

**Oral History Interview of
Rex Preis**

**Interviewed by: Fred Carpenter
February 25, 1970
San Antonio, Texas**

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Interview Series Background:

In the process of conservation and digitization, our Audio/Visual department transcribes existing interviews in the Southwest Collection's holdings for a new generation of listeners to rediscover. Such interviews frequently cover topics relating to the founding of Texas Tech and the settlement of Lubbock but can also encompass a wide range of subjects.

Transcript Overview:

This interview features Rex Preis as he discusses playing in a big band orchestra during the early 1900s. In this interview, Preis describes how he started playing cornet and attending the University of Texas and his first experience with a big band orchestra. He then moves on to recall touring with the orchestra and the places he has visited. He ends the interview by reflecting on his friendship with Herman “Hymie” Waldman.

Length of Interview: 01:17:09

Subject

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Keywords

Music, Big Band Orchestra, Art, Musicians

Fred Carpenter (FC):

This is Fred Carpenter. This morning I am in San Antonio, Texas, in the office of the KITE radio at 535 South Main Street. I'm with Mr. Rex, R-e-x, Preis, P-r-e-i-s, whose home address is [REDACTED], telephone [REDACTED]. Mr. Preis has had much experience in the music world and has agreed to talk to us this morning and tell us of his early beginnings, something of his grandparents and parents, his first interest in music and then bring it on down from there with his music career and this era of the big bands and then on down to his present associations, too. Mr. Preis, if you'll begin then, start as far back as you can remember, and remember people talking, and give us some incidents, anecdotes, and so forth.

Rex Preis (RP):

Thank you Mr. Carpenter. I suppose I should start off by just giving a little brief background. My grandparents were New Orleanians. In fact, my grandfather on my father's side came from New York, and my grandmother came from Mobile, Alabama. On my mother's side, my grandfather was a native of Germany and came over here, and my grandmother was Scotch-Irish, which gives me a mixture of practically everything. So I guess that makes me an American, wouldn't you say so?

FC:

Exactly.

RP:

My father was a general store keeper for the Southern Pacific lines in New Orleans. I was the youngest in a family of seven children. We moved to Houston when I was, oh I think, about two years old. My father was transferred there when he moved the general offices of the Southern Pacific to Houston. He passed away in 1916, when I was eleven years old, and my mother and my youngest sister—she's older than I am but the younger of the two sisters that I had—we moved back to New Orleans. I went to school there for about a year, and then I went out to the Masonic Home School in Fort Worth, Texas, which was I believe in 1917, and that's where I started playing in the school band, playing trumpet. And I always remember—I don't know whether you're familiar or not with band music—I mean brass band, marching band music, but they always have the solo cornet, then they have the first cornet, and then they have the second and third cornets. We had about eight places in the band for cornets. And I remember the band was going to make a trip to Waco for a grand lodge meeting down there, to do a concert. And they had only eight places, and there were ten of us trying for it. Here I was, trying to what we used to call woodshed, a part, trying to read it and play it, and the second and third cornet part doesn't have really much in the way of melody to it, because where the solo cornet is going [sings "Stars and Stripes Forever" melody] ta-da-da-da-da-da-da, that second and third cornets parts down there are going [sings non-melodic accompaniment part] um-pah-um-pah-um-pah-da-dat-da and that sort of deal. And I remember the larger, the bigger boys screaming at

me about, "Gee, get that out of here. That's horrible," and that sort of thing. Anyhow, I did make—I was finally eighth cornet, I made it, and I was a very proud little guy, I can tell you that.

FC:

How old were you then?

RP:

I was either twelve or thirteen about that time. So when I finished high school there I went down to the University of Texas—[coughs] well to digress a bit, that summer in Fort Worth I worked there that summer, and I met some of the—well, now like an old friend that I still hear from, usually every Christmas comes by, is Bob McCracken from Fort Worth, a very fine, now, and has been for years, a very fine sax and clarinet player. Bob lives in Los Angeles now. And in fact he was through here recently with the Morgan band, Russ Morgan Band with Russ's son heading it up. So I went down to Austin University in 1922. As my dear wife says when I tell this story, that with a tear in the eye about, I went down there and I didn't even have a horn. She always says she just couldn't imagine me without a horn. But I made friends with a young chap down there who's passed away now, he was the son of a banker, and Bill Page, who was afterwards an insurance executive. Bill's father had given Bill quite a lot of things. I mean he had had a real nice, fairly affluent life. He was one of those characters that loved music and had a little talent for it. But, oh, he had a set of drums, he had a saxophone, he had a trumpet. And I was using a trumpet that the Longhorn Band had, and as you know usually those instruments that belong to the band get pretty well used up quickly; so it wasn't too good a horn. So Bill insisted, "Why don't you use my horn? I never play it. I'll never play trumpet." So I took Bill's horn, and Blondie Pharr at that time was director of the Longhorn Band, and I promptly became Blondie's personal freshman, which meant that I got a few additional licks on the fanny for being a smart aleck, as you could well imagine. Sort of, you know, teacher's pet. So anyhow, during the year I organized a little five-piece band, we called it Rex's Rebels. That was a great name now, wasn't it? Rex's Rebels. And we played at the old gym, which was an old wooden gym in those days.

FC:

I remember it.

RP:

So that got me through that year. I was on the band tour. That spring we made the principal cities of the state. I played first horn in the pit orchestra, which, of course, had to open the show with the "over sure," not overture, over sure. And then I played assistant solo cornet in the big band. And then we did a show after the concert and had a stage band, a jazz band, and, of course, I was playing with that. So I was a pretty busy guy. And it was really a lot of fun. We had a great bunch of people all the way through, people that I can—oh like Harold Broom who has passed away, Dr. Royal Calder here in San Antonio was a solo cornet player. Oh just some—in fact Dr.

