

**Oral History Interview of
B.A. Hyatt**

**Interviewed by: David Marshall
March 7, 2013
Lubbock, Texas**

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Transcript Overview:

This interview features B.A. Hyatt, a native of Dickens County, Texas. B.A. discusses his early life and growing up on the Murchison Farm in East Dickens County, and talks about the early communities in that area. B.A. discusses his ancestry dating back to the Republic of Texas, and what he has learned from his genealogical research.

Length of Interview: 01:59:17

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Keywords

Dickens County, Texas, Murchison Farm, Wichita Community, Republic of Texas, genealogy

David Marshall (DM):

The date is March 7, 2013, and this is David Marshall interviewing B.A. Hyatt at his home in Lubbock, Texas. And we're going to talk a little bit about family history at least today, and hopefully get to some other topics, but let me get some biographical information about you first. If you could tell me when and where you were born?

B.A. Hyatt (BAH):

Well, I was born on the farm which my grandfather moved to in 1901. It's in Dickens County, located about eleven or twelve miles east of Dickens. And I was born there on that farm June 20, 1928. My parents had moved in with the family because my grandfather had a stroke and was in poor health. They lived there for a year or two and took care of him in the latter years of his life, and I was born there on that farm in 1928.

DM:

Does that farm have a name?

BAH:

It's just the Murchison place. By the way, there's always a question about Murchison. We pronounce it like it's a *k*. C-h-i is *k*, but a lot of people say Mur-chi-son, but Mur-ki-son is the correct pronunciation. My mother was Murchison. My father, Boon Hyatt.

DM:

Alright, now that gives us a little bit of biographical background, but let's go back now. Let's begin with as far back as you've researched—I know you've gone at least back as far as your great-great-grandfathers who were here in the period of the Republic of Texas.

BAH:

My furthest research goes back even further than that to Marmoutier in Alsace-Lorraine in France, which, part of the time was in Germany and part of the time in France in that part of the world. The Heller family came from there. Francois and Alex Heller came to the United States on the ship Sully in 1837 and wound up in Fayette County, Texas. In 1839, he built a piece of furniture which I still have. So he was actually in Mexico. At that time, it was not the Republic of Texas until 1836, but he lived in the Republic of Mexico. And then tracing the Heller line, I found a contact with the Murchison line, and found out that John Murchison also came from Alabama to Texas, first to San Augustine then later on settled in La Grange. Those two men had a business transaction, one bought land from the other, and when I found a copy of that deed, well then that gave me a lead on both families. So tracing back in Texas to the very revolution when it became the Republic of Texas, two of my great-great-grandfathers were living here at that time.

DM:

Amazing. One of them enrolled—enlisted in the army? Is that correct?

BAH:

Yes. John Murchison joined the Texas Army in San Augustine, Texas on the very day that Sam Houston won the battle of San Jacinto, and he served in the army from that date until July of that same year, and then later on was again in the service of the state, or the nation, it was at that time a republic. And he fought in the Battle of Kickapoo, during the Cordova Rebellion. In that battle he was severely wounded and carried that wound the rest of his life from that. But he did recover. He lost a horse, however. And I do have a record of him being paid two-hundred dollars for that horse that he lost in that battle. And then later on, after he settled in La Grange, he became a justice of the peace and also was a member of the congress of the Republic of Texas. [He] served one term from Fayette County when the county was first formed. So I guess that from that standpoint, I'm Texan all the way.

DM:

(laughs) That's right. Can you tell me about the wound he sustained?

BAH:

I really know very little about it except that the information I have gleaned was that it was a severe wound from which they didn't think he would recover, but he did. So I really don't know any further about that.

DM:

Did you mention in your paper—by the way, I will mention for the record here that you've written up a lot of this as well, and it's deposited at the Southwest Collection, including a photograph of the piece of furniture you mentioned in the description of that. That's very interesting.

BAH:

My son has it now here in Lubbock.

DM:

But I seem to recall from the record that he was in the Fifth Congress?

BAH:

Fifth Congress of the Republic of Texas. Fayette County had just been organized. I suppose he might have been the first one from Fayette County to serve in the congress. I don't know that, but he was active in the Masonic Lodge. In fact, he helped organize the lodge in La Grange, or in

Fayette County. I suppose that made him somewhat popular. He was an activist in the lodge to help organize other lodges in that part of the world

DM:

Did you have any other information on Mr. Heller?

BAH:

On Heller, he came from Marmoutier, France, of course, as I said. He had a wife in Fayette County, but I don't know her name, have not found a record of their marriage or of her death or anything, don't really know. But at the time he came over on the ship, there was no mention of a wife. So apparently he married at a later date, and had three children. W. F. Heller was his oldest child, and then Anettie, or Antoinette was the original name. They anglicized it to Anettie, and she is my great-grandmother. And then the younger brother was Frank Jr., and the year he was born, apparently is when his mother died. I am not sure if she died in childbirth or if she died shortly after.

But later on then Heller, which the Francois was changed to Frances when he came to America, and then was changed to Frank after he came to Texas, so he was Frank Heller. He married again and had five children by his second wife, and then died intestate, and then they appointed four men to handle his estate later on, in fact, several years later. One thing that I thought was really impressive was that in the probate of his estate, it listed the items that were given to the different children. And it listed one bureau, valued at ten dollars, which was given to Anettie. And how it got from La Grange to Lampasas and on out to Dickens, I don't know, but it was in the farm house down in Dickens County as long as I can remember from my earliest recollections. It was a piece of furniture that was used in the home there, and we still have it today. Then in the probate of the estate, it also listed a set of woodworking tools, which pretty well verified that he was a wood craftsman, and on the ship Manifest it lists him as cabinet maker when he came from France. So it all ties together until we're sure. Of course, all I had was family oral tradition that this sideboard was made by Frank Heller in 1839. And I'm not sure what type wood it is, I think it may be walnut. But in his probate it also listed in the inventory, one lot of walnut boards. So he was definitely a cabinet maker in that part of the world, and later on became a farmer.

Then his oldest son, W. F., after serving in the Civil War, wound up in Randall County, in the Texas panhandle. He came out as a buffalo skinner when they were killing off the buffalos, and he was the first farmer in Randall County. There's a lot of history recorded at the Museum at West Texas A&M University. He was the first county clerk of Randall County.

Then just recently, sometime last year, I was in a meeting in Lubbock where a man spoke that he was mapping all of the patent land of Texas. In Burnett County, it showed W. F. Heller, Frank Heller, and Duncan Murchison, who was the husband of Anettie Heller, all as land patent people in Burnett County. And then, later on of course, he moved to Randall County. His brother Frank settled in Happy, Texas. I'm not sure if it's in Randall County or Swisher County, but he was in Happy and is buried in the cemetery there. I knew one of his sons that we call Cousin Charlie.

