

AMOS HARRIS

Interview 59a

May 22, 1985, Temple-Inland Cafeteria, Diboll, Texas

Becky Bailey, Interviewer

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ABSTRACT: Amos Harris was born in Nacogdoches County in 1910 and was raised on a farm. He moved to Diboll in 1930 and began a career working for Southern Pine Lumber Company, mainly at the sawmill. An African American, he tells interviewer Becky Bailey about work and social conditions, early company management, race relations, social entertainments, and the Depression of the 1930s, continuing to the 1970s.

Becky Bailey: My Name is Becky Bailey, and I am interviewing Mr. Amos Harris at the meeting of retirees from Temple. Today's date is May 22, 1985. Mr. Harris, first I'd like to ask you where you were born and when.

Amos Harris: I was born in Nacogdoches County in 1910. Raised on a farm.

BB: In 1910—so you lived on a farm?

AH: I lived on a farm until I came to Diboll in 1930. When I came to Diboll it was way different than what it is now. When I came to Diboll we had red houses all over the quarters. And them red houses, we had dirt streets through there and when it rained you couldn't go to church for bogging up. And Dr. Clements had to ride his horse to make house calls in the night when it rained. Come on down, we didn't have electric lights like we have now. The Southern Pine Lumber Company had a dynamo that they used in the day time and at five minutes to nine every night it would break the lights. When they break the lights they'd let you know to get your lamp lights lit. And on and on that way. We had outdoor lavatories and it was pretty rough in them days when I came here. When I went to work for this company they didn't have no personnel man. You'd go out on the job and whoever your foreman was, he'd hire you and you'd go to work right then. The first work I did I made it under Broker, Thompson. Mr. Broker, and he was a good foreman, and I stayed there with him until they cut the mill down and went to tearing down these old sheds and dolly ways, making concrete.

BB: But that was later, wasn't it?

AH: That was later. And then during that time or before that time came, they didn't have, the general manager was here then when I came to Diboll. His name was Mr. Walker. He was general manager of Southern Pine Lumber Company. After he passed off the scene Mr. O'Hara and Mr. Eddie Farley, they were superintendents of the mill. And they passed on and Mr. O'Hara, when he passed on, Mr. Henry Temple was sent from Pineland over here to be general manager, that was Mr. Arthur's cousin. When he came over here he began to change up a little. The main office was in Mr. Bud Rutland's

house, across the street where the personnel office is now. He was the store manager of Pineland and Diboll. When he passed away they took that building and made an office out of it. Then a few years later they moved, tore it down and built a doctor's office back there. And when the men would come in from Texarkana and made the head office here. During that time we worked then 10 hours a day. We didn't get but 30 cents an hour, about \$2.25 a day at that time.

BB: Okay, now this was in the early '30's?

AH: In the early '30's.

BB: When you first went to work?

AH: Yes, then we didn't have no picture show or nothing like that here. Just only had a log cabin hotel. That was the big building where you could spend the night and eat and the bus stopped there. We had to go around to the end building, go in to catch the bus at the log cabin hotel.

BB: Now are you talking about a bus or train?

AH: The bus.

BB: The bus? There was a bus that came through here then?

AH: A big bus came through here then.

BB: Okay, was this the same route as now, from Houston to Lufkin?

AH: Then you came right straight down that street, across the railroad track, you hit all the big, big men, over the plant. They lived on the left hand side of the railroad. And then up above there, when you were coming into the commissary, why, you strike the "Big Shots" office, the "Big Shots" house, we called them Big Shots back there then. And then you get down there to the office, down to the commissary now. We didn't have but one place then. When I first went to work in the early '30's we had checks, round piece of paper with a dollar mark on it and we went from there then to white horses. They moved the office then to the commissary then.

BB: Why did they call them white horses?

AH: Well, you see in that time, the bookkeeper stayed in the commissary and they would write it down like you made a bill, like you get a bill at the store, write it down and write in red ink down there. If you want five dollars, get it and then you carry it over to the counter and you get your groceries with. That's what you call white horse.

BB: So that was just white slips of paper, and that's why they called them white horses?

