

OPAL FRANKS

Interview 64a

July 9, 1985, at home of Opal Franks in Diboll, Texas

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ABSTRACT: In an interview with her niece, Deanna Crump, longtime Diboll teacher Diboll teacher Opal Franks reminisces about her life as an educator. Mrs. Franks and her husband moved to Diboll in the late 1940's, and since she had not finished her degree at SFA, she stayed home to raise her children. The school needed a teacher, however, and she came in as a substitute and stayed on until her retirement. She discusses life in a small sawmill town school, her students, their struggles to get supplies, and the changes in discipline and academics from when she started teaching.

Deanna Crump (hereafter DC): This is Deanna Crump. I'm interviewing Opal Franks, my aunt, in her home in Diboll, Texas. This is July 8, 1985. When were you born and tell me about your early years?

Opal Franks (hereafter OF): I was born February 10th, 1926 in Goodwin. Goodwin was the name of the little community where my grandfather's farm was. I went to school in grades one through nine there, then I moved to Pineland – well actually I went to live with a couple who had been good friends of ours. He had been principal there for a few years and they asked me to go and live with them and go to school and graduate from Pineland. Goodwin was not an accredited school then and they, had hoped that I would go to college and wanted me to be able to (go to college) when I graduated. I graduated at Pineland in 1944. I did my junior and senior year there. Now, then they only had eleven grades. It was later that they added 12th grade. And then I was ready for college in 1944, June of 1944. I worked part-time in the library at the college. I had to work my way through school. This was during WWII so there weren't very many students on the campus.

DC: Was this at Stephen F. Austin?

OF: This was at S.F.A. and then it was not a university, it was a teacher college and I might add here that, at that time Stephen F. Austin was considered the "teacher" college of the South and I evidentially started to work for an insurance agency part-time and taking two or three courses along. Then I became full time employed and had to drop out because I didn't have the money to finish. I lacked about a year finishing and that's ok then-----

DC: You married.

OF: Yea, uh huh, married my husband Bennis Franks and we were married in '47, October of '47, and he was teaching at Mt. Enterprise at that time – coaching.

DC: Tell me how you all came from Mt. Enterprise to Diboll.

OF: Well, back at that time, that was soon after the war – actually during the war. You see, just a few years prior to that time teachers were very, very scarce in that everybody went to the cities to work, on, in the shipyards and what have you – toward the war effort. Even after the war was over, many of the people continued their jobs and teacher pay was very poor and they could make so much money and teachers were very scarce, Bennis was offered several good jobs that paid more than what he was making at Mt. Enterprise. He had had several people to come ask him to come to their school and I'll have to say here and now, we did not come to Diboll for the money, that was not that important to Bennis. Robert Ramsey, his brother-in-law and my brother-in-law, was principal here. He had been principal here for about a year and they needed a basketball coach and Social Studies teacher. So Robert just insisted that Bennis come down and talk to Mr. Pate, the superintendent. Bennis knew Mr. Pate, so they began to point out the good things about Diboll, cheap rent and you have to remember that housing was very, very scarce. There had been no building during the war – and the mere fact that the company would furnish a house at a very low rate of rent and Bennis knew Mr. Pate and Robert, made the difference. So we chose to come to Diboll.

DC: Ok. After you moved to Diboll, is this when you – were you already certified to teach, or did you have to go back and get your certification?

OF: No, I was not certified to teach. Now when we came to Diboll I had no plans for teaching, Suzanne, our daughter was a tiny, tiny baby when we came and then 3 ½ years, later, we had our son, Eck. I was actually happy to be a wife and a mother. I'd worked all my years prior to that, ever since I could remember, but I was very happy to be a housewife and a mother. And I really got into teaching rather accidentally because, my college work that I'd done prior to this, 3 years, was in business. Now I'd taken some education courses because you just didn't go to SFA without taking some education courses, that was one of their big things. I had thought when I was going to college that I would like to teach business in high school or, preferably get into business. So – I wanted to go back to school, it was in the back of my mind that someday I would go back to school because a college education was terribly important to me. It wasn't that I felt that I had to do it, but I – it was something I needed to finish for myself. So---just by chance, I had started back going to school in the summer when Bennis could keep the children. Then in 1954, during the Christmas holidays, one of the sixth grade teachers left rather suddenly – turned in his resignation and left town. Mr. Pate asked me if I'd finish out the year and I agreed to do so with Rita keeping Eck. I didn't want to leave my children just anywhere. To me, it was terribly important that they get proper care. Suzanne was in school; that was her first year in first grade in school. After I finished the year out, then I was asked to, was given the contract and I wanted to teach. Each year I kept thinking, well I'll teach one more year, I'll teach one more year, things were going along rather smoothly with Rita keeping Eck. I would come home with the children in the afternoon. I didn't feel like they were missing anything and I enjoyed teaching. I went back to school in the summer and I finished my degree in '56. I started in January of '54. I had to get a

