

Vernon Burkhalter
Interview 85b
November 12, 1987
Todd Kellam, Interviewer
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Abstract: In an interview with Todd Kellam, Vernon Burkhalter reminisces about growing up in Diboll, going to school, hunting, fishing, and harvesting Mayhaws. He also remembers working for Southern Pine Lumber Company during the summers while in high school, cleaning out ditches, cutting weeds, and painting fences. He compares the lives of teenagers today with life when he was in high school and notes positive and negative changes.

Todd Kellam (hereafter TK): This is Todd Kellam, I am interviewing Vernon Burkhalter at his office in Diboll, Texas and the date is November 12, 1987. Vernon, how was school like when you were growing up?

Vernon Burkhalter (hereafter VB): Todd, that was a long time ago. My first grade teacher in my school was a lady by the name of Mrs. Noonan and I used to play in the rhythm band, we had what they called a little rhythm band.

TK: In the first grade?

VB: Yes, it's a rhythm band, you have little cymbals you beat on and the kids sang, and sticks you play and march. We had to wear a uniform but when I went to school in Diboll, even in high school. I think there were three cars at school. There weren't any kids in high school who had cars.

TK: Just the teachers?

VB: No, a couple of kids had a car, Model A, Model T. Right before I got in high school, a gentleman by the name of Spears was the Superintendent and I remember him, Coy Colwell, and later on Mr. Massey and Wilbur Pate, Robert Ramsey and all that group. But a lady here, Mrs. Poland, Mrs. Schinke, everyone of them taught me. School was quite a deal then. We didn't have air conditioning, they raised the windows in the summer time and the boys used to sit on the back row and chew tobacco and spit out the window.

TK: Did you get caught?

VB: Yea, we got caught. Wilbur Pate paddled four of us one time for spitting out the window. One of the boys spit just as he walked by the window and spit on his brand new hat and we got tore up for that. We had a good school, had a good football team and had a good baseball team.

TK: How many kids were in your class?

VB: Oh, gosh, I don't know. In high school, I expect there were twenty or twenty-five. Dixie Cook taught me in high school, she had the likes of me, Joe Donald Smith, Raymond Weeks, Calvin Wheeler, Jack Weeks and that was a rough bunch for anybody to teach in school. One of the things I remember happening, we had a guy going to school with us by the name of Pat Landrum. One of the guys slipped behind his chair one day and took an alcohol burner out of the lab class and set it – we had metal chairs we sat in – and he put it under his metal chair to heat the chair so he would jump up and the guy crossed his feet and put them up under the chair and set his long handles on fire. It was in the wintertime, we got into a lot of trouble for that. But we had a good school, in fact, when I went to school most of the guys in grammar school went barefooted to school. Well, until it got so cold it bothered you. But every day at lunch – we went home – I think we had an hour. I walked from where the grammar school is now, in that area it was the high school and I would walk.

TK: Were the schools at three different places?

VB: No, we had one school, we had a colored school and we had the white school, and right about – I don't remember exactly, it was right about where the bank is, somewhere in there was the football field. We had to go across the highway, where the old highway was – the only highway then that came through town, had a row of houses out there and we had to go across the highway to play football. We had one building and the old gymnasium that was just torn down. It is the one that we played basketball in. That's a long time ago, boy. We had good teachers, had a good school. Everybody knew everybody and we walked home every day to eat, hardly anybody brought their lunch unless it was the kids that came in out of the country. They would bring their lunches; no cars – if you had anything to ride it was a horse or a bicycle.

TK: Did the school start early in the morning like it does now?

VB: Yes, it is like it is now. Yes. And you went to school, you did what the teacher told you and I'll guarantee, if you crossed them they would snatch you up and paddle your fanny in a New York minute and you didn't go out crying to Mama – “teacher whipped me”. You didn't want your Mother and Daddy to know it. If I got whipped at school when I went home I got it again from my mother who was a schoolteacher.

TK: Was he that mean?

