunes, and sold willow furniture. They also reminisce about their childhood favorites, like the banana car that sold bananas to the townspeople before they were available at the local commissary, the shipments of oysters that would cause great excitement when they arrived in town, children playing all over town, the old calaboose and several criminals that attempted (and succeeded) escaping from this early jail, and the excitement that surrounded the arrival of Buster Brown and his bulldog.

Marie Davis: Pate, people have talked about the Italians who lived in Diboll and somebody said they lived just west of what we now call First Street. Do you remember the Italians?

Pate Warner: Yes, I remember them. There were about 5 or 6 families. And the ones that I knew that went to school were named Tomarillo. Joe and Frank and they had a sister or two that went to school in Diboll. And then there was Sam Cotroni and Joe Cotroni. They worked around the planer and others worked around the mill, and I don't know exactly where they worked. They stayed there and I would say they left Diboll in the early twenties. They all went to Houston and none of them ever came back that I knew of.

MD: When you knew them, about what year was it?

PW: It was about 1920 when they went to school---1921-22 in that vicinity.

MD: Did they go to the white school?

PW: Yes, they went to the white school.

MD: Do you know anything about their church life?

PW: I don't know anything about their church life.

MD: Did they buy their groceries at the store?

PW: They bought their groceries at the store. At that time, you had to buy your groceries at the commissary. They didn't have anyway to go to Lufkin. You shopped at the store in Diboll.

MD: Did you ever play with the boys?

PW: Oh, yes. They were treated just like white boys. If you played at school, they played with you. There wasn't any question about that.

MD: Do you remember seeing them after school?

PW: I don't remember seeing them after school. That has been too long ago for me.

MD: Then you don't know anything about their social life?

PW: No, I don't know anything about their social life. I just know there were 5 or 6 families lived there at that time.

Vivian Warner: Pate, you remember how one of the men helped your uncle after work.

PW: Oh, yes. There was one of the men named Sam Cotroni who helped my Uncle Holly Warner. Uncle Holly raised game chickens and Sam would come down to his house and work a lot of afternoons. You didn't get off from work then until 6 o'clock. You worked from 7 to 6. In the summertime, it would not be dark and he would come down there and work until dark a lot of evenings. They were very good-natured people. They didn't get mad like people do these days.

(note by Marie Davis: The 1920 Federal Census showed 3 Italian families in Diboll at that time.)

MD: Now let's talk about the gypsies that used to come to Diboll.

PW: The gypsies came there in the early twenties. They came before the first highway was constructed through Diboll. They told fortunes, they were horse traders and they also made chairs out of wicker. They made them out of willow limbs. At that time there was a branch that ran through Diboll. Well the branch still runs through Diboll. There were a lot of willow trees along the branch and a lot along the creek. They would cut those branches and make all kinds of furniture---chairs, settees, tables. They would stay there a week or two to trade horses and sell furniture. Then they would move on down the road with their junk. The women wore long dresses and had their heads tied up. The men were just ordinary looking men.

MD: Would the women have a lot of jewelry on?

PW: Quite a bit---beads hanging around their neck. They had all kinds of tents they carried you in to tell your fortunes and they had palm readers. Anything to get your money—that is what they were there for.

MD: Did they come back year after year?

PW: Well, Marie, I don't remember that. Maybe a year they would come back or two years they would come back. They would come pretty often through there. They always wanted to trade horses. I remember one time, Jim Fuller was a horse fan then. He traded for a real pretty horse. It was a white horse—what do you call the white horses? Well, anyway, Jim got the horse down and washed him down with a hose. He then started to ride him and the horse couldn't hardly get his breath. The horse traders had already gone by then. They had set him up. Jim really got beat on that deal.

MD: They were really horse traders.

PW: They were horse traders from way back.

MD: How did they travel?

PW: In wagons. They had wagon sheets over them. They would spread little tents out there. They would all eat together.

MD: They would have a camp fire.