And I met him on two or three occasions. And he told me that, he said, “My folks came from Alsace-Lorraine,” so it all pretty well tied together, but we didn’t know all of that until all of the family that’s older than I am were already gone. So most of that is information I’ve gleaned from other sources over the past few years.

DM:

How did this come about, that you began delving into family history? You haven’t always done this I take it?

BAH:

Well, I tried to get started on it a few years ago, a number of years ago, but I had to make a living for my family, and I did a lot of traveling and didn’t have time to get involved. But when you just follow one lead after another, one thing leads to another. Actually, I did not know where the Murchisons came from, but when I started researching the Hellers—because I did know that Uncle Billy was famous in Canyon, and when I spent most of the day in Canyon researching his records and found out he came from Fayette County, I posted on the Fayette County web roots board there, or I was reading a post, and it said, “Roy F. Heller has information about Anettie Heller.” And that’s all it said. So I typed Roy F. Heller in Google, and it gave me name, address, the whole information, and he is a professor at Southern Methodist University. And he’s the same age you are. He was born in 1959—oh no, he was born in ’63. He’s the age of my youngest son, you’re the age of my oldest son. So he was born in 1963 and is much younger, but Dr. Heller has been a great source of help and gave me a lot of information about the Hellers. The reason I couldn’t figure it all out was because of the double marriage of Frank Heller. Roy is descended from his second wife, I’m descended from the first wife, and we’ve had a lot of e-mail correspondence. I’ve never met Roy F. Heller, but he has really been a help to me in this genealogical thing. But the key was that Heller came from Fayette County, and when I got searching there, I found records of the Murchison connection also.

DM:

What prompted you to do this? Was there always an interest in the family history, or did this develop later?

BAH:

I was always interested in it, but I didn’t do much about it until I retired and had time to spend on it. And the reason I started in Canyon with W. F. Heller is because he’s about the only one I knew anything about. And that was because my grandmother always talked about Uncle Billy. He was an uncle of her husband. She talked about Uncle Billy and the family had met him. I never met him, he died in 1936, before I met him, but I found a lot of information about him there.

DM:

Well, you probably started this at a good time, when you had Internet resources as well as other more traditional resources to follow.

BAH:

Well, actually I never got into the Internet thing until real recent years, and I've never had a day of tutoring on a computer, I just stumbled through it. So there's still a lot I don't know how to research, but mainly I would go to a library or whatever, and there's the house that W. F. Heller built in Canyon still stands today. And there's a plaque there telling about him being the first county clerk and that type thing. So we have seen that and I have pictures of it. And that just led to other things. I think I'm the only man that ever lived that can ride off in fifteen directions at once. But when on one family member and start really zeroing in on it, then something will happen that'll get me off on another line. I'm not a professional historian or genealogical person at all, just a West Texas farm boy that wanted to know about family history.

DM:

You've done a great job of pulling it out. There's a wealth of information. Who was the ancestor that was a sheriff in Denton County during the Civil War? There's some mention of that, I'm trying to fit him in.

BAH:

That was my father's grandfather.

DM:

Okay. That's your father's line.

BAH:

His name was Steven S. Hyatt. And in researching him, I found a lot of other family that I knew nothing about. But he was sheriff of Denton County. The way I found that was down at the Mahon Library right here in Lubbock, Texas. There are two books that are written about the early history of Denton County, and I found his name there. I did not find that he was sheriff there until I went to Denton to research down there. There's all kinds of information in the museums down there.

He came to Texas. He and either three or four of his brothers came to Texas. They were in Iowa, and they came to Texas. The other brothers went on west, and wound up in the Salt Lake City area and became Mormons. Steven stayed in Denton, and was one of the first businessmen in Denton when the town was formed. He settled first at Holford Prairie, which is somewhere around Flower Mound now, and lived there, and then at Old Alton, which was the first county seat of Denton County, I believe. And he lived there, and that's where his son, Jess Hyatt, my grandfather was born. And also, my father was born there in Denton County.

In tracing them, I didn't know just how it all came about, but I found out from talking to my parents that there was a Dick Hyatt in Ralls. Back in the early days, he was editor of the *Ralls Banner* newspaper, and I asked my dad one time, Are we kin to that Dick Hyatt? He said, Yeah, distant kin. That's all he ever said about it. And I never knew how we were kin to him, but after I started researching, I found a newspaper clipping when my grandfather, Jess Hyatt, died at Crosbyton. *The Crosbyton Chronicle* had an article saying that Jess Hyatt was the uncle of Dick Hyatt, who was the editor of the *Ralls Banner*, and it all kind of tied together. But still, I didn't know much about it, and I began researching.

I had a friend who lived in Ralls, and I asked her if she could find out anything about Dick Hyatt. And she said, Well my mother remembers the family and knew somebody that knew somebody that knew somebody in Arizona, and she wrote to this lady in Arizona, and she wrote back, saying, I really don't know much about the family, but my cousin in Boise, Idaho, Judy Bacon, is the family historian. Gave me an address, so I wrote to Judy, and she said, Well, really, all I know is that my great-grandfather was S. S. Hyatt in Denton, Texas. Well, that's my great-grandfather, so what's going on here? And she had documents showing that he had married in 1962 [1862] to a Janie Walling from England. Well, the record I had was the 1860 census showing him with his older daughter, Loretta, who was nine years old at the time, another daughter two years old named Clarissa, and then Jess Hyatt, eight months old. And he was my grandfather.

So in 1860, he was the baby of the home, and it didn't say the wife was Jane, but listed after S. S. Hyatt's name was Jane, age twenty-five. A twenty-five year old girl is likely not the mother of a nine-year-old girl, so there's still some mystery there, but Loretta, the older girl, married at age sixteen married Boone Daugherty, and they raised Jess and Clarissa. Well, S. S. Hyatt died in 1867, but I didn't know that he had had another wife and another family until I met Judy Bacon. So Judy has been a key to my research, and one thing just leads to another, on and on.

I was organizing a family reunion in Denton, because I thought, Well, that's the furthest back we could trace the Hyatts in Texas, so in this organizing the reunion, Judy told me by e-mail, said, I have one date in July that I can be there, and I will be there if you have the reunion on that date. So I set it for her convenience on July 25-26, 2008. So she came to the reunion. From there we traced it—that I have a lot of other relatives that I didn't know about. But that all came about through this connection in Ralls.