Waylon Moody who is president here of San Antonio College was in the band playing cornet at the same time. So they really were a wonderful bunch of people. The University in those days was around forty-two hundred, forty-three hundred. In fact, you go over there now, you can't find the old university, it's gone, most of it. In fact, where I lived the first year that I was there, is where Gregory Gym is now because that land was finally taken over, it was on old Duval Street. Anyhow, at the end of school in 1923 I went home, visited my mother in New Orleans. And I heard about a job in San Antonio with the old Paul Mohnkern Orchestra at the Gunter Hotel on the Gunter roof.

FC:

How do you spell Mohnkern?

RP:

I think it was M-o-h-n-k-e-r-n, I believe. Paul, of course, has been dead quite a few years. But Frank Meadows, who is still—who lives in San Angelo now, Frank was a very fine tuba player, bass horn, and banjo. So Frank was the one that got in touch with me and said they needed a cornet player. So I came on over to San Antonio and played here for a couple of months, and then they decided to reduce the size of the band, the hotel did, and knowing that I was the one who was going to go back to school and, being the latest addition to the band, I was the first cut. So there I was, with another month or so, six weeks before school started. So I'm trying to think of how I heard about—oh Bob McCracken that I spoke of earlier was playing with Eddie Whitley's orchestra up in Wichita Falls, Texas. So they called me and said, "Why don't you come up and finish out with us," because Red was going to go back—wanted to go—I mean not Red, Bob McCracken was planning on going back to school too, "Just come on up and play with us." So we did. I went up there, and I'll always remember, I joined that band in Bowie, Texas. In those days you went to Bowie on the old Fort Worth & Denver. I always remember I got off the train there, and I had a cornet case and a Gladstone bag, and I'm the only one sitting in the depot—not the railroad station, the depot. Lo and behold, this long, tall, red-haired drink of water comes in, his name turned out to be Lavelle J. Stewart, known mostly in music circles as Red Stewart, a very fine trombone player who has been a friend of mine throughout the years. He walks in, and he looks down and he says, "You're not by any chance Rex Preis, a trumpet player?" I looked at him and practically said, "What do you think I am, the guy who's going to put the roof up," or something like that. So that was my introduction to Red Stewart, and we played a dance there in Bowie that night. We had a rehearsal that afternoon. I think that's the first time I ever heard "Rose of the Rio Grande" because I learned it that afternoon, and we had a real good little shake 'em up band for the type of thing they were doing. They played out at Lake Wichita, and of course, we were young, single, carefree, and really just had a ball. Had cute girlfriends and we were, of course naturally, celebrities to them. Not to many other people, but to them we were. We had in the band, like, Brown Tommy, who was from Brownwood, Texas, and Eddie Whitley played piano, Sammy Byrd was on drums, I said Bob McCracken on sax and

clarinet, Red Stewart on trombone, and me on cornet. We really had a pretty good little band. The arrangements were strictly off the top of the head, and I guess that's what made it fun playing, because you were just loose as a goose. There was no question about it. You had fun. The man that owned the band, actually the booking man, his name was R. J. Marin, M-a-r-i-n, and he was a nice little guy, he was a typical booking agent. I can always remember him because he had—he wore a toupee, and for some reason or other—you know at that age, when you're—well when you're eighteen, a man with a toupee just sort of looked like a man with a toupee. There's no other way to describe it, particularly the toupees in those days weren't like the fancy jobs that Sinatra will have today. So at the end of that little sojourn up there came the middle of September and time to go back to university. So I got back to university and in the meantime I was hoping that I could get the contract again for the gym dances on Saturday night. Lo and behold, Shorty Nowotny, my dear good friend, and—Bill—oh—anyhow—I'll recall that name in a minute, I think. Anyhow, they'd given the contract to Steve Gardner. Steve had undercut me. [Laughs] So I was a little disappointed and rather perturbed because after all I was working my way through college, or should I say blowing my way through. So lo and behold, Jimmy's Joys was the big band at the university in those days. In fact, I guess Jimmy's band in those days over the state was the biggest attraction over the state. And the trumpet player with Jimmy was from Tyler, Texas, Charlie Willis. And Jimmy had a chance to go out to California, to Los Angeles, on a trip to maybe make some records and try to find that fleeting hallway to fame. So Charlie couldn't go. He was going to stay in school. But Dick Hammill, who was the drummer, and from Los Angeles, was already out there. So Jimmy came to me then and said, "How about you going out with us and joining the band?" So here I was, all of eighteen years old, full of vim, vigor, vitality, and everything else, the sky's the limit. You know, I was on my own. So out we go. Lynn Harrell was the piano player, Son Harrell, he's living in Dallas now, one of my real old, close friends. He's also a good friend of Ligon's and Hymie. I just remember that Son, as we called him, had a 1924, brand-new, red Buick touring car. And it was the first Buick in the state of Texas with four-wheel brakes. So here we are in the fall of 1923, we played a one-nighter up in Wichita Falls, and we headed for California. For those who might be listening to this, the roads in 1923 were not conducive to making many miles a day. But we had a ball, and Smith Ballew was riding with Son and me. Jimmy and Jack Brown, the trombone player were in Jimmy's Model T Ford. Dick was out there, see. So there we were, we had six pieces. And I remember, one time on the way out we—you know they didn't have such things as motels in those days, and darned few filling stations. At every filling station of course, all the local yokels had to look at those four-wheel brakes and say, "They'll never work. They're going to turn someday and that brake will lock and throw you over." That you could only have two wheels on the rear, which had been standard throughout the years until then. So, I remember we stopped one night, it was near the Continental Divide and getting dark, we didn't know where to go, so we saw this sign, "Guests taken overnight." So we turned off and went up to this very, very nice-looking ranch house. It turned out that this chap that owned it was a Princeton graduate. What he had done is he had just put aside several rooms that he had. He would feed you, and I remember

