

**Dewitt Wilkerson**  
**Interview 080a**  
**October 23, 1985**  
**Megan Lambert and Marie Davis, Interviewers**  
**Dorothy Farley, Transcriber**  
**Retyped by Elaine Lawrence**

**Abstract:** In this interview with Marie Davis and Megan Lambert, Dewitt Wilkerson recalls living in Angelina County for over six decades, with most of them spent near Diboll. Mr. Wilkerson recalls bootlegging and illegal hunting, living through the Depression, working for Southern Pine Lumber Company and the foundry in Lufkin, picking cotton, unions, and different ethnicities that lived around Diboll.

**This is Mr. Dewitt Wilkerson, October 23, 1985 and it is Marie Davis and Megan Lambert interviewing.**

**Megan Lambert (hereafter ML):** Mr. Wilkerson is going to tell us stories of bootlegging in Diboll.

**Dewitt Wilkerson (hereafter DW):** This is bootlegging. It was making and selling it, too, and it was about October somewhere around 1937, I imagine. The squirrel season had opened in October and I generally went. This morning that I went, I think it was about 9 o'clock, about a mile behind my house in a pasture. We heard that there were several people that made whiskey and most of them made it and sold it. I was walking along beside the fence in this pasture that was noted for bootleggers and whiskey makers and some of them called it "Shinny". They had the stills and they ran it all themselves. But this morning, I wasn't thinking about that. I was looking for squirrels and I was walking down the trail, parallel with the fence and I heard something over the fence in a little thicket. It kept popping, kept popping and I waited and looked and I couldn't see nothing, it was so thickety. So I eased up, got down and crawled part of the way, eased up to the fence. I still couldn't see anything so I got down and went through the fence and there was a little opening right out in there where the popping was going on. What it was was a little fire and they had this still and it was running off. The old boy, and I knew him, I'd been knowing him for years, he was a little younger than me, and he was sitting there and I just hollered. Boy, he jumped and he started to run. He saw who it was and he stopped and came back. He wasn't afraid I would tell on him. I'd been knowing him for years. So he asked me to come over and sit down and talk to him, which I did. The whiskey was running off. It was dripping a little clear stream. He had a copper coil in a barrel of water, well as I remember, and this was running into – I forget what it was running in. He asked me to take a drink. I never did drink very much but I tasted it and it was warm; it was hot, it really burned me. So we talked on a while and I told him, I said "You needn't worry, I'm not going to tell nobody about it." He said he appreciated that. I went on to my squirrel hunting and he went on with his business and that's about all I can tell you about it. That's all I can remember.

**ML:** How many bootleggers do you think there were at that time?

**DW:** Oh, it would be hard to tell how many there were. The way they talked there was one –there were several making it down there in that pasture. I've been and seen where the Sheriff chopped up their stills, shot holes in the barrels in that pasture where I was squirrel hunting and around it. It would be hard to guess but I imagine there were ten or twelve at that time. They would buy sugar by the hundred pounds and make up their mash in a barrel. Let it set, you know, and work and whatever it has to do to go through. When it gets ready then they have to cook it off. I believe that's about all I can remember about this episode. But there were a lot of people back then, didn't have much of any way to make a living except to make whiskey and sell it, bootleg, or whatever you want to call it.

**ML:** You know, the first time I went to Nacogdoches, a couple of years ago, somebody offered me some white lightning.

**DW:** That's what that was coming out of that coil that was warm, it was white lightning. I mean it was hot, too. I didn't taste enough of it to get me drunk but I took a swallow of it.

**ML:** Do you have any other memories about working for Mr. Devereaux?

**DW:** I remember one time when we worked out there in a wintertime and we had to saw off some pilings out in water that was up nearly waist deep and it was cold weather and we stayed with it until we got through with it. Seems like it was about two o'clock in the afternoon when we got through, and he told us to go on home and he gave us a full day for it. We thought that was pretty nice of him. But it was cold water, too. I don't see how we stood it.

**ML:** How did he keep people working under those kinds of conditions all night with cement and in cold water?

**DW:** Well, there was always somebody wanting a job pretty bad and they were up against it most of the time. They would take a lot of stuff in those days.