And then in this same reunion organization, I found another one. I was in Denton to find a place to have the reunion, and doing research, walked into the old county courthouse, which is now a museum, and I told the young lady there that I wanted to do some research on the Hyatt and Daugherty families. And she said, Well, that is strange that two men would come in here the same day, researching the same two families. She said, Another man just left here a few hours ago, researching the same two families. I said, Who is he? What's his name? She said, Sam Eaton and he had an e-mail address for him, but that's about all I knew. So I told my niece, who was with me—I didn't have a computer there and any way to contact Judy, but I gave my niece the e-mail address for Judy Bacon in Boise, Idaho, and said, Get in touch with her and tell her

what we found today. By the next morning, she had already been in touch with Sam by e-mail, got back in touch with me, and we established e-mail contacts and Sam said, Well, I live most of the time in southeast Asia, but I will be in Texas on that date, and I'll come to the reunion, and at least one of my daughters will come along.

So when we got there for the reunion, I met Sam Eaton and Judy Bacon at the same time, and Sam is descended from this Loretta Hyatt, who married Boone Daugherty, and he's descended from them. So we had a close contact from him. He's married to a Vietnamese girl, has six lovely daughters that they raised in Texas. The story of their life and how that they came together is very interesting, and it is in the Vietnamese Center at Texas Tech, a recording that was done in a similar manner of what we're doing right now with Bob Eaton and Sam also did a recording. I haven't heard all of his, but hers is very interesting.

DM:

That's funny how you come across these things.

BAH:

It is.

DM:

They're treasures. Well, let's go back to John Murchison for a little while, because you know more about him than just about his coming to Texas, his days in the Republic of Texas, it continues on. You said that he later—did he come out—let's see. Just pick it up there at the Republic and kind of give it to me—

BAH:

Well, he served in the congress, the Fifth Congress of the Republic of Texas, and settled there in La Grange. When the Gold Rush started in California, the wagon trains were coming through La Grange on their way to California from Houston and points east of there, even some from New Orleans, one place and another going to California in the Gold Rush. And Duncan Murchison, John's older son, decided that he was going to go to the gold fields, and John wasn't comfortable with his young son joining just any wagon train that came through there, so he had some experience in organization, and had fought in the Battle of Kickapoo and other encounters, had been a public officer, so he decided to form a company and go himself. And he formed a company of approximately a hundred men to go to California to search for gold. And he made up a list of what each of them had to have, and I don't have the list before me, but it included an axe and some ammunition, and one thing and another that they'd need along the way, and he organized it in a military fashion, and he was known as Captain Murchison. They left La Grange, and went through Austin, and then on west from there—

DM:

About what year was this?

BAH:

That was in 1849.

DM:

Was it really? It was the first—

BAH:

So he was the first one to lead a wagon train across the Guadalupe Pass. The other wagon trains were going south down and following the Rio Grande, and a longer way around, but he opened up a new trail through the Guadalupe Pass and across the desert. There was also another wagon train, a man named Cox, that kept a good diary. A lot of what I know about Murchison came from him, because he would mention their trails crossed at times on the way out there, and he wrote more about Murchison than he wrote about himself. But they got over into Arizona and John Murchison was killed in an accident along the way. Apparently the way the story goes is he had his rifle hanging on his saddle, led his horse under a tree and a twig caught the rifle and fired it. Now, that's a coincidence that wouldn't happen very often just leading a horse under a tree, but the bullet hit John in the head and killed him, and he was buried along the trail. But Duncan, his son, and other members of the wagon train went on to California.

DM:

His son was young, too.

BAH:

His son was—one account says seventeen years old, and another says nineteen, but somewhere in that range. He went on to California and didn't find any gold, apparently, because he came back to La Grange later on and married a lady named Harriet Dodson in La Grange, and had two daughters, and then he was drafted into the Civil War, and his wife died, and he had these two daughters. And he married again then, he married the daughter of Frank Heller who was seventeen years younger than he was, so there was a vast difference in their age. And then Duncan Murchison died when their oldest son was fourteen years old. And that son was my grandfather.

DM:

And how did he die? Do you know—Duncan?

BAH:

Evidently just natural causes. People in those days didn't live as long as they do now, but he did die fairly young.

DM:

Now, can you tell me about the move out to Dickens County?

BAH:

Okay. Well, going from Duncan Murchison, after his death his widow Anettie stayed on in either Burnet County or Lampasas County, I'm not sure which, along about the county line, because he had an address in Lampasas, but yet we know that he had land in Burnet County. So she stayed on in the farm there for a number of years, evidently she and this fourteen year old boy farmed the place. I've not found any record of that, but my grandfather, John A. Murchison, John Alexander Murchison, who was her son, married in Lampasas County. And then they were next found in Taylor County, in the Abilene area, and John A. Murchison, my grandfather, became the postmaster at Buffalo Gap. And there are newspaper clippings about that. One says John Murchison was all smiles today because he had a new baby boy, and that was the one I call Uncle Lee. John Lee was the oldest child, and then after that, they had a girl named Ethel, and then another girl, named Nettie, who was my mother.

DM:

Was she named after Anettie?

BAH:

Named after Anettie, I'm sure.

DM:

Her grandmother.

BAH:

When he left Buffalo Gap, those three children is all he had. He lived one year in Stonewall County, had another son born in Stonewall County, and then in 1901, they moved to Dickens County. He bought land from "Teed" Davis who had homesteaded there in Dickens County, lived in a dugout, and he bought the place, I understand, for a dollar and a half an acre.

DM:

Six hundred acres? Is that what it was?

BAH:

Well, it was a short section, six-hundred and forty acres is a section, but that was a just a little under six-hundred acres, where two surveys came together and it was what was left between them. It joined the Pitchfork Ranch, which was east of it. The other three sides were Matador Land, and it was all open range. The Pitchfork was fenced in 1901 when they moved there, but the Matador wasn't fenced until later. The cattle just all roamed together. The settlers coming in to Dickens County all came right up the road by the Murchison place. It's the only road leading in to Dickens County from the east, and still is today except for one little farm road up in the very corner, northeast corner of the county has a farm road. But it's the only highway coming in to Dickens County today, but the highway's about three-fourths of a mile south of where it was at that time.

DM:

It is? Okay. Is there any trace of the old wagon road?

BAH:

It's just about disappeared now. When I was a boy, I hunted in that Pitchfork pasture. Don't tell the manager. (DM laughs) and I've walked for miles up and down that old road there. The settlers graded a pretty good road there with team-drawn graders. And the way they did it in those days, there was no organization in the county, no money to care for the roads, so the farmers took turns. They assigned each one a certain time that you take care of the road this month, and they used their teams from the farms, horse-drawn graders.

