

**Oral History Interview of
William Earl Hewett**

**Interviewed by: Daniel U. Sánchez
November 16, 2012
Lubbock, Texas**

**Part of the:
*Lubbock History Series***

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The Lubbock Series interviews include general life history interviews and topical interviews document Lubbock, Texas.

Transcript Overview:

This interview features William Earl Hewett speaking about his time in the Lubbock Fire Department. Of note is the department's response to the May 11th, 1970 tornado.

Length of Interview: 01:08:40

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Keywords

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William Earl Hewett (WH):

I need to get a little recorder like that.

Daniel Sanchez (DS):

Yeah, they're not bad. My name's Daniel Sanchez, today's date is November 16, 2012. We're at the Southwest Collection, and I'm talking with Bill Hewett, and we're going to be discussing his career with the fire department here in Lubbock, Texas, but we're also going to talk about other aspects of his life. Bill thank you for being here.

WH:

You're quite welcome.

DS:

And let's start off with your complete legal name?

WH:

William Earl Hewett.

DS:

Okay, and where and when were you born?

WH:

June 5, 1936, Mount Pleasant, Texas.

DS:

Okay, could you tell us a little about your family history, start off with your parent's names and where they were from, and when they were born?

WH:

Okay, let me—I don't know about the dates—Russell Gayland Hewett was my dad, and then Florence was my first mother, she died in childbirth with my second brother, and then dad remarried again when I was three years old, and Ione Rea was her name, R-e-a. And then they got married three years after I was born, so that's what, '39?

DS:

'39.

WH:

Yeah.

DS:

Where was that at, was it still there in Mount Pleasant?

WH:

No, I think that was in Plainview, they had moved to Plainview by then, and I don't know at what point, but it was in that three year period. And we lived in Plainview until 1945, and then in 1945 we moved to Lubbock, and we've been in Lubbock ever since.

DS:

So what did you dad do as an occupation?

WH:

Dirt, construction—I remember he did road grading for Hale County, and when we moved to Lubbock he bought a Ford tractor, and we started plowing gardens, doing yard work, pulling down trees, just anything.

DS:

Wow.

WH:

And then he stayed in that until about, oh let's see, 1950 to '55. Somewhere when I was in high school, he went to work for Kerr & Middleton Paving Contractors, worked for them. And mother was just a stay-at-home housewife.

DS:

Okay, and what part of Lubbock were y'all living in?

WH:

Well, lots of places. When we first got here. One of them was at fifth, right off of Q & Avenue R, and about 6th Street—Thompson, there was a Carroll Thompson school there. We lived there for a while, and we moved to 2415 Auburn Street in a trailer park, daddy bought the trailer park. Then from there we went to 34—well it was Indiana & 29th Street.

DS:

Okay.

WH:

And they hadn't paved the street out there, they was still building brand new houses out there. And then whenever I went in the service, they moved over to 5019 40th Street.

DS:

Oh.

WH:

And that's where he passed away at.

DS:

Okay, so you mentioned that you dad had that trailer park home, was that the one that was over there close to where the Lubbock Hubbers used to play?

WH:

Yes.

DS:

Baseball?

WH:

Yes—well, I missed one, before he did that, we lived at 2415 Sanders St. at the time, it's called 2nd Street now. And our backyard opened to the Hubber Park, and me and Keith would play in that park quite a bit. And if they had a ballgame, we'd go over and catch foul balls that went over the fence, and we could get back in and see the game.

DS:

That's interesting, because one of the things we do here, if you noticed from my backdrop there, is sports history.

WH:

Yeah.

DS:

And the Lubbock Hubber history, of course that's one of Lubbock's great moments there.

WH:

Oh.

DS:

And what was that like as a fan, having that accessible to you, especially as a young child?

WH:

Oh gosh, it was just—back then we didn't have any money to go any place, or have any kind of

vacation or anything like that, so that was our fun time was to do that. I do remember, you might enjoy this, they had a donkey ballgame, did you ever see one of those? They had donkeys out there, and I brought a foul ball in and the old boy told me that he'd give me a dollar if I could ride that donkey from home base when they hit the ball to first base, and he'd give me a dollar. So I thought, "Okay, I can do that." Hit the ball, jumped on the donkey, and went out into center field, and that donkey sat down. And I stayed out there for the longest time, but that donkey finally got up, and the ballgame just kept going on. But I finally got that donkey over on first base. And finally waved at him, okay, he gave me my money. But that was lots of fun.

DS:

Yeah, because I remember talking with some of them, they said one of the rituals was they had an outstanding hit or something, they'd run along the fence, and some of the fans would slip him some extra cash.

WH:

No kidding, I didn't pick up on that.

DS:

Yeah, he said that that's how they made some extra money, was if they hit a home run or something, they'd run around there and people would say here, here's a dollar for you.

WH:

Well, I don't remember any of the players. We just was— something to do. So Keith and I, my brother, would—

DS:

Was that your younger brother?

WH:

Yes, that's the one, he died—I'm eighteen months older than he is, and my mother died in childbirth with him. And then after dad got married in '46, had another brother with my, I guess it would be my step-mother—we don't hardly ever refer to her as step-mother, that's all I ever knew for a mother, so.

DS:

Yeah that's a story that's more common I guess in that time, because the fatalities during birth were a lot higher.

WH:

Yes, yeah, well and this was out in the country. I think we finally got to the doctor, but it was too late, as the story goes.

DS:

That's sad to hear. You talked about coming into Lubbock, and your dad starting to work for somebody else. When he was running his own company, well I guess he must have been fairly successful, because he bought some property here in town right?