that's the first time I ever saw one of the old ranch tables that had the center cut out on a roller. So if you wanted something you just pulled it around. Very, very interesting chap. Oh, and the next night I think we stopped at the—let's see, yeah we went through—went through Flagstaff and to the Grand Canyon and spent the night there. So we really saw quite a bit of the country and finally got in to Los Angeles, and Smith was broke two days before we got there, and I got there and I'd say about—we went to the Hotel Clark, and I remember we stayed there about a week, and after the first week I was broke. Poor old Lynn, Son, he was taking care of me and of Smith, and I finally paid him back, oh I guess it was maybe a year later, I finally finished paying him back. That's the way you were in those days. If I was broke, somebody'd lend me some money. If they were broke, I'd lend them some money. But, usually, the good guys always paid you back. There were some that didn't, and of course when the next time they came around you were broke too then, see. Anyhow, we finally got an apartment out there, and the five of us lived in it. Of course, there were only beds for four. Since I'm five-six and the shortest one, I was the one that got the couch. But as I say, when you're eighteen, nineteen, you can sleep on the floor, and what difference would it make? So we stayed out there, and we played some dates. I remember we played, like, the Rancho Golf Club and various club dates. But, really, things were a little bit on the rough side. We made some recordings for Golden Records. This name I will never forget as long as I live, how could I? His name was Theophilus T. Fitts. Theophilus T. Fitts. F-I-double T-S. You know, if you can't remember a name like that you're really getting senile. He had a lovely daughter, Katherine, and she was—in fact I think Son fell in love with her. In fact, I think they've been friends throughout the years. She really was a very lovely girl. But in those days I remember we'd go down Wilshire Boulevard or Hollywood with the top down on this red, new Buick, and we'd have on our golf—what'd we call them in those—plus-fours. Yeah we'd have our plus-fours on, and of course didn't have any money, but we looked awful good, and we could ride down Hollywood Boulevard and cars come up, see that Texas license plate and say, "Hi, Tex." So, of course, we acted like we were royalty, and we were, like most royalty today, royalty, but broke. After, maybe a couple of months after I guess, we decided that the fleeting call of fame was much bigger in Texas than it was in California. So we went back and stopped and played a one-nighter, I believe, or two in El Paso. I think that was the first time I ever imbibed too freely in port wine, which I have never particularly liked since then. But we got back to the university just in time to make the Thanksgiving day game down at Aggieland. I recall vividly on that occasion that—incidentally, my freshman year was the first year that A&M beat Texas at Austin in Clark Field in '22. Now, this year, in '23, was the first year that Texas beat A&M at Kyle Field when Lane "Buddy" Tynes picked up a fumble and ran it across. And I always remember that field. It was a nice, bright, sun-shiny day, but it had poured that morning, and when we marched at halftime the water was practically up over your shoe-tops. After the game I was surrounded one time by about a half a dozen Aggies. I got lost, you know, off by myself, and they liked this hussar cap that the Longhorn Band wore in those days, and they decided they wanted that cap, and me, being the kind of rough, tough Texan that I am, I gave them the cap and ran like hell. [FC laughs] I wasn't about to get mixed up with a half

a dozen Aggies on their own home field. Not me. I know when discretion is the better part of valor. And I got back to the train, we, of course, made it back there, and then we played some one-nighters, played right on through the holidays, in fact made quite a—well we made real good money for kids being the age that we were. Of course, I went back into school after the holidays and stayed on in school there. Well, I finished that year. We played, of course, in the old German club downtown and the hall down there, and fraternity parties and club parties and that sort of thing. So, considering what the cost of schooling was in those days, compared to the terrible rise of cost today, we'd average thirty-five, forty, fifty bucks a week, which made us—was very good money for kids in school. So we were really—oh we were big men on campus you know. Of course, we were having a ball, as I say. At the end of the school year we went down to Bayshore, which was down near Sylvan Beach, and we played about a month down there. Then we came to the St. Anthony Hotel in San Antonio in 1924. Wallace Robinson, the old Robinson Hotel Company, owned the hotel in those days. So Wallace wanted us to come down here and play a one-nighter, which we did. So he liked the band and offered us a job. And being as how we liked jobs, we came to the old St. Anthony Hotel open-air roof. That was in the summer of 1924. On that job we got—and I'll never forget it, because when you look back on it, it doesn't sound much now, but considering the times, we made sixty-five dollars a week, and room and board in the hotel. When I say "room and board," I don't mean one of these things of, you know, like you can have the seventy-five-cent breakfast. We could have anything that we wanted, see? So as a result, we were really big shots. We'd go up on the roof in the morning, about ten o'clock you know, and played the night before until twelve, and we'd order a la carte, we must have the strawberries just so, and that sort of thing. It was really a nice job. We played, of course, luncheons and then played the dinner music and dancing at night. [Coughs] We had a real fine band. Collis Bradt, who still lives in Houston now, it's B-R-A-D-T, that is. Collis was on saxophone, and of course Jimmie played sax and clarinet, John Cole was the bass player. John died many years ago. Gilbert O'Shaughnessy, now there's a name that was well known throughout this area as far as his clarinet was concerned, was on clarinet and saxophone. Gib had played with Peck Kelly and the boys down around Houston way. Jack Brown on trombone, and Charlie Willis played second trumpet for a while with us. So we had a real good band. Lynn Harrell was still on piano, and then he was followed by Red Bourne

FC:

Was Smith Ballew still with you then?

