

**Oral History Interview of
Bill Weaks**

**Interviewed by: David Marshall
October 20, 2011
Plainview, Texas**

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Transcript Overview:

Bill Weaks discusses his early life and transitions around Texas with his family. The importance of his educational background, his experiences, and his photography career are also discussed in depth.

Length of Interview: 01:50:45

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David Marshall (DM):

The date is October 20, 2011 and this is David Marshall interviewing Bill Weaks at his home in Plainview Texas or near Plainview, Texas. Are we in the city limits? Okay let's just start out with a little bit of background information. Can you tell me your full name? Let's just start with your full name.

Billie Weaks (BW):

Billie, B-i-l-l-i-e. middle initial S, last name Weaks, W-e-a-k-s.

DM:

Okay. So Billie is your official name.

BW:

Yeah but I've always gone by Bill.

DM:

When and where were you born?

BW:

Silverton, Texas in 1928. January 2.

DM:

Okay. January 2nd, that's a cold time to be in Silverton, Texas.

BW:

(Laughter) I don't remember.

DM:

How did your parents come to Silverton?

BW:

My mother was from Silverton and she was a country school teacher and my dad worked on a ranch over close to Vigo Park, Texas, which is east of Tulia.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

And they met there and married and I was born a year or two later. And my mother taught at a school called Milo. M-i-l-o. Where that came from I don't know but it's not in existence

anymore. But she was, as I said, a teacher, and I think she taught all of the first six grades, with one teacher and probably about twenty students.

DM:

Can you give me their names?

BW:

My dad was Lester, L-e-s-t-e-r. And my mother was Jessie, J-e-s-s-i-e.

DM:

Okay, do you remember her maiden name?

BW:

Burson.

DM:

Did they ever talk about how their parents came out to this country?

BW:

My dad's family came out here from down in the Snyder, Texas area; and my mother was born in Silverton. Her father, my grandfather was an entrepreneur in Silverton. He owned part of a lumberyard, part of a bank, part of a dry goods store, and they lost it all during the Depression.

DM:

Oh boy.

BW:

And they even had a hotel over there.

DM:

Did she ever talk about how he got out here or where he had come from?

BW:

He came from down in East Texas. The exact place, I'm not sure.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

He came out and he and my grandmother lived in a dugout over—would be south of Silverton for a while until he started his entrepreneuring.

DM:

Did you ever happen to see the remains of the dug-out or anything?

BW:

No. I didn't.

DM:

Okay, well that is an interesting story. A lot of people tell about coming out here and digging in first of all and then getting on their feet.

BW:

Yeah. I remember my dad said that when they lived at Vigo, that they used to go to Tulia, the town, and there were no fences. And then occasionally when they ran into a fence they had to open the gate and be sure and close it when they went through.

DM:

Did they talk about all the—you're probably too young to remember the early Depression and the dust storms that came through, because you were born in twenty-eight.

BW:

I remember the Black Sunday.

DM:

You remember them? Do you really?

BW:

Yeah.

DM:

Oh.

BW:

My dad got to be a hand on a ranch called Cobb Ranch over east of Tulia. And jobs were real scarce back then. And I remember he got thirty dollars a month and housing, such as it was, and could run a few of his own cows.

DM:

So you lived in Silverton until the age of what?

BW:

I've never lived in Silverton, I was just born there.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

I lived in the Vigo Park area, on the edge of the canyon part of that time.

DM:

Okay. What are you some of your earliest recollections of that area?

BW:

The dust storms and rattlesnakes.

DM:

Could you describe one of these early dust storms, these Depression era dust storms?

BW:

I remember one time we lived in a little house out in the middle of a field pretty much and the dust storm came. My mother got wet cup towels and put around the windows to catch the dust so we could breathe. Then that Black Sunday, we were all out in the yard and we saw this big huge cloud coming from the west. A lot of people thought it was the end of the world, you know. My memories of the dust storms and rattlesnakes are pretty vivid.

DM:

Now this storm, it came in pretty slow didn't it?

BW:

Yeah.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

We could see it; I don't know how many minutes or hours before it hit. But you could see it for a long time coming in from the West.

DM:

And it was black mostly, or really dark?

BW:

Yeah, real dark. We did see one tornado off to the south. It hit the ground. But it went back up in the sky and we never did see it again.

DM:

That's the only tornado you ever saw out there in that area?

BW:

Yeah.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

The only one I can remember, at least.

DM:

Okay, did y'all have a storm shelter or anything like that?

BW:

No.

DM:

What was the house like that you lived in out there?

BW:

We lived in two or three different ones. The one on the ranch was a fairly nice house. It was two story, with four rooms downstairs and four rooms upstairs. We were in tall cotton when dad got to work for thirty dollars a month.

DM:

Were these houses in that area, were they mostly just single walled houses or did they have an inner-wall?

BW:

I think they were shiplapped with an outer covering on them.

DM:

Right, Okay. Do you remember when rural electrification came in?

BW:

We never had it.

DM:

You never had it out there.

BW:

I remember the first radio we got. It ran off the car battery. And we'd listened to KGNC in Amarillo, and Little Orphan Annie, and Jack Armstrong and some of those programs were on. And the way we could listen to the radio, we had a Model-A Ford car that had a battery in it of course. And we would take it in and listen to the radio and when it died we would put it back in the car. And there happened to be a hill on the south side of the house. So we would put it in the car and jumpstart it going down the hill and then it would charge itself back up. So that's my experience for the radio.

DM:

Oh that's pretty good. That's a great story. Yeah.

BW:

We wouldn't think anything about it. Now we would think we were in deep poverty, if that happened now. And we were.

DM:

(Laughter) How did y'all heat out there?

BW:

With wood stoves. I remember going with my mother and my dad down in the canyon. We were right on the edge of the canyon.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

And gathered cedar wood and we'd bring it back up and burn it in the stove. And then we had a kerosene cook stove part of the time. It was thoroughly dual purpose, for cooking and heating.

DM:

Okay. Did you light with kerosene?

BW:

Yeah we had a kerosene lamp and we were really up town when we got what was called an Aladdin lamp—kerosene lamp. But it had a wick in it, and it was quite a bit brighter. Sort of like those old Coleman—

DM:

With the mantels?

BW:

Yeah with the mantels.

DM:

Okay. Did you know anyone out there who had carbide—lighting?

BW:

I remember hearing the name of carbide, but I never did know anyone that had an experience with it.

DM:

Yeah, I guess it was kind of rare. I hear about it, but not much.

BW:

I know it was a superior light than the old kerosene lamps. I think kerosene was really cheap then and it made it a lot more practical. I think that carbide was relatively expensive.

DM:

I'll bet. Bet it was.

BW:

So the main fuel then was cedar wood, besides the kerosene.

DM:

Okay. Now what other kinds of plants were growing there off of the, down in the canyon? Did you have mesquite?

BW:

Mesquite and cedar. And that is all I remember.

DM:

Okay. If you were to go back out there today would there be more mesquite and cedar? Or about the same?

BW:

I have no idea.

DM:

Okay. You haven't looked at it in a while. Tell me about these rattlesnakes.

BW:

We came in one night from Silverton and there was a gate on the south side of the house and a walk way up to the back porch. My dad started to step up on the back porch to open the screen door and heard this rattle. And so we went around to the front of the house to get in. (Laughter) Another time, that one was at night, another time during the daytime my mother had a garden and she started out to the well house which was in the back of the house. There was a walkway and there was a rattlesnake in the walkway under the boardwalk. And she went in and got my dad's .22, and got a chair, and stood in that chair, and shot that rattlesnake until all the shells were gone. He was dead. (Laughter)

DM:

How big were these rattlesnakes?

BW:

I couldn't tell you exactly but I imagine three or four feet long.

DM:

Did anyone ever mention what kind of rattlesnake they were? Were they western diamondback?

BW:

Diamondback. That's all I remember is diamondback.

DM:

Do you remember seeing any other kinds of snakes around?

BW:

Bull snakes and there were garter snakes but I guess if that happened nowadays, you'd think the world is coming to an end. (Laughter)

DM:

So you didn't see snakes on a daily basis but it made an impression when you did see them.

BW:

We'd see them maybe once a week.

DM:

Oh really? I guess being right there on that canyon.

BW:

Yeah. At night you could hear the coyote hollering, that's a lonely sound.

DM:

What other kind of wildlife did you have out there?

BW:

I don't remember any other wildlife to speak of. Of course there was always skunks. I think we did see a badger and a possum once in a while, but mostly coyotes.

DM:

Did you ever see a raccoon out in that country?

BW:

Not that I recall.

DM:

Did you ever hear anyone talk about a mountain lion?

BW:

No.

DM:

Or bobcats?

BW:

Never did hear of that.

DM:

Even today occasionally, someone will claim—

BW:

I've heard stories about them but we never had any direct relationship with them.

DM:

Back in those days did you ever see any deer?