temporary certificate when I started teaching and that of course cut into my pay. I never shall forget what my salary was - \$180.00.

DC: That was bring home?

OF: That was bring home \$180.00. I paid Rita \$40.00 a month to keep Eck. So I was making \$140.00 a month and that was good extra spending money. But I think the experience I had going into the classroom, having had my own children, being interested in them, seeing how they learn, you see, I never had been around children very much in growing up, I was the late one, so to speak in that I grew up mostly with my aunts and uncles and they were older. It was a very satisfying experience to work with children.

DC: That was where I wanted to go to next. It was evidently enjoyable – but let's just think back to that very first teaching experience that you had in terms of (you already mentioned that it was sixth grade) size of class, type of structure that you taught in, those types of things.

OF: Ok, I went into a class of 28 children, and we were in this great big old wood frame structured building with high ceilings, a lot of windows and wood floors that if you weren't careful, you'd get a splinter in your foot. Our heat was steam heat. There was a boiler that they, fired up and heated all the buildings. Of course you have to remember too, that grades one through twelve were on the same campus there.

DC: That campus was located behind where Brookshire Brothers is?

OF: Right. Where the Elementary campus is now, that was the campus for all grades at that time. I never shall forget, I only taught in that building, I finished out that first year, and then one more year before those buildings were torn down, and the new school was built. But there was one experience that I shall always remember. The weather was terrible, it was cold, sleeting and about half the children had made it there that day, and we were very – my classroom was very structured at that time. We really had, what I want to call, good classroom behavior and everything was, well, I guess you would say I was probably a little more informal with the children then, but that day I told them they could bring their chairs and we would sit around the steam heaters along the side of the wall there. We took off part of our coats and wrapped our feet and sat on them. I told them that they did not have to bring their books, I would just talk with them and we would do the best we could that day. We were just freezing to death, and, it was 19 degrees in the classroom all that day. About 2 o'clock I hear something go thump, boom: it like to have scared us to death, and come to find out the ice in the steam heaters had finally thawed and melted: There we had been hugging that thing all day. But now I would have to say that probably that was the worst experience I had, because I had a lot of good ones there. Even though when I started out, the building was poor. Actually it had been condemned I am sure. We had great hopes and they were working on getting a new building. They built the new high school first, and moved the high school off. Then the next year they started the Elementary you have today and the twelve classrooms. We had two teachers for each grade level and the first through the sixth was on that campus.

DC: Before we go on further. What is the largest group you have ever taught?

OF: Alright. You were in the largest group Deanna. I had 42 students that year and I was teaching all the sixth grades. That year we lost a teacher; we did not have enough students to have twelve classroom teachers. There were fewer in the first grade than there was in the sixth grade but because they were first graders, they just could not put that many little first graders under one teacher, so they chose to put the two sixth grades together. I was the teacher and you, my niece, was one of the students, and Eck, my son, was one of the students, and of course that was a good year. I worried about it because of having you and Eck, but it was no problem at all.

DC: At the risk of dating myself, was that about 1960?

OF: Well that was in, let's see, you graduated in about 1970, so six years from that would be 1964.

DC: Go back a little to your first days, if you can. Think about the curriculum in our school then and now. Can you think of anything that was drastically different, any major differences, or were the subjects pretty much the same?

OF: Well, subjects, at that time were basic. You stuck to your basics. It was really more structured. Today, as we all know, there are so many other things to bring in. Ah, as technology becomes available, you have to get a little bit of that in, and ah schools are reaching out trying to ah, familiarize the students now with ah, all of the new technology and the career ah education and drug education, back in those days we didn't even think about that, you know. Ah, I would say that it was more structured toward strictly basics.