**MD:** Do you think people nowadays would take that much?

**DW:** No, no, I don't think they would – they'd walk off, a lot of his walked off, too. I've seen – I could call his name but I'd better not – one of them when we were working over behind the sawmill and we were busting up concrete with sledgehammers. You could beat and beat and a little piece would fall off about half as big as your fist. He was standing right there looking at us, and directly one of them got enough and he just threw his maul down and went right straight across beside that mill pond and went to the house. He didn't come back either. Didn't say a word to the boss or nobody, just took off across there. One reason he did it, I imagine, is because the boss was standing looking right at him, you know.

**ML:** Did you ever hear much talk or any talk about unions?

**DW:** Very little, they talked about it one time there, some of them met and I went to one or two of the meetings and they never could get it off the ground. They couldn't get it organized. It was kind of a weak trail, you know, they tried a little but it was weak, it didn't materialize.

**ML:** Maybe people were not so dissatisfied?

**DW:** Well, maybe not, they were afraid they would get worse off than they were, I think, is the way it was.

**ML:** Especially that time?

**DW:** That was, I guess '37, '38, along in that time, after Roosevelt took over.

**Marie Davis (hereafter MD):** But they never have been able to organize over here, have they?

**DW:** No, they did organize Lufkin and, I think, let's see, the paper mill in Lufkin and Lufkin Industries finally did. I think that helped Diboll some as far as wages, but they never did go that far.

**ML:** Tell a little bit about the other kind of work that you did, foundry work, etc.

**DW:** Foundry work? I started helping out in the assembly, assembling their pumping units. Then one of the bosses over in the other part came and got me and put me on a machine and that was '42, '43, '42, I believe. Right after I started to work up there. And from then on I started running machines and went from that to – you won't understand all this; but a gear shoat and then a warren swasey and an engine lathe and let's see I forget what other kind. I finally wound up on a Bullard and stayed there until I retired in '76. The bullard was the best job; it was cutting heavy stuff, and it was a pretty good size machine, it was forty-two inches, I believe. We turned steel and cast iron, made a lot of commercial gears, made sheaves for pumping units, machine them, I did, during the war, used to do a lot of stuff for guns. They'd make gun parts there and it turned tank gears and pinions and other things for the Army.

**ML:** Well, going back to growing up in Diboll, I heard from Mr. Burke this afternoon there was a whole lot of fighting went on in school in Diboll. Do you agree with that?

**DW:** Yes, they used to be some fighting, some of them would get little gangs and fight each other. I saw that one evening, one of the old boys, he had his brothers fighting another brother in his gang. This old boy, the biggest one and he wasn't older than me. I imagine at that time he was about sixteen, seventeen and he had his brother, younger than him, fighting the other boy's brothers. He got mad and he cried. They sure had a fight, after school was out in the evening. I just watched them, I didn't take no part in it. There

was a good bit of fighting then. I heard from some that some of them would fight the teachers even.

**ML:** Really?

**DW:** Them big old boys, I never did see that.

**ML:** Do you think it was rough because it was a sawmill town, or were all towns like that?

**DW:** Well, it could have been but I don't know, it could have been rougher because a lot of it – I didn't see it, I just heard about it and I'll tell this little story, it's kind of funny. I was raised on a farm and we had peanuts and I'd take parched peanuts with me once in a while out there and eat them and then the boys got to bumming. I'd give them some and then I got to selling them, just bring a little in my pocket or lunch kit or something and sell them for a nickel a bag or something. That was against the rules, supposed to be. A teacher got after some of them about it and asked two or three if they had been eating peanuts and two or three said they had. One good friend of mine, I don't think he had ever had a whipping – she asked him if he had eaten some and he said "Yes, Ma'am" about three or four more did and she called them up there and paddled them. I really felt bad about this good friend of mine getting a whipping. She didn't ask me; she asked him, and I didn't say nothing; I just watched them get a whipping. There wasn't much paddling.

**ML:** You know, a lot of people in this tape recording business, they will tell a story that they felt bad about for so many years – have to get it off their chest.