BW:

No.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

Never did.

DM:

Yeah. They say that—you know there are deer now. They say that maybe overhunting or maybe the screw worm used to get them and you just didn't see them out here much. So usually when I ask, people say "No, they didn't see any deer around the thirties or forties."

BW:

We'd go coyote hunting at night with the car to get the coyotes in the headlights and we'd lean out the car window with a .22 and shoot at them; hardly ever hit them.

DM:

.22 is a hard way to do it.

BW:

Especially with that car moving. Those coyotes can shift. It's a wonder we didn't wreck the car.

DM:

Were there any bounties on coyotes, back then?

BW:

Not that I remember. This was the first five or six years of my life so I can't recall too many things. Some things made an impression.

DM:

Oh yeah. I'm always interested to hear about the wildlife sightings back then and to compare them with what's going on to today, but the coyote, just never changes much. There might be a

little dip in population but they're right back the next year. What about water sources along the canyon? Do you remember any springs?

BW:

I don't remember any springs. We had to dig windmill—dig four windmills. I remember my dad had to pull the sucker-rods out of the pipe that was under the windmill and change what they called the leathers on them. They'd wear out real periodically. They'd have to pull the sucker-rods up and put new pieces on the bottom of them so it'd pump water. Mostly it was windmills.

DM:

You don't have any idea how deep those were, do you?

BW:

No I'd be guessing if I tried; probably a hundred and fifty feet, I'd say, or maybe two hundred but, that's a guess.

DM:

Do you remember any standing water, any running creeks or anything down in that canyon?

BW:

Down in the canyon there was occasionally the creek that'd run.

DM:

It seems like it was a different world before and after irrigation.

BW:

I imagine that's true.

DM:

Well alright. Then you lived out there until what age?

BW:

Till nineteen thirty-six.

DM:

Thirty-six so you were eight years old.

BW:

Yeah we came to Plainview when I was eight years old.

DM:

Moved right into town?

BW:

Yeah.

DM:

You'd already gone to school a couple years by then maybe?

BW:

One.

DM:

One year.

BW:

Yeah I came to Plainview in the second grade. My dad had bought a little acreage out south of Plainview. It was ten acres and an old house. So that's where we first lived in Plainview.

DM:

What was his intention with the ten acres?

BW:

We had cows and hogs and a big garden and just a place to call home and a place to raise some food I guess.

DM:

Kind of self-sufficient, it sounds like, with livestock and a garden. What was he doing for a living in Plainview?

BW:

He did several different things; I remember he worked at a grocery store for twelve dollars and fifty cents a week. And he worked at a service section for about the same wage. Then he worked for an implement dealer and he got raised to fifteen dollars a week. So that was an upswing.

DM:

You know that was pretty good for nineteen thirty-six. Finding work like that, finding different kinds of work.

BW:

He was young. He was twenty years older than I was. He was still a very young man. He eventually owned a service station that was successful. Then he thought he was going to get drafted into the army in World War II. He sold his service station and he was doing very well. But then they didn't call him for the army. So they hired him at the hospital here as the manager.

DM:

Oh really?

BW:

He was manager of the hospital, business manager I think for probably four years during the war.

DM:

What hospital is that?

BW:

That's Plainview hospital and clinic. It's the old hospital.

DM:

Is it still operating?

BW:

No. It's all gone into the new hospital.

DM:

Okay. So that's what he did during the war. Did your momma—did she teach?

BW:

She was a dietitian at the hospital.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

They called it dietitian. I think it was just a glorified house keeper. (Laughter)

DM:

Did she do any teaching out here?

BW:

She substituted some. But she never was a fulltime teacher.

DM:

When you were in first grade were you in one of her classes?

BW:

No. No, she wasn't teaching then. The only time she ever had a fulltime teaching job was over in Vigo Park, at the Milo School.

DM:

Tell me about your first year in school. Was it first grade?

BW:

Yeah. That was when they called it San Jacinto, east of Vigo Park about, I don't know, three or four miles. It's not there anymore. But it was San Jacinto school. It had first through the eighth grade. It was a very poor school. I remember we didn't have scissors in the first grade so the teacher taught us how to fold, and refold, and refold, and then tear and you would get a straight line. That's one of my impressions of first grade.

DM:

Wow, so there was one teacher?

BW:

Yeah, one teacher. I forgot how many were in the first grade. But in the first one through four grades there were probably fifty or so, one teacher trying to teach them all.

DM:

How do you do that?

BW:

You don't.

DM:

Would she give you an assignment and then the older kids a different assignment? So y'all had your own little books or—?

BW:

Do what?

DM:

Did you have your little first grade book to work on?

BW:

Yeah we had our books. We were fortunate that way. Then when we moved to Plainview of course we had a different school system, which was much superior. We went to different teachers for different subjects.

DM:

Okay. Already in the second grade?

BW:

Yeah.

DM:

You were dividing out like that. Okay. Back at the other school, your first grade school, or even in Plainview, what was the discipline like at those schools?

BW:

Discipline was good because people didn't think about misbehaving. They knew they would get hollered—get shellacked [spanked] at home if they did.

DM:

Word got out that the teacher would contact the parents?

BW:

Right.

DM:

Now how did you get to school out there in first grade?

BW:

My mother and dad would take me some of the time and some of the time I rode a horse.

DM:

First-grader riding a horse.

BW:

Yeah. I had an old horse named Ball, b-a-double l. And he had a ball face, white on his face. My dad bought him from somebody for a dollar.

DM:

(Laughter).

BW:

One time my dad sent me to herd up the cows; there were two or three cows loose. And old Ball was chasing this cow and the cow turned and Ball turned but I went straight.

DM:

Was Ball your horse?

BW:

Yeah.

DM:

Golly. That's pretty good, for being about 6 years old and having your own horse. Even if it was a dollar.

BW:

Yeah I didn't think anything about it at the time.

DM:

How long a ride was it over to school?

BW:

About three miles.

DM:

That's an experience. Up to the age of eight before you moved did you have any particular responsibilities around the house? You said he sent you out there to round up some cattle, but did you have any daily chores that you were responsible for?

BW:

Well just like feeding the chickens, menial things like that.

DM:

Well lets go on over to Plainview then and see what that was like. You started dividing into, or going to different teachers for different subjects. Did you have any favorite subjects early on? Anything that grabbed your attention?

BW:

I don't remember anything especially that I liked except recess.

DM:

Typical boy. (Laughter) and I know that later on in school you were in athletics or at least played football. I don't know what all you were involved in.

BW:

In high school I was in football, that was basically it.

DM:

Okay. Did y'all have a pretty good team?

BW:

In nineteen fort-five we played ten teams and we lost one game. And that one game we lost was to the Amarillo Sandies. Amarillo had one high school then and Lubbock had one high school. We played both of them. We had a very successful season and we were the last team in the state to be scored on. And there were only thirty-five points scored on us the whole season and those were in the last five games. Seven points in each game.

DM:

Plainview, would it have had a school as big as Lubbock or Amarillo back then?

BW:

No.

DM:

So y'all were playing some big—

BW:

We were playing the big boys.

DM:

Y'all did good.

BW:

Well we had one good team that I was on.

DM:

You graduated in fort-five then?

BW:

Forty-six.

DM:

Or forty-six.

BW:

Football season of forty-five.

DM:

So you just barely missed World War II didn't you?

BW:

Yeah we thought we were going to get drafted. I went to summer school and saw that I was going to be eighteen if I went the whole twelve years. So I went to summer school and I thought I could get out a year early and if I got drafted I'd be through with my high school.

DM:

Right. Okay. But it didn't happen that way. Were you going to try to go into a particular branch of the service or just wait to be drafted and see where they—

BW:

Well that comes a little later.

DM:

I know you went into the Navy later on but as a high school kid did you think, "Well, if I go to war, I'd like to be in this branch."

BW:

Well, I was interested at that time in aviation. When I was a senior in high school I took a flight course at the local airport and got my student pilots license. I had eight hours of solo time and that was the end of my aviation career. Except for doing aerial photography.

DM:

Oh yeah. Well that's just incredible that you can do that as a senior in high school. I guess it's unheard of now, to have an aviation course when you're a senior.

BW:

Well it was through the local airport. It wasn't a school sponsored thing. In high school we had what we called the CAPC, Civil Air Patrol Cadets. I was the training sergeant for the Civil Air Patrol Cadets.

DM:

You were? Golly.

BW:

Uh-huh.

DM:

J.B. Roberts said that—I think. Did you go down with him down to Pyote—or whatever—that town down there?

BW:

No. He went by himself, I think, to buy his airplane.

DM:

But he has a picture that you took.

BW:

Right, yeah.

DM:

Of him, pretty soon after getting there.

BW:

Yeah. That's right we used to get out in his old airplane and fly and make aerial pictures and just flew around mostly. But there's a picture of Wayland College that we took when Wayland just had three buildings and it was made in nineteen forty-seven. That was out of JB's plane.

