

ROBERT ROACH

Interview 152a

July 29, 1999, at Parkwood Place, Lufkin, Texas

Jonathan Gerland, Interviewer

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ABSTRACT: In this interview with Jonathan Gerland, Robert Roach reminisces about growing up in Trinity County and working for Southern Pine Lumber Company and the Texas Southeastern Railroad on the railroad tracks in the 1920's. Mr. Roach recalls his year of work building bridges and caring for the tracks, particularly near Goodrich. He then went to Arizona where he worked for Southern Pacific for a few years. After leaving Arizona, Mr. Roach leased land from Southern Pine Lumber Company and Dave Kenley in Trinity County, where he watched for lumber poachers and farmed.

Jonathan Gerland (hereafter JG): Today's date is July 29, 1999 and this is Jonathan Gerland and I'm visiting with Robert Roach at his room at Parkwood Place in Lufkin. Mr. Roach, can you tell me when and where you were born?

Robert Roach (hereafter RR): Yes, I sure can. I was born March 16, 1907 right here in Lufkin.

JG: In Lufkin.

RR: That is right.

JG: Okay, who were your parents? Who was your father and mother?

RR: Marion Jefferson Roach was my father and Frances Smith was my mother.

JG: Smith, okay. What did your father do for a living?

RR: Well, he was over the tracks I guess, he did work for Diboll, you know, the company there. He worked in...he was a foreman for them. He kept up the tracks for the train.

JG: So he worked for the Southern Pine Lumber Company?

RR: There at Diboll.

JG: In Diboll, for the Temples?

RR: Well, it's Temple now.

JG: Okay, you said you were born in Lufkin. Was your family from Trinity County? Where were your parents from?

RR: Well they were, he come here and he owned a home here in Lufkin and he also owned some property over in Trinity County, in Trinity.

JG: Okay.

RR: But the house that he lived in got burned up here.

JG: In Lufkin?

RR: That was ruined, and (unintelligible) wouldn't build another one to replace it so he just moved over on the place where he lived. He owned a well. He drilled a well there that was so strong and everything, the water was so plentiful he thought he would put in a cotton gin so people raising bales of cotton and they would have to haul them to Apple Springs. That was a long way, 4 miles. And so he built it all right, but the water wasn't...you could draw a bucket of it and set it outside and it had that strong stuff inside, what we called coppers. And he had a boiler set up in the cotton gin and all, the grist mill and...

JG: That was in Lufkin? Here in Lufkin?

RR: No, that was over by that place, right there beside the home where he built it, just a few hundred yards from the...

JG: And where was the home?

RR: Well, it was over there just falling apart on the place.

JG: Over there where?

RR: Four miles north of Apple Springs.

JG: Four miles north of Apple Springs in Trinity County. Okay.

RR: That is where it was. Anyway, he used it one year. He had a grist mill there, you know, he would grind people's corn on Saturday and you know, they would eat that meal take rocks and do that. It's funny but that is the way it was.

JG: Go ahead.

RR: The coppers in that boiler eat the boiler up.

JG: The copper?

RR: Yes, the copper, it eat holes in it. He discarded that and put up one more, one more boiler, but it was no good.

JG: No good.

RR: No good, he finally had to do away with the whole thing.

JG: Now his first name was Marion? What was your father's first name?

RR: Marion Jefferson.

JG: Marion Jefferson.

RR: We called him Jeff. He went by the name of Jeff all the time.

JG: Okay. How many brothers and sisters did you have?

RR: I had seven brothers and sisters.

JG: Seven.

RR: Seven brothers and four sisters.

JG: Seven brothers and four sisters. Okay.

RR: One of my sisters died as a baby. That left eleven in the family that lived right on through.

JG: I had mentioned earlier that I had visited with Elaine Ingram Lockhart of Apple Springs. And her mother was one of your sisters, Lillie, Lillie Roach. What number child were you?

RR: Well, I was number three from the bottom.