**DW:** I don't think he is even living now. He was a good old boy. I hated it, hated that I even sold him the peanuts. I didn't think he got his money's worth.

**MD:** Can you think of any other pranks or tricks you used to play?

**DW:** I really can't, not right off.

**ML:** You mentioned somebody named Avery a while ago, was that the same Avery who got found in a shoebox as a foundling? One of the tapes he talked about an Avery somebody.

**DW:** No, this was – Avery Jones, that drove the Jitnies around on the Dolly run, hauling lumber around there to certain machines, you know, and to the box cars, load it up to ship it, you know? That's about all I could say about that. I've been out there early on frosty mornings; I didn't see him do it, I've seen others do it. The first would be all over them dolly runs and they'd run one of them little old Jitneys, they were Model A Fords is what they were, up there on that slick frost and get on the brake and just wheel it around, just spin it –

**MD:** Did any of them ever fall off the dolly run?

**DW:** Not that I know of, they could have, and some of them. Before the Jitney, they used horses and had a buggy like – wasn't a wagon but it was something and they could pull them with horses, spot them pulleys, whatever it was – dollies is what it was. Spot them with horses. I've seen lots of that, too. And I helped build lots of big sheds there in Diboll. Put on, I would say, acres of tin roof, me and old man Dred's bunch, and the bridge gang. At first I couldn't go up high, climb very high, but I got where I could go thirty or forty feet and didn't bother me too bad. I liked to have fallen off the roof the last time I worked there; they got to where there was a guy would come along with candy and we would take a break. Old Garland Fairchild, we were putting on tin with metal and he was underneath on a scaffold and I was up on top of the roof and it was really wet that morning, had been sprinkling a little. We saw the candy man coming and old Garland Fairchild hollered out to me "Dewitt, you got a dime?" And my feet slipped out from under me and I was about ten feet on the roof going off on the ground, it would have been about twenty feet, and he said "I believe if I'd asked for a dollar, he would have jumped off the roof."

**MD:** Who was the candy man? Was he just....

**DW:** A colored boy that came there with...

**MD:** Was that his own?

**DW:** Yes, they allowed him to do it, and I forget what his name was, but he was regular every morning with that candy and we were ready to eat it. They got to where they would let us have breaks, you know; they didn't do that too much earlier but they got to where they did. They wouldn't buy nothing, they would look the other way, the bosses looked the other way while we were eating our candy.

**ML:** Did your brother, Van, used to work around here, too?

**DW:** Yes, I don't – seems like he worked in the carpenter crew, I don't think he worked over at the mill any but he helped repair them old sawmill houses here in Diboll. I don't know how long he worked there, but him and Cora stayed the first few nights with us, with me and my wife after they married, stayed there a little while until they found something else. I don't remember how long but they stayed there a while.

**ML:** I know he was sure strict about taking breaks on the job, my goodness, yes, you couldn't finish your lunch to save your soul before he had you up working again.

**DW:** Well, most of us Wilkersons, there never was a day long enough for us. We'd just keep working until after – until dark run us in.

**ML:** Yes, that's the way Gary is, too.

**DW:** That's what I did, see I was – I lived right here, joined them all around, that's my land right behind and joined down here. I used to work, come in give out and then have to work some more. Used to milk cows, thought we had to milk cows but it really wasn't necessary, you could buy it cheaper than.

**MD:** Megan milks a cow.

**ML:** Well, we've dried her off now.

**DW:** Even while we were working, me and my wife, she would milk, if I couldn't milk she would milk and we even sold milk after we married, oh, I'd say in '36, '37, '38, we still sold milk, fresh milk.

**MD:** Dewitt, what about – I've heard some people say that some people never drew a payday from here, they would work that day and draw it.

**DW:** They would use it up, a lot of them did, and a lot of them got what they called "Ok slips", "Red slips" they could use it in place of money and draw it on their time, you know what they had. Payday came a lot of them had done used it up, didn't have a payday. Course, I couldn't spot you just who it was, a lot of them would draw the okay slips, we called them okay slips or red slips.

**ML:** How do you think it would have been different for people around here if the Company had not been as successful as it was?