WH:

Yeah, traded, we just kind of traded up a lot as I recalled that's what he was doing. But I don't want to say that he was real prosperous at all. Because sometimes the food was a little short, but we always food on the table, and we had clothes to wear. I went to school in high school on one of those Ford tractors. He ended up, we bought three of them at one time. And I'd go to work in the morning, and he'd tell me where he was going to be in the evening, and I'd ride the tractor to school at Lubbock High, and then wherever he was going to be working, that's where I'd meet him after school.

DS:

Oh so he could just go straight out there on the tractor?

WH:

Yeah, just ride the tractor, that was my transportation.

DS:

And Lubbock was so much smaller back then, it wasn't like—

WH:

Well, yes, yeah, 34th Street was way, way out in the country, 34th & University. There was a shoe store there, and I remember dad used to, as we was going down the street, he'd say, "Bill, remind me to have you give me a big swift kick whenever we get home." And I, "Whoa, what do you mean, Dad?" He said, "We should have kept that property right there." He had done some work, and they had gave it to him for the work that he did, but there was no water—way the heck out of town. We tried to have a dry land garden—didn't do much—but then it turned into—what a piece of property it was later on.

DS:

Oh yeah. Yeah, in fact still going to be busy again once they finish those renovations there on 34th Street.

WH:

Oh yeah, it's going to be nice.

DS:

Yeah, I think you had mentioned that one in the past, when we first met, you'd talked about that property.

WH:

Yeah.

DS:

And so, as you're trying to work and go to high school, you thinking about life after high school?

WH:

No, no. As I recall, it was strictly day-to-day. If I'd have had any idea of what I should have been doing, I would have changed and tried harder in high school. I just took courses that they said I had to have, and I had fun. I had lots of fun in high school, and then it was over. And dad said, "What are you going to do?" And I said, "I don't know, guess—I don't know, can I go to college?" And he said, "I've got enough money for you to start at Tech." And so I did, but I flunked. They overloaded me, I decided to take civil engineering, and not knowing—I didn't take any high math or anything like that, so I bombed out big. Then he said, "You've got another choice, you have a military obligation, and you can do that and get that out of the way, eight years." And I said okay, and my life just sort of fell naturally. I mean I didn't plan a thing.

DS:

So you're talking about that military obligation, when did that start?

WH:

1956.

DS:

So we had just come out of Korea?

WH:

No I didn't, let's see, I wasn't in Korea.

DS:

Well I mean we, the U.S., had just come out of Korea.

WH:

Oh yeah, yeah, the U.S had, right, yeah, yeah, sure had. But 1956 was a very, very tough year. Let's see, first my grandmother passed away in February, and then I got married, I was already in the Marine Corps, and I come home and got married at ten-day leave. And then daddy gave me fifty dollars and an old '54 Ford, and I went to California in it, until I could get the wife settled. She slept in the car, we just didn't have any money. But then we turned around and, let's see, dad had a heart attack in August, passed away in November, and it was just a tough year. I was in Yokosuka, Japan at the time.

DS:

What branch were you in?

WH:

Marine Corps, I was a sea-going marine, you know what that is?

DS:

No sir.

WH:

A sea-going marine, we guarded the brig, or the prisoners. We also stood watches with the officer of the deck, and we also stood Exec's Orderly, and Captain's Orderly. We just stood out there in front of his quarters I guess you'd call them on board a ship. And dumb, I didn't like it.

DS:

Yeah so you were doing a lot of fetching?

WH:

Yes, yeah, and spit and polish. It was a spit and polish thing.

DS:

So as your career there evolved, what else did you start to do?

WH:

Well of course whenever we got out of Marine Corps—well we had a wreck, the wife and I, and we spent two years, four months, and twenty-two days in the Marine Corps. Come back to Lubbock, started looking for a job, decided I'd go back to Tech. Went to Tech, come up with what they called *encephalitis*. And lost out, had to go to work. Wife decided she'd go ahead and finish her degree in teaching, so and she did that. I just worked all kinds of little jobs, delivering parts, worked for Ford Motor Company in the parts department there, and then somebody at a party told me that the Lubbock Fire Department was having applications to go to work, and they

was going to pay twenty-five more dollars a month than what I was drawing, which happened to be at that point and time three hundred and five dollars a month, big salary. But then took it, passed the test, and went to work for the fire department July 1, 1959.

DS:

What was the training like back then?

WH:

No training—we had a training department, I don't want to misinform you there, but my training, as I recall, was they asked me if I could drive a pickup truck, and I said, "Yes." And they let me have an International pickup with a wench and an arm deal on the back, and I spent two weeks hauling transformer oil from a place up on 4th Street almost to University, and down to the drill tower. And we put it in a pit, and at the end of our two weeks, we lit that thing off and squirted water in it, put it out. Climbed ladders—the other guys, they had a lot more training, but that's all I did. And then they assigned me to number four fire station, which was at that time 3rd & College Avenue. And that's where I started to work.

DS:

Yeah, in fact that building still stands. It's no longer—

WH:

I think so, they've got something else in it now, station four it was called, and its moved over on Clovis Road, close to Clovis Road over that area.

DS:

Yeah it's up there, it's on Cornell & University's where the fire station is now.

WH:

Okay, alright.

DS:

Yeah, but that old building, I know it intimately well, because I was on the board of Fiestas Del Llano, and we've got that from the city.

WH:

Oh you did?