DM:

Who had a grader?

BAH:

The community must've bought one. I don't really know. But I do have family oral history that they took turns.

DM:

Some of them could've gotten a tough assignment in a muddy month, or—

BAH:

Could have because that road right across the north side of the Murchison place was one of the muddiest roads in the whole country. And it was just about impassable.

DM:

Do you think it's possible to go up there and see a trace of that road today? Or do you think it's pretty much gone?

BAH:

I can show you where the part through the Murchison place is, because when it was deeded back to the original owners, after the new highway was built in 1935 or '36, the fence was built right down the middle of that road. And our turn-row on one side and the neighbor on the other side. But it was a visible road then. There's some signs of it, I'm sure, in places. But we're talking now about sixty, seventy years ago, when I was a boy. There was a good trace of it, but now it'd be hard to find. I could point out some areas of it.

DM:

By the way, is there any trace of the dugout that was there that was the homestead—I guess it was the homestead dugout—

BAH:

Yes, the dugout we filled in later on. My earliest recollection of it was in 1940. It was still kind of usable as a storage place, but it was not really a place you'd want to be in, because the spiders and the snakes and everything else lived in there, too. But it was there until sometime in the 1940s that we tore it down. Just caved it in and graded over it.

DM:

Is that why people did that, to keep their kids from getting bit by a snake or something like that? Was it a safety deal, or just to use that land?

BAH:

Well, it just wasn't any good. We didn't use it as a dugout for shelter from storms. It got to be the place you didn't want to go in it. More danger there than there was in the storm. And it was also falling in, so instead of repair and upkeep, we just filled it in with the farm tractor and graded over it. I know just about where it was, and of course, digging there, you could find traces of things, I'm sure. It was right in the yard there at the house, which still stands.

DM:

Who owns that land now?

BAH:

A lady named Shirley Largent. Her father bought it from Roland Murchison, and then when he died he left it to Shirley, and Shirley lives down at Alvin, which is close to Houston. I have met her on a couple of occasions. She came out to the dedication of the plaque when we dedicated a plaque showing where the first school was. The school was built on the corner of the Murchison place.

DM:

Northwest—

BAH:

On the northwest corner of the place. My grandfather deeded one acre of land to the county, and had a clause in that it would revert back to him if it ever ceased to be used as a school. In 1925 I believe it was dedicated back to him. There's another school built a mile and a half west of that.

DM:

Is this the other school or is this the original?

BAH:

No, that's the new school. It was this picture that I just handed to David is from the 1925 era, and my uncle, Earl, the youngest Murchison boy which was born there on the place at Dickens, is in this group of people at the new Wichita school. And I attended this school one semester in 1940, when we moved back to Dickens County. I went in the sixth grade, I was in the school. And it has since been abandoned. There is still a cistern, which was at the teacherage which was a house just south of the school where the schoolteachers lived. That old cistern is still there.

DM:

Was there a coal house? Do you remember how it was heated?

BAH:

It was heated with a coal stove. Coal had to be carried in. I don't remember where the coal was stored, but I do remember the heater that we stayed warm by.

DM:

You still see little coal houses near these abandoned schools sometimes so I was wondering. The original school was called Wichita school and then this later school also? Was that the name of it?

BAH:

It was Wichita school.

DM:

Is this Wichita's watershed? Upper branches of the Wichita?

BAH:

The divide between the Wichita and the Brazos River runs between the Murchison place and the new Wichita school, so it's right on the head of the Wichita River. And the Wichita tank was on

Matador Land. It's still identifiable. It's not a water-holding tank any longer, but it's still identifiable, and it was right on—just north of the line of the Murchison place. In fact, the road still today makes a bend around the end of the tank dam. So it was right there by the Murchison place. And that's where they got their drinking water from when they moved there, and lived at first in the old dugout that the homesteader had left there. And they would—my uncle told me that they would back the wagon into the tank with barrels in it and get out there and dip up the water out of the tank into the barrels, and then drive out. And that's where they got their drinking water. The well water in Dickens County, in that part of Dickens County is gypsy, and it's all right for livestock, but it's not very pleasant for human consumption.

DM:

And you used it in your gardens as well, the gypsy water?

BAH:

It was good to irrigate with. Later on, we did have an irrigation well and experimented with irrigation there on the place. But the water at first came from this Wichita tank and then when the house was built they built cisterns and used rain water.

DM:

So the Wichita tank is a sweet spot somewhere in the middle of all this gypsy country, I guess? There's a good source of water there, but everything else around it was—

BAH:

But it was just rainwater.

DM:

Oh, it was rainwater. Yeah. Surface water—

BAH:

When there was a drought, the tanks would dry up. Cattle would bog down in the mud trying to get a drink of water, and a lot of times would die there unless they were drug out.

DM:

So it wasn't spring-fed, it was a rain catchment—earthen, all earth?

BAH:

All-earth dam, built with teams and fresnos.

DM:

Dug into an upper ravine—?

BAH:

Right across the head water of the Wichita River. It's about three-fourths of a mile from the divide down to it.

DM:

How far from the modern highway?

BAH:

It'd be three-fourths of a mile north of the modern highway. It was in sight of the first Wichita school. I remember my uncle telling me one time that at school they saw something swimming in this tank. They couldn't figure out what it was. It was something strange they'd never seen before, and when they got down there and identified it, it was a pig that was swimming and only his snout and his ears were showing above the water, and he was swimming across that tank.

DM:

(laughs) Dickens County's own Loch Ness monster, I guess.

BAH:

I guess so. Must've been.

DM:

I bet it attracted some wildlife.

BAH:

I'm sure it did. And cattle and—everything. That was the only source of water—of good water—in that part of the world.

DM:

How often would they have to go fill water barrels—since this was their sole source of drinking water, how often would they go there to fill barrels?

BAH:

I really don't know, but I know that we were pretty conservative with water, even after I was growing up there. They must've had a daily routine of going for water, because they got water to cook with, to wash, and all of that. They let the cattle drink gyp water, of course, but—

DM:

They must have fenced it or something to try to keep the cattle out of the water supply?

BAH:

Nope. No.

DM:

Just let them drink it.

BAH:

Cattle came down and drank out of it, and the people in the community hauled water from there—

DM:

Pigs went swimming in it. (laughs

BAH:

Pigs went swimming in it. A flock of ducks would come in once in a while and settle in on it in the migration season. Then the tank sprang a leak, a suck hole they called it, and it wouldn't hold water anymore. So sometime after that, before my time, there was another dam built below that one. And it held water up until it washed out in the late 1930s, I guess it was.