DM:

Golly, I bet that's a prized possession of Wayland.

BW:

I think it's in the vestibule of the president's office.

DM:

Really? Oh that's something. So you stepped into aerial photography early on, pretty much as a kid or a teenager. What about eighteen or nineteen?

BW:

Yeah.

DM:

How did that do? Could you get a good picture from the plane or did you have to practice a lot.

BW:

You'd have to make more than one pass at it to get the right angle and so forth, and the right lighting.

DM:

You're far enough away that you don't get blur?

BW:

Yeah you do get blur. You have to use a real fast shutter speed and as fast a film as possible.

DM:

Okay. When did this interest in photography come about? Were you younger?

BW:

With my first interest, I was about ten years old. I went to a movie and I saw the teller unroll the film and see-saw through a tray to develop it and so I went home and got behind the couch and got an old roll of film and a bread pan with some water in it. And I see-sawed it, and I was surprised that nothing happened.

DM:

(Laughter)

BW:

This was in the daylight of course. That was my first interest and I got interested when I was a senior in high school. I got my first camera, I guess, when I was a senior in high school.

DM:

Now you didn't do any photography really before being a senior?

BW:

Not much.

DM:

When you were a senior. You were a senior when you first got started? What kind of camera did you get and how did you get it?

BW:

The first one I got was a little Falcon Camera; F-a-l-c-o-n, I think. Something like that. And it was a Split-127 which is a small negative, and split means it'd get two frames on each regular frame. That was the little camera I had at— You want to see my camera?

DM:

I do. Yeah, let me. I'll just—

BW:

This is the first camera I had—a little Falcon. It's a regular daylight camera, 127-film. The next one had a flash on it, and it was a Agfa full-frame 127.

DM:

What'd you say? Agfa?

BW:

Yeah. A-g-f-a.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

And the next one was a Kodak Reflex which was a nineteen forty-seven model probably.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

And then the one I used the longest and the most was an old Speed Graphic which is four by five inch film. It took sheet film. And of course it had the flash. And it was the camera I used for twenty, maybe twenty years or so.

DM:

Starting when, about forty-seven or forty-eight or so?

BW:

Yeah about forty-eight I think.

DM:

And then on to sixty-eight or so?

DM:

Yeah.

BW:

So that's the progression of cameras.

DM:

Later on, if you don't mind, I might just bring a camera in and take a quick picture. Okay. That'd be good. It could go with the recording here. And then from there it just went on to more and more modern types.

BW:

Yeah, look at this camera in here.

DM:

Oh yeah.

BW:

That was the one I used in the nineteen sixties probably.

DM:

Okay. It's a big wooden— What would you call it?

BW:

Just a big wooden portrait camera.

DM:

Portrait camera for your studio?

BW:

Yeah a studio camera. I gave one of those to the Southwest Collections about that size and I need to send the lens back to Lubbock with you, because they didn't pick up the lens.

DM:

Oh okay. Well very good. I haven't seen it. You sent it with the collection they picked up?

BW:

Yeah.

DM:

I'll mention here for researchers that might be listening to this also that you've donated a lot of your photographic collection to the Southwest Collection so that they can be viewed there as well. Let me just ask you how you found these cameras? How did you know what kind of camera you wanted when you were a senior? Had you read up on it? Heard about it?

BW:

I just stumbled into the first two or three cameras I got. Then, of course, by the time the war was over, well they had a few cameras on the market.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

That's when I got the first Speed Graphic.

DM:

Okay. Well how did you buy them? Did you save up your money for them? Did you get them as a present?

BW:

I saved up my money for them.

DM:

So you were really serious about this?

BW:

Yeah, I sold a few pictures in high school and sort of got the bug of maybe I could sell them eventually.

DM:

Uh-huh. Well who was buying photographs from you?

BW:

Different groups of people. Different clubs and different organizations.

DM:

Were you ever able to make a business out of this aerial photography, telling people that you would fly over and take a picture of their place or something?

BW:

I'm still doing a little of that.

DM:

Really? When did you start it?

BW:

When did I start the aerial photography?

DM:

Well as far as selling aerial photographs?

BW:

Probably ever since I've been in business. It's been part of a portion of the business.

DM:

When you and JB Roberts went up were you able to sell any of those aerial photographs?

BW:

I don't remember selling any of those. Most of those were fun.

DM:

That was back when you were learning how? Did you have to lean out of the plane or was it pretty safe?

BW:

You have to get away from the wing of course and get away from the slip-streams as much as you can and then you have to angle the plane and get the wing out of the way.

DM:

So would you tell him to bank?

BW:

Uh-huh.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

To bank and to stall and be as still as he could.

DM:

That sounds like an adventure.

BW:

Yeah.

DM:

So you had your Falcon camera and you were able to sell some of those first photographs off of the Falcon camera?

BW:

A few. Yeah.

DM:

Okay. Well did word get out? Did people contact you or did you go around trying to contact them?

BW:

Both.

DM:

Okay. Like "there's that guy with the camera. Let's get him."

BW:

(Laughter). Back when I started in photography if you could get a negative and get a print from it well you were way ahead of the game.

DM:

Well, were you developing your own film?

BW:

Yeah, from the beginning.

DM:

So you always had some kind of a dark room?

BW:

Oh yeah.

DM:

How would you do it? Were you still living at home when you started developing film?

BW:

Yeah. We had a basement when we moved out on twenty-first street in Plainview. We had a basement and I sort of took it over as my darkroom. It wasn't too big, probably eight by ten feet.

DM:

How did you make it dark? Did it have windows at the top?

BW:

It didn't have windows in it, so it was no problem.

DM:

Perfect. Perfect. Well, were your parents pretty supportive of all this?

BW:

Always.

DM:

Yeah that's great.

BW:

When I was a senior in high school my mother took me to Amarillo and they had a photo supply up there. She bought me a contact printer and a print dryer and a few little things so I could update my dark room. I remember that was a highlight of my life when I got some of that semi-professional equipment.

DM:

Right. Golly. Now, were you making enough money off of selling these photographs to support buying this equipment or did you have to work to buy it or did your parents help out a little bit?

BW:

When I was in college it was helping support me.

DM:

Yeah, oh really?

BW:

Yeah. I worked as a stringer for the *Amarillo Globe News* and also for *Amarillo Times*. They had two newspapers then. And so I was able to sell activities from the campus activities at West Texas State to those two newspapers and of course I sold extra prints to the people involved.

DM:

Yes, okay. Back then if you were able to sell a print to a newspaper how much could you expect to make off a single print?

BW:

I don't remember exactly what I was paid but probably in the neighborhood of five dollars.

DM:

Oh, pretty good. And then if you sold it to individuals what would the price be?

BW:

Anywhere from three to ten dollars—

DM:

Okay.

BW:

—for an eight by ten.

DM:

Okay. So when you went into this commercially, which was I guess right out of high school, I guess maybe you sold your first prints in forty-seven or forty-eight or—

BW:

Mm-hmm.

DM:

What kinds of photographs were you taking? I know you were taking some aerals. Were you doing portraiture, activities, weddings?

BW:

Well like I'd do a group of the football players and a group of the Western Riders Club. Groups of sororities, groups of fraternities, and all different activities, and if they had a special event like homecoming I would sell the newspapers those photographs.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

Also when I was in college at West Texas State, I was a publications photographer. I got a forty dollar a month stipend out of that.

DM:

Wow that's great. Well that was part of my next question because I can see you selling photographs to the newspaper but I wondered if the yearbook staff would try to get those photos for free or if they would actually pay for them.

BW:

Well I was on publications, so they pretty much got what they wanted without paying me except through my little monthly salary.

DM:

Okay. (Laughter)

BW:

But they did furnish the supplies, all the chemicals, and the papers.

DM:

And you sound like you loved doing it anyhow, and that was good experience.

BW:

Oh yeah. Always fun.

DM:

Okay. Well, you graduated from high school in forty-six, right?

BW:

Uh-huh.

DM:

Okay, then did you go right into West Texas State or did you go into the military at that time?

BW:

I went into college at TCU [Texas Christian University] in Fort Worth.

DM:

Oh you did?

BW:

In forty-seven I think it was.

DM:

Yeah, okay.

BW:

And then I spent that time there, and then I came to Wayland. I was running short on cash so I came to Wayland for college and spent a semester and got eighteen semester-hours I think. And then I interviewed and got the job as staff photographer for West Texas State. That's how I ended up at West Texas State.

DM:

I'll be. Now TCU, that's an expensive place to go.

BW:

It sure is.

DM:

(Laughter) Were you still continuing in your photography when you went down there?

BW:

Oh yeah, I was on the staff down there.

DM:

Oh, you were? Did you sell any photographs to the *Star Telegram* by any chance? Fort Worth *Star Telegram*.