**DW:** Oh, it would have been rough, you know. The Company was the main reason, I'd say, of the settlement on the outer, not right in the city. You know, we had pretty good housing out this way and every way from Diboll. And, of course, that was on account of the Company having that big sawmill and there were so many industries there. They had the sawmill, they had the Handle Factory way back yonder. Well, I didn't mean – I meant Box Factory and then they began to build other things – of course, the planer and the sawmill was there, had been there. But I started to say something about the Handle Factory, I believe it came in '38 or '39, along in there, and I worked on it from the foundation on up to the top but my big job, there was windows in there and they got five gallons instead of quarts, or something like that, but they had five gallons of putty, red putty, I mean there were several five gallons, and my job was to putty most of the windows. I got to where I could do pretty good at it, make a smooth job on the puttying. He put me to doing that mostly. Sometimes he would give me a helper, but most of the time I was doing it by myself. I'd go to a little old building we had it in there, and every morning start out puttying and putty all day long, but I enjoyed it. I kind of got to where I enjoyed it.

**MD:** Did you help build the Antler Hotel?

**DW:** No, no, I didn't help on that.

**MD:** That wasn't one of Mr. Devereaux's jobs?

**DW:** I don't think it was; I think that fellow that came in here, kind of bossed that, I did know his name, you remember?

**MD:** Mr. Cammack?

**DW:** Cammack – yes. I understand that it rotted down pretty bad with them logs – termites and rats.

**ML:** Boy, that puttying really takes patience, I really respect you for that.

**DW:** I can still do it pretty good, I did have a limber putty knife that I kept, I wouldn't let nobody else have it. I don't know what I done with it now, misplaced it somewhere. But we puttied all of our windows, but my kids helped me; they got pretty good at it, down here when we painted, last year or year before last. Re-puttied nearly all of them.

**ML:** Well, I know that the Company used to have a carpenter crew that went around and fixed people's houses when they were renting – how about after they bought the house?

**DW:** Well, the Company wouldn't furnish it; they could get anybody they wanted to but we had a carpenter crew that went around. That's what Van was working in, in the carpenter crew. He worked for – I don't know if he ever worked for his daddy-in-law, Slim Stephens, I don't know whether he did or not, but he worked with some of the rest. I don't know really who was running when he was – but he was working, I heard him telling about working under the houses, help level it up, I think he could do anything they came up to, fix steps, windows or roof or whatever.

**ML:** He sure is a perfectionist. Well, have you ever thought of where else you might have liked to have lived instead of Diboll or are you pretty satisfied here?

**DW:** Been pretty satisfied most of the time, we happened to settle out here close to Marie and Mrs. Glass and them on this old flat land prairie. I always said “Well, nobody else couldn't get along with it but us so we'll just stay here.”

**MD:** Good neighbors.

**DW:** Yes, we had good neighbors; most all the time we've had good neighbors, exceptional neighbors. Most of the time if our cows got in somebody else's or somebody else got in ours we'd just go tell them, if they didn't get it right then, well, in two or three days they would so we didn't worry about it.

**ML:** Speaking of cows, somebody was telling us that during the Depression some times the Company would give a family a cow to help them make it through, do you know anything about that?

**DW:** I don't really know about that – it seems like I've heard that but I don't really know now. Before all the paved roads went in nearly everybody in Diboll, I don't say everybody but lots of people, owned their cows and they could go wherever they wanted to, outside. A lot of them would come out this way and graze. Pretty milk cows and they would go back in for their feed.

**ML:** Every night, huh?

**DW:** Every night – go back into Diboll, it got to where it was all these paved roads and all, so many of them got killed, they quit owning them. Even us, I've had as high as three yearlings to get killed at a time up there by a truck on the old highway after it came in. So that made us go to fencing and take them off of the outside range.

**ML:** It was the highway coming in then?

**DW:** Yes, you had to have hog laws, stock laws to keep fence – keep the hogs up and the cows up.

**MD:** Then when the city became a city they put in those ordinances over there. People can't keep things like that in town now.