RP:

Who?

FC:

Smith Ballew?

RP:

No, Smith had left the band after our second year, after that sophomore year of mine in twenty—in the fall of—the spring of '24. Smith had left and had gone to—he had married and gone to New York. And we had—let me see, Clyde Austin from Danville, Virginia, joined the band, and for a while we had Fats Oldman there on drums. Fats was a dead ringer for Fatty Arbuckle and really a really funny guy. Anyhow that lasted, as far as I'm concerned, the band stayed there from July twenty-fourth until February twenty-sixth. In the meantime, I married a San Antonio girl, and her father was in the automobile business here. I decided that I'd get out of the band business, and I went to work for my father-in-law. Jimmy's band went up to the Baker in Dallas. In fact, they followed Don Bestor, who died just recently, Don Bestor opened the Baker, and Jimmy, I think, was the second band in there. I stayed out of the business for several years. Oh, I played a little club work in '28 and '29 with Jimmy Kline's band here, and played a few dates under my own name. You know how the pick-up bands are and that sort of thing. But in 1930 my first wife and I divorced. In the meantime, we did have one young son, who now is a Lieutenant Colonel in Marines air. He's in the Army War College now and married to a lovely gal with two children. After my first wife and I divorced, which was in 1930, my good friend Herman "Hymie" Waldman was playing at the Gunter. Mac Rodgers was playing first horn with him, and Mac—I don't know, Mac and Hymie disagreed on some things anyhow. They're both good friends of mine now and in fact have been good friends through the years. But anyhow, Hymie—I'd played with Waldman several times when he needed a substitute or something, you know, like Mac was sick or something like that. So in November of 1930—

[Pause in recording, end of tape one, side one]

RP:

We were playing at the Gunter Hotel and getting terrific crowds. The younger San Antonio, the college crowd and the younger crowd, all of them—I've always said I thought it was very fortunate to play with Jimmy's band, Jimmy Joy's band and then, again, with Waldman, because probably, I guess I played with two of the most popular bands the state of Texas ever had. We were broadcasting over WOAI, which, of course, was a clear channel station in those days and still is. And those nightly broadcasts were heard all over the southwest and, in fact, down into Mexico with that terrific nighttime signal that they had. So as a result, we played the Gunter, and, oh, there were five of us that lived in—we had two apartments, upstairs apartments in a four apartment house out on San Pedro. It's a horrible-looking dump now. In fact you wouldn't think—I go by there and I think, I couldn't have lived there. Of course in those days it was a pretty nice apartment house. If you don't think that five single musicians do not have, should we say, quite a lot of happenings going on. Frankly we used to call it the riding academy or hangover hall, and anything could and would happen at any given time. In fact, I can't go into all of the things that happened there because we don't have the time to do it. Some of them were

funny; some of them were almost tragic. I remember we had a kid by the name of—we called him Jimmy Valet, remember this was Depression time, 1930, well this was really the latter part—early part of '31. Things were pretty bad, and we were very fortunate to make the money that we were making at the time because—well I'll get into that a little later. Anyhow, this kid, was sort of a—I wouldn't say he was completely nuts, but he really wasn't smart, and he was just working for us, we called—I never did know his name. We just called him Jimmy Valet because he would care of our clothes, take them to the cleaners and clean the apartment, that sort of thing. But, oh, he got his feelings hurt one night, because Tommy Blake the piano player bawled him out about something, and he goes into the clothes closet and closes the door. Tommy comes in and goes to bed. He wakes up in the night and hears this noise in the clothes closet, and he gets his gun out and he opens the door, and out falls Jimmy Valet, asleep in there. It's a wonder Tommy—Tommy said, "Why I didn't shoot him, I don't know," because we didn't know—those were the kinds of silly things that happened that could've been tragic. Oh, naturally the girls entered into the picture. You couldn't have five guys, young and pretty normal, that weren't going to have at least five girls to each boy. You know, that was par for the course. But we had a lot of fun and that went on until—I think we stayed at the Gunter about eleven months, and then—

FC:

What were some of the more popular pieces along about this time, besides "Lazy River?"

RP:

Oh, you had "Lazy River" of course, you had "Stardust," you had "Body and Soul," you had "Please Take Me, I'm Yours," "For You." Oh my goodness, there were so many of them that are still great numbers today. They bring them back all the time. "Dream a Little Dream with Me," you know just came back, that was about that era, maybe a year or so around there. Of course, we played all the showtunes, like "Get Happy." Oh, even on Sunday evenings we used to play on the terrace up there, and oh, we played some more or less classical music. In fact particularly some of the—like the Broadway shows and that sort of thing. Herbert Clark's—not Herbert Clark—Victor Herbert's stuff. We were really sort of semi-longhaired on Sundays. That made it a little rough, because usually Sunday afternoon was we'd go on an all-day party somewhere out to Medina Lake or something and come back in and somebody might have indulged a little too freely in the grape, you know. Waldman really looked down his nose at that. He didn't think that was very funny at all. Hymie was a great guy to work for though, he was a tough taskmaster, and he wanted you to play your part, but he was always a pretty fair guy. I always remember him from the standpoint that he always looked on the band like he was the father and they were the kids. Hymie's just probably two-and-a-half, maybe three years older than I am. But he always talks to me, even now, as though he got older and I'm still—as I tell him every now and then, "Hymie, I'm not that twenty-seven year old kid on your band anymore." I remember he told me about the Adolphus some years ago when he was playing there before he quit playing. We had a