BW:

A few. Not many, but a few.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

Al Panzera was their sports photographer and I used to idolize him. He got some fantastic shots.

DM:

Oh, were you starting to pick up some tips and ideas from these professionals in the field?

BW:

Oh yeah, it's always been a learning situation.

DM:

Never stopped? — The learning situation. And then at Wayland you continued on with it.

BW:

Yeah. I didn't do much in photography at Wayland. I did take a couple of photography courses but I mostly went from there to West Texas to pick up the money part of it.

DM:

Right. And then you got your degree at West Texas, didn't you?

BW:

Right.

DM:

Bachelors in—

BW:

Education Administration.

DM:

Oh yeah, okay, Yeah. Did you stay with the photographic side of it throughout the whole time you were at West Texas State?

BW:

Uh huh. The last year I was at West Texas State I was a night photographer at the Amarillo *Globe News*.

DM:

Really.

BW:

And after, I've forgotten how many— somewhere near a year of that, I got to be the instructor of photography at Amarillo College while I was a senior in college. After I graduated from West Texas State I taught at Texas Tech for a year in the photography department. That was in fifty I guess.

DM:

In 1950. Okay. I know that teaching is a good learning experience too.

BW:

It sure is.

DM:

You have to really learn to teach. You got your degree in educational administration you said. In what year?

BW:

Nineteen Fifty.

DM:

In 1950. You went over to Texas Tech and taught there and then where'd you go from there?

BW:

University of Houston.

DM:

Okay. That's Masters?

BW:

I was working on my Masters.

DM:

Yeah, Okay. Specifically in photography this time; right?

BW:
Yeah.

DM:
So now your vocation was definite at this point sounds like.

BW:
Oh yeah. There were two colleges that granted master's degrees in photography. It was University of Ohio and the University of Houston. So naturally I chose Houston since it was much closer.

DM:
How was the program there?

BW:
It was good. Very good.

DM:
How was it structured? Were there specific courses, graduate courses in photography, photographic techniques, or use of equipment or—what would a course be like?

BW:
Well we had a course in portraiture, portrait lighting and posing and so forth. A course in commercial photography where you photograph products, and outside activities, and courses in photographic history and so it was pretty well rounded.

DM:
Very well rounded. So you came out of that filling in some gaps that you had had or getting a larger picture of the whole thing. And that was maybe a couple of years, two or three year program?

BW:
One year

DM:
Was it one year?

BW:
I had some advanced standing exams I took and got I think twelve or fifteen hours from that.

DM:

Well good for you. What year did you graduate then with your masters?

BW:

Fifty-one.

DM:

Golly. That did go by fast.

BW:

Maybe it was fifty-two.

DM:

Coming out of your master's work at Houston, first of all did you consider staying down there on the coast or did you want to come back to —

BW:

I never did want to stay down there. That was the years before everything was air conditioned.

DM:

Well you know what, being a photographer and an artist in that sense, I would think and I have heard that the light, the natural light is very different up here on the plains than it is down there on the coast and things like that, climatic differences cause lighting differences. Were you noticing that kind of thing or was it, nah, that's just kind of a myth?

BW:

Well you have to be aware of different lighting situations. And usually your best light's early in the morning and late in the afternoon wherever you are.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

So it doesn't make that much difference about geographic location I don't think.

DM:

But anyway, you wanted to come back to West Texas.

BW:

Uh huh.

DM:

Get back up on the plateau here.

BW:

Right.

DM:

I know that you started your business in fifty-five didn't you. Bill Weaks Photography. But now we're talking about fifty-one or fifty-two. Were you back here doing freelance kind of work in the meantime?

BW:

After I came back from the University of Houston, I had joined the Naval Reserve while I was at West Texas State, and I was about to get drafted so I volunteered for the Navy.

DM:

Korean War.

BW:

Yeah.

DM:

So then did you ship out or did you stay stateside?

BW:

Stayed stateside. The last and the longest station was at Lakehurst, New Jersey.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

And that's where the blimps were.

DM:

Oh yeah.

BW:

Do you know what a blimp is?

DM:

Mm-hmm. Yes.

BW:

I was stationed in Lakehurst and they had that huge hangar there, and that's here the Graff Zeppelin exploded and killed all those people. Anyway that hangar was where I was headquartered for over a year.

DM:

Really. Did the Navy tap on your photographic experiences? Were you able to use that any?

BW:

I had a rating as a photographer.

DM:

Did you ever go up in one of those blimps?

BW:

Yeah.

DM:

Do some aerial photography from one?

BW:

I didn't do the photography but we were patrolling the area. Dragging sonar fish, that's when the Russians were threatening us and they'd come out to the outer limits a few miles offshore and just sit. And part of our job was to track them with a sonar fish out of those blimps and to see where they were.

DM:

How did that work, the sonar fish? Did you actually drag—?

BW:

Drag it on a cable; it looked like a big bullet.

DM:

How far up would you be?

BW:

Oh probably a hundred feet, maybe one-fifty, two-hundred feet. Cable's not too long so you have to be fairly low.

DM:

Yeah. And you'd just drag that around all day.

BW:

Yeah.

DM:

It seems like from that height, if a submarine was anywhere close to the surface you could see it.

BW:

Yeah you could see them.

DM:

You could see them?

BW:

Occasionally.

DM:

That would just be a little bit eerie. But you weren't taking photographs.

BW:

No.

DM:

Okay. Did you ever take any photographs of the hangar? Around the hangar or the blimp?

BW:

I really didn't and I've always wished I had.

DM:

I wonder if there might have been any restrictions on that kind of activity.

BW:

There were. We couldn't photograph anything on the base. I know now there's a museum at Lakehurst that records a lot of the history of that area.

DM:

So you were in the Navy then for two or three years?

BW:

Two years.

DM:

Okay. And then came back out here again.

BW:

I came back out here.

DM:

Well you were kind of destined to live out here, huh?

BW:

I think so.

DM:

You never wanted to live anywhere else?

BW:

No, I never did.

DM:

Even with the dust storms that would occasionally occur.

BW:

That's what we tell people who live out in the east, so they won't come out here. (Laughter)

DM:

(Laughter) That's good. Well, you were also back east it sounds like; either down in Houston or up in New Jersey during the great drought that hit west Texas in the early fifties. So it might have been a good time to be in a wetter spot. I've heard people say that they remember the early fifties as being dryer than what the thirties were. But I don't know.

BW:

You know, I don't remember the fifties as well as I do the thirties.

DM:

Yeah. Uh-huh.

BW:

I know when I first went in business it was fairly dry for five or six years weather-wise.

DM:

Well, when you came out here after the Navy is that when you set up your business?

BW:

I set up a little business on the side but I taught school a year.

DM:

Oh you did.

BW:

I taught fifth and sixth grade and was assistant principle and a football coach.

DM:

Okay so you were pulling on your degree from West Texas State—

BW:

Right.

DM:

Did a little teaching and then you—

BW:

Then I went into business in fifty-five.

DM:

What made you decide to go from education into photography?

BW:

I always wanted to be in photography. I never seriously considered teaching except maybe teaching photography.

DM:

Yeah. Did you ever teach again after 1955?

BW:

Not in a structured sense. I've taught a lot of seminars and a lot of short courses. One-week or two-week courses all over the United States.

DM:

Okay. Well now, you set up your business in 1955. Were there any other photographic businesses here in town?

BW:

I was the fifth one in business here.

DM:

Well that seems like that'd be pretty tough getting started with that kind of competition.

BW:

It was.

DM:

Had these other people been around awhile?

BW:

Yeah most of them had.

DM:

Were most of them reputable or were they—

BW:

They were doing okay. They just weren't up on things. A lot of them got behind on their techniques and knowledge and so forth.

DM:

But you tried to stay up on the cutting edge.

BW:

Oh yeah. Ahead. I tried to stay ahead, not up.

DM:

Okay. There you go. (Laughter). A true businessman. So you continued your education in a sense at least individually. And then you also offered courses at that time or seminars, or was that much later?

BW:

In the sixties the Professional Photographers of America which is a national association—now we have about twenty-five thousand members—but anyway they had a school up in Indiana and I went up there two years as a student. I had taken one week or two week courses and then the next thirty years I was on the faculty teaching one or two courses a summer.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

For a week or two weeks. And then that school sponsored schools in Mexico and Canada and different places, so I taught in Mexico and Canada and all over the United States. I think about thirty-five states.

DM:

You got to see the country while you were doing all this. And took photographs everywhere you went I guess.

BW:

Oh yeah, sure

DM:

Are these in our collection?

BW:

Some of them are.

DM:

Some of it is. That'll be very interesting. What year did this organization begin? When was it founded? Had it been around?

BW:

Yeah. Photographers of America. Eighteen ninety-eight I bet.

DM:

Wow, okay. Did you have any heroes of the past? Photographers that you really liked? Who were some of those?