AH: That's right, that's why they called them white horses, and then they left from white horses, after Mr. Lee came here from Pineland, he was a big fellow over in Pineland and got to checking on store, different things in the store, he changed it to books, just a book with a dollar, five dollars, ten dollars in it, we used them. Then later on in the years, I have to bring that in here, Mr. Arthur cut them books out, made checks that we get now.

BB: As late as 1950, they had white horses?

AH: When that happened it was around 1940 when they commence to give us checks like we are getting now. And the commissary down on this end, coming from the village now, when you go up the steps there was the post office. Miss Zettie Kelly was the post master here then. She lived right on, you go right on down the store porch. Then you come on down and the next door you go into the drugstore, Mr. Hines was the druggist, his home was in Garrison, Texas, and then you come on down –

BB: He drove all that way?

AH: Yes, and then you'd come on down to the commissary. There was Mr. Bud Rutland, he took over then, and the other older heads that was over that store was Mr. Drew, Mr. Strauss, he'd got shed of them.... And Mr. Bud Rutland took over the store manager's job for Pineland and Diboll. You go in the store there was Mrs. Farrington, she sold you the clothes, women's clothes. You come right across from there you hit Mr. Jim Fuller, he took care of the men's clothes and you come on around and got your groceries round there. You come out of there then, come on down to the end of the store porch. They had a market there, Mr. Cruthirds was the butcher man then. We had a door to come in here and a door come in here, the whites would come in three and we would come in here. Mr. Cruthirds lived right over across the track.

BB: All of that was in the store?

AH: All that was in the store, in the commissary.

BB: Okay, there was a door for the blacks and a door for the whites?

AH: That's right, after then they closed it down and they commence to remodel it. They set up a credit union here and you paid two bits to join it; they would cut you so much a week to pay your money in there and they got to be good. And then, Mr. Vernon Burkhalter, he was, he just finished high school that year and he worked with me on a pole truck for Mr. Ed Strickland and he stayed on the pole truck with me for about four or five months. Then behind the personnel office now was the doctor's office, wasn't no office or building there. And he was the first personnel man, he was helping Mr. Jake Durham, Mr. Burkhalter was. That's when the first personnel man came into Diboll. Mr. Jake Durham was the personnel man but he was sick and Mr. Burkhalter left the pole truck with me and went to help him.

BB: So Mr. Burkhalter was the second personnel manager?

AH: The second personnel manager, he was the first personnel manager helper.

BB: Okay.

AH: Mr. Jake Durham was the personnel manager, he was sick and Mr. Vernon had to do the running around out to the plant and then –

BB: Tell me a little more about the credit union. This is the first time this has come up.

AH: The credit union, see, they hadn't had a credit union and when they set it up, it was right there where you cross and go to the doctor's office right now. They set it up and thought maybe it would help the employees to save money. We didn't have no bank here then.

BB: Oh, that was before the bank?

AH: Yes, and they charged us all two bits to join it and whatever we wanted them to cut out of our salary they did. Maybe we got a hundred or two hundred dollars in the credit union and we'd go down there and would borrow a hundred dollars and they let us have it and we'd pay the credit union – that's why the credit union is so big today. And after Mr. Arthur taken over, after he taken over, you see all that, that's the old sawmill right there in that picture. That's the old sawmill. If you come on up here you see the logwood. I worked in the logwood department and that's the commissary. I made many a step across there and on up further there's the – they call – we had them oxen, we had all of that in the woods at that time. Mr. Richie Wells was the foreman, the wood foreman. Mr. Albert J. Wells was the foreman out there, to see that the logs got to the mill.

BB: Tell me about your job when you first came here, when you were about 20 years old, what did you do?

AH: When I came here I went to staking lumber for Mr. Thompson Broker under the separator. They had a separator, the lumber, pulled off in the stalls and get so much on there and then we stacked it up and put it in a car where it would go in the kiln to be dried and on and on. If we would catch up I'd go on up in the mill and do this and help them do that and I got to be a real sawmill man all the way around.

BB: So you did all the jobs?