VB: No, you just knew he would spank you and you respected him and if he said “No”, it was “No”. That was it; there wasn't any arguing about it. We had a guy that taught us in the eighth grade, I guess, Coy Colwell, and boy, let me tell you, he was about 6'2” or 3, an ex-basketball player, and if you crossed him, he would take his belt off and whip you. When he had class you paid attention. Most of my – I had several classes from a

Mrs. Katherine Spradley, and I assure you she knew how to use a paddle and she was a disciplinarian deluxe. We were pretty rowdy kids in school, with pranks an all like that.

TK: Did you get in trouble a lot?

VB: No.

TK: You just didn't get caught?

VB: No, well, a lot of things we did we didn't get caught at. Our group, we weren't destructive. Nobody ever heard of tearing up the school the way they do now. We did things like while the teacher was writing on the blackboard one of the smart-alecky in the back would shoot somebody in the back of the head with a spitball on the front seat. This kind of thing, or maybe we would play catch with a baseball all across the room and she would look around to see who threw the ball and couldn't catch us. We never dreamed of going to the school and tearing it up, you know. It was just unheard of. You just didn't do that. And I'm not saying the kids are bad today, that's not what I am saying. Even the rowdy kids were not destructive. I passed the other day going out to Bessie's and I looked at all the cars in the parking lot over there at the high school and I'm glad to see that the kids have them but I'll guarantee you, the only time we saw that many cars was when we went to the State Fair or to the Forest Festival in Lufkin. Everybody walked to school, had good teachers. What do you want to talk about now?

Let me tell you something about going to school. When we went to school forty years ago, most of the guys wanted to get out of school and on to work and make money and that's what most of us did. The teachers would try to encourage you to go to college but a lot of them didn't have money to go to college. A lot of them wanted to go to work, a lot of them wanted to go in the service. As best I remember there was not that much interest among the kids to go to college. When now a days a young person going to school makes a terrible mistake if they don't go on to college. It is the best time in their life to get the kind of education that they need. Then they waste so much if they don't go and a lot of emphasis is put on it, by the school, on going to college. It's put out by industry and colleges recruit. Really, when I was in high school, Stephen F. Austin was kind of considered a Teacher's College. That's where you went to school to get your Teacher's Certificate, Etc. And now you can look at it, the kind of school it has become now. I watched it on big time TV the other night, their homecoming game with Sam Houston State. It's wonderful, you kids, nowadays, have the educational opportunities that you have and the emphasis that is being put on it is fantastic and all the kids ought to take advantage of it. I had a good schooling, I had good teachers, we had a good school and I enjoyed it and it was a great time in life, but you guys have so much more going for you. It's a high tech world; schools are doing a great job.

You were asking me about summer jobs while we went to school. The Company, it was Southern Pine Lumber Company then, made an effort to work boys every summer. Back then, most people had fences around their yards and we had what you call "Alleys", that would go all the way down a row of houses and you would have weeds that would grow up in it during the summer time. They would have a crew of boys cut weeds, that was a

big job then to get a minor's release and go to work for the Company, cutting weeds all summer long. We would cut weeds all over Diboll.

TK: All day long?

VB: Yes, about six hours a day, seven hours a day and then as you got older they had another crew, see that was back, you're getting close to war time back up in '44 and '45. A lot of the boys were gone off to the service and they had a crew of boys that were painting the houses; start off cutting weeds, pouring oil in the ditches to kill the mosquitoes, that was a full time job for a bunch of us. Then the next summer you would get a job, you would move up the ladder. You'd get a job painting fences, or painting houses or helping in the carpenter crew. Then the last one you wound up with was stacking lumber or handling lumber out on the plant. Picking up stacking sticks. Now the Company worked a large group of guys every summer. You know, they used their time to clean up the town, rebuild the fences, cut all the weeds, pour oil in all the water places where mosquitoes would grow and just, in general, because the Company owned the whole town, all the houses belonged to them.

