

**Oral History Interview of
Jane Stevenson Chandler**

**Interviewed by: Monte Monroe
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Lubbock, TX**

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Transcript Overview:

This interview features Jane Stevenson Chandler, daughter of Texas Governor Coke R. Stevenson. Jane discusses key items in the Stevenson Collection at the Southwest Collection. Jane also talks about the Bowie cabin and briefly describes her household growing up.

Length of Interview: 00:15:55

Subject	Transcript Page	Time Stamp
Smithwick letter	5	0:00:00
Items in Stevenson collection, driver's license	6	0:05:50
Bowie cabin	7	0:07:19
Jane's household growing up	8	0:13:07

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Monte Monroe (MM):

This is Monte Monroe, the archivist of the Southwest Collection. It is three o'clock. We are in the Preston Smith Room. It is September the 25, the day before Texas Tech beats TCU. And I am here with Jane and Fred Chandler. Jane is the daughter of former governor Coke Stevenson of Texas. And we have one interview, general interview, that Dr. David Marshall conducted with Jane here, about two years ago, but we are going to contribute to that interview on and off. This is an installment today relating to a story of the famous ballot box thirteen and the Smithwick letter. And Jane, I'm going to leave it up to you to provide the early context and then the letter. Tell us all about that.

Jane Chandler (JC):

[Laughter] Well, Daddy lost to Lyndon Johnson in 1948 by eighty-seven votes, and I grew up always hearing whispers about that. But, one of the things that I found in the course of going through Mother and Daddy's papers and bringing them to the archives here at Texas Tech is the original letter written a man named Sam Smithwick to daddy. Now Sam Smithwick worked for George Parr in Duvall County. I believe he was a deputy sheriff at one point down there. Duvall County is where someday after the election in 1948, they filed an amended report to the election commission giving Lyndon Johnson an extra two-hundred and something votes which put him ahead by the eighty-seven votes. Now, there was always some controversy about that. Daddy was good friends with the famous Texas Ranger, Frank Hamer [phone dings]. And he and Frank Hamer went down to Duvall County and asked to inspect the voting list and the election returns. When they got there, it must have been a famous scene. Robert Caro describes it in his book about as well as anything I've ever heard. But Daddy and Frank Hamer walking down the street and George Parr's henchmen on either side. Everyone armed, and Frank Hamer just glaring and saying, "Get back." And so, they marched on through and they looked at the voting list and the last two-hundred and something names were all written in the same handwriting, the same ink. Of course, there weren't cameras or anything back in the day, but they remembered and wrote down enough of the names to find out that a good many of them were straight out of the cemetery down there. But anyway, in 1952, Sam Smithwick had had a falling out with the Parrs. He had been convicted of murder and sent to the penitentiary in Huntsville, and he wrote a letter to Daddy. In the letter, he mentions that he knew the truth about box 13; he knew where it was hidden and he was ready to tell everything he knew about it, and he implored Daddy to come to Huntsville and see him. The letter was addressed to Daddy in Austin and course, by then Daddy was living back in Junction and it took several weeks for the letter to be forwarded along to him. So, when he opened it up, he went to Junction and called Huntsville and inquired about Sam Smithwick and said that he wanted to come visit him and the response he got was, "We are very sorry to inform you that Mr. Smithwick hanged himself in his cell a couple of weeks ago." So anyway, I have the original of that letter with the envelope. I did not donate it to the Texas Tech Archives at this time, but we were talking about how to make a copy and preserve it and make it available to those that are interested in looking at it.

MM:

And the letter was, tell us the story about how your dad wanted to kind of let it see the light of day and it was published in the *Dallas Morning News*.

JC:

I think Daddy, among others had some suspicions about the letter. Although, I believe that Robert Caro discovered the man that Sam Smithwick referred to in the letter and actually interviewed him for his book. But anyway, Daddy was good friends with, and I don't remember who at the *Dallas Morning News*, but he made sure that they had a copy of it, and that it was printed at the paper.

MM:

Okay, so it would be probably in the Dallas Morning News in 1952, or somewhere thereabouts.

JC:

Yeah, somewhere thereabouts.

MM:

We've talked about a number of things today, but one of the things we were looking at in the back when Bryan was processing your dad's papers was, he had, Bryan had run across one of your dad's wallets with a number of little cards, membership cards, rotary cards, and especially his driver's license. And Bryan was curious because the number on the driver's license was number one, so why don't you tell a little bit about how that came about.

JC:

Daddy wrote and passed the driver's license bill in the legislature. It was before he was governor. You can look up the year, but it was in the 1930s. So, he was issued the very first driver's license ever issued in the state of Texas. It has number one and he kept driver's license number one until his death in 1975.

MM:

So, that's a very curious thing to see. It's certainly not something you see every day. We were also today, with Professor John White and Professor Elizabeth Loudon from Historical Preservation in the Architecture Department working on the famous Bowie Cabin which they undertook to survey, with themselves and some of their student staff. Within the past year, they have been working diligently on that, trying to determine the validity of this legend that has descended down through the family. Tell a little bit about that legend and then you mentioned a couple of things today about the orientation of the building when it was moved and things like that that might be interesting for researchers many years from now.