AH: Yes ma'am, all the time. I'd edge, edge lumber, fight the bear, pull trimmers, did anything, millwright sometimes when the millwright would get sick. They kept me down there and I'd work millwright. Had to fix the chain some when it was broke and back in them days, I done practically anything. The Temple Foundation has been might good to me. I put in some hard days, and Mr. Arthur Temple, when I came to Diboll, he wasn't no more than that high, followed his daddy here and his sister. And over in that library,

we called it a library then, but over in that tall building on that side of the office where the office used to be, Mr. Arthur stayed upstairs when him and his father came down to Diboll from Texarkana, that was their headquarters. And when we got a picture show here Mr. Shirley Daniel, he went around with a list and different ones turned him down but he finally got to Mr. Henry Temple, he gave him orders to build a picture show. He built the picture show and remodeled it down there in the village.

BB: What did you do before the picture show came, for entertainment?

AH: We didn't have anywhere to go but just had some stands in the quarters.

BB: What do you mean by stands?

AH: Stands, where we would go there and buy soda water. Somebody would run a place so we could buy soda water.

BB: Oh, you mean like a café?

AH: Yes, like a café.

BB: I've heard of some domino parlors, do you know anything about them?

AH: Well, we played dominos.

BB: In those little cafés?

AH: Yes, we played dominos, that's the only entertainment we had and our school, the high school. Temple High was back over there where the middle school is now. That was the high school and then over in the colored quarters, is the junior high now. That's where we went to school, in a white building, didn't have no brick school. They didn't come in until after Mr. Arthur taken over.

BB: Right. Okay. Were you ever a sawyer? Did you ever run the saws?

AH: No, I never run the saw, I edged.

BB: Well, can you describe the process for me, what was it like?

AH: Well, the log would come up in the mill this way, and the man up there would scale that log, and when it got to where the carriage was they could crip it off and knock that log down to the carriage. Well, the carriage would trim the bark off one side of that log and turn it over, then they would make one by six, I mean two by six, or one by six or two by twelve. Then the edger man would make, when it got down to the edger man and they put it through the edger, why it trimmed the bark off and make a one by two, two by six and two by four.

BB: Okay, that would actually finish the lumber when it came through the edger?

AH: Yes, the carriage man, the block setter would manufacture that board, whatever he wanted to make out of it. Two by six or two by twelve – well, when they cut that board off it falls on a roller and comes down to the carriage and then, see there would be bark on both sides of that log. The edger man would set his saws like that and trim that bark off and then manufacture it and it would be ready to be stacked or go into the kiln to be dried.

BB: And when would it go through a planer? After that?

AH: After they manufactured it and it would go from the separator into a kiln dried, just like you –

BB: Just like an oven?

AH: Yes, and when it was dry, then it would go to the planer and be manufactured and then it would be dressed, wouldn't be rough, it would be dressed lumber and it would be ready for shipping.

BB: When did they start doing away with the dolly runs? And all of that and start making it more automated? When, about what time, when did you start seeing changes like that?

AH: Well, the changes started right around about 1946 or '47, when they commenced to tearing down the old dolly ways and tearing down the old sheds, building new sheds, pouring concrete and then they ordered lifts then. See, men didn't have anything to lift that lumber up, those lifts go under it and carry it up in that shed and set it up. See, wouldn't be no more dolly way then, would all be concrete, yeah.

BB: Okay, so you started doing it with machines at that point? How did you feel about that, were you afraid you would lose your job?

AH: I never did feel like I would lose mine. I knew they would give us something to do because I was an all round man and I edged practically all the time. Cause a lot of them, they weren't out of a job. They paid for different phases, they'd package so many pieces of lumber in a package and bind it up and get ready for shipping on the truck. They kept them all busy all the time.

BB: Didn't have a shortage of things to do? Okay, would you like to tell me anything about your family or your church?

AH: Well, I got married in 1941.

BB: Why, you were an old man getting married in '41.

AH: I was an old man – I stayed here and got married and been here ever since. My wife’s name was Rosie Lee Harris, she was a – I can’t think what she was now, but anyway, we got married and I settled down here. We had two children and we stayed together.

BB: Do your children still live here?

AH: Yes, and we lived here. Me and her were married lacking one month being together 40 years and we had a lovely marriage. Never was sick. We lived well together.

BB: Did you attend one of these churches?