TK: So if you wanted to work you went to the Company?

VB: That's right, or unless you knew – Yes, a lot of the guys worked on the farm at home but those of us who lived here in town worked for the Company. I think the first time I went to work for the Company I must have been about fourteen years old, cutting weeds in the summer time.

TK: How much did it pay?

VB: Lord, I don't remember, it was a lot of money, I remember working for something like \$.46 an hour, or less, and it was a lot of money then. You could buy a whole lot of stuff with a dollar bill. I have gone – they used to have a thing they called "the Texas Forest Festival". You could take a dollar and go up there and ride everything they had. You'd take \$.50 and do pretty good. My mother was a school teacher and we didn't have a lot of money and I was lucky if I got that, and you could entertain yourself all day with a big hamburger and ride everything up there for a dollar.

TK: You didn't need a lot of money?

VB: No, you didn't need a lot of money and everywhere you went you all went together because everybody didn't have their own vehicle. We'd all – my cousin, Raymond Week's daddy had a Model A Roadster and we would all pile in that thing when we were in high school and go to the Forest Festival, go to ball games and stuff like that. We had an old boy in school, he is dead now, named Frank Morgan. He had a Model A and everywhere he went it was for the kids, you see, because if you went you took everybody, all your buddies with you, there was only one car.

TK: Everybody piled in?

VB: Yes, we worked here one summer, one of the last summers I worked, painting houses. We caught a man's bird dog and painted him red and green and yellow and turned him loose over where the old office is, that used to be the Commissary where you bought your groceries, your drugs, your clothes. You got haircuts, your mail and went to see the doctor. It was all over there. We painted that dog right here, across from those apartments. It was in Bernice Hines' old house, gentleman by the name of Snelson, we caught his dog, a big pretty bird dog and we painted him and he went right straight up that store porch. Right here where you are sitting used to be the big office. There was a two-story building here and Mr. Henry Temple ran the Company.
(Interview took place in Personnel Building at the corner of Hines and Thompson.)

TK: What happened to the dog?

VB: Oh, they cleaned him up and we got in a lot of trouble for painting him.

TK: Whose dog was he?

VB: A guy by the name of Snelson. The man we worked for was W. W. Jackson, he was standing on the store porch talking with Mr. Henry Temple when the dog went by and he had been asking him how the boys were doing painting, and that dog came by just a hollering with that paint flying off of him everywhere. They said Mr. Henry said, "Well, Wilbur, I see them boys are pretty artistic." That's all he ever said about it.

Now, that was summer jobs and some of us right after that, went to work for the Company full time, different ones did, doing different things. But they had a full crew every summer working here in town.

Let's see now, we talked about going to school in Diboll and working. I'll tell you, I always felt that I was fortunate to grow – to live in Diboll and to grow up here. I've lived in Louisiana and several places but when I was a kid growing up in Diboll right across from my office here was the Commissary. I mean, they had the Ice House, the end of it down here was the Ice House, then the Meat Market and then they had the big Dry-Goods store where you bought all your groceries. I mean Grocery store, and then they had a Dry-goods store in the center where you could buy your clothes, shoes the whole ball of wax. Old man Kirk Drew ran it back in my memory. Now they had W. T. Rutland that did it before that, but Mr. Drew ran it and Mrs. Fannie Farrington had the ladies department. Then next to that we had a drugstore, then a barbershop. The Post Office and upstairs was the doctor's office. Now, that's this old building right over here, it's the historical marker that was the Company offices but when I was a kid that was the center of town right there. You could get any and everything. Pop Hines was running the drugstore. Of course, Mr. Agee was in there, also. This concrete street out here in front of my office, I have seen that thing knee deep in mud from the old highway. The only one we had at the time was right up here where the drugstore is now. From that highway to this crossing right down here was just solid mud. If it rained, because all the log trucks came into town, from either way, they would come up there and turn about where the old Antler Hotel used to be, right next to the drugstore now. And they would come all the way down this street, go across the tracks right down here going to the mill and go across up here. And they would tear that street up, and then if you were lucky, about half way