drink or two after the dance and he said, "You know, you just don't realize it, Shorty, but when you get to be fifty, your dogs sure do start barking when you stand on that bandstand all the time." I looked at him, I said, "Waldman, you're fifty. What do you think I am? Still twenty-seven? Unh-uh, unh-uh." Anyhow, after we left the Gunter we went up to the Baker, and we more or less just had a nice little deal of the Gunter to the Baker to the Gunter to the Rice. Those three kept us in business for, oh, a couple of years there. In fact, Lawrence Welk was in here several years ago, and out at Oak Hills Country Club, Dude Skiles brought Welk over and, "Lawrence, do you remember Rex Preis? He used to play with the old Waldman band." And Lawrence said, "I remember Rex Preis. I remember the Waldman band. I had Lawrence Welk and his Biggest Little Band in the World, and we were playing the Wooten in Abilene and we were playing San Angelo, and Lubbock and Odessa, and I tried to get Norm Stepp the MCA in Dallas, 'Why don't you book us in the Gunter, or why don't you book me in the Baker, or why don't you get me in the Rice?' And Stepp, he'd always say, 'Well, I'd like to, but I've got to take care of Waldman, I've got to take care of Ligon Smith, I've got to take care of Joe Wrightman,'" and oh, what was the one that was very popular in those days? Well Herbie Kay, either one that had—oh well anyhow, I'll think of it in a moment. But anyhow, like Lawrence said, "I couldn't get anywhere because you guys had all the good jobs booked up and I was playing out in the hinterlands." Anyhow, we finally, in 1933 I became—well, I'll tell this little story, because it might bear some interest. In 1932, when we were playing here at the Gunter, I, as I say, was a man of many talents, I had quite a few girlfriends, and I'd met one here by the name of Evelyn Phillips, who I decided was a real cute girl, and I made the mistake of telling her one night on a date that, I said, "You know, Evelyn, I enjoy being with you for the simple reason we have fun together, and every girl that I go with I always feel is—wants to get me involved, is trying to put the ring through my nose, and you're not that kind of a girl. I know you'd never love me, and I'd never love you. We can really just be good pals." And, of course, now here it is, thirty-seven years later, she still says, "When you told me that, you certainly started right then and there a challenge which I could not afford to pass up." So, to make a long story short, in 1933 Evelyn and I got married, and here we are, it'll be thirty-seven years this coming May, nice to say, we have a son and a daughter, both married. Of course, Reagan's married and he has two children. The daughter has three. The youngest son, Phil, is married but no children as yet. So I guess this one took. I would think that it did. So in 1934 we went to the Peabody Hotel in Memphis. We stayed there from April to about October and had a wonderful time there. Memphis was just great to us. And of course, when you're single it's a great life. When you're married and have a really beautiful wife, and a lovely gal, it's still all right, because like there at the Peabody we lived in the hotel, and you always—you'd make friends, and first thing you know, they'd be saying, "We'd love to take Evelyn to dinner with us tonight" or to the dance or something. Great. So, oh, we had a ball there. That went on then from, I would say, from the Peabody, I think we went back to the Rice, the Washington Youree in Shreveport, and the Chase Hotel in St. Louis. I'm just going through a few of these. That was in 1935. [Clears throat] In the meantime I forgot too that while we were in Houston, in 1933 along in there, right after Evelyn and I married, that

we'd get through playing at the Rice on a Saturday night we'd always go down to the Hollywood [Dinner] Club in Galveston, which was of course a beautiful nightclub. Galveston was the Las Vegas of the Gulf Coast in those days. And Sam Maceo and his people had these very fine, beautiful clubs.

FC:

Right on the pier.

RP:

Well, that was the Balinese Room, that came later, but the Hollywood Club was on the way into town from Houston. Phil Harris, usually, was playing there, or Henry Busse. And so we'd get through playing at the Rice roof and, of course, you know when we say roof gardens in those days, you'd come off those roof gardens just after playing a dance and just be soaking wet because maybe you had a breeze and maybe you didn't. In Houston when you don't have a breeze, you know, we say that the air conditioning ruined the state of Texas, made it possible for the Yankees to live here. [FC laughs] Well actually, in those days the Yankees couldn't have taken it, you see. We'd run down real quick, take a shower, throw on some clean clothes, and head for Galveston. Get down there about maybe two or three o'clock in the morning and close the place at five, then go to the old Buccaneer Hotel, get a room, put on your swim suit, go down to the beach, and we'd challenge Harris and his boys or Phil Busse and his boys to have a softball game, everybody still about half-crocked from being up all night. But just had a lot of fun and, about seven o'clock, eight o'clock, go get some ham and eggs and then go back to the Buccaneer and go to bed. We'd sleep until one or two and go on back to Houston. That was just regular routine during that summer. But as I said, I was back in—it was in '35 that we played the Chase Hotel and then were going out to the Cosmopolitan Hotel in Denver, the Silver Glade Room. That's one trip that I don't think we'll ever, ever—just can't forget it, because it was during the Dust Bowl and as I said, of course this was still the Depression. Franklin D. was still trying to bring the country back. We went through—we got through Kansas City and we get into western Kansas at night. I think we stopped at Ellsworth, Kansas. I remember this chap at the hotel said, "Have you run into any dust?" I said, "No." He said, "Mister, if you do, don't drive in it, because it's terrible." We thought, Oh, this is bound to be—they've oversold this stuff. Well, we found out the next day. I had a Ford, '34 V-8, one of those little jobs with a lot of speed and power to it. But of course, in those days you didn't have air conditioning, you didn't have power steering, you didn't have the air filters, you didn't have a lot of the things that the cars have today. Didn't even have radios, didn't have heaters, of course that wasn't too bad. We were driving along the next day and saw this black cloud coming toward us. My first thought was it looked like rain. It wasn't. As we got closer to it, you could just see this dust swirling up. Believe me, that when we went into it, with even a little short hood on that Ford I couldn't see the front fender, that's how bad it was. You were completely engulfed in it. Actually, we had some wet towels that we had taken, the hotel told us to take it and keep them case so we could put them