JC:

When I was growing up out there, there's a log cabin under a barn to the northeast side of the house, and it was always called the Bowie Cabin. Of course, as you said, they have been trying to go back and ascertain whether that was actually true or not. But anyway, we always called it the Bowie Cabin. Daddy said it was on that ranch when he bought the ranch, the first piece of which I think was in 1914. He used it as a home for ranch hand, I believe at that time and then after that, it was used to store feed and saddles in. Sometime after the flood of 1935, but before he became governor, so roughly 1935 to 1940, he had talked to friends in Austin by then and was convinced that the cabin was old enough to be and important enough to be preserved and he moved it to the area where it is today. It was the south side of an existing barn, and then I think they built a cover over it.

MM:

A pole barn otherwise, yeah.

JC:

But, it was moved to that location and Daddy told me that it was set up in the same orientation as far as north, south, east, west, as it was in the original spot.

MM:

Okay, and of course, that's important for archaeologists and researchers, such as Loudon and White, to know. Tell what you know about it. I know that your mother wrote an article about it. Mention Mr. Cook's little recollections in his book about it.

JC:

Like I said, I don't know that daddy knew the importance of that cabin when he bought the place. It was just a very old cabin, even in 1914. But, old timers coming by always referred to it as the Bouie Cabin. When he was in Austin, he became friends with Frank Dobie, among other people. He also went and talked to Jim Lang Cook and he said, described him as living near Austin in a shack. But after talking to him, he became convinced that that was the cabin that Jim Lang Cook refers to as being the Bouie Cabin. And it was after that and after a flood in June of 1935, that he decided it should be moved and tried to preserve it.

MM:

And the legend is what? About the cabin.

JC:

The legend is that Jim Bowie, who was something of a land speculator and a bit of a scoundrel was involved and trying to gather up as much land as he could from the Mexican government just before the Texas Revolution. He was wanting to resell it, of course, and make a profit on it. Jim Bowie used to come to town, to San Antonio I believe, with some silver that he claimed was from his silver mine, northwest of San Antonio. Daddy's theory was that the silver was actually from Mexico, that he had acquired somehow and that he had cash for this silver somewhere up in Hill Country. There's a famous battle that Bowie and his men had with the Indians, I believe it's supposed to be on Calf Creek, tributary of the San Saba. But Daddy's theory was that their actual cash was down on the south llano close to this place. Of course, he wanted it well hidden. The falls of the south llano has soapstone formation in it and in that soapstone, there is a vein of fool's gold. And, over the years, I think there have been people that claim that that was the area of the Bowie silver mine.

MM:

So, these are legends that are well known in West Texas, particularly in Mason and Kimble County and down around the San Saba River. There are maps that date to the 1840s and 1850s that we hold in the Southwest Collection that actually show these river systems at that time, but Loudon and White are trying to bring some kind of substance to that story, and hopefully, they will at least be able to determine one way or the other whether this structure is of the period or perhaps a later period. Of course, that would help with the future plans for the Stevenson property, either as a park or some kind of historic site. With that, I think we will conclude today and wait for the next time we get Jane and Fred up here to get a more thorough interview because Jane has endless stories. One final thing I'll let her close with, tell about growing up in the household with your parents who were older and no TV and how you listened to everything.

JC:

[Laughter] Well, I was born on that place near telegraph, we had no TV, we had no telephone until I was thirteen. There were no children around, so I had to amuse myself or listen to my parents. When I was born, my father was almost sixty-eight, my mother was almost thirty eight, and it was a very interesting childhood. The house has no heating system; it has no cooling system. It does have running water, which is a plus, but most of the time in my childhood, I slept on the screen porch.

MM:

And it has many interesting physical attributes, doesn't it?

JC:

Yes, it does. The house is built out of almost solid rock and concrete. The only things wooden structurally in the house are the doors and window frames.

MM:

Tell about some of the unique pieces that were incorporated into the architecture of the house, such as the tiles and some of the doorknobs and things like that.

JC:

Well, the previous house burned down, or burned mostly down, and I think it was the second structure on that site that had burned. So, Daddy was determined to build a fire proof house and he started on it in I think 1929. Anyway, it was just before the Depression, but as times got harder, it sort of stretched out the construction. He was elected to the legislature, and they had undertaken to remodel the Capitol building in preparation for the Texas Centennial in 1936. So, he got a good many of the things that were being thrown out of the Capitol, including loads of tile for the floors, some doors and hardware for the doors from the State Capitol and they were in the house. Most of the bottom floor is tiled, the tile in the living and kitchen area is bought tile, Mexican tile, but in the bedrooms and the hallway, the tile is pieces of the Capitol, the original tile that was in the Capitol in the 1880s.

MM:

Very good. Thank you, Jane. Thank you, Fred. We'll see y'all next time.

JC:

So, that's a digital recorder, huh?

End of Recording