DM:

It was an earthen dam.

BAH:

It was an earthen dam also. And then there were two more dams below that across the Wichita River, and on the next place down there's a tank that as far as I know is still there and still holds water today.

DM:

Well, that's the good thing about being at the top of the watershed, because after a few dams, there might not be much water—(laughs)

BAH:

That's right. Well now, there were springs about a half mile down from the Murchison place, it became a running stream. Little springs, a trickle of water all the time in there.

DM:

Okay. What happened when the Wichita tank dried up? Did it ever completely dry up?

BAH:

It did completely dry up. Of course, by then people had wells and pumps and all of this. If they needed to haul drinking water, they could haul it from Dickens. We used cistern water, but my grandmother couldn't drink cistern water, so we had another little cistern that we hauled water from Dickens and put it in there for her to drink. Dickens had good water back in those days.

DM:

Her stomach couldn't handle the cistern water?

BAH:

I don't know what the thing was. She just said she couldn't drink cistern water, so we hauled water for her, even up into the sixties.

DM:

Can you describe the cistern to me, the type of roof and how it ran off and the type of cistern that caught the water?

BAH:

Okay, there were two rainwater cisterns at the Murchison house: one on the west side, one on the east side. And they were just holes dug in the ground and then plastered with cement—concrete inside, then had a concrete structure on top to make it above ground and a pulley across to pull water up in a bucket. The house was guttered, and when it rained the water would run into the cistern. In normal years we had plenty of water but a few times they would dry up. And we'd take advantage of the dry times to clean out the cistern. When it'd be real low, we'd draw all the water out of it and scrub it out good and then start over again when it came the next rain.

DM:

What were the dimensions of one of the cisterns?

BAH:

It'd be a total guess. I'd been down in there a lot of times to clean it out, but I would say it was fifteen feet across and probably—maybe eighteen feet deep from top to bottom.

DM:

Wow. Oh, that's big.

BAH:

It did hold an awful lot of water. And the water would sour sometimes if you hadn't had a rain in a long time, the water would sour in the cistern. When it would you could stir it, turn it over and

it'd refresh itself and be good drinking water again.

DM:

Well, how would you do that?

BAH:

Just drop a bucket in there, lift it up and pour it out and do it again.

DM:

How many times would it take before you had it good and stirred? Was it a long time?

BAH:

Pretty good half day's work, it there was much water in there.

DM:

Did you have to boil the water because you were concerned about the quality of it?

BAH:

Well, I don't remember. I wasn't concerned about it. I liked cistern water. But we had company sometimes that didn't want to drink it. And especially if a rat fell in there and drowned, you'd draw him out, pour him out on the ground and draw up a bucket of water. That's just the way we lived in those days. I started living there with my grandmother and my Uncle Roland when I was twelve years old. We had lived on the plains and then moved back down there, and I lived with them because Roland was crippled and my grandmother was old and it was hard for her to draw water out of the cisterns and to cut wood and bring it in, so I stayed with them and did the chores for—well, from then until I was grown. And I would draw enough water out of the cistern for her to use all day long and carry in the wood in the winter times for her to have a fire and then milk the cow, and then catch the school bus before daylight sometimes and then come in in the evening and do it all again.

DM:

This was the school bus to Dickens, wasn't it?

BAH:

The school bus came from the Deer Lake Community back to the north of the place, and picked up all the kids and would make a circle to the new Wichita school and drop of the grade school kids. And then would make another route to pick up some more, come back to the school and drop them off, and then all the high school kids would go on into Dickens and come back in the evening the reverse of that. It was a ninety mile round trip every day that the school bus would make. We could either stay at the Wichita school while it made its other route, or ride around the

route, whichever way we wanted. I found out that I could get off the bus in the evening and walk home and be there before the bus got there. So a lot of times in pretty weather I'd walk that two miles or practice my running a little bit, and beat the bus home.

DM:

You said you would bring in the wood, was it a wood-burning stove?

BAH:

Wood-burning stoves. At the time we moved back there when I was twelve years old, that's the only heat we had. Later on we did put in a butane stove, but wood-burning stove was the only source of heat and cooking. Grandma cooked on a wood cook stove.

DM:

What kind of wood did you burn? Did you have enough mesquite around?

BAH:

Mesquite. Other woods, but mostly mesquite.

DM:

It wasn't wood brought in then, it was wood that you chopped?

BAH:

Wood that you'd go out and cut down yourself.

DM:

Mesquite's pretty tough to cut, too.

BAH:

Mesquite is tough to cut. Later on, we got a saw that ran off the belt on the pulley of the tractor and we'd saw the wood, but in the beginning it was chopping with an axe.

DM:

Now this house they were living in—I guess we need to back up a little bit, because I know that there was a small house built after—let's see—did they first live in the dugout when they came out there?

BAH:

In the dugout until they could get the first house built. And the first house was a fourteen-by-fourteen, with a dirt floor.

DM:

Now this is John A. Murchison we're talking about that first came out?

BAH:

John A. Murchison. He had three children when they left Buffalo Gap, one born in Stonewall County, and then two more boys that were born on the place there. My Uncle Roland, the one that was crippled was born in 1903, I believe. The younger was born in about 1905, or eight, somewhere along there. And they were born on the place. The whole family lived in that fourteen-by-fourteen. Well, the youngest boy wouldn't have been born then, I guess. But the rest of them lived in that fourteen foot square house until they built the house that still stands there today.

DM:

This includes your mother, Nettie—

BAH:

My mother Nettie.

DM:

Did you ever see a remnant of that house? Was there any remains of it?

BAH:

Of the original one?

DM:

Of the fourteen-by-fourteen?

BAH:

No, it was gone before.

DM:

Did your mother ever describe it?

BAH:

Just that it had a dirt floor and that they would sweep the dirt out.

DM:

It was trampled hard enough that they could—

BAH:

It was trampled hard. That ground is really hard when it's trampled. That lumber to build it and the house that still stands today was hauled by a wagon from Quanah, which was ninety miles away the nearest railhead. And that must have been a pretty good week's journey, to go to Quanah, buy a load of lumber and bring it back. In those days, just the ordinary life of the people was a full-time occupation. I suppose that's one reason that we didn't have much family history. They were too busy making a living to be concerned with ancestors.

DM:

Survival takes top priority, doesn't it?

BAH:

It does, but Anettie, my great-grandmother, did come and visit the family. I never knew her. She died two years before I was born, but she was there at least two or three times to visit them.

DM:

Anettie?