over our face. Like I said, you could keep your lights on and you couldn't see, you just—people said that honestly just trying to cross the road would get lost at night in a dust storm, it was that bad. They didn't last long, fortunately. The wind, naturally, would just roll this stuff up and then would go on over you. So anyhow, and the next day I remember stopping in eastern Colorado. Here was this poor old gal at this filling station, stopped and gassed up, you know, she had some wash out on the line. I always remember how pathetic it was when she said, "You know—" I said, "Dust bother you very much lady?" She said, "Mister, you just don't know. Those clothes out there, this is the fourth time I've washed them, and I'd hang them out to dry and before they'd get dry the dust would come in and I'd have to wash them again. I just don't know what we're going to do. We're just going to have to pull stakes and go somewhere else. We can't live in this." You know, that's rather pathetic when you think that's right here in the United States of America, and that was only in 1935, that's only thirty-five years ago. Of course, the wonderful thing is—is what we've done to prevent that and the erosion that caused it in those days. Maybe we're making a few strides in spite of people that say this country is going to hell. We had a very nice engagement there at the Cosmopolitan. One thing I'll always remember, now that television has reared its ugly head, in those days we had a thirty-minute pick-up on NBC from—you know, they picked up the dance bands in those days. We didn't play dances every night out there. We played dinner every night, and we would have like an off night where we had a broadcast, thirty-minute broadcast. So we'd get through playing actually at nine for dinner and we'd go to the apartment and get the wives and change clothes. We'd have our thirty minute program and come back and we were going to go on the air from ten to ten-thirty over NBC. So of course here we'd come back in the Silver Glade Room, and they had the chairs on the tables, and the waiters had gone and everything. But here's Herman Waldman and his gang up on the bandstand, and the announcer from KOA there would come on the air: "And now, ladies and gentlemen, from the beautiful Silver Glade Room in the Cosmopolitan Hotel in Denver, Colorado we bring you the music of Herman Waldman and his Orchestra, and there's a gala crowd here." We're playing the theme song, you know—"There's a gala crowd here this evening." That would mean our wives out in front and anybody who was in the lobby, we'd invite them to come in, and we'd get through the theme song and put our horns down and we'd clap, and the wives would clap. We went ahead and played thirty minutes, and as I say, there wasn't anybody in the room except just the people sitting in chairs around right in front there. You can't do that in television, you know.

FC:

It wouldn't work so well.

RP:

And on the NBC network it sounded real good. Of course then we went on through that year, and then in 1936 our daughter arrived, Patsy, a very lovely gal, now married to Bob Beveridge, a wonderful guy, and they're the ones that have three kids. So that's when we started thinking about that—as I said earlier, when you're single it's a great life. When you're married just you

and your wife, and you're young, it's a great life. When you start having kids on the road it's still a great life but it certainly starts poses some problems. So after Patsy was born, the band went up to the Schraeder Hotel, and Evelyn and Patsy stayed with her mother here in San Antonio, with her family here and then joined me at the—let's see, we went to the Washington Youree Hotel, and then on New Year's Eve we went back to the Peabody. In the meantime were there for several months, and I always remember Patsy was six months old, and they were threatened with a flood, the Mississippi River flood there at Memphis, and were evacuating people, bringing them in from Mississippi and Arkansas. I remember Evelyn was scared to death of an outbreak—they were always afraid of those times of outbreak of some sort of typhoid or some other sort of plague. And we went to see this old doctor, McDonald I believe was his name. Great guy, just really of the old school. And in the meantime Waldman had booked—and he had told Evelyn when we were worried about an outbreak of disease or something, he said, "I'll tell you, Rex, you and Evelyn both, don't worry about it. I know I will be told by the health department if there are more than some X-number of cases of anything starting and if they do, then I will call you and Evelyn, you and the baby can hop the train and go back to San Antonio. Don't worry about it. I'll let you know." Which was really fine. In the meantime, Waldman booked us into the Sir Francis Drake in San Francisco. Well, here, you know, when you jump with a six-month-old baby from Memphis to San Antonio to San Francisco, it's a pretty long haul. That's even a long haul today. We were wondering about it. Evelyn went to see old Dr. Mac, and I went with her. Dr. Mac said, "Do you think it'll be all right for me to take my little baby from all the way on that trip by automobile from Memphis to San Francisco?" And I never will forget how he looked at her and said, "Evelyn, I just want to tell you one thing. It won't hurt Patsy one bit. It might kill you, and that's about the size of it." So we came by San Antonio, and in the meantime that little V-8 Ford that I told you about that we went through the Dust Bowl with, well the dust had so—I'd had a ring job done on it but the dust had so ruined the car that the block had just—it wouldn't hold oil. I'd gotten to the point where really what we'd do is just go in fill it up with gas and I'd say, "Do you have any used oil?" And he'd say, "Yes." "Well fill it with used oil, because it just went through." So I traded that in and got a 1936 Oldsmobile, and we headed for California. We played some one-nighters on the way out. We got out there to the Sir Francis Drake, and it was a nice job, good hotel. We didn't play any noon sessions. We played just merely seven until two with a floor show. Then on Saturdays we'd play a tea dance, and we'd be through though—I think we played until three, I believe on Saturdays as I recall. But then we were off—that was three Sunday morning. Then the union had what they called a "home band" that had to play there Monday night. So we'd be off from Sunday morning at three o'clock when we'd get through until seven o'clock Tuesday, which made it beautiful, because we could take little side trips. It just was a real nice job, well-paying job. Believe it or not, Waldman calls the band together. We went out there on a booking of six weeks with an option. At the start of the fourth week he calls the band together and says, "Well I've got good news for you. The hotel wants us to stay here until October." This is about April or May. So, naturally, we think, Well this is fine. Good job, good pay, nice hours. And in the meantime we had a nice apartment, and