DS:

So we started using that as the Hispanic Cultural Center. Those plans are still not finalized what's going to happen, because that's been, gosh, almost a decade since that happened. And

there hasn't been much movement by the current people, but yeah so that building was still serving a purpose it looks like.

WH:

It did, I've got fond, fond memories of working at that station.

DS:

What was it like working as a fireman in those early days?

WH:

Well, training whenever I got on duty, the trainings there was pretty strict. And the biggest training that I recall was whenever we'd come back from a fire, and after we got the station and the trucks all cleaned up and everything, we would fight that fire again on a blackboard. This is what we did, this is what we should have done, we should have went in here with an inch and a half life, instead of a booster line we called it. We just fought the fire over, and we learned—I did—I really learned a lot from that, because you could see what we did wrong, and what we should have been doing, or could have done and made it better. That was mostly it, and when I went to work, they had a—I believe it was an eighty-five foot aerial ladder truck—assigned to that station. Every Saturday morning we was on duty, we would raise that ladder up, and then wipe it down, clean up if any hydraulic oil leaked or anything like that. And my job—well when I come on I was afraid of heights—but my job was to climb that ladder. And I'd started out, I'd get maybe twenty, thirty feet up, and then woah, this is all of that. And then next Saturday I'd try again, and just keep on until you finally got the confidence that you could do that. And that was a real learning experience, because I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to climb that ladder, but that's what they told me I had to do.

And then it was fun to go to work. We had a twenty-four hour shift, and we just, whenever we went to work, we checked our equipment, everything ready and set to go, and then we had our own time. And we could play cards pack then, and dominos, played a lot of dominos. And then when I first went to work, they could pull a car in the back door back there, and we could overhaul it, work on it, do the brakes. And we'd do everybody's car that way. And then if we had somebody that was snoring, or giving us a problem, what we would do is we'd take his bed apart. Especially if he didn't get up at seven o'clock like he was supposed to. They'd call and say it's now seven o'clock, and you're supposed to get up. If they didn't do that, his bed would disappear. They told me after the city moved from that building to another building, that while they were doing some work on that, they found blankets, bed rails, pillows—in the duct work of that station. They just never did find it I guess. A lot of times we'd take that aerial truck, take it out, and we'd tie a rope over the top rung, we'd pick the whole bed up—blankets, sheets and all—and pick it up, set it on the roof, and then take all that down, park the truck back in there. Whenever that guy found out he didn't have a bed, he'd go looking all over the station trying to find it, and he couldn't find it. And somebody they'd finally, "It's on the roof." He'd have to

break it all down. We used a wooden ladder to get up on the building also, and he'd piece by piece take it back down, put it back up, fix it up, and make it up. So I ain't kidding you, it was so fun.

DS:

Did y'all have any people that would break that rule over and over, or was it just like a one-time thing?

WH:

Most of the time, the first time they said, "You better not do that again, or I'll get you." Or something, and just as soon as he got out of sight, that bed disappeared again. And he figured out finally that he's one man, and there's eight men on shift—seven against one don't cut it. So he'd give up and start doing what he was supposed to do. So it worked, it was a disciplinary trick too.

DS:

And so you got there right about the time some growth was starting in Lubbock.

WH:

Yes.

DS:

Could you talk about how that growth impacted not only that station, but the department as a whole?

WH:

Well I wasn't really involved in administration; I was just a hoseman, or a firefighter. The area, as I recall, just kept—the district of number four fire station, for example, just kept growing and growing. Your response to a fire, if you can't get to a fire in approximately five, real close to five minutes, you're not going to save anything, it's going to be gone. So the response time is very, very important. Once we move out further and further, we have to move the fire station out, and cover that territory. Businesses, its structures changed—Texas Tech, this was my territory, whenever I first went to work on the fire department. I had to learn where every building was, where every fire hydrant was, where every standpipe system was, sprinkler systems—that was your job, and that's what you learned. Same thing within the city—you have a fire at Avenue Q & 6th Street—well the first rattle out of the box is you've got to know what does Avenue Q separate?—Separates sixteen, seventeen hundred block, so you'd get that so you'd know where to go. And then you'd have fire hydrants, is it on that corner, is it down a block, is it over a block—where is that hydrant? In case you needed to go tie on to it, you'd know where to go. All of that is a learning, and a training process. And then we had the airport finally come in—we had to train on how to fight an airplane fire. I was a backup station, number two at 22nd & Avenue X,

and I wasn't actually assigned to the airport, but I was a backup. So if they had a crash, or needed a response, I was the second truck in. You've got to learn how to get there, you've got to learn where all the fire plugs is on the airport, you've got to learn what's available, what's the equipment there—that type of thing. Tall structures—they built this, what is the big tall building called—Lubbock, it's NTS I think now—big, tall tower building. How do you fight a fire on the top floor of that, fire hose won't reach—they got a standpipe system in there, you'd tie on to that the floor below, go up, fight the fire. And we practiced that. Texas Tech high rise—whenever Texas Tech put in these dorms, we had one big fire on the sixth floor as I recall. Can't remember the name of the dorm, but we fought that fire. And you practice, but you can't actually get the feel for it until you have a fire. On that particular fire, we had use of the elevators, but every time we'd go up, the floor was covered with ladies, the girls, it was a girls' dorm. And they was smoked down, so we'd have to get them, put them on the elevator, take them down, get them rescued if you will, and then go back and get back up to the floor and try to get to the fire scene and fight the fire—and we didn't have enough people. So that was one lesson we learned—we needed more people to respond initially to a dorm-type fire like that. Most of my training, as I recall, in all the new buildings, is we'd go to them, we'd inspect them, look at them, get familiar with them so that whenever we did have a fire there, you could have somebody say, "Hey Bill, there's a big burner up on the second floor. Watch out for that, it's got a propane up there," something like that.