PW: Yes. There was one local boy who got killed down there. He was named Patrick Parker. They told him the horse was gentle and he got on one of them and he ran away with him. The horse killed him. It threw him off and ran up against a tree and killed him. He was about 10 years old. Of course it wasn't anything done about it then because they didn't tell him to get on it or anything. If anybody got killed then, you didn't sue anybody—you just got killed.

MD: Where were they located?

PW: Just about where the high school--is that the high school--

MD: The junior high?

VW: It's the junior high now and the corporate office.

PW: Just as you turn off the highway--that building--in that vicinity.

MD: Between the red light on FM 1818 and the corporate office.

PW: That is right. In those woods there—see that was all thick woods then.

MD: It wasn't mowed then, was it?

VW: No buildings.

PW: It was all woods. After you left there were only two or three houses until you got to Lee Massingills; Two or three more until you got to the other Massingills and on to where Uncle Dod Warner lived. It was all woods.

MD: I believe you told me there were some Indians who lived here a short time.

PW: Yes, there were some Indians who came here about that same time. They lived over what you called the "old Hardin field". That was about two miles south of Diboll. They were the first ones that tried to farm over there. They didn't stay over there but about one year. They couldn't make a crop, and I don't know where they went. That was the first road that was ever cut south of Diboll.

MD: I believe that is Mulberry Street.

PW: That is where Flava Vaughan lives. That is not it.

MD: Okay, it is Hackberry and Hackberry runs into Mockingbird.

PW: On south about where Mr. Pearson lived.

VW: Were those Indians all men?

PW: All men. No women with them at all.

MD: What did they live in? Do you know?

PW: They had a little house over there at that time. Two or three little shacks that they lived in.

MD: What year was that?

PW: About 1920, 21, 22, something like that.

MD: Did they come to town to buy supplies?

PW: Yes, they would come to town to buy supplies. You would see them every week or two to come to town and buy their groceries and go back. You never did hear anything out of them. They did not come at night or anything like that.

MD: What about their dress?

PW: Just plain ordinary dress--just like a white person would dress. But they did have long hair--most of them did. These were American Indians.

MD: Now then, what about the Slavonians?

PW: The Slavonians had a camp on the Neches River. It was below Dollarhide Lake. They made staves and Uncle Dod Warner hauled the staves, and I helped him haul some in the summertime. I would say that was about 1925, 26, or 27. They had a camp down on the Neches River. You hauled the staves to Diboll. You put those staves out on the track at Diboll. At that time they set cars out on the track and they would come and pick the staves up. They would stay three or four months and they cut white oak timber only. They had food—I ate with them. Everything was mixed together. Meat, cabbage, beans. They had that three times a day and it was good. It was good food. They would put all kind of macaroni, tomatoes—anything you could think of and they cooked it in a big, old pot. It was what we called a wash pot, but they called it something else. It was bigger around than a wash pot and more flat than a wash pot. They took it up in tin plates.

MD: Did you ever eat with them?

PW: Yes. I ate with them several times. Uncle Dod Warner and I ate with them. They would always invite you to eat, if you wanted that kind of food. I thought it was pretty good.

VW: Did they serve any bread with it.

PW: No bread. You just ate that stuff—that is all you had. They would stay there until all the timber ran out. These were barrel staves now. Do you understand what I am talking about—a barrel stave? They are as long as a barrel—those timbers they cut. They were about four inches thick and they were heavy. It was green and the reason it was green because they wanted it so they could bend it. They could make barrels out of them.

MD: What did they use to cut them? They did not have any machinery, did they?

PW: Oh, no. They did not have any machinery. They had axes and saws. That is what they used. They would split them with wedges. White oak trees split really good. They put a wedge and a ballpene hammer in it and it split real good. That is what they made baskets out of years and years ago. Vivian's uncle used to make baskets out of white oak.

VW: How did they haul these to the railroad cars, Pate? Did they use a team?

PW: I drove a team. You could carry about 200 a load. They were real heavy. You had a team and a wagon and you put these on the wagon and you hauled them down there to Diboll. You put them out right in front of where the Methodist Church is now. You stacked them when you got them there.

MD: Did they speak English?