AH: Yes, I attended the First Church. She belonged to the Methodist Church, and I was 49 huh, I was about 39 years old, I had never joined the church. We joined the church at Perry Chapel and later, down in later years, she went back, she was born in the Baptist church. She went back to the Baptist church. While we were in the Methodist church I got to be a steward here, we called them stewards in the Methodist church. And I – we stayed apart – I stayed in the Methodist church six years and she went back to her church and I went over there and I made a deacon in the Baptist church up there on the hill. We had a lovely time. When Mr. Arthur first come here, the first speech he ever made, it was right there at the old school house. I never will forget it. He was on a trailer, they backed a trailer up there and he got on it. He made his first talk to the colored people over there. In his talk he said “Now, I’m the new manager here” – says “I love all of you”. He said “I’m coming to tell you today Diboll won’t be like it used to be”. He said “I want y’all – I’m going to make a sweetheart town out of this place,” it was pretty rough in them days. I was sitting there listening to him. He said “If you want something, I want to see you with something. If you don’t want nothing, I don’t want to see you with something”. And I took it out I wanted something. I made something out of myself and he sorta helped me. Me and my lady worked to make Diboll a sweetheart town. And he has been a mighty fine fellow, I ain’t never went to him for nothing since I been working for him. He’s been mighty nice to me, and they are nice to me now. I can go down there to the personnel office and Mrs. Pouland, Mr. Burkhalter and tell them what I want – I got it. They are real nice. I enjoy working for this company.

BB: What do you mean, Diboll was a kind of rough town?

AH: Well, Diboll wasn’t so rough but it was pretty rough, too. We had some shinny here, they made shinny, across there, man called Mr. Johnson.

BB: Are you talking about bootleg whiskey?

AH: Yes, bootleg whiskey.

BB: I have never heard it called shinny.

AH: Well, we called it shinny. We'd come right across here, it was all woods and you'd go down right across where that bridge is out there and hit that other road. We'd go down through, go back in there and buy that whiskey and come back through them woods, go home and drink it and get drunk.

BB: I see, it was rough, huh?

AH: Yes, it was pretty rough here then. Afterward it got to be a nice place to live.

BB: Well, when did all that stop, in '42 or....?

AH: Well, it stopped in '42, commence getting better in 1946. That's the year I came out of the service. I stayed in service two years, that's the only time I left Diboll after I come here in 1930.

BB: Okay. What do you remember about the depression?

AH: Well, when I came to Diboll the depression was on then. We were just working one and two days a week. I'd work a day this week and maybe next week I'd worked two and maybe the next week I'd work one but they always tried to fit it around where everybody could make a day and get a living made. Back in the first war, you'd take \$5.00, you could tote it home in a wagon. Chester Willis had to carry it home, the delivery boy, would have to carry it home for you.

BB: If you bought \$5.00 worth of groceries?

AH: Yes, if you bought \$5.00 worth of groceries . . . then you had a lot of groceries. Now, you go to the grocery store and \$5.00 worth of groceries you can carry it back on two fingers.

BB: That's about true, for sure.

AH: That's the way we worked, one or two days a week.

BB: Well, what was the farm like?

AH: Well, I came along right about the time of the depression. It was the farming, you raised cotton and corn, you raised it on the halves and when I came to Diboll I was raising it on the halves. And a white man told me, "You can't make it out" and I ain't been back on a farm since.

BB: That was enough of that, huh?

AH: Yes.

BB: Well, I am surprised that you were able to get a job in Diboll in 1930.

AH: Well, I went out one morning with a friend of mine, and Mr. Thompson Broker was foreman and Mr. I.D., he is assistant foreman, he hired me and the next morning I went out and Mr. Thompson Broker started to send me back home and I went to work that day on the timber dock with another boy and every time I'd go out every morning, somebody was laid off and I'd work in their place. I was sort of an extra man.

BB: I see, and you just kind of worked into a permanent position?

AH: Yes.

BB: Where did you live when you first came here? Did you have relatives here?

AH: Oh, I had a brother living here.

BB: So you were able to stay with him? Okay, Mr. Harris, did you ever do any work in the woods? Work with the mules? What was it like?

AH: Yes, it was like – a truck would come up, we would pull the logs up beside the truck and run a chain on them and turn the log over, put the mules on the other side, put a chain on it and roll the logs up on the log truck.