DS:

Because that's really potential danger if propane just go off.

WH:

Oh gosh yes—well, you don't do that, that's just a scenario that you run into.

DS:

Well I was going to ask you, since the training was very limited when you first got on—what was the first fire you responded to, what was that like for you?

WH:

I didn't do nothing. I was in the way. I was a rookie. I didn't know what to do. So you learned, the next time they'd tell me, "Okay next time, now you see how we took this red line," if you will, what we called it, "and you go up to the fire and you start putting the," what we called the "wet stuff on the red stuff." And it just goes from there, and then you had an officer with you that was always standing right with you, and he'd grab you by the coat collar and say, "We're going over here," and you moved in teams, we worked in teams. Learned how to do that. You never leave your partner. Teamwork, that's just what we worked with and what we did.

DS:

And I think you touched on it, because you'd try to make sure that people fell in line, and that was because you had to be able to depend on your coworkers?

WH:

Yes, oh yeah. Once I got on, you learned that what you're doing, the other station or the other people that are coming to back you up, you know how many is coming, you know what they're going to do. They're going to be thinking just like you that we need to do this. As the first officer on the scene, I would tell them, we need this to happen, and get this going, and they would do it. And if they couldn't do it, they'd pass it right on down the line to the next crew, and they'd do it. So that's one thing about working with a paid fire department, is you knew what the response was coming, you knew what equipment you had coming, so you could plan on how to set it up, where to put it, what lines to lay, what fireplugs to go to, and all of that. It sounds complicated now whenever I talk about it.

DS:

Well you mentioned something interesting too, because you said the word "paid". And all the communities around Lubbock have probably volunteer stations at the time. Did ya'll interact with them, or have to back them up at all?

WH:

When I was on, we did all that—we made the how county, the Lubbock Fire Department. At some point and time, the city council and the commissioner's court got in a fuss over the city health building and the city county library. Anyway, they decided not to pay the fire department to go outside in the county. They organized—the county did, commissioners—organized all the volunteer departments around Lubbock: Shallowater, Wolfforth, Woodrow, Roosevelt—all of them around. And they started paying them to fight fire out in the county. I was living out south of town at the time, and I got asked to be the fire chief at Woodrow Volunteer Fire Department, so I did a lot of volunteer work too. And if we was working in the city, we could only go to the city limits, and we had to stop—just tore us firemen up. I mean there's a fire right over there, we need to be over there fighting that fire and putting it out, but they've already told us if we do, we're going to lose our job. Real, real picky at first, but as time passed by—the city has fire hydrants, out in the county, they have no fire hydrants, so how did they get water? Most of the time, they had to drive all the way back in to the city, find the closest fire hydrant, fill the truck up again, and come back out. By the time that happened, the fire had progressed, and you'd lose the structure. With the volunteer departments, we started out having to buy tank trucks, and we would take the tank truck to the fire. We had a portable tank, canvas thing that would expand, lay out on the ground. We would dump fifteen hundred gallons of water, sometimes three thousand gallons of water, in that tank. They city truck, they finally let them come out and work with us, and we with them. And we could haul them water, and they could fight the fire, had better, nicer,

newer equipment than the counties did. And the counties was very supportive, they would let us buy a new fire truck—they would give us the money for it—and they would pay us half of our fire run money, and they would keep the other half to pay for the truck, until it was paid for, which worked out real nice.

DS:

Well that's interesting, I'm glad I asked that question, because you did some more work.

WH:

Well yeah, and I loved the volunteer fire department. I'm a paid firefighter; I'm getting paid to do this. What are these guys doing, to come up here, risk their lives, fight fire, save people's property, and they don't—well we finally paid them five dollars to run as a volunteer. We couldn't pay them a salary or anything. Really, really admired these people that did that. It was something that I just couldn't hardly quite get in my head why they would want to do that for nothing. But it's a—what do you call it—a self-gratification-type thing, to see if you done a good job, save somebody, or save their house or something like that—very good feeling of doing that.

DS:

During your career as a firefighter, is there a moment that stands out in your mind?

WH:

There's lots of them, I mean I don't know what specifically to respond to.

DS:

Yeah.

WH:

For example, on 5th Street, right off of University, there was two ladies, sisters, that lived together. And one of them was a nurse, and the other one was a teacher as I recall. We made that fire, and the fire was in the front of the building, and they were in the back bedroom. I helped rescue those ladies, and found out later that both of them had already deceased, but you'd never forget that.

DS:

And were you with the fire department when the tornado hit?

WH:

May 1970, May 11th I believe it was.

DS:

Yes sir.

WH:

9:42 as I recall. I was home, had just got off duty at six o'clock. The radio said, "All firemen, policemen—report to city hall." Well, whenever they said that, I said, "Ah, somebody's messed up, that's not right—we don't report to city hall, we report to number one fire station." When number one fire station, at that time, was at 6th and Q, which the roof fell in, trapped the fire trucks in there, they couldn't get them all out. And the men, we don't think we had any fire fighters seriously hurt, the dispatcher was really hurt bad, had glass where his room was up there, and he lost an eye. But I went to city hall—as I recall, about seventy-two hours at least—didn't get to go to bed—went out to Skyview addition out by the airport, we walked that whole area looking that whole area looking for people, found some people. It was just a chaotic time. I tried to get downtown—glass was everywhere—to get to city hall, and you could see devastation just everywhere. But that was a learning experience too—what do you do at a time like that. They called in the National Guard as I remember. We had one lady out in Skyview that we kept going and we'd hear her one time, but the next time we walked by we couldn't. I guess as the third pass that we was going through the debris and looking, that we heard her call out, "Help me, help me!" And the house was gone, the bottom part, it was just like somebody took a big hand and swept the walls, and furniture, and just cleaned the slab.