BW:

[Yousuf] Karsh, from Canada.

DM:
Okay.

BW:
And he was probably the most outstanding. He photographed world celebrities.

DM:
Okay now how do you spell that?

BW:
K-a-r-s-h.

DM:
Okay. Karsh. Who were some others?

BW:
[Paul] Gittings, in Houston.

DM:
Okay.

BW:
He was an outstanding photographer.

DM:
Did you happen to know—you met Karsh, apparently, did you happen to know Gittings when you were down there working on your masters?

BW:
Yeah and there was another photographer down there — it'll come to me in a minute. Uh— well anyway there was another famous Houston photographer. Gittings had a little seminar once in a while and I was down for one of his seminars.

DM:
Good.

BW:
And Marvins. Kaye Marvins was the other one.

DM:

And these were all people that you knew I guess. These were contemporaries. Do you have any back from the turn of the century whose work struck your fancy?

BW:

There's so many of them I don't know where to start. There were.

DM:

Can a photographer learn just by looking at older photographs and saying I like the way he did that angle or his lighting? Is it possible to just look at a photograph and say, "I want to try the technique he's using?"

BW:

Sure. Yeah. In fact that's one of the main ways you learn.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

Lighting technique is the biggest part of photography I think, posing and lighting.

DM:

It seems like, well, if it were me, as ignorant as I am on all this, I would look at a photograph, like I was looking at this Karsh Eisenhower photograph a minute ago, and say "I love that lighting but there's no way I'd figure out how he did the lighting. Did you have to communicate with people sometimes to see what their secrets were? Were there any secrets that you couldn't unravel by yourself?"

BW:

Well, I think you had to have the photographer there to explain it some of the time. And you can look and see what lighting was used. Posing and lighting as I said are the two most important things. But lighting is the whole key to good photography I think.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

Of course if you do good lighting; you've got to be able to pose a person to get that position to light them.

DM:

Right, right. Well, are professional photographers good about sharing this kind of information?

BW:

Before World War II they weren't, but after World War II there were so many GI's that came out and wanted to learn about photography that photographers began to share their ideas.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

Because they found out they learned as much by sharing as they would by giving. That's when the big learning process started, was after World War II.

DM:

And now, what about the sheer number of photographers? Did that increase after World War II also?

BW:

Oh yeah. There were so many people that didn't have a job or a trade that a lot of photographers went into business without knowing the fundamentals or the little nuances of photography. And a lot of them didn't last very long.

DM:

And now back to your business. You came into this with a lot of competition. Did you have to find a particular niche to work within? Did you specialize in school portraiture or weddings or—

BW:

When you're starting out like that you have to do a little bit of everything. I did, especially in a small town. You've got to do commercial, you've got to do aerial, you've got to do portraits, you've got to do every different type of photography there is to scratch out a living.

DM:

So you had to be kind of creative about what you were going to go do that day? You think, "Well, I can do this kind of work, or I can do that kind of work," or kind of beat the pavement a little bit.

BW:

Well you have to do that too.

DM:

Were you still selling photographs to newspapers?

BW:

Well I did a little bit of stringer work back then but mostly studio work.

DM:

I meant to ask you when you were in Houston; were you able to sell anything to the *Houston Chronicle*?

BW:

No. I did work for a photographer down there two, three or four hours a day for maybe every other week. And he was more of a party photographer. But I just did that, I worked in the dark room for him just to get a little income going. That's about the only employment I had in Houston.

DM:

Alright. Now in 1955, when you first set up your studio—I guess you had a studio then, right? How did you find an appropriate place and set it up with—I assume you set it up with a dark room and all that?

BW:

Uh huh. While I was teaching I was looking all the time toward the future and I found some lots down on South Broadway that I bought, and my dad was a carpenter and contractor at that time. And he helped me build my first studio which is where I have been all the time.

DM:

Isn't that nice. You had a little help there.

BW:

Yeah I had a lot of help. He donated his work and made it a whole lot more practical to go in business.

DM:

Okay. So you were able to set this up. It couldn't have been too cheap to get all the dark room equipment and things like that, that you needed, or had you been accumulating that kind of thing.

BW:

I'd been accumulating.

DM:

Very good.

BW:

I had all the equipment. I just needed the building.

DM:

Once you got that building in place—was it up and running in nineteen fifty-five?

BW:

Yeah the last part. I think we had a September fourth opening in fifty-five.

DM:

Okay. Now once you had it setup and ready, how'd you get people in?

BW:

Well you just beat the pavement, and run a few ads in the paper and mingle with the townspeople. Joined the Rotary Club.

DM:

(Laughter) And you've been here since you were young, so I guess you knew some people around.

BW:

Oh yeah I had a lot of ins [inside connections] with people.

DM:

That's good. Well, did business kick off pretty well?

BW:

Surprisingly well.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

I was scared to death with the competition I had. But it worked out. I even showed a profit the first four months I was in business. It was September through December. Of course December is your big month.

DM:

Oh is it? Okay. Why is December a big month?

BW:

Because people give photographs as gifts.

DM:

So a family portrait or something like that for a gift. What are the big months? Are they December and what, May and June weddings?

BW:

Yeah. Summer weddings and Christmas portraits, and those were the two main big seasons I guess. School pictures all during the year.

DM:

Okay. Those are the main standbys for the business.

BW:

Right.

DM:

And then, besides that kind of thing did you launch out into other areas like doing landscape photography or other activities or aerial photography? Did you continue any of that?

BW:

I continued doing it. When I built my buildings down there on South Broadway, I had some property on the south side of me about a hundred feet I think. So I built a building for a laundry and for the General Adjustment Bureau. So I was paying out in five years.

DM:

Oh good.

BW:

So I came into some real estate that way.

DM:

Good. A little side business there.

BW:

Yeah. And I got into farming and I guess I went partners with four other GI's, and we bought a little farm and sold it and I took part of my money and bought a farm over by Olton.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

And I kept it until the year before last.

DM:

Oh, okay. Were these farms that you were leasing out to—?

BW:

I tried to farm them, custom farming. But it never worked out and I ended up farming one of them for fifteen years maybe, but mostly I've got them in CRP [Conservation Reserve Program] now.

DM:

Right, right. Well, when you say farming them, were you hiring someone to come in and farm?

BW:

Custom farming.

DM:

Yeah. You weren't actually out there trying to—

BW:

I was out by Olton, we had a quarter-section out there and I ran cattle on there for twenty years. Tried to photograph and be a cowboy too.

DM:

I tell you that would be busy, busy. I bet you have some photographs of your ranch out there though.

BW:

Well it wasn't a ranch it was just an old farm.

DM:

Yeah. What were you running out there Hereford or —

BW:
Mixed.

DM:
Mixed.

BW:
Herefords and a little bit of Angus, little bit of Brangus.

DM:
What twenty year period are we talking about here?

BW:
From sixty-five to eighty-five.

DM:
Oh, that's when that mixed started coming in wasn't it.

BW:
Yeah.

DM:
Yeah, Okay. That seems to be the case anywhere I talk to people about ranching. They might have started out with Hereford but somewhere in the early seventies or so they started mixing. Is that what you saw out here or?

BW:
Yeah. At first we were using mostly Hereford cows and we tried an Angus bull and run a bunch of cows and so we got a smaller bull and it worked a lot better.

DM:
Right.

BW:
Got an Angus bull, and Angus and Herefords work pretty well together, if you have a bull that's an Angus.

DM:
Yeah right. Ended up with some white-face?

BW:
Yeah.

DM:
Well, your ranching interest comes out in this book we were looking at earlier—*The Adams Ranch* book. When did you start that project? You said you—

BW:
Early seventies.

DM:
Early seventies and it spanned about twenty years.

BW:
Thirty.

DM:
Thirty year period. It's a real good book and I want to mention it for researchers listening to this. I hope to get a copy for the Southwest Collection. So I'll check to see if there's a copy there. It's real good photography. This is one of those sideline kind of things that I was talking about. You were doing portraiture, maybe doing weddings and family portraits around Christmas. But then you found time to go work on these other projects too. Did you have other similar projects to this? Like going out to the community to take photographs.

BW:
Yeah. I don't know what you mean specifically.

DM:
Well, when I look at *The Adams Ranch* book, it's kind of like a little community. You know, it's the families living on the ranch and I'm wondering if you ever went into maybe a community on the plains here and took pictures of some of the buildings, maybe some of the historic buildings or some of the businesses or families. Did you ever do that kind of work?

BW:
Yeah a little bit. We used to work for a publication in Lubbock called *South Plains Journal* or something. I've forgotten what it was. But we did a lot of work for them, for different communities.

DM:
Okay.

BW:

Hale Center and Olton and different places.

DM:

Did any of these photographs end up in this collection that came down to the Southwest Collection?

BW:

I've got negatives going back fifty, sixty years. Some of them are included in those and some of them I'm still digging.