BAH:

Anettie. They went to Abilene a few times to visit after moving out there. One thing that I think is a real amusing story is that in the 1950s, we had some freight coming in to Abilene and got a card in the mail—actually it was live goats is what it was. They said it missed the train on to Spur, and we'll have to wait until next week to ship them out to Spur. So I told my uncle, I'll just go down to get those goats. And it's a hundred and twenty miles from the place to Abilene, and I got up early the next morning, had a new 1951 International pickup. I got up at four o'clock in the morning, drove to Abilene, ate breakfast at a café and then went to the depot when it opened, got the goats and came back home. At about eleven o'clock that morning I walked in the kitchen, my grandmother said, I thought you were going to Abilene today. I said, I've already been. (DM laughs) She said, You've been to Abilene and back today? Yes ma'am. Two hours down there, two hours back. One hour down there. And she said, "My lands, it took us four days one-way to make that trip." They had made it in a wagon the first time, and then they said the next time we went to Abilene we had gotten a hack and a fast-stepping team, and it wasn't near the torment it was the first time. But in a wagon, a hundred and twenty miles was a long way.

DM:

Whew, don't you know. And I guess it was all paved in '51?

BAH:

Oh, yes. Yeah, it was paved then.

DM:

Quick trip.

BAH:

Twenty miles to Guthrie, south on 83, right on down to Abilene.

DM:

Just as you do now.

BAH:

Two hours down there and two back.

DM:

Amazing. For her, especially.

BAH:

She also had a little trouble adapting to the modern age when we got gas there and put in a gas stove. She said, Well, I've heard about gas stoves blowing up. I'm afraid of that thing. My uncle said, Well, you don't have to use it. Just let us put it in. The room is big enough, you can go ahead and have your kerosene stove. The wood stove was still there; had wood and kerosene. We put in the gas stove and she said, Well, you can put it in there, because I'm not going to be able to carry on here for many more years, and it can sit there and the next person may want it but I'm afraid of it. So we got it all hooked up, I showed her how it worked; just turn it on and it came on. Didn't have to strike a match or anything. [It] had a pilot light. She said, Is that all there is to it? Turn it on? I said, Yes ma'am, that's it. Turn it on, turn it off. She never lit that kerosene stove again.

DM:

(laughs) Just way too convenient.

BAH:

Too convenient.

DM:

Too clean.

BAH:

She would adapt to modern ways. In fact, we were amazed sometimes at new things that would come out that she wanted to try. She liked it because it wasn't near the work she had always had

to put up with.

DM:

What year did she die?

BAH:

She died in 1962.

DM:

An amazing time that her life spanned.

BAH:

Ninety years.

DM:

Amazing ninety years that her life spanned.

BAH:

She was an amazing woman. When I think back about them driving up in a wagon with four little kids and night coming on from wherever they'd traveled, and no house, just an old dugout, they had to either camp out on surface or in that dugout, had to haul water and chop wood and all of those things, and yet she survived. She was raised an orphan. Her father was murdered when she was fourteen years old. Her mother died about a year later, and family and friends raised she and her siblings, seven other children. She never would tell us anything about it, except her father was murdered. If you asked any more questions, "I don't want to talk about it." And at age ninety, when she died, she still hadn't talked about it. I'm the one that actually uncovered the story.

Then when my aunt Lotella, the wife of their youngest son—when Lotella died, I thought, Well now she's the last one. I'm the senior generation now and I don't know much about the family. And I had talked with her about it, and she said, Mrs. Murchison did tell me a little bit about it, but not much. All she knew was that he was murdered. So I didn't even know where they lived at the time. I was looking in the Lampasas area because that's where she got married, and I thought, Well maybe that's where they were. No records of any kind. And finally, some way, we got a connection that they had lived in Kaufman. So I posted again on the web page, "Would like information about J. W. Heller, or Sands that died on that date," and the next day I got an e-mail from three volunteers in Kaufman, saying there was a story—J. W. Sands murdered on a certain date. I got a clipping from that old newspaper story, and it told all about his murder. And then we knew that his wife, my grandmother's mother, was buried in Fort Worth. She was a Melton, originally, and her family, her brothers, were pretty well-known in the Fort Worth area so she

was buried in their plot. And where the family went from there we really don't know. But they were farmed out to different relatives, various ones—

DM:

Does the Southwest Collection have a copy of the news clipping along with your other family—

BAH:

I'm sure that it does. If it's not there, it will be.

DM:

Is that something you can talk about on a recorder, or would you rather not?

BAH:

No, I don't mind talking about it.

DM:

How did that happen then?

BAH:

They had moved from Mississippi, the Sands-Melton. J. W. Sands and Sally Melton were married in Monroe, Mississippi, and they were so young they were afraid to stay by themselves at first, is what the family said, but they had several children when they left Mississippi. And of course after the Civil War, the time of Reconstruction and all, it was a pretty rough time. And a lot of people in Mississippi moved to Texas at that time. And they came, my grandmother remembered nothing about the trip except crossing the Mississippi River on a ferryboat. And she was just a child when they came across, but she still remembered that and talked about "that terrible riva." She never quit softening those "r's. " That Mississippi way—"that terrible riva that we had to cross." And that's all she remembered about the journey. And she never talked—in fact, I didn't even know she ever lived at Kaufman until she was already gone. But they moved to Kaufman and were living there.

He had been in a squabble of some kind with a Columbus—I've forgotten the last name now, the man that—anyway, he was a prominent man in town. They had had an argument about something, and got to a point that in a conversation when they were trying to settle it, he brought his gun out in case he needed it, and then this man's brother, who was a drunkard, took up the argument and tried to threaten him actually. Sent notes to him, put notes on the mailbox, and even threw a brick through the window with a note tied to it threatening him. We don't know much about that thing, it was not settled at the time of his death. He went out to cut wood that day and his wife was in bed with their youngest child. Back in those days, when a woman had a baby, well she had to stay in bed for two weeks.

So apparently my grandmother, who was the oldest daughter, had stayed home from school that day. It was in February, and apparently she had stayed home to take care of her mother and the new baby. And he was going out to chop wood and she said, Well, I'm uneasy about that man that's been stalking you. You better take your gun with you. So he took his shotgun and his axe and went out to chop wood. And after a while, they heard a shot. And she sent my grandmother out to see what had happened, and when she got up to the place, she saw the man riding away on his horse and recognized him, and she thought he would kill her, too. So she hid until he rode off, and then she went and found her father laying on top of his axe and his gun. And he had slipped up and shot him. The news clipping said he had fled. And there was another news clipping about a year later, said that he'd been found in another town, and would be returned to Kaufman, but there the record ended. I still need to get back to Kaufman and do more research—

DM:

You don't know if it ever came to trial or if your grandmother had to testify, or—

BAH:

No, it came to trial in absentia. They had a story, they had a trial, but they didn't have a prisoner because he had fled. I got copies of the court records there, but have found nothing further than that. I'm sure there are records somewhere, but I haven't traced that yet.