through January it would come a freeze and those ruts were two feet deep, some of them. And they would freeze solid as a rock. Now you talk about somebody driving a car down them, what few cars there were, they used to have a good time. That was a mess. You never had to lock your doors in Diboll, we'd leave home and be gone one whole weekend, or three, four or five days, you didn't have to lock your doors. You'd just close your house up, your neighbors watched after it. If something happened to it, or if a pipe burst or fire got out, they tended to everybody's stuff. If somebody needed to come in and borrow a little pan of flour or something they could come get it and tell you when you came back. No, you didn't worry about theft. If somebody had stolen something that was one of the worst things you could do. We had a good life, I think, there were good folks here in Diboll, you didn't have to worry about stealing and robbing and that kind of stuff. It was just fun growing up here, in this kind of atmosphere.

TK: You knew everybody in Diboll?

VB: Sure, there was one time I could tell you the name of everybody that worked out in that plant and where they lived and basically how many people they had in their family, of course, this was later on. In those days and time you knew everybody and everybody cared about everybody else. We had more churches than they had in any town our size.

TK: How many people lived in Diboll?

VB: Oh gosh, I remember one time there were 700 people working out there and that was back in '49 and '50. Now before that, I didn't keep up with how many people were in town.

TK: Most of the people in Diboll worked at the plant?

VB: Worked at the plant and lived in a Company house, your lights, gas, water, electricity, the whole thing at one time came from the Company. Of course, we were fortunate, the Company, I think was fortunate, to be tied to a family like the Temples. When Arthur, Jr. came, he started this program of getting out of the utility business, getting out of the housing business, getting into production and industrial lumber, etc., not only in the town. Let people own their own homes and this kind of thing. That's why we survived and a lot of other sawmill towns didn't. I guess at one time, you could have called us the best sawmill in existence, but not any more. You can see what it has grown to be, it's that kind of foresightedness that let us survive, or gave us a way to survive and come to what we have now. I think we have a great school system, we have a heck of a Company and Diboll is on its way to being a sure enough city that will compete with anybody.

I have good memories about the old days when I was a kid, when I was your age, you know we fished, we hunted and we used – if it came a big rain and the water would come up down in the pasture we'd take – you know what a washtub is? We would take a couple of washtubs and a bunch of tow sacks and put together to make a seine and we'd go down to Ryans Lake, get in what they called the back part of it and find the may haw bushes. You'd take the seine and stretch it out across the water where it was running to you,

another would go up and shake the bushes but the may haws would fall out and the water would carry them down against the seine, you'd go along with a syrup bucket and dip them up and put them in the tub. You'd bring them back to Diboll and sell them after you got all you wanted to make jelly, you know. Your mother or grandmother would make jelly, and if you shook a water moccasin out of the tree why he just went on down in the backwater with the berries. You got him out of the way but – those are the kind of things we did, and we fished a lot and hunted. Back then Ryans Lake was not a club, you could hunt any time you wanted to down there.

TK: You would just walk over there?

VB: Yes, sure, we had a place right – you know where the old Plywood Plant sits, right behind it, and there are still some houses, it used to be called the old Box Factory houses. We had a big Box Factory, right behind that was Ryans Lake and you could go hunting and fishing whenever you wanted to.

TK: What would you hunt with?

VB: A 22 with shorts, single shot. Some of us might could have borrowed a shotgun from somebody but most of the kids our age, we hunted with a 22 and we fished out of a wooden boat and you paddled it. You didn't have a blooming motor to take you anywhere, didn't have a four wheeler then, Todd, you went on your two feet everywhere you went.

TK: What did you hunt for?