PW: Oh yes, you could understand them good. They could not speak real plain, but you could understand them.

MD: Were they kind of stocky people?

PW: They were big people. They were stocky and big people. Most of them were about 6 feet tall—big, stout people.

VW: Where did they come from, Pate?

PW: I don't know where they came from. I don't know where they went. I just remember them being down there and helping to haul the staves. I met a lot of them and the big man that Uncle Dod Warner dealt with was called Joe. They just called him Joe. He was the one that did the paying and everything. You got so much a hundred for hauling. I don't remember how much the price was. It wasn't very much, though, because then you did not get very much for doing anything.

MD: Did you ever know any Irishmen?

PW: No. I never knew any Irishmen. Were some supposed to come to Diboll?

MD: I read something about the Irishmen worked on the railroad.

PW: There were big railroad crews that came through Diboll but they were all Mexican. There might be 40 or 50 of them working on the railroad. But I don't remember any Irishmen. There probably were some here, though.

MD: When you were growing up, were there any Mexicans that lived in town?

PW: No. not anybody like that at that time.

MD: I guess you had a lot of black friends.

PW: Oh yes, I had a lot of black friends—the Randolphs. There were a lot of folks over there I knew.

MD: When you were a boy, did you play with them?

PW: Played ball with them. Went over there every afternoon and played ball with them. The ball park was over there where the Junior High or rather the Elementary is now. The whites played the blacks. We played them every day. We had a good time over there playing them. We knew them all and they knew us. We integrated way back there before they ever did in school.

MD: When you got grown, you had a lot of good friends.

PW: Oh yes. We had a lot of good friends. I fished with a lot of them—Charlie Billy, Shoes Randolph, Varee Davis. They were hunting and fishing all the time. They were good fishermen and hunters. I had rather fish with some of them than the white folks. Chester Willis and I hunted together. We fox-hunted a lot. He liked to hunt and we hunted together. He kept 12 or 14 dogs over there at his house in a little pen. We had a good time though.

MD: You didn't have to have the dogs, then?

PW: I had some at home, but not as many as he had.

MD: I bet you have some other good stories and memories that you could tell us. What about the banana car?

PW: Yes, that was way back in that time, too. The banana car would come to Diboll and they had side tracks by the depot. A man would be in the banana car there. He would open up every day and people would go up there and buy bananas. You could take a dime and go up there and buy two or three dozen bananas. That car would be loaded with bananas. After all the bananas were gone off a stalk, people would want the stalks to put in their chicken houses to keep the mites out of the chicken house. He would stay three or four days and people would come from every where buying bananas. You didn't get them in the store then. Later on they would get them in the store or commissary. They would hang them up by the stalk. They didn't come in too often and you bought them by the dozen. Finally, they got to selling them by the pound, didn't they, Vivian.

VW: Yes, now.

MD: Then this banana car was before they started selling them in the store?

PW: Way before. They did not have any bananas in the store at that time. I can remember another thing. They would order oysters that would come in. People would go around taking orders for oysters. They would come in on Sunday morning. Each person that ordered these oysters would go up there and there would be someone there with a dip net or dipper and dip them out.

MD: Oh, you mean they would come in a barrel?

VW: Iced down.

PW: Iced down. Uncle Holly Warner would send me up there after his part. He would order 5 or 6 dozen. He would ask me to go up there and get them for him. He would give me a dime and I was rich. Vivian can tell you.

VW: Yes, they would come in at the TSE Depot. I guess they would come down from Lufkin on the TSE. People would kinda let you know when they came. They came from Houma, Louisiana. Different people would come and bring their pan or bowl. Daddy would count them out. Oh, that was a big day when they would get in oysters.

PW: Nice, big oysters. You don't see anything like them now.

VW: You didn't worry about pollution then.

VW: Pate, before we leave the banana car, tell about the boys that bought a whole stalk and ate them all.

PW: You could buy a whole stalk then pretty cheap. They made up money around there. I don't know what boys there was, but there were 4 or 5 boys that bought a whole stalk. Do you know what I am talking about—a stalk? A bunch—they bought the whole bunch of bananas. They carried them down on the creek somewhere. They ate them all—finally late that evening they finished them up.