Patsy and Evelyn are getting along fine, oh I mean just really nice. Well that was good except for one thing. It comes the next Saturday, and we're playing the tea dance. In the meantime we'd heard about that there was a little labor trouble developing. So at five o'clock Mr. Waldman goes to the microphone, the waiters just put their trays down and walk out, and Mr. Waldman goes to the microphone, says, "Ladies and gentlemen, I'm very sorry but due to relations between the culinary workers union and the hotel we will have to close the room." And I mean they walked off and didn't pick up checks or anything else. So we, of course, thought really, Oh well this is silly. Nothing's going to happen. They'll settle this thing in twenty-four hours. Well, they didn't. As I recall, I believe it was a question of whether the hotel clerks should belong to the union. The hotel said no, that the clerks were more of a confidential nature, and that was one of the—I'm sure there were other things too—but that was one of the major disagreements between the union and the operators of the hotel. So this goes on for about, oh a few days, and we still think, Oh there's nothing to it. They'll get this thing resolved. Well, they didn't. So after about three weeks the chancellor of the exchequer was beginning to hurt a little. So Waldman hurriedly got ahold of MCA, and they booked us into Sylvan Beach down there between Houston and Galveston on the bay, where NASA is now in fact. We went down there, and Patsy stayed in San Antonio with her mother part of the time, I remember we lived over the barbershop in LaPorte, Texas, in an apartment. [Laughs] Of course it was a lot of fun job, in fact the gal singer on the band was married to a fellow who's a fairly decent cowboy star now. You know who I mean?

FC:

No.

RP:

Man and wife.

FC:

Oh, Dale Rodgers.

RP:

Yeah. Dale, Dale Evans. Dale Evans was the singer on the band. She didn't stay with us very long, but a really lovely gal. Funny thing is her name, Dale Evans, of course, is a singing name, and her real first name is Fanny.¹ She was married at that time to a guy by the name of Dale Butts, which made her name Fanny Butts. [FC laughs] I've seen her several times during the years. In fact, I've a picture of Barney Dodd, who was a bass player on the band, and I were doing a specialty number of some kind and, lo and behold, there's Dale, sitting at the side, watching us with the crowd ganged around and that's Dale. We had a lot of fun because, of course, we'd go fishing down there, swimming, that sort of deal. That was, as I say, in '37, and

¹ Lucille Wood Smith was born in Uvalde, Texas, in 1912 and changed to Frances Octavia Smith as an infant.

as I say in the meantime, it was beginning to get a little more strenuous all the time because with the youngster growing along. I just decided that this was no way to raise a family. So we went on through 1937, I think we were at the Rice for a while, then in the fall of '37 we were at the Blackstone in Fort Worth. That was the year that—the following year, in '38, was the national champion TCU team, which that year in '37 it was practically the same team with Davey O'Brien and Ki Aldrich, I. B. Hale, and, oh, Wilkinson. I can't name them all. Don Looney, father of the Joe Don Looney, that's playing today. So in '38 I was really beginning to—I was just a little bit, should I say teed off at the business. I wanted to settle down somewhere. Because that's the trouble with leading that kind of a life. You don't accumulate anything. You live well, but you just accumulate nothing. You're not buying a home, you have an automobile and you have your clothes and your possessions and what you have with you, and that's it. So I finally told the wife that—I said, "Honey, look in this business you're a salesman. I sold automobiles years ago, and I think I'm a pretty good salesman—"

[Pause in recording, end of reel one, side two]

RP:

So I suggested, let's go back to San Antonio, and I'll find a job, selling something. I've got my horn. I can play some club work or something, and between the two, we ain't going to starve. Don't worry about it. I never have let you starve yet, and I'm not about to now." So back to San Antonio we came. Just to show you that the Lord takes care of fools, drunks, and strangers, we walked into Evelyn's mother's house and her aunt says, "George Johnson called you and wants you to call him at KTSA." George Johnson was an old friend of mine from the University of Texas days, and I'd seen him in San Antonio many a time and everything and George was manager of KTSA. That was the year, in '38, where one James Caesar Petrillo had decreed as president of the American Federation of Musicians that network stations would have staff bands. And KTSA had an eight-piece staff band. So George did not like the set-up that he currently had at that time with the band. So I went down to see George. He said, "Look, here's what we can do. I just don't like the way this guy is handling the band here now. I'll tell you what, I can't offer you a lot of money, but we're right here in the Gunter Hotel, and I've already talked to Blake Stevens, who handles conventions and the food manager and all that. He can give you all the Gunter Hotel business. So why don't you organize the staff band for me. You, as a director, will make forty dollars a week, and the staff band will make twenty-seven dollars a week." Which wasn't big money, but at the same time, it was at least here I am, coming into town looking for a job and the Lord hands the manna down from heaven, see. So I got home and I told Evelyn about it, and her mother asks, "Did you take it? Did you take it?" And I said, "Of course not. I told him I'd think it over and let him know tomorrow." She says, "But suppose somebody gets there between now and then?" I said, "That's the chance you take, but that's good business, you don't jump at something like that." So, to make a long story shorter, well I became staff music director and really of course, the having—being on the air then, see, all of a sudden Rex