BB: So they were already using log trucks at that time, when you worked in the woods? Did they do much cutting right around Diboll or was that pretty well cut by this time?

AH: Yes, they cut some around Diboll, most of the time they'd cut in different places. They had timber over lots of places, they may cut here close to Diboll, maybe a month, and they may skip down around different places, Maydelle, all like that.. down at Hull, just different places.

BB: How would you go out in the mornings, in a train?

AH: We went out in a bus, just like a bus you ride. A maid...

BB: What was that again?

AH: Maid – called that truck a maid – just like a bus, they'd made for the men to go in the logging woods. To send the logs into the mill. And I stayed in there a pretty good while after they built the new separator. They brought me back and trained me up to feed the separator, under Mr. Joe Bob Hendrick. He was my foreman for a long time, he was a good one, too. He worked us though, we had to work. When it came to a raise, he got it for us. We had a good time. I worked in the log woods, we would load them logs back there, different places like that.

BB: Have you noticed any differences in the way that the land is being used now as opposed to back then, around this area?

AH: It is better, got a better place to live than it was back in them days when I first came here. We are living better than we ever have. We got indoor lavatories, gas. We didn't have no gas back in 1930. We burned wood, wood in heaters, now we burning gas now.

BB: Okay, so you think the changes in the town have been a lot better?

AH: Oh yes, the changes in the town have been a whole lot better.

BB: All right – when did you retire?

AH: Now, that's something I can't tell you, it was back in – I can't tell you, I done forgot now. I got it down at home. I retired at sixty-two years old.

BB: Okay, so that would have been about 1952? About that time? *[note by Jonathan Gerland, March 2008: if Mr. Harris was born in 1910 as earlier stated, then he would have retired in the 1970s, if he retired at 62 years old.]*

AH: 1956 – something like that.

BB: '56, somewhere in there. Okay. Have you seen a lot of changes in the company just since then?

AH: Oh, yes, a lot of changes have been made since then. When I was working we had to work for it – we had to work hard and where I was getting \$2.70 and hour, they pay \$7.50 and hour on the same job that I was retired off of. A lot of difference and they got new buildings, new chain, for the lumber to go in different stalls, back in them days when I was working on the separator, we didn't have that. Back in them days, Mr. Joe Bob was foreman, we didn't have that deal. We just had one straight chain, come down to that separator, we had to catch all the lumber that was manufactured at the mill to go through that separator. It'd go into a stacker to be stacked and then that lumber would to out of there and go to the kilns to be dried. Now they do most all that work now with lifts, we had to work hard for ours, had a lot of changes.

BB: Well, there's certainly a lot of change in how much money you were paid since 1956. Do you have any stories you would like to tell us from work, things that might have happened?

AH: No, all I know is when I went home all I could do was rest. Mr. Joe Bob worked us pretty hard.

BB: He was right on you the whole time, huh? Well, that's good.

AH: Yes, I had to rest.

BB: How do you feel in the change in status that the blacks have experienced these last few years?

AH: Well, I like this change in the last few years, don't work the men as hard but if we had had that when I was a young man I wouldn't be stove up now, never would have worked as hard. In them days we would work, I'd say, I believe one man would do two men's job. The work was a heap harder that it is now.

BB: What do you think of the changes in the way the blacks are treated?

AH: Well, they are treated a lot better, they are treated real nice. Back in them days they had a mean quarter boss, Mr. Jay Boren, was right there, come in and knock us around sometimes. Since Mr. Arthur Temple taken over, they cut all that out and we commence to living good. Like it is now, we hardly ever have any stir – nothing like that. Of course, I don't be out as much as I used to. Since I been a Christian I stayed at home all the time, don't be out, just go to church.

BB: Have your children's lives been like you would want things for them?

AH: Yes, always I supported my family good. My granddaughter is in school and one of my granddaughters is up in the nursing, and she's got a job now in a nursing home down in Houston. Been down there about five years. She was out in California several years, she went to work over there and then went back to Houston.

BB: If you had it to do all over again would you do about the same or would you do it differently?

AH: I believe I would do it a little different.

BB: What would be the difference?

AH: I would try to make it go a little bit different in the way of living.

END OF INTERVIEW