DC: Ok, and what about basic instruction techniques then? I know that there is probably a difference in how you would go about today teaching a group of kids now as opposed to say, twenty or twenty five years ago.

OF: Well, your approach naturally is going to depend on what is available, ah to work with. Now back ah, then ah, you had your textbooks and you could get workbooks to go along with them. We had no paper for running work sheets, ah the children copied their extra work, or practice work, you know that you have to practice, and there is just so much that is in a text book. Everything had to be copied from the board, nothing was mimeographed. It took an awfully long time to copy the text and then answer the questions. Ah, we had a mimeograph machine, an old one, but it was used only for special occasions in that, that was all of the paper allowed; like sending out notices for PTA, or it would really have to be something special, you just didn't go in and have paper to run a test for your class, or a worksheet, or an outline all that the children copied from the blackboard. Of course, that was terribly tiring. Ah, the teacher had to draw up on the children's experiences, we didn't have, we didn't have the AV materials to show and tell, so to speak. You had to do an awfully lot of explaining and try to draw up on their experiences and similarities to get your concepts across. And certainly, it was very

difficult. Really, the teachers had to have quite a bit of skill in holding the children's attention with all this talk that you had to do and ah in order to, ah, hold their attention and make it come alive for them.

DC: Ok, that brings us to another point - discipline. I know that you did have a different range of children then, but basically you still had your small town Diboll children. What was discipline like?

OF: Well, ah, the children in my earlier years of experience in teaching were better disciplined at home, I think, and they were not as much of a problem at school. Ah, you have to think about ah, their home. Now most of the people at that time worked for the company, they were these good old hard working basic type people. And they expected their children to do a good jobs work at school, and they were very supportive. So actually ah, as a whole, the discipline was not ah, ah, well I would say that it was easier to handle them maybe than in the last few years. And I think it is because they grew up here, many of them ah, when they got out of school went to work here. Ah, we were not as mobile then as we are now, and the children seemed to be a little more stable then. Of course, certainly you had ones that acted up, you are always going to have some of those. And ah, we classroom teachers took care of our own discipline problems unless it was something that ah, we felt like the principal should handle. Ah, they were more ah, self-disciplined and that is probably why they had more respect for themselves to the point that they cared about what people thought. They cared what their friends thought, and ah, they were more respectful as a whole. I think it came from their family background; the type of people.

DC: Would you say Diboll was a close-knit community?

OF: Very, very close knit. Everybody knew everybody. That was one of the things that I liked. Ah, you could build up, not only a better rapport with the child, but you could also do the same with the parents. You knew the parents, they knew you, and therefore, there was better communication. You saw their parents, they didn't come to school, but you saw them in the church, or you saw them on the street, or you saw them at the commissary. So actually, that also helped because the child was very much aware that teacher and parent were communicating. And ah, I think that helped them an awful lot to keep them in line and to keep them to wanting to do their best.

DC: Well that brings us to the next category – to the overall school and community relationship.

OF: Ok, you said it when you said the community was a very close-knit community. It was. Ah, everything seemed to be around the school. Ah you had the good churches you know and all that, but when it came to the community, everybody came in. Ah one of the things – the best way to explain the relationship between the community and school was to talk about the PTA. That was always a big deal here. The PTA was very, very active. And ah Halloween brought on the carnival, and the crowning of the queen, and the program that was put on by the students. I would say that every person in town had an

opportunity to participate. If they weren't asked to donate or give something, they were asked to work. And at least come to the program and pay their \$0.50, or what-have-you. And the money that was made and we always made a good sum of money, ah out of the Carnival was always used for the school. Buy books for the library or to buy curtains for our new building that we eventually got. Ah something ah that was constructive and I might say that ah not only the children but the adults looked forward to that. The campus would just be swarmed with people. With cake walks, ah there was dart throwing, there was a lot of eating going on, not only with games but with ah we would make stew in a wash pot and ah, there would always be a group in charge of that and selling cakes, selling pies, every grade level had an activity of either selling food or some game they were in charge of. It was the room mothers and the mothers that did the work. Of course the teachers were working too, as well as working the program up and each year seemed to top, we just felt like we had to top the year before. The parents and the community, people who weren't even parents participated. So that is one good example. And of course your school activities, we had more programs then. You don't have as many programs now where the children perform and the parents come in to visit or to see the program. But back then we felt we had to have these programs and let the children perform and parents come and so you had a very, very good relationship.