JG: Number three from the bottom, okay. You and your brothers did any of your other brothers...or did you work for the Temples and did any of your other brothers work for the Temples also?

RR: Yes, they all, might near all of them worked...

JG: Might near all of them.

RR: ...for the Temples at different times. They sure did.

JG: Where did you go to school? Where did you go to school as a boy?

RR: Yes, I went to school up there.

JG: I'm sorry. Do you remember the name of it?

RR: Iris. I-R-I-S.

JG: Iris, I-R-I-S, okay. Did you graduate from Iris?

RR: No, I was still a little baby boy.

JG: You were still a little baby boy. Did you go to any other schools?

RR: No, I did go to that school I'm talking about after I got a pretty good size boy. But my dad sold out up there in that country and moved to Apple Springs and I finally graduated from high school in Apple Springs.

JG: You graduated from high school in Apple Springs.

RR: In 1924.

JG: In 1924. Did you, I think Mrs. Lockhart said her father was a schoolteacher, Mr. Ingram. Was he your teacher?

RR: Yes he was my teacher.

JG: He was your teacher.

RR: Yes, and I was in the sixth grade when he taught me.

JG: Okay. Mrs. Lockhart also gave us some photographs of Clay and Smith Roach who are I believe your older brothers.

RR: Smith was one of my brothers. He was engineer on the log train.

JG: He was engineer on the log train.

RR: My oldest brothers worked on them logging trains during the times we...

JG: Do you remember what number engine he was engineer on?

RR: No.

JG: Now, you mentioned that you worked for the company some. When did you start working for the Temples?

RR: I started in....

JG: You graduated in '24 from high school.

RR: Probably in 1926.

JG: 1926, okay.

RR: I started working for them. I took my brother's place, he was working and he got a job in Arkansas as brakeman on the train on the railroad.

JG: Was that Smith?

RR: No, that was John.

JG: John.

RR: John, he was four years older than me. He quit his job in Diboll and went to Pine Bluff, Arkansas and went to work on the railroad there. And I took his job and we was working for the bridge crew with Temple's tracks, Temple bridges and all.

JG: I think in 1984 you wrote some articles for *The Free Press* about working for Dred Devereaux. Do you remember that? What can you tell us of Mr. Devereaux? What do you remember about Mr. Devereaux?

RR: Mr. Devereaux was a Frenchman I guess, by his name. He was a smart man. And so it was that we just went from one place to another. (unintelligible) He was a pretty strict man. He wanted everything done just (unintelligible).

JG: Was he hard to work for?

RR: No, if you just do your part, he praised you there, instead of, what ever you call it.

JG: I brought a few photographs I wanted to show you. This one is dated November 17, 1925. And that is a bridge, I think that is Mr. Devereaux right there.

RR: That is my brother John Roach right there.

JG: Right here, okay, fourth from the right, this fellow right here is John Roach.

RR: That fellow was Hollis, his name was Hollis, from down there on the Alabama Creek. I don't know any of the rest of them.

JG: Which one was John? This one?

RR: That is my brother John.

JG: John okay, and next to him was Hollis. Is that what you said?

RR: No, Hollis is the tall one.

JG: Oh, Hollis is the tall fellow. So you took John's place working for Mr. Devereaux?

RR: Yes. (unintelligible) But that is my brother John.

JG: That is your brother John right there. Third...

RR: And Hollis is the tall one.

JG: And Hollis is the tall one. And that was his first name or his last name?

RR: I called him farmer, but I can't think of his name. Elaine could have told you. Her husband is one...

JG: I think that is the bridge over the Neches River there. Does that look familiar to you?

RR: Well, it is a nice bridge they built on there.

JG: Would that be the one going into Cherokee County or is that the one coming from Angelina going into Trinity County?

RR: I don't know which one that is. It went two or three different directions at one time you know.

JG: Okay.

RR: I can't say which way...