DS:

Wow.

WH:

But the roof fell down and just broke in half, and sat on top. And we finally could hear, and detected that she was in that roof someplace. So we tore the roof apart to get down to her. She was under the kitchen table, and the kitchen table was on top of her, and the roof was on top of that, and she didn't have a scratch on her.

DS:

Wow.

WH:

It was just a miracle. Stuff like that, I mean it was a bad three or four days before we finally got everything pretty well organized to where we could start getting electricity back. Didn't have water, because the electricity went off. Well when the electricity goes off, the pumps that pump the water in the mains to go to the houses, and the fireplugs, they wouldn't work. So we didn't have any water.

DS:

So what was it like as far as working with those other entities—FEMA was here, of course city and the county was probably involved.

WH:

Was FEMA—

DS:

Yeah.

WH:

Organized then?

DS:

I think so, yes.

WH:

I don't remember FEMA as such.

DS:

Well it might have been under a different name, but I know there was a Federal Agency that was here.

WH:

Okay, alright. We had what we called EOC, Emergency Operating Center, and nearly everything was coordinated from that. And as I recall, you couldn't have asked for better cooperation from any of them. If you indicated a need, if this person couldn't do it, another one would. But we had all of the heads of these organizations in the EOC. So the mayor could just turn around and say "Fire department, can you do this?" and he'd say "Well, no, maybe the water department can." And just everybody really did work together.

DS:

Yeah, and that's what it needed, because I saw some photos the other day where it showed people like in the coliseum—because that was one of the places where they were taking people that were homeless and shelter to live.

WH:

Red Cross, I didn't see much of their work actually. I was always out on the scene going through wreckage, and trying to help get fire trucks, streets clear where we could get fire trucks through. National Guard brought in heavy equipment, and they just went down the streets, and plowed the

debris over so we could get through, get rescue trucks in. Boy you'd just call down there and say, "Hey, I need something," and they'd all get together and here it'd come, it'd happen.

DS:

So were there some lessons, because you were talking earlier about how you would break down a fire, and talk about what we did right, what we did wrong. So did you take that approach after responding to that natural disaster? Did y'all find something y'all could build off?

WH:

We actually, we did that. When I first went to work in 1959, we did that, and that was one of the big learning experiences. Out of all the books that you can read, that tells you a lot of things to do—but there's nothing like, "Hey guys we were in this bedroom, and the fire was over here in this other bedroom, we should have been moving our lines over to go in there, we should have looked." To be actually on the scene gave you a lot of help for the next time. No two fires, as I recall, really were alike. You learned something on each one of them.

DS:

Did you learn something from having to go through the debris to find people in the tornado? Because that was a massive search and rescue.

WH:

Oh yes, like I said three days. And actually it was longer than that, it was just three days for me before I got relief. You just learn a system—hey, if you move this, that moves this over here, and you can't do that, you've got to really think ahead about what you move, because what you move may hurt somebody someplace else. You just have to do—that's just an on-the-job learning, and you learn from that. I don't know whether they teach some of that now, they probably do, the schooling now a day is so astronomically broad. I can't believe the things that we have to know. A tanker truck goes through town, it catches on fire, it's involved in a wreck, or it explodes—what do you do? Well you get on the scene, you think the first thing you do is it's on fire, I'm going to squirt water on it. Well what if it's a hazardous chemical? If you get within so many yards of it, you're dead. You learn to read those placards, you know what they are on railroad cars, on tank trucks that all go through? They've got a number on them, they got a book that says whatever number corresponds to in that book. You need to know the book—you can't remember everything that's in the book, but at least you've got an idea of where to start, before you actually get somebody hurt fighting the fire. It may explode if it gets too hot, got to keep it cool, don't put out the fire, let it burn, because that's the best way to handle that situation. Just all kinds, and I could just go on, and on, and on, but.

DS:

Well I want to talk a little bit about the changes in technology. I know that you had shown me a

picture, and I think it was like '68 or so when y'all got y'all's first ambulance, or emergency response vehicle like that. Could you talk about introducing that into the fire department?

WH:

The way I recall it, Chief Hershel Sharp, he was the fire chief then, and the—what do you call them, the Resthaven, Sanders Funeral Home—the funeral homes, they had the hearse, and they had the facility to haul wreck victims, or people that had passed away, to pick them up—they quit doing that. Twelve o'clock one night, I happened to be on duty that shift—there was four of us—they called us down to central fire stations. There were two Pontiacs that were automatic transmissions, that were, I'm going to say '49 and '48 models is what I recall, I may be wrong. But we fixed those up for ambulances, and I was assigned to one of them, and it was assigned to station four, which was at 4th & College, and the other one was downtown. I had first aid experience, I had taught first aid, I was the first aid instructor, so that qualified me to be assigned to the ambulance I guess you could say. We had two of them that we just went and we just did the best we could, with not having any experience in it—we learned. And I don't remember how long Lubbock did that until the county finally put in their ambulance service, and they started doing it. But we learned right then that all of the firefighters needed first aid training, which we got, and now then you got to be an EMT before you can even get on the fire department. So the learning process is carrying on. Plus, to get on the fire department, you've got to take a test, and then whoever is highest on the test—if you're going to hire ten men—the top ten men are picked to go to school, or maybe a few more, to go to school, and then you get your training, and then you can report on duty. What else, you have to be a certified EMT, plus you have to have a physical, you've got to be physically strong, can't have any weak backs or anything like that, or they'll kick you off. You have to do a physical agility test, I forgot, they got a name for it. They didn't have it when I was on. But it's a rugged son of a gun. In fact it's so rugged that there's a TV show, used to, that shows different competition of different fire departments doing it. Fireman's Challenge or something. I can't remember, but that's all evolved. A lot different training now then when I went to work in 1959. Of course it needs to be.