DC: Thinking about the decrease in activities and programs – comment on that. Do you think that it could be because you said that there were two teachers per grade level, whereas, now we may have eight teachers? (per level)

OF: Well now, the reason we had to stop that, we got too big. Just suddenly our class size doubled. I mean to say that the number of teachers that were added, we had for years just two teachers to each grade all the way up to high school, but we began to grow and it seems like just overnight we just doubled and tripled and you could no longer do those things. And ah, I'll have to admit it took a lot of time out of the classrooms to do those programs. Then too, the community grew and for instance, we got the new golf course, we got the new park, and the community could have other activities. Diboll Day got started, of which really kinda took the place of the one big event, you know. So ah, your activities began to spread out. Not only did our community grow, but we as a society became more mobile in that our families and children now ah have opportunities to get out of Diboll for some of their entertainment. Ah, there's more to attend and I would say that the growth more or less came in and took over this close-knit town. I still think that Diboll, for this size town, has good cooperation of parents and school. There has always been a good relationship but it just is not as close anymore.

DC: Before we get too far away from the classroom, what would you say about...describe a very, very typical day in your classroom twenty years ago.

OF: Well, there's not really that much difference, well I say there's not that much difference. Routine wise, there is not that much difference. But one of the things we use to do that I remember, that is no longer done anymore, when the bell sounded the children lined up, got in a straight line and got very quiet and then we marched in. And then you were told to be seated and everyone got to their seat. Then when the bell

sounded to do, you told the children to rise and they passed out orderly and they lined up in a very straight line and then you dismissed them.

DC: I don't believe that could be possible in today's classroom.

OF: We had very, very structured and rigid rules in our teaching technique too. Well another thing I want to mention that would be different today from a little more than twenty years ago, would be the lack of AV materials that the teachers have to work with, and that the children have to work with. Your approach is different, and ah I would say that you are still teaching the same things.

DC: Think about, for a minute, attitudes; the general attitude of the community toward you as a teacher in the school system, as a parent, the parent's attitude toward you, the administration's attitude, just the general overall attitude of the people toward you as a teacher in terms of maybe discipline were they supported then in terms of support, expectations?

OF: Alright. There has been a change, a great change, within my teaching career. I think I have already spelled out the earlier feelings attitudes. Ah, as the years went by and we grew and we, as I said, are a more mobile society, we did not know the families as well, they did not know us as well and we had to work harder to have a better rapport with the parents and with the children and some of them were rather impossible, ah to get to know the parents very well. And ah this attitude of letting the children ah make more of their own decisions, ah, kinda got in the way of ah being able ah for the teacher ah to do the discipline and ah you'll have more parents today that will tell you that they do not want their child punished. And in the earlier years I certainly felt the teachers were always very fair with students. And ah, at least the teachers I knew and we were very close, we did not have that problem. The parents accepted what we told them and if they wanted to know something they felt free to ask and we would explain, and they were supportive. Now you don't always get that kind of cooperation. We didn't think about expelling a child because he wouldn't take a paddling, or because he wouldn't take the punishment for misbehaving, but now it is nothing unusual ah, the policy is, do you want to take your punishment or do you want to go home. He has a choice. And ah the parents usually ah will ah let the child decide in many cases that happens. And usually a child will take his punishment and no questions asked based on what he knows about his parents and how they feel, and if he has the least little bit amount of feeling that his parents will back him rather than the school, the school policy they are going to take that out, they had rather be expelled. Then too, that bothers me. Not necessarily the board is the answer to everything, but it, regardless of what it is, if he doesn't want to do it, he has the option of going home and it makes a great difference, because in the beginning when you walk into that classroom, you had no doubt that you were not in control, and certainly the teachers wanted the parents approval, they wanted their support and they got it in those cases. Very seldom did you have a parent that didn't agree with you. That is certainly not the case today.