**DW:** No, they had a man to pen up the hogs and things when they went over there in Diboll, you know. They will get into everything, they root into everything and I had an old sow and about eighteen shoats. I think they had done penned her up once and I went and got them and brought them back and they got out and he penned them up again. It got to where you had to pay a little, you know, a little extra, to get them out. One night there was an old boy, I was working nights, I'd get off at 11 o'clock or 12. The boy was riding with me, and I got to Diboll there. I knew where those hogs were penned – I said "you take this car on home and I'm going to get my hogs" – I went over there, pulled a board or two off and I was going to walk home, it wasn't but about a mile, them hogs beat me home.

**ML:** They didn't like being penned up.

**DW:** I never did hear what they said about it – I could tell you the man's name that had them penned up.

**ML:** Did everybody slaughter their own hogs, or did you take them to somebody?

**DW:** Well, it got to where people would take them to Lufkin to get them slaughtered, a packing house or...

**MD:** A long time ago?

**DW:** A long time ago we killed our own; we didn't know what it was to call on somebody – made our own sausage, cured it, smoked it, put it in there and cured it. I've

cured many a hog. I got to where I could do pretty good, make pretty good sausage and cure the ham and shoulders. If you didn't watch it, it would get a little rank on you, or if it turned off warm after you killed them, like there'd come a norther and then that norther fade out, well, it would sour on you.

**ML:** What other kinds of things did people used to do at home? Did they ever make cheese? I know they made butter.

**DW:** Not cheese – I've heard of them having California beer, you know, making it, setting it on the table.

**ML:** What is California beer?

**DW:** Well, you get a seed, get it stirred with a seed and then – and I've heard of them making it with – what was it – sweet potato peelings? Making beer out of it, you know, just to drink with your meals? It didn't have no kick but it – you would tell it was fermented.

**ML:** Wonder why they called it California beer?

**DW:** Well, I think that seed must have been from California.

**ML:** Was it hops? It wasn't hops, was it?

**DW:** Well, I don't know, hops, they use that in beer, home brew, didn't they, a lot?

**ML:** Yes.

**DW:** They used to make lots of home brew around here and in the quarters and that was when whiskey wasn't legal and beer, you know. You couldn't get it just any where, so they'd get home brew and get it for a nickel or a dime a bottle. Get on a bender.

**MD:** Was there a lot of home brew made in the quarters?

**DW:** Yes, yes, used to be. I drank a little of it. Me and an old boy got off work one evening, we were tired, we went by a fellow's house there in the quarters. I knew him pretty well and he made pretty good home brew. This old boy had him an old Cadillac touring with a cloth top on it and we went by there and got two bottles a piece. We opened it and that smoke would come out of it, you know, steaming out, and that was a pretty good sign it was good. And he had him a stopper – he opened his, sometimes it would foam over, and he opened it and rammed this stopper down in there and it blowed it out and it hit the top of his car. This old boy was pretty high up, he was a superintendent's nephew. And we drank them two and he told me the next morning he went in drunk, he said he liked to not got by with it, they liked to caught it. Wasn't supposed to be but he was tipsy. It didn't bother me much cause one or two is all I ever drank.

**ML:** So the fact that alcohol was illegal pretty much kept people from drinking or did they get it from some place?

**DW:** They generally got it from some place. If it wasn't legal here, if it was legal in Trinity County they would go over there. But a lot of time it wasn't even legal in counties around us so they made it or bought bootleg. They knew where to go. They say the laws protected the bootleggers a whole lot if they paid them off good. Most of them bootleggers I knew got along good financially. I knew one over in the quarters I went in his house, a colored man over there and he had nice furniture. And he told us how he got it.

**ML:** Is that all he did?

**DW:** He worked at the mill too and if anything came up his wife would sell it in the daytime. He worked days. I forget his name I did know it.

**ML:** How come it was called bootlegging? Where did that word come from?

**DW:** Well that's uh, the sale of illegal I guess, it's called bootlegging, slipping it by. I did know some women they claimed bootlegged and done pretty good with it. They'd peddle in the quarters, milk, peas, watermelons, anything they had, eggs, take that along and sell it.