DS:

Yeah, and I think part of the parallel to that is how you mentioned TV, and TV kind of glamorizes that life.

WH:

Oh yeah, yeah.

DS:

I mean there's so many shows that that's what they're about, and so people might think it's about glamour, but it's really not.

WH:

No, I've been watching "*The Towering Inferno*." Whenever it come out, the firefighters, they got a special deal to go down in the middle of the day, and we could see that movie. I was impressed in the way that it was done—it looked just about as real as I could think about it being. There was some stuff in there that was not really up to snuff. This fire with the two brothers in it, that was bad—showed the firefighters more, the fires were terrible, that's ridiculous the fires. But being a firefighter, I can understand that. When I went to work in '59, they did not have an air mask. You just sucked it up, went in there, and did the best—you kept your nose to the floor so you could breathe. And then we got air masks, and you was talking about incidences on the fire department—one of them just flashed—Underwood's Bar-B-Q, remember that place, used to be on, what, 34th Street, East 34th Street?

DS:

Right.

WH:

That caught on fire one night—we lost three men in that fire, and that's the only firefighters on duty, in a fire, lost, that the fire department suffered. And we've had some heart attacks and some other things, but those men was wearing a mask, we'd just got them. Scott Aviation, they built these masks—they learned that toxic smoke that was in there is what killed them. How did that happen? They had on an air mask. If you have any kind of a beard or something that that air mask will not seal good, then that smoke would get in, and you would breathe it. They learned that what they come up with is they invented a way to put that positive two pounds pressure inside the face piece, so that if you did have any leaks, that two pounds positive pressure would keep it—it would be going out, and not let that poisonous smoke get in. Big, I mean that went all over the world I guess from that fire. We just, I mean, it's typical fire department, we just learned by our mistakes, learned by things that didn't happen that should have happened, how could we make them happen better for us—it's just the way we learned.

DS:

And are you still involved with the fire department?

WH:

No, I finally—let's see, '95, '97—I think it's about '95 or '97 I was working with the Woodrow Fire Department after, still, after I'd retired in '91 from the Lubbock Fire Department. And you need to be young, need to be in good health, and very active, in order to really serve as a firefighter. Getting old is tough, it just gets harder, so I retired.

DS:

Okay, so what have you been doing since you left the fire department?

WH:

Oh it's been tough, it's been really tough. I've had to buy a travel trailer, and go traveling, I've been all over the country, I've been in all fifty states traveling, I've been to Europe, Hawaii—we just take these trips, and cruises, and then in the spare time, I have to go play golf nearly twice a week. And then on the days I don't do all of this, I go to the coffee shop and sit around, and talk, and visit.

DS:

So you're finally reaping some of the rewards for your career?

WH:

If you want to call it, yes, and we're loving it. I was being a little facetious there.

DS:

Oh I know.

WH:

We just have a ball.

DS:

Well I was going to ask you, so what's it like for someone that grew up in this area, now to be traveling the country when you want to, and seeing different things?

WH:

It's wonderful. I've read quite a bit, and to go and to actually go to Washington D.C., to see the capital, go in it, it's just—you read about it, now you've actually seen it. To go up in the Statue of Liberty, it's just my goodness; it's such a thrill I guess to be able to do that. You've read about it, but to actually go there, and to actually see it, be at the place that history happened, it's just an awesome feeling, and I highly recommend it to anybody that can get out and can go do it.

There's so many places right here in the State of Texas that is history, that if you just knew it, you could go there, and visualize it as you read it, that this happened right here where I'm standing. And it's just a wonderful, wonderful feeling—I highly recommend it.

DS:

And as a historian by trade, I'm going to obviously, yeah I agree with you.

WH:

Well you need to do it, I mean it's just been so wonderful, and I think the good Lord that he's blessed me with good health, that me and my wife, we're in our seventy-seven age bracket, and

we're getting to where we can't move like we used to, but we're still trying to go as much as we can.

DS:

We talked a lot about your career in Lubbock, and the growth within your department in that career. Well how about Lubbock in the time you've been here, talk about the growth you've seen in the city, as a citizen, and also being involved.