DC: This is what I wanted to ask you also, you have been in the place of parent and teacher. You have seen the community from the perspective of then and now. Do you see a change in level of respect?

OF: Alright. Yes, and something else I might add too. Ah when we came to Diboll we didn't expect to make this our home. I mean, we didn't plan that we were going to settle in Diboll because back in those days and particularly prior to the war, teachers were like preachers, they were always on the move for one reason or the other; either for better jobs, better locations, ah they were very mobile. But it came to the point that teachers were not ah ah well I am trying to think of the word now, ah they were not scrutinized I guess by individuals. In other words just because one parent got mad and went to the Board, didn't cause the teacher to get fired because teachers were too hard to get for nothing. But yes you had an awful lot of respect and you were expected to live up to it, and you were expected to take part in all community activities where today, teachers usually choose what they want to participate in. Ah the churches looked at the teachers to be Sunday school teachers and leaders in the community. Now I can truthfully say that I never did any of that because I felt the pressure, I did it because we were a family and lived here, and my children were growing up here. So actually it was never any problem with us. There is one thing that I want to mention here that happened. Ah this was shortly after I started teaching. The Board passed a rule that all teachers must attend church and Sunday School, and every Monday morning they had to write on the back of the absentee slip whether or not they did attend, and I refused to do either, even though I was going to church and was a Sunday School teacher. That didn't last. I don't know when they took it off the books or when and if they did, but the teachers refused to go along with that, although there were a few of them that did. I refused to do that and others did too. Now that was absurd. So that ah tells you what they expected. I really don't know the reason because most of the teachers lived here and you have to remember now though, a lot of our teachers lived in Lufkin because then in the beginning there were just company houses and then when it changed from company homes to individual homes and we became incorporated as a city, you had to buy a home. No one had houses for rent so there was a housing shortage here for teachers so they missed having those teachers in the community. Ah, they decided they would hire only teachers who lived in Diboll. Well that didn't go over because they couldn't furnish them a house so they had to repeal that. Ah but I found that most teachers just naturally took a part, not because they were forced to or pressed to.

DC: Thinking of the community and you mentioned the housing; Diboll was made up mostly of company people and teachers. Is that correct?

OF: When we first moved here, ah the company owned every house and we were lucky. Certainly they were going to house the company workers first and then whatever they could find the teachers got. We got a house right in front of the school campus where the Elite Cleaners now stands. That was where the company house stood. Ah well the next house South, Mr. Pate lived in. And ah, we were very lucky to get a house here. We paid \$13.50 a month house rent. Now all of the houses were furnished electricity from the company's electrical power plant. We paid \$0.45 a month for our electricity bill, unless

we went over a certain amount, if we did we had to pay a little extra, think ours got up to \$0.90 one time. Ah but it was not soon after we got here that they began to sell houses and people began fixing them up as their own homes and did away with the commissary. At one time, it was a typical sawmill town. Everybody worked for the company. The commissary and their office down there took care of everybody's needs. If you wanted to cash a check you went to the office and cashed it, we didn't have a bank. Ah you paid your rent and your electric bill, no water bill, we were on the company's water. We did all of our grocery shopping, all was under one big roof. The grocery store on one side, then you had the furniture section and then you had the clothing section and then you had ah I think there was a partition between the clothing section and the drug store and the post office, all under one roof.

DC: Where was it located? The commissary...

OF: Across the railroad tracks, it's that great big building and I believe they use it for a warehouse now.

DC: It still stands?

OF: Yes, it still stands across the railroad tracks.

DC: Where the handle factory is, in that area?

OF: No, I am trying to think.

DC: Where is it in relation to the large office across the tracks over there? You know, where the Temple Eastex office was?

OF: Well that was it.

DC: Ok. Thinking then just in general, getting back to education, if you would like, or the community, could you, or would you, contrast for me either our schools in general then and now, or any comments on the community?