VB: Squirrels, mostly, and occasionally we would be fortunate enough to kill a deer. You think you can't kill a deer with a 22 rifle you better think again. We didn't have any scopes, of course, my eyes were a lot better then. But Raymond Weeks and the Bell boys were good hunters. We did that and we didn't waste it. If we killed something, we cleaned it and brought it home and you cooked it. How would you like to do that, no four-wheelers, no scopes, no nothing. If you wanted to go hunting you walked. We used to camp down there, fishing, for the weekends. We walked to Ryans Lake, if you know where Ryans Lake is, we walked and carried our bed rolls, and our grease and our frying pans. We ate what we cooked. We would have some cold biscuits or stuff like that that we would carry along. Raymond's grandmother, I called her Aunt Netty Weeks, it was Charlie Weeks' wife, always made us some syrup cookies and we would have some biscuits with some salt pork in it to take with us down there in case we didn't catch anything.

TK: But you usually caught something?

VB: Sure, we always caught fish.

TK: Were you fishing with worms or something?

VB: Trot lining and we used crawfish and Catawba worms, stuff like that. Didn't have any rods and reels then. It's more of a sporting deal now than it was then. But that was a lot of fun to go down there, a bunch of guys and do that kind of thing. We had fun doing that.

TK: Did you do that kind of stuff during the summer?

VB: During the summer, no, you'd freeze your fanny off during the wintertime. We didn't have tents or clubhouses, if you had a tent you took a tarpaulin and made one.

TK: Did you sleep on the ground?

VB: Yes, blanket, right out in the open, if it rained you got wet. Sounds like the old, old days.

TK: Yeah!

VB: Well, people walked a lot then when they went places or rode a bicycle. Bicycles were a big thing, if you had a bicycle, boy, I'll tell you when I was fifteen years old, if you had a bicycle you were stepping in high cotton. And my mother got me one and I sure was proud of it, too. Diboll was, and still is, a great town but it has changed a lot. Of course, you don't change you don't survive.

TK: Yes, move up to modern times.

VB: Yes, that's right, but those times were good times. I'll tell you what though, I heard Clyde Thompson say something one time, we were always talking about the "Good old times," well, they were good old times but we are living in the good old times right now. Because I lived then and I am still alive now. I like the way I'm allowed to live now. Those were good days but that was a different time. Diboll didn't have a library. We had one picture show, the old theater sat right where Stubby's, or Sabine's Storage houses are. We had a theater. It had a little "Tonk" beside it, that's what we called it, the "Tonk". Shirley Daniel ran it and we would go in there and get hamburgers, frozen cokes were the big thing, and dance. Boy, now you talk about some high stepping, it went on then.

TK: Country-western?

VB: Oh yeah, man, what else was there? And Mrs. Poland, sitting out there, now you talk about dancing. We all worked at the picture show at one time. Me, Geraldine Poland, Clarence Curry, Cecil Seekings.

TK: Was there just one picture show?

VB: One picture show, yes, that was all we had and we were fortunate to have it. If it hadn't been for Mr. Henry Temple we wouldn't have had that. We'd go up there to the

Tonk and dance, of course, all the mothers and daddy's could sit in there and drink cokes and eat popcorn or what have you and watch us dance. I'll guarantee you Mrs. Poland has danced many a night right there in that Tonk, me and her both. Even the preacher could drive by and see you in there, but the big thing to do then was go to the picture show.

TK: How much did it cost to go?

VB: Oh, gosh, Todd, I don't know, I believe you could take a quarter to get in the show and get a sack of popcorn and a coke. I have bought hamburgers for a dime. And I'm talking about a hamburger, pure ground beef and a hamburger that big around. They had a place in Lufkin called "Zacks", a hot dog joint. We would go to Lufkin sometimes, to the midnight show and go by Zacks. You could get six for a quarter. That was with the wiener, the watered down chili and the mustard and that was it. Now, I want to tell you something, that was some good eating, or I thought it was then.

Will that do it? How about that, teacher, I didn't cuss one time and there were a lot of stories I didn't tell that wasn't safe.

END OF INTERVIEW