WH:

The growth—it's awesome to think that—I don't know, did I mention this, that whenever I first come here that 19th Street was paved up to University, and that's all? That Texas Tech only had just a very few buildings. To be here whenever it's dirt roads so to speak, cotton fields, places that I picked cotton is now residential businesses—the growth is—I keep wondering, all these houses they're building, who's buying them? Where are these people coming from? What are they doing? We're spread out now, Smyer—well we're not that far, but a little town this side of that—city completely took it in. Carlisle, it's out there by Carlisle. Whenever I moved out in '83 to 1585 & University, little addition out there, I think the city limits was like 82nd Street, and that was way out in the country. Now then, they're out there by me—they're fixing to take 1585 I understand in the city limits. It's just, who's doing this? How's it getting there? It's just spread out, it's just growing leaps and bounds. And I guess the houses for the people there's doing the work, somewhere, I don't know where, but it's awesome. And people get the kid in me, they'll say, "Hey Bill, what was the name of theatre on University, right there by the college?" And I said, "Oh, you mean the Tower Theatre?" Which is no longer there. Arnett Benson, it's still over there isn't it, I don't remember—

DS:

The building's there, but it's just a pawn shop or something.

WH:

Oh okay, okay.

DS:

Yeah.

WH:

But I mean, I got lots of friends—and I'm a western reader also, so guys was watching TV, when I was on the fire department, they'd call up and said, "Hey Bill, we're on channel so and so, who's that tall cowboy on the left of this guy over here?" And I said, "Oh, well that's Roy Rogers, or Tom Mix." "Wait a minute, Tom Mix, who's Tom Mix?" Well he was an old western

cowboy, you know. And I don't know why they'd call on me, but and the theatres, my wife worked for Preston Smith.

DS:
Oh.

WH:
She was a ticket seller at the State Theatre, which was then on Texas I think.

DS:
Well you do know Preston Smith has a strong ties with the Southwest Collection, right?

WH:
Yes, yes.

DS:
And in fact our reading room is the Preston Smith Reading Room.

WH:
Oh, I don't think I remembered that.

DS:
Yeah, so this room that's just outside the window there, that's the Preston Smith Reading Room.

WH:
Well I'll be.

DS:
It's named after him, there's a little office out there.

WH:
He was a wonderful man, I'm telling you for sure.

DS:
Yeah, he had a lot to do with our building and getting it to move forward.

WH:
Well I'd read about that. I didn't realize that he had the reading room though.

DS:
Yeah.

WH:
So that's wonderful.

DS:
Yeah, it's the main room here for our patrons to come and use, that's named after him, and there's a small meeting room next to it also that's named after him.

WH:
That's great.

DS:
Yeah, yeah, because he went from owning theatres to becoming governor for the state of Texas.

WH:
Yeah, that's awesome, yeah. Friend of mine on the fire department, we weren't union, but we're affiliated with the union, I believe is the way the story goes. I was on the committee or something; anyway, they invited me and this friend to go to Austin to present some kind of a talk to them, to tell them we needed this, or something. And while we're there, we went to the governor's office, and this old boy went over—he wasn't in right there—but they ushered us on into his office, and this old boy, can't think of his name right now, but he went over and sat down in the governor's chair, and put his feet up on the governor's desk. And I told him you've got to be an idiot, get out of there. "Oh, it'll be alright." And he wouldn't move, and Preston Smith came in, and I introduced myself, and this guy got up, and they just hugged each other and pumped hands. He'd run a projector for Preston Smith here in Lubbock, they were real, real good friends, but I didn't know that. I sure thought we was going to be in trouble.

DS:
Yeah, and there's people that always seem to know somebody.

WH:
Oh yeah.

DS:
And you were in Lubbock when E.J. Holub was the star, first at Lubbock High, then at Tech?

WH:
Yeah.

DS:

And then he went on to Kansas City Chiefs.

WH:

Yep.

DS:

And I remember hearing a story, when Montford was the chancellor, and he went to go approach Lamar Hunt, and he was going to go visit Lamar Hunt, and he invited E.J. and he told E.J. to be on his best behavior, so of course E.J. and Lamar went way back, and so he was as country as he could be with Lamar, and it was all good, because Lamar—if you’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting Lamar—

WH:

No I never met him.

DS:

He was just a very personable man himself, and so E.J. was that way, and John Montford got to find out that oh, I don’t have to be on my P’s and Q’s with him.

WH:

Right, well older I guess we get, and the broader our scope, our knowledge—it is such a small, small world. We was traveling in England as I recall, the wife and I, and we’d rented a car, and we were in London and we stopped for gas, and the old boy—that’s back when they had service stations—and he said, “Where are you from?” And I said we’re from the USA. He said, “What part of Texas are you from?” And I thought now how did he know I was from Texas? Of course it was my accent, surely. And I told him, I said from Lubbock, Texas. And he said, “You know—” the singer that graduated with him—

DS:

I was going to ask you about that, Buddy.

WH:

Buddy Holly, thank you, went blank. But we graduated together, and I told him, I said, “Lubbock, Texas.” And he said, “Oh, did you know Buddy Holly?” I said, “Yeah, we graduated from school together.” My goodness, he went crazy, started hollering, people started coming up, they gathered all around the car, they was asking us questions about Buddy Holly, and the songs that he sang, and we’re going woah, let us out of here. But it just goes to show you how small this world is.

DS:

Well in fact I was going to ask you that, when you were talking about Lubbock High, because I was thinking that's the same time frame he went there. What was it like going there with someone—I mean did you know him personally very well?

WH:

No. I mean I know him, I knew who he was, but I never did really run in that group with him. So George Montgomery I believe was the other one that they sang at the assemblies a lot, and at our dances that we had back then. But we've got others that are really famous now, but he's of course the top of the line. But it's kind of wonderful to say I graduated with Buddy Holly.

DS:

What was that like when you were a young man, and you'd both just gotten out of high school fairly recently, and Buddy's already rocketing to stardom, and everybody knew his name.