JG: Can't say which one that is. I've got another photograph I was wanting to show you. What can you tell us about the bridge Mr. Devereaux built across the Trinity River?

RR: That is the old pine bridge.

JG: Did you work on that?

RR: No, I never worked on that. It was torn down long time, long before I...that was built long before I was growing up.

JG: Now, I understood that that bridge was built around 1920.

RR: Some time or other, it was built before 1920, I can guarantee you that.

JG: Before 1920?

RR: Yes, this bridge I'm talking about is across the Neches River.

JG: Okay, this one is the Trinity. That is Trinity out of Goodrich.

RR: Oh, the Trinity, well that is probably right. I thought you was talking about Neches.

JG: Yes, this one was built around 1928. Now you worked out of Goodrich didn't you?

RR: I never worked on that.

JG: You never worked on that bridge. But did you work on any of the bridges across the creeks out of Goodrich?

RR: That is different, that was made by a different railroad, different railroad. That wasn't Southern Pine, that wasn't, that trestle goes on further. That is....

JG: Okay, that picture of Mr. Devereaux here though, see that is Mr. Devereaux up there. Now which bridge are you talking about?

RR: I can't talk about this one, this may be the one you're looking at from this way, from under the bottom.

JG: Right, right, that is the same bridge. I believe this is the bridge that is over the Trinity River.

RR: Yes, that one is over the Trinity. That railroad is still running.

JG: Now, you mentioned from time to time, or you wrote in your articles in the Free Press about working out of Goodrich. Do you remember about living and working in Goodrich?

RR: Yes, I remember working in Goodrich, I worked down there. Every time I was down there, he got all and enough stuff to build that bridge across the Trinity River. But just after we got started around, started to build the bridge across the river his self. And the man came over on the boat and he went in there and went to working that timber and everything. But the man that owned it, he came down there and stopped them. He asked them what they were doing messing with his timber. They lost \$17,000 when they built all that stuff down there and they never got nothing from it.

JG: How did they loose \$17,000? How did they loose that much money?

RR: They were building it, and they used that much for going down there from Diboll, they had established a camp down there. Build all those, down there, they build bridges at Gilbert and everything. They built two cattle guards across some ones land and he had cattle down in there, and they had to build cattle guards to hold his cattle in there. They dug a fence.

JG: The cattle guard.

RR: That was tough going, we had to pour water in there to soften it and tore it out and dig it 3 feet deep see. That was hard digging.

JG: I remember you talking about that in your article. I think you said it was 10x12 and 3 feet deep.

RR: ...building a bridge and cattle guard to know what we done.

JG: Right. But I still don't understand why they lost money. The timber wasn't any good or what?

RR: Well, he didn't get nothing out of it. It wasn't, they didn't get to cut the timber cause the bridge, there was something wrong, sorta turned, dealt with them, and he didn't even know that he was crooked.

JG: Oh, a crooked deal. So they weren't able to cut any timber?

RR: The Diboll people accepted a \$17,000 loss from what they built from what they had paid, so the total was \$17,000. That is what I had heard now, it could have been very different later on.

JG: Right. Were they able to eventually cut any timber on the other side of the river? Were they able to ever go to the other side of the river and cut some of that timber?

RR: They went over there to look at it, but they never got to cut it.

JG: They never got to cut it.

RR: They never got to cut a stick off of it.

JG: How long did you work for Southern Pine?

RR: From '26 to the summer of 1927, a year and something. I quit that job before they left down there, before they left Goodrich I quit and went to Arizona. 'Cause, say you were drawing \$3.00 an hour, \$3.00 all day. You could get twice as much money working out of Arizona, same kind of work our there.

JG: The same kind.

RR: They paid twice as much and I went out there and went to work for Southern Pacific.

JG: Southern Pacific in Arizona. How long did you work there?

RR: I worked from 1927 to 1929, I worked almost 3 years.

JG: Do you remember the location in Arizona where you worked? Do you remember where you worked, what were the near by towns? Where did you live in Arizona?