**MD:** Did you ever hear about anybody painting milk bottles white and filling it up with bootleg whiskey and selling it and people thought they were selling milk?

**DW:** No I didn't hear that, but I think they tried every trick on it.

**ML:** Did you get some of that on tape?

**MD:** Yes, mother knew some people who did that.

**ML:** Were there any other kind of illegal activities that you knew about? Either of you?

**DW:** Well I know one thing. When they first started fencing up all this country for clubs and things, hunting clubs, and where you raise deer. What do you call it? Keep them from anybody else.

**MD:** Wildlife preserves?

**DW:** Yes preserves. A lot of these people that had been hunting everywhere, they began to cut the fence. They would go at night. Certain ones would take a strip and another a strip and cut it between every post with a pair of pliers. And I had heard, I don't know if it was ever that way here, but I heard it was against the law to carry a pair of pliers for a long time.

**ML:** Didn't they call that an East Texas gate key? A pair of pliers.

**DW:** I guess so I can't remember.

**MD:** That is a pretty good name I guess.

### **END OF SIDE ONE**

**ML:** Did you work your cattle with horses?

**DW:** Not necessarily, we did some times but most of the time our cows were gentle and usually just take a bucket of feed and toll them in the pen or out – wherever you wanted to. If they were hungry. Now if they weren't hungry they were kind of like some of the horses; now those horses you could catch them most any time with a bucket of food unless, if the grass was good, sometimes those mules and horses would be contrary and they wouldn't come to a bucket of feed. Most of the time you could catch them, just toll them in a lot with a bucket of feed or an ear of corn.

**ML:** How many horses would an ordinary family keep?

**DW:** Well, just for working and riding, most of the time there were maybe two mules and a couple of horses. But some would use more and some would have a surplus, you know, and some of them would use just certain ones to ride and they wouldn't work him too hard. We always had to ride ours and work them, too. I had a little saw horse, Marie might can remember him – Charlie – Little Charlie? You could ride him in the woods and he would come to a fence and if you didn't want to go way around it, you could mash down the top bar and take him by the reins and say "Come over" and he would hop it just like a dog; go anywhere with him then.

**ML:** I know some horses would go to pieces if you asked them to jump.

**DW:** Yes, he would leap right over, but he was bad about jumping anyhow.

**ML:** Well, do you remember what year it was that you or your family first got a car?

**DW:** Well, the first car we got was about 1923, I believe it was, a 1923 Ford, Model T and I was about then eleven years old. That was sixty-one or sixty-two years ago – sixty-two or three years ago. My brother bought it, who is older than me. He bought it from an Italian that lived here in Diboll, Sam Cotine, I believe they called him. He lived across the railroad track, next to the quarters. He couldn't pay for it, he bought it in Nacogdoches, bought it new. My brother was working on the railroad and he bought it and he never did stay at home much, so he gave it to my mother. Me and my daddy drove it; I was the oldest; I guess I was about eleven then or twelve and I learned to drive it – old Model T and we kept that thing, oh, three or four years and it began to go down and

my dad got rid of it. I don't remember now what he got for it but – whether he traded it or sold it.

**MD:** Dewitt, do you remember anything about the Italians who lived in Diboll?

**DW:** Well, I just knew this one really, but I'd go by there with Poppa. He would peddle milk, and butter and stuff like that in there and we'd go by there and I can't remember if he had any of them for customers but he probably did. This one – I guess they all worked at the mill.

**MD:** And they lived over there close to the quarters, didn't they?

**DW:** Yes. They were first and then the other quarters. They were first, about eight or ten houses.

**ML:** Was there a name for the area they lived in?

**DW:** Nothing but the regular quarters – colored quarters.

**ML:** Someone told me that they thought the Italians first came to this area to do truck farming after the stumps had been cut out...