Preis and His Orchestra became very well known in San Antonio, and I was doing very well on club work. Actually, within six months, I was doing way beyond my expectations of what I'd been able to do. I always remember one little deal in that, in particularly with my dear good friend Herman Waldman, who today, in fact is, I told you a little earlier that Evelyn and I had dinner with Hymie and Ruth up in Dallas just a couple of months ago, and even though it's been thirty-two years since I left his band, I don't think I have a better friend in the world anywhere. I think he feels the same way. But I always remember one little deal. Hymie and Ruth had been married, I'd say ten or twelve years when their son Robert was born. In the meantime I was playing, of course, as the staff band and as Rex Preis and His Orchestra at the Gunter Hotel and playing club dates. Then in 1940 I went into the sales end at KTSA as a local time salesman. But I kept my band. As the late Chuck Balthrope, my good friend who just recently died, said, "Old Iron Man Preis," because I'd play until one or two in the morning but I was down at the office at nine to look at the mail and run across the street to Jackson, my barber, and say, "Jack get out the cold towels, get out the vibrator," but I could shudder through the day, and I learned then that you don't drink until five o'clock in the evening, you know. I had too many of my friends who never learned that and got into bad troubles. But anyhow the thing I started to tell you about Hymie in the meantime, and this was several years had gone by, Evelyn and I had built our home—which we still live in. We were the first house on the street, and we've been there twenty-nine years, and we love it. The kids are all grown, married and gone. But Waldman, when I left his band, I owed him seventy-five dollars. Well Waldman was one of these kind of guys that I know that more musicians worked for him got into him and just felt like, "Oh, well—" you know. So this was during the war, and Hymie came in town, and his wife was Ruth Karotkin of the Karotkin Furniture Company. So he phoned me and said, "I'm over at the store, and I'll come on over," and we went to Gunter Hotel, the station was. I said, "Let's have a cup of coffee and visit." He said, "All right, how about three o'clock?" I said, "That's fine." Well in the meantime, Robert, their son, was born, and as you know, this was during World War II. So through the years, there have been several years since I left Hymie, I said, "Hymie, I haven't forgotten I owe you seventy-five bucks." And he said, "Oh, Shorty, don't worry about it, my goodness. Whenever you feel like you can pay it. Forget it, don't worry about it." I said, "I just don't want you to think I have forgotten it." So I went over to the Bexar County Bank where I banked for a few years, and I bought a hundred-dollar bond for seventy-five bucks. And I put it in the name of Robert Waldman. So when Waldman came over at three we had old home week, sitting in the coffee shop and laughing about old times and that sort of thing. Finally I said, "Waldman, I do want to tell you one thing.", "What's that?", I said, "You know I remember that seventy-five dollars I owed you since I left the band several years ago?", "Oh, forget it. Don't worry about that." I said, "I'm not worrying about it, but I think it's about time we ought to straighten up on the thing. I look at it this way, Hymie, there's many a time in the eight years that I worked for you that you could have given me an few extra bucks a week when you didn't. I worked awfully hard for you. As you know, gee, I wrote lyrics, I wrote some arrangements, I did specialty numbers and played first horn. I just look back on it, Hymie, and I don't see any reason

why I should pay that back to you.” And he looked at me, and I could see he was kind of crestfallen. He said, “Look, Shorty, if you think I’m going to let seventy-five dollars ruin a friendship as close as ours, you’re crazy. Forget it. I don’t care if I ever see the seventy-five.” Well I said, “That’s not what I’m talking about. What would you do with that seventy-five dollars? You’d take it and go buy a case of booze or throw it away on something like that. So instead of paying you that, I’m going to take that seventy-five dollars and I want to give it to somebody that maybe in ten years will appreciate it a lot more than you will, so here it is.” And of course I handed him that bond made out to Robert Waldman. And I cannot repeat here what he called me, but it was not, should I say—he wasn’t complimentary, I’ll put it that way. But I always got a laugh out of that. Then, of course, to kind of break this thing off, I quit playing. Oh, I played out at the Olmos Club, we had the band there, and had in the meantime, of course, what I wanted to do in which I finally successfully did, was to the band business supported me while I was learning the commercial end of broadcasting, but I finally got it to where it got evened up, and then the broadcasting took over and I got out of the band business in roughly, oh, I think the last band set I played was about twenty years ago, because I left KTSA when it was sold and I went over to WOAI, and I was with them sixteen years, and then when they were sold, the Howe family sold them to Avco Broadcasting. I didn’t get along too well with the new owners—probably their fault, my fault, whose fault. Anyhow, my good friends over here at KITE radio, which is a Doubleday Broadcasting Company station. Dave Scribner, who is president of Doubleday Broadcasting, was a good friend of mine, and Dave just told me, “Anytime you’re unhappy over there, you want to make a move, well let me know. We can make beautiful music together.” So, practically three years ago I decided to again make beautiful music together and came over to KITE radio, and I certainly appreciate you taking your time to come up and listen to this long tale of, should we say, fun, tragedy, just plain out of an old normal musician’s life, who is now supposedly they call him “The old pro of radio.” As I always say, I really haven’t learned much I’ve just been at it. But I do appreciate your taking your time, Mr. Carpenter, and I hope somebody that will listen to this drivel will maybe understand a little of it, and I hope it is of some value to what you’re trying to do, and I commend you for what you’re doing. Thank you.

FC:

Mr. Preis, I deeply appreciate the time that you’ve given us today, and rest assured that people are going to be interested in it. That the tape in my opinion will make a contribution to the preservation of the history of this particular era that we’re interested in. This was your era and my era, and it will be well worthwhile, and I thank you very much, I enjoyed the morning entirely, and I hope to be able to call on you again sometime when I come back and maybe have this taped and then have some questions in particular to ask you. So—at some future date. Thank you.

RP:

Very good. Thank you.

FC:

Thanks again.

RP:

Thank you.

End of Recording



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