DM:

Now you know why it was so traumatic to your grandmother.

BAH:

Right.

DM:

She saw the man and she was afraid—probably afraid for a long time after that.

BAH:

The news clipping said the oldest child—well, actually, she was not the oldest child. She had a brother two years older than her, but she was the one that was sent and found him. So I just—it's more supposition than anything else, but I suppose that he was either at school or at work, because the paper said she was twelve years old. Actually, she was fourteen on that date, and he was sixteen, so he probably was either working or at school, and the other children—there were seven in all—the youngest one was just two weeks old when the father was murdered.

DM:

Anyway, it explains the trauma. It would explain the trauma.

BAH:

And they all turned out well.

DM:

This is Martha, right?

BAH:

Martha, Earl was her name.

DM:

I understand, or I got the idea from what you wrote up that she was a little hesitant about going from Buffalo Gap on out to Dickens. Did you ever get that idea?

BAH:

Well, she liked the social life in Buffalo Gap. Of course, him being the postmaster, they were well-known in town. Everybody knew them and she had friends and had relatives there, his relatives, because his mother lived there. And she really didn't care much for pioneer life, but she was subject to her husband. She respected him and called him "Mr. Murchison." I never heard her refer to him as anything but Mr. Murchison.

DM:

Well, it's a different kind of country, too. Buffalo Gap is a nice, pretty area, and Dickens is pretty, but it's rugged.

BAH:

In 1901 it was still pretty rugged in Dickens County. And Buffalo Gap, of course, being close to Abilene, had been settled for many years before this part of the country out here. But Dickens County was formed in—what, 1887, somewhere along there. So it was still a new county. My grandfather did serve as county commissioner in one term, about 1914 or somewhere along there, he was county commissioner. But in the early days they built their own roads, did their own maintenance.

DM:

Here was Pitchfork Ranch, then Murchison farm, and then the Matador Ranch. So it sounds like he was one of the first settlers beside the large ranches, right? In that area? Or were there others there when they got there?

BAH:

There were some others there when they got there, and then others were coming. So there were several families that preceded them, but they were a little further away. The Shaw family had

been there for quite some time. And the Askins, who was the father-in-law of Ebb [Eldgbridge] Shaw, had a dugout up in Dickens, close to the spring that's right east of Dickens. So Eb Shaw had been there for quite some time. There were the Drivers and the Counts family, several other families that were already there, and then other families that came and would stop and spend the night, camp out there at the Murchison place, because it's the first place they came to. And then they would go on to where they were going. So it was a settling time for the county. I don't really know just how many people lived in Dickens County at that time, but—

DM:

Was this ever considered a little community? It had a school—

BAH:

It was the Wichita community.

DM:

It was called Wichita Community?

BAH:

Wichita Community.

DM:

Is there any trace of that name still on maps, like the Roads of Texas maps or a cemetery?

BAH:

Oh yes. I'm sure there is. I know the Wichita tank's on some of those early maps, and the Wichita River. There's a plaque that we put up where that first school was. It's just known as the Wichita Community.

DM:

Driving through, you just don't know that.

BAH:

No, you don't know that driving through. In fact, it was a thriving community where the family owned nearly a quarter-section back in the 1930, and forties and fifties, along there. But it has gone down now to where there's very few people living in that community—three or four families, maybe.

DM:

How many would you estimate were in the Wichita Community at its height?

BAH:

There were probably a couple of hundred. Wichita, Croton and Deer Lake communities all just there together, and it's hard to—

DM:

Did they all have separate schools or was it a main school?

BAH:

They did have. Now, the Deer Lake school, I don't know when it was abandoned. Apparently it was just for a very short time, and then they came to Wichita school. But Croton had a school, and there was always a battle going on between Croton and Wichita. At one time they consolidated, and then the Wichita people pulled back out of the Croton school. The story goes that they did it on a holiday when the courthouse was closed and nobody could get a restraining order, and they went and moved the Wichita school back to the Wichita community. And someone at Croton said, Well, I just can't stand to see our school torn up like this! One of the Wichita men said, Well then, you better sit down, because we're going to move it. And they did. So two schools went together, and then they came back. When we moved back there in 1940, and I went one semester to Wichita school, there was a controversy going on then. Some wanted to consolidate with Dickens, and others didn't. The Pitchfork Ranch especially didn't, because Dickens was an independent school district and they knew taxes would go up. People in the Wichita Community, many of them didn't want to, and some did want to, so it was a controversy going on all the time there. And eventually when the school did close, they divided up and part went to Patton Springs, part went to Dickens. I went to school at Dickens, but my youngest sister went to Patton Springs School. That's where she graduated because the school had been split up and the Wichita school was closed.

DM:

When you came back, was Croton still there? Back in '40?

BAH:

Croton?

DM:

Mm-hm. Was Croton still there?

BAH:

Oh, yes.

DM:

I bet there was a healthy rivalry between those two.

BAH:

There really was.

DM:

Did you have athletic events between each other?

BAH:

They had baseball games between each other, I don't know of any other athletic contests. Eventually Croton of course, went to Patton Springs, and part of the Wichita Community went to Patton Springs, and part to Dickens. But those little schools were thriving then. Patton Springs, McAdoo, Dickens, Jayton, and Girard, all had schools and they all played football and basketball with each other. And there's quite a rivalry going there.

DM:

When do you think Wichita Community hit its peak in population? About what year would you say? What time period before it began a decline?

BAH:

It began its decline when World War II broke out, really.

DM:

Okay. Why is that?

BAH:

The whole nation became so mobile at that time, and of course transportation was one of the things that held civilization back. I asked someone one time, Well, why was other parts of the world established so much longer before that part of the world was? And they said, Well, there's no rivers there. Rivers were the way of getting around back in those days, and they had to build roads, so transportation is one of the things that held it back. At the time World War II started, by the time it was over, the transportation industry had totally changed. People that had grown up with a wagon and team now had automobiles. They began driving in to other places. It's so easy to go where you want to go, that community life just somewhat dissolved at that time.

DM:

Okay.

[break in recording]

DM:

Talking about transportation at the time of World War II, I was wondering when that road got paved through there.