**DW:** Well, I don't know, I don't know any of the Italians a working out in the country. I'll tell you another funny thing, this prairie here used to be in cotton, nearly all of it, of course, part of it was in corn. Her uncle, great uncle, Lee Massingill, owned a lot of this right in here, and we would work for him. We would hoe, pick cotton, chop cotton and I have helped him cut a few logs, just whatever came up. But before that there was a man working for him, and you picked cotton then, most of it was a dollar a hundred. If you picked a hundred pounds you'd get a dollar – one hundred fifty pounds \$1.50 and there was a big old man over here in Diboll. His name was Joe Young and he came out and picked cotton one day for Lee Massingill and he picked 500 pounds. In one day and Lee had to pay him \$5.00 and he fired him. He said \$5.00 was too much to pay one man.

**MD:** But he got all the cotton –

**DW:** Yeah, he got the same amount but – when he was paying the rest of us \$1.00 and \$2.00 – that was all we could pick – I liked to never got where I could pick over a hundred pounds, finally got to 125 and 150 a day, I'd just get out there early and stay late and I had brothers and sisters both could just beat me and just walk off. And I – my back always hurt me so bad I had to wear knee pads, I'd crawl most of the time, picking cotton. Some of them would get straddle a row or take three rows, one of them they called a "Snatch" row, you know, you take this row on your left and get half or more than half off that right, and the other one over there doing the same thing. We called the middle row, and when you take three you call the middle row the "Snatch" row and you snatch what you can.

**MD:** How old were you when you went to work for Mr. Devereaux, you said that was your first job?

**DW:** Yeah, it was 1934, it was before I married, I married in '36.

**MD:** When were you born?

**DW:** 1912, October 10, this month. A few days ago I was 73. I was born in Leon County, me and my sister, Winnie, and Lewis, and when I was four years old we moved to this county. My Daddy already had three boys, Bill, John and Gene. His wife died out from Dayton or Tarkington Prairie and he met my mother in Leon County. He sold out everything he had and moved over there, stayed until I was four years old. We moved over here in a covered wagon from Leon County and it took us three days. You can imagine six kids and Mamma and Poppa in that covered wagon. They had a mare to it and I don't know if the other one was a horse or mule, but had a – that mare had a mule colt and he followed us – didn't have to put anything on him, he just followed them all the way, stayed with his Momma.

**MD:** That was about one hundred miles?

**DW:** One hundred miles, we came out at Lufkin somewhere, we came across a ferry on the Trinity River, that's south of the Centerville, between Centerville and Crockett. We came to the old Iron Bridge on the Neches River, and I don't know where it is, out towards – let's see, I don't know what place it was, but it is out west or northwest of Lufkin, old Iron Bridge, and seems like I can remember crossing it, just a little boy four years old. Only thing I sure remember, we came by Porter Springs and Poppa drove out in some water there. You know, you used to drive out – get your wheels wet so the rim wouldn't come off. That scared me when he drove out in that water. I just can barely remember that, Porter Springs.

**MD:** That's in Trinity County?

**DW:** Yeah, that's from....

**MD:** On the other side of Groveton?

**DW:** Well, it's the other side of Crockett, it's in Houston County. But we came on and some, I guess we were camped there close to the Iron Bridge and a fellow came down to tell Poppa, there used to be a good many deer, then it got to where there wasn't none and then there got to be more deer again, people used to take care of them. But then it wasn't against the law to kill one and this guy came down there and told Poppa there was a deer up there with some cows and Poppa took his old pump shotgun and twelve No. 6 squirrel shots. He went up there and killed that deer for them people, gave them half and we kept half. So we had something to eat – a little extra. Let's see, I was four years old, that's been sixty-nine years ago, hasn't it?

**ML:** Well, what was it that your folks were coming to? Did they know...

**DW:** He had a half sister up here in Lufkin and they moved there and stayed with one of her boys until he could find them a place. The first place I remember us living was up here close to Fairview and they called it the Old Eck Wilkins' Place. And my daughter married one of Eck Wilkins' grandsons, my youngest daughter. It was an old run down place and we just made out there a while and then we moved to Burke, to Ab Renfro's place and we stayed there, I don't know how long, a good while, worked for – all of us who was big enough to work, worked for Ab Renfro; he was a big cotton farmer and had lots to do. One of my brothers is named after him, named Renfro, after Ab Renfro.

**ML:** I was just going to ask you what you think about the...oh, the way Diboll grew from a town that was really a Company town into an independent town, you know, you lived here through that time?