DM:

Okay, well that is of real historic interest, that kind of thing. So we're always kind of keeping our eyes out for it.

BW:

Yeah. I don't know if they told you or not, but they carried out all these file cabinets from the studio and they had four or five vans to haul all the negative and some equipment.

DM:

I don't remember what I was doing that day but I wasn't up here. I must have been off interviewing someone else, I'm not sure.

BW:

I think they had four or five people.

DM:

That's a nice book. *The Adams Ranch*. Have you done any other projects that became photographic books?

BW:

I worked for the symphony guild in Lubbock, and they put out a yearly calendar book and would sell it to their members. And I worked for the Assembly Club in Lubbock.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

So I've done a whole lot of work in Lubbock.

DM:

So your work is going to appear here and there. We probably already have some that's trickled into the Southwest Collections in some form or fashion.

BW:

I started working in Lubbock in probably the mid-sixties.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

And I worked with Sybil Cochran, she was the social director at the country club there and she got me in with the right crowd of people to photograph. And I worked through Margaret's Dress Shop down there.

DM:

Right, I was going to ask you about that.

BW:

And Louis Patello had College Flowers. We did a little, what I called a network, they would recommend me and I would recommend them and it worked out very well.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

I photographed many many of the leading families in Lubbock and a few in Amarillo, and especially through that networking.

DM:

Yes. Now, what kind of work were you doing for Margaret's Dress Shop, for example?

BW:

Mostly bridal dresses.

DM:

Did you have live models wearing these things or were you taking pictures—

BW:

These were actual brides.

DM:

These were the actual brides. Okay, Okay. Were you taking these pictures at a wedding or were you just taking them modeling these dresses that—

BW:

Not modeling, but wearing them like they were going to be in the wedding.

DM:

I see.

BW:

Then I'd photograph the weddings themselves. Candid wedding. At that time I was probably doing a hundred, or a hundred-and-fifty photographs at the candid wedding. And then of course that always led to some individual portraits of families and individuals.

DM:

Right. Is that how it works?

BW:

Yeah.

DM:

Word gets out that way?

BW:

Networking.

DM:

You do a good job and then you get a recommendation that way.

BW:

I've photographed in Post, and Amarillo, and Dallas, and El Paso and different places but it's all through references.

DM:

Yes, okay. So you started traveling some.

BW:

Oh yeah. A lot.

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DM:

That had to become a part of the life of a photographer.

BW:

It has to be, if you're going to put beans on the table.

DM:

So, you would get a call at the studio and they'd say we're having a wedding in Dallas, can you come photograph? That kind of thing?

BW:

Mm-hmm.

DM:

And as far as Margaret's Dress Shop was concerned they were taking these photographs and using them for advertising.

BW:

No. They would use them in the Sunday papers and then she let me keep an exhibit in her dress shop. So I'd usually have two or three different brides with her dresses on hanging in her dress shop. Then that always meant more business. People would see those and ask for who did them and—

DM:

Right. You had your "Bill Weaks" [sign] down there in the corner.

BW:

Very prominently, when possible.

DM:

Right. And then by the same token, at your studio, did you have some pictures and photographs you had done in Margaret's Dress Shop, in your studio and people would see that and go, "I like that dress. Where'd you—" Is that how it works then?

BW:

Yeah, that's how it works.

DM:

It's kind of like these days on the internet people share links. I'll link to your site, you link to my site. That kind of thing. Okay, besides Margaret's, what were some of the other businesses you worked with, you mentioned...

BW:

College Flowers.

DM:

College Flowers, okay.

BW:

At that time it was Louis Patello. I don't think he's active any more.

DM:

I don't know.

BW:

And then Miss Stark made the wedding cakes that they'd bring up from Jacksboro, and those were huge cakes. Very decorated and at least five or six feet tall. Those were all at the Lubbock Country Club where Sybil Cochran always recommended me.

DM:

Well it's nice to have a recommendation like that.

BW:

Yeah. The way I got on with her, was she had seen somebody's work I'd done in Plainview, and her daughter was getting married, so I photographed her daughter's wedding, and it just sort of snowballed from there.

DM:

Oh great. You like that snowball.

BW:

You bet.

DM:

Okay, well I see how that works. That's nice. Then at some point, although you started out with Plainview, at some point Plainview sounds like it might of not been as big a part of your profession, your focus.

BW:

That's right. It was probably fifty percent of it.

DM:

What happened to the competition that you started out against?

BW:

One of them retired. I guess the other three went out of business eventually.

DM:

Did other new ones come in?

BW:

Yeah. Usually you keep two or three in Plainview. They'll stick.

DM:

Are you fully retired now? Are you still running—?

BW:

I'm doing a little bit of aerial photography now and occasionally something else but mostly just aerial and very little of that. I just photographed the Cargill Plant out here in an aerial style photograph, and the Walmart Distribution Center. We've got two, three, or four big industries here that I'll photograph their plants from the air.

DM:

Who takes you up in the air?

BW:

There's a plane out at Hale County Airport that I know the owner of and he takes me up. You have to have a pretty well-equipped airplane for photography.

DM:

I see.

BW:

Certain things you have to have to do a good job. You never photograph though glass.

DM:

Right. So do you have a camera mounted outside?

BW:

Just around my neck.

DM:

Around your neck. But you have to be open air.

BW:

Yeah. Well, I have to have the window open.

DM:

What kind of speed would you be going at?

BW:

I varies depending on wind and all that, as slow as possible.

DM:

As slow as possible. Which is why you would have JB Roberts stall-out. He had to stall-out to get it slow.

BW:

Like when I did the Walmart Distribution Center. I probably made three or four passes to see what angle I wanted to take and then we'd go back and photograph each angle and hope for the right one.

DM:

Yeah, okay. How many other photographers would you say are in Plainview at this time?

BW:

There's two full-time.

DM:

Two others. That's really interesting that when you started out there were about five. And now it's really winnowed down to a few. And you might have been responsible for some of that because you got a lot of the business apparently.

BW:

The two photographers that are here are doing a good job. So they'll probably stick it out because it's getting harder and harder to make a living in professional photography because of all the instant gratification that these cell phones have.

DM:

That's an interesting topic then, so this vast amount of amateur photography is eating into the demand for professional photography.

BW:

Right. Especially weddings.

DM:

Because people are popping off these things everywhere. Well I'll be.

BW:

I had a studio in Lubbock for I think, I've forgotten how many years, five or six, you know here at the Hemphill-Wells?

DM:

Mm-hmm.

BW:

I had a studio in that building and the mall for five or six years.

DM:

Oh, you did?

BW:

So that was where I was getting a lot of Lubbock business.

DM:

So, in South Plains Mall you had a studio. Well, how would you spend time at different studios? Did you have a particular day when—

BW:

We would schedule certain days in Lubbock and I had another photographer that worked with me.

DM:

Okay. I was going to ask you if you ever had any apprentices.

BW:

Oh yeah. I had one probably all through my career.

DM:

One or another. Not the same one.

BW:

Not the same one, no.

DM:

Can you name some of these?

BW:

Dale Couch in Amarillo was with me nine years. Lonnie Adrian over at Muleshoe was with me five years. Those are the ones that immediately come to mind.

DM:

Did they get their start pretty much with you?

BW:

Yeah.

DM:

Well that's kind of interesting how that works. It kind of spins off another business. They finally went off and did their own—

BW:

There was one guy that worked for me for, I guess, a couple years. I taught a seminar in Georgia. He was there at the photography school and he came out here and worked for me a couple years. So they come from all different directions.

DM:

Yeah. How did they find out about you? Just word of mouth again? They see your work?

BW:

Well if you teach seminars that's one way.

DM:

Right, okay.

BW:

Would you like something to drink?

DM:

Well, if you want to stop and get something.

BW:

Let's stop and have a little break.

[recorder paused]

DM:

Let's go to some broad questions then. I'd like to get your take on changes in photography over time. For example, we could start with equipment. Equipment and film, and maybe certain photographic techniques that have changed from, say, the nineteen forties and fifties to the present. You were talking about some of your earlier equipment can you talk about equipment changes?