OF: Well I would like to say in general that I can't think of another community that has grown and improved any more than Diboll. And it's not just because I live here and this has been my home, but I have heard comments from people who have just passed through here about what a nice clean and neat little town. And I think that Diboll today has more to offer than most small towns, so I can say that in most part everything has been an improvement over the past and is certainly growing. Now let's get back to the schools as a whole. I may repeat some of the things that I have already said, but the discipline was much more strict than it is now and parents had a more appreciative attitude toward the teachers and what they were doing for their children. And they worked hard and they wanted their children to have an education, because most of those people, it wasn't because they weren't smart enough to have college educations, it was because that they had not had the opportunity money wise, so they wanted their children to have a better

education and so, therefore, those children knew what they expected. Certainly you are going to have some who will not take advantage of their opportunities. And to expel an elementary child was just unheard of. You just corrected him and just went right on teaching. No problem. We have, as I say, not only has our town improved but our school, and of course our schools have been our leaders in growing, in our community. We have better libraries and excellent AV department. The teachers have more materials available, better teachers planning, better presentation concepts, greater selection for individualize instruction for both the slow learner and the gifted students. Your physical school facilities are more comfortable, more convenient, and certainly that makes for a better learning environment. We have a better means for testing students in order to meet their needs. Now one thing I would like to say here, in the beginning even though our testing, we had good tests and we gave achievement tests every year. Most of the students would place within their grade range. We had few students who fell below. We have many more students now, the ratio is much greater now that fall below grade level, than we had in those days. The one thing though that we always kept working toward and bothered us, was the fact that we were weaker in reference materials, that was where the children would fall down, because we didn't have what was necessary for them to work with. Of course most small schools in those days did not have, but usually that was our weak area. Now I don't want to say that our students today are not as smart as they were then. They are. And certainly more well rounded when it comes to what is going on in the world. Children have more now to draw from. They, I think that maybe getting away from the smaller knit little classrooms in the small community, I think somewhere they lost a little bit of that self-discipline and pride in their work, and again this mobile society. You know we have families moving in and out now more frequently and I think the first three grades are terribly important. If they don't learn to study and to get their work and get their foundation then, it's going to be a struggle all the way through for them. And I think it is just a matter of getting the child back to the to the idea that this is what we are going to do, this is what you need and letting him know that is what he needs and feels that is what he needs. And when he gets it, and only he can do it, that will solve that problem. Now that's easier said than done but you have to realize that the child is the one that is going to do the learning and that is the reason we like to get them in school early. That is why this kindergarten came along. We didn't have kindergarten then. That's going to be a great help for students. Then there's more to teach today in the same amount of time. Now we had the same class time that we have today. We have a tendency to stress new ideas a little more sometimes than basics. You can't leave these out, you've got to get those new ideas in, you see that is where future planning comes in, now today you have so much that to me is one of the greatest skills a teacher can acquire is being able to select the best material to use in getting a concept across. Because you have an array of now which one is going to do the best job, or what combination is going to do the best job. So you see you go from one end of the spectrum to another and then I find that we are more specialized in our fields and this is good in that now we have resource people that we can send these children to remedial classes that we did now have before. Of course we have more that need to go now than we use to have. We have such a wide variety of materials to draw from, which help to individualize, there are instructions for the gifted and the slow students. I may have already said that.

DC: Overall, you say that we may be in better shape now?

OF: Oh yes. We are, and I think that we are taking advantage of that. I think there is going to be an adjustment period in attitudes more or less, but when we once overcome that we're just going to, I think, just go by leaps and bounds. And of course you have to remember that to me one of the great contrasts between the beginning of my career and the ending of it is that you had TV coming in that takes a lot of the child's time. Years ago a child didn't think about coming to school without his assignments, but now he has more activities to participate in and TV is one of them, that is just one of many that takes his mind away from school. And then we've mentioned about how our school has grown. I think that pretty well covers the things that I can think of.

DC: You've just discussed that we are progressing, but these are the questions that I want you just to think about. What, if anything, do you miss about Diboll or what do you see that is missing, or is there any one particular thing that you miss about Diboll twenty-five years ago as opposed to Diboll in 1985?

OF: It would have to be that twenty-five or thirty years ago I knew my students better. By that I mean to say that everybody knew everybody. I knew where they lived, I knew their parents, I knew their sisters and their brothers, and I knew every single member on the faculty. We discussed all the way from the first grade through twelfth grade what was happening and what was going on with our work, and we were very cooperative in that sense that we knew how to help each other. Today, that is missing.

END OF INTERVIEW