RR: We had a car to live in on the railroad.

JG: Okay, you lived in cars on the railroad tracks. Is that correct?

RR: We lived in the cars. They had them fixed for about 20 guys, about 21 people in the group. Each man had a job to perform. I used to help with them pilings. You'd take an ax and go round and round them pilings, make it just exactly like this so this tap thing would sit on top of it. And then they would set them pilings further up. The last time I set that piling off there, fit just over the top of it, the tap that they used to put on there to drive it with. Take shims made out of bark after you trimmed this with an ax a certain way. Then when they come in there and went to drive that piling in that place, that piling was held in there by knots, then they put some shims on top of it made out of iron, it weighed 1100 pounds. It set on top of that bridge. Pile droppings was down (unintelligible). I worked 3 years with them down in them bushes. I was experienced when I quit there, I went to Arizona, I worked out there. I could do any part of that job out there. They liked me, they used me, they paid me the top wage out there.

JG: Did you have a job title? What did they call you, what type of work were you doing?

RR: What did they call me?

JG: Yes, did you have a job title?

RR: Well, they just...I don't know.

JG: And then what happened after you quit working there?

RR: Well, I got fired.

JG: You got fired!

RR: Yes, it was a Mormon in charge and I wasn't a Mormon. And he was going to put someone else in my place 'cause he was a Mormon, and that is what he done.

JG: Where did you go from there?

RR: North of El Paso, Southern Pacific reached up to the Oklahoma line and then it went on to Kansas City, they had a bunch of work to do, north of El Paso up and down that railroad.

JG: So you were in your early twenties then?

RR: In 1929.

JG: I guess my question is where did you work after that? Were you still working for Southern Pacific?

RR: No, I left Southern Pacific when I got fired. They had this foreman and he was a Mormon and all his crew was Mormons and he was getting himself a crew.

JG: But who did you work for after that?

RR: He was promoted to foreman. And I just got myself a ticket from El Paso back to Lufkin here.

JG: Oh, okay.

RR: I caught the train from here to Apple Springs. I leased a bunch of land from the Diboll people, doing some trapping and I leased that and farmed it and raised cattle.

JG: Did you ever know Mr. Dave Kenley?

RR: Yes, he was the one I dealt with.

JG: You dealt with him when you leased the land.

RR: He was the one that let me have that land. He leased it to me for \$50 an acre.

JG: Fifty dollars an acre.

RR: Fifty dollars for the amount of acreage, fifty dollars for the acreage.

JG: Oh for the whole thing.

RR: The whole thing. More or less for protection, he leased it to me and let me have it more or less for protection of the timber. People were stealing it off of him. And I kept them from stealing it because I was living on it.

JG: And that is in the thirties, in the 1930's that you started doing that?

RR: Yes.

JG: What did the land look like, were they planting trees then, or was this just tree's that were naturally growing up by themselves?

RR: I seen there was three kinds of timber on that. There was cedar, and white oak, then red oak, pine trees you know. There were at least three or four types of timber on that. We wouldn't let nobody cut it. People would go in there and cut that white oak and make baskets out of it. White oak is what they use, take that thing and strip it. Cut it eight feet from the top, put it on the top of your stove and strip it all the way down. People would take them strips and make baskets with it. That didn't come cheap.

JG: No, no, same kind of process.

RR: They was ready about that big around, hold so much corn, use the cotton too. Never did that no more.

JG: So were people doing this all the time in the woods? Or by you leasing it that kept people from it.

RR: Fifty years or more it won't be the same as it is now.

JG: So this land that you leased and you had cattle on, was just a mix of hardwoods and pines and then had some cedar on it too, you said. Do you need to take a rest or something?

RR: Yes I need to rest.

JG: Okay, I'll stop the tape then. At this point Mr. Roach laid back in his bed and was still feeling pretty weak from a high fever he had a couple of days earlier.

TAPE STOPPED

END OF INTERVIEW