**DW:** Yes, well, I think it's really improved and I think, I know the "Old Heads" had lots to do with it, putting it on the maps and getting it started and all that, but I think Arthur Temple, he is one of the smartest builders – what do you call it? – I can't think now what the word for it – producing?

**ML:** Entrepreneur?

**DW:** Improving things.

**ML:** Developer?

**DW:** Developer – he has really been good, he must have been farsighted. In other words, if it wasn't like it was we would be in worse shape now all around. It hurts all around when something goes down and there are still things going down, places still going busted and I don't know whether it is going to stop or not.

**ML:** Marie, can you think of other things you want to ask Mr. Wilkerson?

**MD:** Did you ever work at the Planer?

**DW:** I think I worked one day there, one or two, something had happened and we didn't have anything else to do. But I worked most all around over the mill, even helped on the dolly run some; we did what there was to do. Helped build that fuel house where that picture was taken. Seems like there was something I thought of I was going to say but I've done forgot what it was.

**MD:** Well, Dewitt, did you think, did you ever feel that people who lived in town thought they were better, so to speak, than you were?

**DW:** Well, seems like I had that impression for a long time, they felt like they, some of them at least, kinda uppity-uppity. Did you ever have that impression?

**MD:** Well, yes, a little bit – I just wondered way back then...

**DW:** I don't know if it was so but we kind of felt that way, we might have been looked down on a little, didn't bother me much.

**MD:** No, because you owned your own home.

**DW:** Yes, we went barefooted a lot and wore patched clothes and all that but it didn't bother me. We wore – always wore clean clothes and not so much patched, to school, but we worked in patched clothes.

**MD:** Oh sure.

**ML:** Marie was saying we should get your children's names on tape if you don't mind telling us.

**DW:** Bobby Joyce, the oldest one, she is, I believe 49 today, is this the 23<sup>rd</sup>?

**MD:** Yes.

**DW:** And Betty Ann lives in Lampasas, Bobby Joyce lives in Houston, out on the old Beaumont Highway in the Royal Wood addition. Betty, she's got four kids. Bobby Joyce has two girls, one of them is married, Jenitha and Jenda. Betty's got four, Nathan, Donna, Greg (Gregory Neal) and Betina, the youngest one and they live in Lampasas. And George, the boy, lives in Royal Wood, I don't know, out on the Beaumont Highway, too, and he's got three kids, Keith, fifteen years old, Carla, twelve and a little boy, I forget his name now, oh, I'll think of it directly. What's that kid's name? – Justin, a year old, year and a half. Peggy lives over close to Shelton, just off the old Beaumont Highway, they are all right there close together in Houston. Peggy's two boys, one's fifteen, Clay and Lance is thirteen, I believe, and Ronnie works for Head and Gill, heavy equipment company. He is Vice President of that company. I believe I told you George worked for Texaco in one of them high buildings.

**MD:** Is he an accountant?

**DW:** No, he is not an accountant. He studied for that but it didn't work out. He took the first job he got and he works with a lot of figures. He makes pretty good but he never did go ahead and really finish with the accounting. I guess he could have but he tried to stay with this, he's done got involved with it now.

**MD:** And your wife's name?

**DW:** Oda, she hasn't got a second name, just Oda Weeks Wilkerson.

**MD:** She comes from an old family –

**DW:** Yes, raised up around Beulah, Renfro Prairie. There's lots of Weeks there and she is kin to a lot of people all over the county. Fred Week's first cousin.

**MD:** And all of your children finished high school over here, didn't they?

**DW:** Yeah, they went – I think every one of them went to Mrs. Poland for something. Ruth Burgess, we called her, me and her both the same age. Everyone of them thought lots of Ruth, of course, they did the other teachers, too, but they all knew here. Ronnie did, too. He thought lots of her. I guess Sterling, that's Bobby Joyce's husband, Sterling Burnett, I don't believe I told her name while ago, and Peggy's is Wilkins, married Ronnie Wilkins. But anyhow, I'll probably think of something good to tell you after I leave but I can't think of it now.

**ML:** Write it down.

**END OF INTERVIEW**