BW:

Well when I first started out everything was either roll film or sheet film. Sheet film being four by five inches or eight by ten inches or five by seven inches or whatever. And roll film, the popular sizes were, one-twenty and six-twenty and one-twenty-seven and when I say roll film that's a spool of film that comes on a roll and is backed by paper and you load it in the camera and the first part of it is the paper and when you wind it in the camera it comes to the film and the sizes were, probably when I was first starting out, the roll film sizes, probably the most popular would be two inches by three inches. And there was a square format that was two and a quarter inches square. And those were the popular film sizes when I started out and then the sheet film, when I first started out five by seven inches was a popular size and then from five by seven inches we went to four by five inches which was the standard for, oh, twenty, thirty years I guess, maybe longer than that. Back in the early twenties and so forth they did some eight by ten sheet film which is a huge piece of film. Then they went from that to full five by seven inch film and then some started to use what's called a split five by seven which gave three and a half by five, gave you two of those on each sheet of five by seven. And I don't know any photographer that didn't do their own processing in the early years, their film processing and their paper processing for prints. And the most popular size of all times was probably the eight by ten inch print. Of course now we make up to thirty by forty photographs, and down to stamp size but with all sizes in between. And that first film was very slow in recording time, and some of the early photographers back in the eighteen-eighties and nineties would have a multi-minute exposure. And then in the twenties, and thirties, and forties we got down to maybe a second or a half second or twenty-fifth of a second even. The faster the film gets, and film speeds are sensitive to the light, what we call the grain of the film increases with the size. In other words a large format would have a larger grain. And then as the manufacturing process has evolved, well the grain

size got smaller which would give you a more—rendition that was sharper and clearer. That's not making much sense I'm sure—

DM:

No, it does. It does. I was sitting here chuckling because I was wondering, how would you like to have some people in your studio, you're taking a photograph of them, and you had to wait a minute or two for the exposure? Like in the eighteen-eighties and nineties. I know it's got to be a challenge anyhow.

BW:

What they used back in the late eighties, first let me say that photography was not invented until eighteen thirty-nine. So photography is relatively young as far as a lot of things go. There's been a tremendous amount of progress made from eighteen thirty-nine until today; the latest, of course, being digital.

DM:

What do you think about that? Did you ever use digital in your studio?

BW:

I'm doing everything I do now with digital.

DM:

When did you make that transition?

BW:

Probably ten years ago.

DM:

Digital has been around longer than that. Why at that point? Were you getting a good enough resolution ten years ago?

BW:

No the resolving power was not good when it first came out. If you've got an image of one megapixel it wouldn't enlarge.

DM:

Right.

BW:

Pretty much now we're getting thousand or fifteen-hundred megapixel speeds which gives you a whole lot sharper image and you can use a faster shutter speed.

DM:

Did you have any hesitation about leaving the film type and going to digital, having done it all of your professional career, and then something really new...? Was that a difficult transition for you to make?

BW:

Well usually those transitions were slowly developing.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

Just like color printing of photographs, Eastman Kodak had the license to do all the color printing until about nineteen fifty-five. And then the anti-trust laws made them release that to photographers individually. So we could start printing our own color at about nineteen fifty-five or six, somewhere in there. And a lot of photographers would not switch from black and white to color back then, and they got left behind. You've always got to be up with the curve in the learning process. If you don't well you're going to get left behind.

DM:

You can't be too sentimental, too traditional. You've got to be ready to—

BW:

Well when you've done one thing one way all your life and then something new thing comes along, you've either got to fit in or be left behind. And as I said it's a gradual transition. It's not just black and white. There's a lot of grey in there in the learning process.

DM:

Well, it seems like another point of concern in all of this would be, if you have all of this equipment, you have your studio equipped a certain way, and then you go to something as drastically different as digital, it seems like that would be an expensive transition.

BW:

It always is. It's just like a computer. You buy one this week and they're out of date next week.

DM:

When you went from film to digital in the studio, did that affect lighting and all of that or did your lighting, at least, and the backdrops and all stay the same?

BW:

Oh yeah. It's pretty much the same. You could use the same backgrounds, the same lighting techniques, the same posing techniques.

DM:

Well that's good.

BW:

Yeah, that's good. Sure is.

DM:

Did the way that you developed your film, before digital, did the way that you develop your film change much from the time you began until—

BW:

Yeah. At first it was all black and white. No color at all. Then gradually, in the mid-fifties they started shifting from some color to a lot of black and white. Then as the years progressed, there got to be more color and less black and white. And now it's practically all color except some specialists that just specialize in black and white.

DM:

Have you seen these kinds of trends where you're going, say for example, from black and white to color, more and more color, and then all of the sudden there's kind of a nostalgic reversal where there's a little more demand for black and white for a little while, or sepia, or something?

BW:

There's some photographers now even that are specialized in black and white and a lot of the younger people don't know that that's not a new process. That it's an old standby.

DM:

And for somebody who's done that in the past it's got to be kind of an advantage because you know the black and white.

BW:

Right. It's always a gradual change. It's not a fast change in techniques and equipment. It usually gives you time to sort of catch up with the curve.

DM:

One thing that I thought was interesting when digital cameras came out was that you could set some of these to take black and white or even sepia tone photographs. So that seemed kind of old fashioned at that time when digital was coming out.

BW:

Yeah. Well of course now with Photoshop you can print it black and white or color or sepia or any shade thereof.

DM:

What was the sepia era? Wasn't there a little time period where sepia was kind of popular—

BW:

Well, sepia and black and white were hand in glove, they went together. I used to, when I first went in business, we would sell sepia tone or brown tone as a more premium product than black and white because it does take some extra chemicals and extra techniques to do the sepia, it's not that complicated but it is another product line.

DM:

Now what about the changes over time in, what was the term you used, posing techniques?

BW:

Posing and lighting.

DM:

Posing and lighting are the two biggies. Have there been changes in posing?

BW:

Not really. Good posing and good lighting is either there or it's not there. And if you know the techniques I think you're way ahead. And it doesn't matter if you're in color or black and white or whatever. Those principles still apply.

DM:

But posing hasn't changed. It's not a stylistic thing that changes very much.

BW:

Oh, well. I see some of these photographs in these publications that are just hideous the way they pose people. They just don't know any better.

DM:

Okay. I didn't know if that was change over time or if that was just bad photography and good photography.

BW:

It's bad photography in most cases.

DM:

I remember sitting for a family portrait and having to turn this way, and my head back this way and when I would see the photograph later it just looked very unnatural. I don't know if that was a thing of the sixties as opposed to the nineties or if that was just a photographer—

BW:

I think it's the photographer because if you've got good posing you've got good posing, no matter what. I see so many of these digital photographs where the photographer just picks up the camera and shoots and has no conception of good posing or lighting. It's just a picture. No aesthetic value to it.

DM:

Right. Now, is lighting the same way then? You don't see a change in lighting techniques over time, or do you—

BW:

No, not in good lighting. I remember when the television was first coming out. You'd have this hideous lighting. It's all flat lighting where everything was flat. They shined enough light in there to get an image. And it was an image, not a good picture.

DM:

So they were kind of frontal lighting right down on—?

BW:

Right. What we call flat-lighting where you flood the whole subject and hope you get something.

DM:

There's no shadow cast or anything? You know, historically, one of the important debates was the Nixon-Kennedy debate, presidential debate. And they say that part of Nixon's problem at that debate was, he was all washed out. I wonder if that was a lighting problem.

BW:

Yeah, It probably was.

DM:

Anyway, he didn't make an appealing image.

BW:

You can see on television, improvements that have been made in lighting. Used to be everything was flat-lit where they just flooded the whole area, the whole subject with no direction to it, and when you are outside in the sunshine you go through all these lighting patterns and don't realize it as you change your subject.

DM:

What about lighting equipment, has it improved? Is it much different?

BW:

I don't think it's much different. It's either—most of what we call flash photography nowadays is pretty much standardized. It's not changed that much in other words. When I first went in incandescent was the thing, where you had more like a light bulb. And then somewhere in that era we went to fluorescent lighting, with the banks of fluorescent tubes. Then we went to parabolic lighting where you have more directional capabilities and once you get into that you can show more depth and more feeling of depth, which is what you try to do in photography, is taking a three dimensional subject and trying to portray that third dimension with depth, and you do that with light.

DM:

Right. So the main thing is how that lighting falls. That's more important than the type of lighting it is. The type of bulb—

BW:

Yeah, type of lighting doesn't really matter. You can use daylight or moonlight or incandescent light or whatever.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

But if it's not perfectly applied then you can ruin the photograph.

DM:

Okay. That pretty much answers my next question then, which was—working with lighting in the studio, how difficult would it be to take your subjects outside? Because it seems like a whole

different world, to me, using directional lighting and then taking them outside to do outdoor shots.

BW:

Well, there's techniques you use outside. Like in the bright sunlight, you don't use the bright sunlight; you use what we call a scrim between the light source which is the sun, and the subject. If you just take them out in the bright sunlight you'll fry them. It'll look like they're fried in the photograph. But if you use that diffuser to diffuse the light it makes it soft and appealing.

DM:

Okay. So that's the main thing. But directionally speaking, if you can do in the studio, you can do it outside.

BW:

Well, in the studio you can move your lighting. Outside you have to move your subject.

DM:

Okay. You have to have an area with a backdrop that will allow you to move the subject around.

BW:

Yeah.

DM:

Okay. And you said that you had a place at one time outside of your—beyond the studio you had a backyard that you would use.

BW:

Backyard down by the fence by the weeping willow tree. Everything that photographs good you try to put in—maybe a touch of red for an accent of color with a geranium or whatever.