VW: That was a big joke around there for a long time.

PW: Can you feature any body buying a whole stalk and eating them?

MD: I bet they were sick.

VW: I bet they were, too.

PW: Oh, I don't know. You didn't have as much to eat then. You could eat anything then. But now, you don't do that.

MD: How many calaboooses do you remember in Diboll?

PW: I don't remember but two. The one that I remember most was the one back near the highway now (east of Ballenger Street). A negro tried to burn himself out. Ol man Ratcliff was the constable. He lived 2 or 3 miles back below the Negro Quarters. What we called the Negro quarters then. (West of town). He burned himself up in there. You could hear him hollering for a mile or two. Nobody could get him out. The thing was locked with two Yale locks. They tried to chop him out, but they could not get him out. He burned up in there. Vivian can tell you a tale about the other calaboose by the pressing shop.

VW: Well, I remember two. One had a 2x4 floor. But the one out in front was on a dirt floor. It was during the time that my daddy was running the pressing shop over there that a man got locked up. Daddy heard somebody holler, "Help, help, somebody come help me." He looked out the front. This calaboose was a smaller one than the one behind that had a wooden floor. A man had tried to dig out. He couldn't get back in, but he could

not get back out. So daddy took his shovel over there and dug him out. And forever more, he got accused of helping the fugitive escape. It was real funny.

MD: And the pressing shop was located where?

VW: It would be right in front of where the Italians lived then. West of First Street. And before the houses got started. There would be a road between the pressing shop and the houses. Well, it would be near where they stacked the lumber to air dry.

MD: Then they had a larger one, too?

VW: Maybe this smaller one had to be done away with since this man had to be dug out. It was on a dirt floor or he could not have dug out. The newer one had a little window with bars. When there was no one in it the door stayed open. The kids went in there and played around. Children could play around places in those days.

PW: The school house was always open. They did not lock it.

MD: I have heard people say they could go over to the lumber yards on week-ends and play.

VW: Yes.

PW: You could get those buggies and ride around. It didn't make any difference.

VW: And since daddy worked at the TSE, we would go up there around the shop where the engines were. We would climb up on those engines. They had a hand pump car. We would pump that—boys and girls.

MD: Did you go any where?

VW: We would go up the track a little ways and come right back, and go again. There was lots of fun over there and no vandalism took place. And those engines—I can remember how they smelled. That oil-and you would be so dirty when you got home. You would get your clothes dirty.

MD: There is a lot of difference in the way kids played then and the way they do now.

PW: Yes. Now you have to find something for them to do.

VW: It would be dangerous for them to do it now, but we never got hurt. Times change and progress takes place.

MD: What about Buster Brown?

PW: Years ago that had shoes at the store. They had a picture of Buster Brown on the front of the box. He was a little midget fellow. He wore a little cap and he had a little bull dog named “Tige”. He would come to Diboll about every 6 months or so. All the kids would gather around. It was a big treat to see him dressed like that. The little bull dog had a leash on him and he wouldn’t bother you. Buster Brown would make him go to people, but he would not bother you. He would stay there 3 or 4 hours.

MD: He was just an advertisement.

PW: He was just an advertisement for Buster Brown Shoes.

MD: Were those children’s shoes?

PW: Buster Brown did not have men’s shoes, only children’s shoes—Brown Shoe Company of St. Louis.

VW: Did he come on the train?

PW: Yes. That was the only way he could come.

VW: Well, he must have had to stay over night to catch the next train out.

PW: He would go over there at the Star Hotel and stay until his train went down that night.

VW: His suit was like a little sailor suit. Later on women that sewed would make a Buster Brown middy blouse. That was what it was called—A Buster Brown Middy Blouse.

PW: A big collar.

VW: It had a square collar with a white tie.

PW: Boys had to wear some of those shirts. I used to get a whipping for chewing the collar that was on it.

MD: I have enjoyed this interview. We certainly do thank you for talking to us.

END OF INTERVIEW