WH:

Yes, and I'm in the Marine Corps, and I had some of his music, and liked his music, but we just never did run together. And I mean, see I didn't know Mac Davis either, but he was about that time.

DS:

Yeah, I think I remember hearing Mac Davis comments about why he went into music.

WH:

Yeah.

DS:

Because he was a little bit younger than y'all.

WH:

Right.

DS:

And he said he'd see Buddy Holly hanging out with all these beautiful women, so he goes, "Well, that's what I need to do."

WH:

He had a good song about that too.

DS:

Yeah, well we've covered quite a bit, and we're getting right up on the hour, is there any thoughts that you want to mention before we finish this hour?

WH:

I don't know, I've rambled about as much as I can ramble I think. But I've enjoyed it. It's brought back a lot of memories.

DS:

Well thank you Bill. I'm glad, because you also helped out with a couple images that we're going to be using in the book once we get that done that we're working on. So thank you and Val for that.

WH:

Yeah, glad we could help.

DS:

Alright, thank you Bill.

WH:

Thank you.

DS:

Alright, well that's good.

(pause in recording)

DS:

My Name is Daniel Sanchez, and this is tape two of my interview with Bill Hewett, and it's November the 16th, 2012. Bill, we were talking a little about as we were taking a tour of the building, and you mentioned—

WH:

It is on. I just had a look up there.

DS:

Okay, well it is tape two of my interview with Bill Hewett, and Bill, we were taking a tour of the building, and we stumbled across a couple of things that piqued your memory. One of them had to do with your father and his work that he had done in the Abilene area.

WH:

Well, one of the things that I recalled was—. I was very little, me and my brother, and daddy went to the Army and the draft, but he didn't stay but it was less than six months. He got an occupational discharge. And from there, we went to Abilene, which we moved to—the park, what—

DS:

You just mentioned the name a while ago.

WH:

I did! Buffalo Gap. At Buffalo Gap was a community, and we moved there and daddy was helping to construct the runways at Dyess Air Force Base. And we had lots of time, we wasn't in school. I remember that, because we were running around all the time. One of the things I recall was, daddy was driving a Cat [Caterpillar] buggy. That's a big rig that cuts the dirt, and they hauled it someplace else and dumps it. And I was riding with him one day and I told him, "Oh, daddy, daddy, there goes a rabbit." And he said, "Do you want to get that rabbit?" I said, "Yeah." So he pulled over there and went through that, and a big mesquite bush in a clump—high hill of dirt, kind of. And he let that blade down, that scoop, and he cut my rabbit half in two. And I cried, and cried, and cried but, what a memory I had of us working at Dyess Air Force Base because it was out in the country.

DS:

And so where did y'all go after Dyess?

WH:

Dyess, we came back to either Plainview or Lubbock. I bet we went to Plainview because it was '45 when we moved to Lubbock.

DS:

And since we're on this topic, in Plainview that's where Wayland Baptist is did he do any work for them?

WH:

Not to my knowledge. No, not that I recall. I do remember that when we moved from Plainview to Lubbock, he had a Ford tractor at that time, and we had a two wheel trailer, and he had his equipment on the back of that trailer. It must have been in the winter because it was real, real cold. But my mom drove the car and us two boys was in it, and we followed him all the way, him driving that Ford tractor from Plainview all the way to Lubbock. Took a while.

DS:

Oh yeah. And that's just the way things were done back then.

WH:

That's right, that's right.

DS:

You know, and another interesting story you had—First of all let's start off with: what's your wife's name?

WH:

Valencia. Just like the orange. You know everybody calls her "Val" for short. But, her last name was Earhart.

DS:

Well, let's talk about, earlier you had mentioned you had gone to service, and during that you mentioned you were married, but let's talk about how you got there.

WH:

Well, I was doing a tour here and I saw George Mahon, and brought back memory that, I went in the Marine Corps, and we'd gotten engaged before we left. And I was writing letters back and forth and I had mentioned in the letter that, "Well, I kind of thought I had made a mistake, because I'm in the Marines, and they're not going to let me out to get married, and I wish we had got married before I left." And that went on for a few months, and I got a letter from her with my invitation to my wedding. And I thought, "Whoa, This can't happen. They ain't going to let me off to do this." So I didn't think much about it. I wrote her and told her, I didn't think I was going to make it.

I was in transit in the Marines from someplace, and I was on a bus. I remember getting off the bus, and they called my name and I went and got in a jeep and they took me to Headquarters, and they gave me some papers, and I signed them and they said, "You're free." And I thought, "Oh, Well, what does this mean?" They said, "Well, you've got ten day leave, you need to go home." I thought, "Whoa, Okay." So I called, and they got me a ticket, because I didn't have any money. And I flew from San Diego, California to Lubbock. Got there, they picked me up. We got to talking and they was telling me about my wedding, and I'm saying, "Whoa, whoa. What are you talking about?" And they said, "Well, you're getting married Saturday." And I said, "How did that happen?" And then, come to find out George Mahon and my father-in-law J.B. Earhart were real good friends. And J.B. was quite big in the Democratic Party at that time. And anyway, George Mahon got me a ten day leave to come home and get married that I didn't know that I was getting married. But it must have worked. I've been married to her now for fifty-seven years.

DS:

Did you ever have a chance to meet George Mahon?

WH:

No, I never did. I would have liked to have done that. I would have liked to have mention it to him and tell him, "Thank you."

DS:

Yeah well thank you. And I'm glad that our little exhibit down there sparked that memory because that's a wonderful piece of information. Well, thank you Bill.

WH:

Thank you, sir.

End of interview

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