DM:

Right.

BW:

And you never—I say never, but generally you should never photograph anyone with the sun coming straight into their face. Usually you work in the shade or with diffused light using a sheet of diffusing material between the subject and the sun or the light source which is the sun.

DM:

After years of doing this I know you must develop a real ability to scrutinize different photographic work. So when you pick up the newspaper or pick up a book with some photographs in it do you immediately critique?

BW:

Oh yeah.

DM:

That's what your life is about so—

BW:

That's how you learn.

DM:

Well are you seeing a lot of good stuff or is there still a lot of junk out there?

BW:

There's a lot of junk. A lot of junk.

DM:

It seems so funny because there are resources for people to learn, if you're going to produce something for a book or a publication, there are resources for them to learn how. What's happened?

BW:

Yeah and the ones that learn are more successful than the ones that don't.

DM:

(Laughter) Well, I would like to get you to tell me some anecdotes. I know that when working with people in the studio or outside the studio there had to have been some incidents that have occurred that are memorable. Can you think of any unusual or funny events?

BW:

This family came in to be photographed. It was a father and a mother and three children, and the youngest child was not behaving at her best. And so the dad after a while got tired of the antics the little girl was doing and he picked her up and patted her on the rear end and gave her a slap or two and said, "Now sit down there and smile."

DM:

(Laughter) Which is the last thing she would want to do. Oh golly. What do you do in a case like that? Your sitting there waiting for everything to come together, I guess, for people to get where they're supposed to be and look the way they're supposed to, it's got to take a lot of patience.

BW:

It does, but usually if you can keep the kids entertained you're way ahead. And usually most children basically would like to have a little discipline. And if you're new to them and they're new to you then they're a whole lot more respectful—

DM:

Oh.

BW:

—than somebody you're trying to photograph like your own children.

DM:

So generally speaking, the less well you know them the better off you might be.

BW:

I think that's true.

DM:

Yeah, that's interesting.

BW:

Of course when you get up past a certain age, when they get into the teen years, especially girls, they like to be photographed. Boys don't but girls do.

DM:

What about school portraits? Did you have any difficulties with those or did they—

BW:

You talking about individuals?

DM:

Mm-hmm.

BW:

No, I never did have that much trouble. Usually you're going through them so fast and they've watched the person in front of them and just do what they do and most of them are well behaved.

DM:

Did you ever have any that were making funny faces or anything like that?

BW:

Oh yeah. Always. You've always got boys especially. They'd like to clown.

DM:

How do you handle that? Do you take a picture of their clown face or do you try to catch them in between?

BW:

Well sometimes you just take two. One clown and one regular.

DM:

How about weddings. Did you have any memorable events at weddings?

BW:

Every wedding is a different situation I think, and each wedding has its own personality. But usually weddings are fun because most people are in a happy mood and it's a celebration and everybody's really, nine times out of ten, very cooperative at weddings. The only trouble I had at weddings was photographers shooting over my shoulder with their little pick up cameras.

DM:

So you had the lighting right and you had the angle right and you'd get a flash all of the sudden from over your shoulder?

BW:

Yeah. And a lot of times they ruined the photograph by doing that.

DM:

Oh, no.

BW:

They don't mean harm. They think they're doing a public service by photographing.

DM:

So they see where you are and they think, "Oh that's got to be a good spot." So they come over to where you are intentionally.

BW:

Mostly it's posing. They don't have the slightest idea of how to pose a person or a group of people. And once you get it set up after all your years of experience and then they come up and snap it it's pretty exasperating.

DM:

Oh I bet it is. Oh my. Well that's interesting. What else would you like to add about photography? Have we covered it pretty well? Or have I in my ignorance missed some major points?

BW:

No, I think you've done a good job. You've brought some things to my memory that I wouldn't normally sit in here thinking about.

DM:

Oh, I'll probably get down the road here in a little bit and I think of some more things so I might give you a call and see if I can fill in my notes or something.

BW:

I'd be more than happy to help you any way I can.

DM:

I appreciate that. Can we talk just a little bit about your Plainview point?

BW:

Yeah.

DM:

How did that all come about?

BW:

When I was a Boy Scout which was— I got into Boy Scouts late, and I was probably fourteen before I ever joined Boy Scouts. And most kids were ahead of me because I had to come in from town from out in the country a mile or two and I didn't have the advantage of being in scouts at an early age. But when I first got in Scouts most of the kids were first class or star scouts and I was a tenderfoot. Anyway we did a lot of camping out over at Camp Haynes near Silverton. And

of course we always had a lot of fun locally in Plainview. And it wasn't a scout project but we had this old caliche pit off of fifth street over here on the draw, on the Running Water Draw. And there was a caliche pit there where they mined caliche to use on road building, and there was a pretty big hole in the ground, and we went over there sort of fooling around, and would dig around on those sides of the mounds, and at first probably four or five or six of us went over to just dig to see what we'd find, and we found, the first time I remember, we found some teeth that pretty obviously weren't human or current animal teeth. Then we got to digging around and found more bones and then we never did get anything, as I said that was organized, but one day I think it was a Sunday my two cousins and I were eating lunch and after lunch we didn't have anything to do so we—I took them over to the caliche pit. One of them was from Panhandle and one of them was from away in college. And we started digging around and started finding bones and teeth and so forth, and I found the first Plainview point. And it was about three inches long and made out of flint and I didn't have no idea what it was, I just knew it was something that was unusual, you know because it was the first one ever found. And then my cousin was older and more sophisticated than I, so he knew we had a find and I had no idea what we'd found.

DM:

What was his name?

BW:

Val Whitaker.

DM:

Val Whitaker.

BW:

Uh-huh, and so he and his dad, or his dad took it—I think it was to Tech, to the museum down there which was in its infancy. And they were interested in it but they didn't have any facilities to do anything with it. So they sent it on to the University of Texas. Then the University of Texas after that sent out a crew to start excavating.

DM:

What did they send? They sent the point; did they send some teeth and bone also?

BW:

Yeah, I think just the point to begin with. And anyway, since my cousin's dad hadn't taken me, well it still wouldn't mean anything to me. I didn't find out what it was until years later when they started ballyhooing the Plainview Point.

DM:

When was that? You said—

BW:

Nineteen forty-three

DM:

Forty-three, yeah.

BW:

I've got a little copy of the piece that was in the newspaper. I'll get you it.

DM:

Oh, thank you.

BW:

That'll prove all of that.

DM:

Now these teeth and bones, is that what turned out to be bison?

BW:

Right.

DM:

Well that would be unusual to find wouldn't it.

BW:

Yeah we knew they weren't horses or cattle.

DM:

Yeah, golly.

BW:

Those teeth were huge. You know, they were maybe twice or three times as big as a regular horse tooth.

DM:

That must have been an ancient bison.

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BW:

Yeah. They said eight-thousand years old.

DM:

Yeah. Bigger than the modern bison. That had to be exciting anyhow.

BW:

It was exciting because it was the first time we found anything that resembled a point you know.

DM:

And then to find out later on that it really was a big find.

BW:

Yeah it was a biggie. Didn't know it at the time, or I didn't.

DM:

Golly. You didn't happen to take any photographs did you?

BW:

No. That was before the camera days.

DM:

(Laughter) If we had some of these things to do over again.

BW:

Oh yeah.

DM:

Okay, well I just wanted to tack that little story on because I'd heard that you were involved in that and that's real interesting. It's kind of like with some other sites around here like Lubbock Lake Landmark. People locally know a little bit about it, but people around the world know a lot about it. Not most people but archeologists around the world, they know about Plainview. They know about Lubbock, they know about Clovis and Folsom of course. So that's really good stuff.

BW:

How does a Clovis point vary from a Plainview Point?

DM:

I'm not sure. I know that the Folsom is quite a bit different. It's got a large flute down the middle and it's a smaller point. I'm thinking that the Plainview is somewhere in between because the Clovis is a long—

BW:

The Plainview Point is about two and seven eights or three inches long.

DM:

I think Clovis is longer but I think that the chipping is different, but I'm not an expert on that kind of thing.

BW:

Did all those materials that they made those points come from Alibates?

DM:

I don't know that all of them did, but a lot of Alibates was found.

BW:

I know Indians used to straggle for months and years almost to get to those.

DM:

Yeah they've found Alibates flint in a lot of places.

BW:

Yeah.

DM:

They sure have, it's pretty widespread, and by the same token they've found Yellowstone obsidian chipped off like that in a lot of places too. Hundreds and hundreds of miles away.

BW:

I'm not a student of archeology, I don't know much about it.

DM:

But this—Yeah it's a big find. You were there for a big find.

BW:

Yep and didn't know it.

DM:

Well, I'll go ahead and turn this off unless you want to add anything else here.

BW:

I think not.

DM:

Okay.

BW:

If you think of something later I'll—

DM:

I will. I know I will. (Laughter)

End of interview

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