BAH:

Okay, the new highway through Dickens County was built in either 1935 or '36. I'm not sure just which, but when it was built, my Uncle Earl, the youngest Murchison boy built the store building there and ran that store for several years. Had a booming business there as long as it was a gravel road. But when they paved it, the people then would drive on by. Instead of stopping at every country store, they would drive from Guthrie to Dickens without stopping, so his business went down some and he closed the store up. And then in 1940, when we moved back down there we opened it again. My dad ran it until 1954. When I went into the army he closed the store and moved in with Roland, then. That highway was paved probably in '36 or '37, along there somewhere.

DM:

There's a whole string of abandoned stores in Dickens. Was that the same time period you think? Were these little stores popping up along the main road in Dickens in the thirties and forties?

BAH:

After that highway was built through there, and I'm thinking 1935. Dickens had an all-night cafe and station that was open for years and years. From Seymour to Dickens there was nothing open at night. Dickens always had an all-night spot until more recent years. And when we moved back to the store in 1940, on a holiday weekend is a solid string of cars, people going from Lubbock back to wherever they came from for the holiday. And at night, you could just see headlights as far as you could see. And then after the weekend, you'd see them coming back the other way. And we had a lot of business there at the store, people stopping back in those days. That highway 82, it's called 114 now, but it's still called 82 also, and it was the road from Lubbock to Fort Worth at that time, before interstate 20 was built. There was a lot of traffic through there.

DM:

It's still the best way to go, as far as I'm concerned.

BAH:

I still use it, I travel it. But the stores in Dickens kind of came and went through the years. They never tore them down, they'd just leave them and build another one.

DM:

It looks like it was a bustling place at one time.

BAH:

It was. There were at least four hundred people living there when we moved back in 1940.

DM:

Can you tell me about the wildlife in that area around Murchison farm as it existed—as far back as you remember—and how it's different, or maybe the same now? How it compares to now? Say the deer, for example.

BAH:

Wildlife runs in cycles, and the Murchisons talked about when they first came there that there were deer and antelope in abundance, but the deer and antelope were killed off. At the time I lived there, we had quail, different kinds of birds, and rabbits. You'd go out any night and shoot rabbits in the headlights of a pickup. And coyotes, bobcats, skunks, badgers, raccoons, all there, and they would rise and fall. When there's a lot of rabbits, well then the coyotes start coming in and before long, you're overrun with coyotes and don't see many rabbits. And it's just kind of up and down that way. But the deer now have come back. I suppose that just everybody would shoot a deer when they wanted to and decimated the population is what happened to them. And my grandmother always said the reason mesquite trees overran Dickens County was because they killed the prairie dogs. Said prairie dogs would eat those beans and keep the mesquite down. I don't think her theory will hold water, but they did do away with prairie dogs because they were a nuisance. They kept the grass from growing, they made holes that were dangerous for a horse to break a leg and give somebody a fall. And prairie dogs were all but extinguished in this part of the world until they fenced a little place here in MacKenzie Park and started bringing them back. And now they're getting everywhere again here, all over this part of the world.

DM:

How did they control prairie dogs? Did they hunt them, did they trap them, did they poison them?

BAH:

Yes.

DM:

All of the above. Was there ever any attempt at coyote control?

BAH:

Yes, there was. And in fact, Dickens had a county trapper who—this Jack Beachley I talked about driving the wagon here was county trapper. He set traps and cyanide guns for coyotes all over the county down there. There was a time when they had a bounty on them. You could kill a coyote and cut off the ears, take it in, get a dollar or two. They kept them down that way.

DM:

You used to see them hanging on fence posts along the way. Did you ever see that?

BAH:

I did. In fact, I've shot quite a few coyotes in my time, just with a .22 rifle. But some people would hunt them with callers, get in the blind and hide and call them like a wounded rabbit and the coyote would come up and they'd shoot him. I never did any of that. But just everywhere I went when I was growing up down there I had either a .22 or a shotgun in the pickup with me all the time, so I've killed a lot of coyotes that way.

DM:

Were they getting people's chickens or calves, or what?

BAH:

Very seldom they'd kill a calf, but they would catch chickens. We had to keep the chickens shut up for an hour or two until the sun got up good, because if you let them out early in the morning, the coyotes would be there and they would get them.

DM:

Did you ever hear about them getting small dogs or other pets around the place?

BAH:

They will kill small dogs. They sure will.

DM:

You hear about it now, I just wondered if that was a concern back then.

BAH:

Well, somewhat.

DM:

What other kinds of predators did you have? Did you have any kind of cats?

BAH:

The real old settlers talked about panthers. But I've seen two panthers in Dickens County in my lifetime. One was right at the store there at the corner of the Murchison place, the other one was on the Pitchfork Ranch when we were traveling back and forth from here to Springtown. One time I saw one there. But they range so far—a panther may range over a two-hundred mile radius. They come and go, so they weren't as prevalent as the early settlers tried to make them

be. Any noise that people hear at night, they'd say it was a panther screaming. But quite a few of the old-timers talked about them.

DM:

How about bobcats?

BAH:

Bobcats were plentiful. There were bobcats.

DM:

Well, I know that this is rattlesnake country.

BAH:

It is rattlesnake country.

DM:

Western Diamondback, I guess—rattlesnake.

BAH:

My Aunt Ethel, the Murchison's oldest daughter died from snakebite in 1905 there on the Murchison place. When they first moved there, they had a lot of wild plums, and they'd go to pick plums and she got snake bit in a plum thicket. At that time the nearest doctor was just east of Dickens on top of Burnham Hill there, there was a Dr. Burnham who lived there and John Lee [Murchison] had to ride a horse from the place to his house to get him, and then he had to come back by buggy—

DM:

John Lee is the brother of—

BAH:

John Lee is the older brother. And when Ethel was snake bit, well he went for the doctor but she died a day or two later.

DM:

How old was she? Do you know?

BAH:

Well, let's see—she would have been about seven or eight years old, I guess then.

DM:

Do you know where the snake bit her?

BAH:

I really don't.

DM:

Yeah. How about now? Are there a lot of rattlesnakes in the country?

BAH:

There always have been an abundance of rattlesnakes there. Back in I guess the 1940s, one April Fool's day, kids from the Wichita school ran off and went down in the Pitchfork pasture. I was already going in to Dickens at that time, but my younger brother Jesse and some of his friends went down there and they killed seven or eight rattlesnakes that day. They had found a den, and we would go back every weekend for a while, and we killed as many as thirteen in one day around that den. Really thinned them out where you didn't see a whole lot of them, but they're coming back now. My sister and her family went by the Murchison place down there, just walking around the old abandoned place and found a rattlesnake not too many years ago. And I don't know right now how prevalent they are, but there's always been rattlesnakes. Watch out for the snakes, that was the call word back in my young days.

DM:

Just working around the farm, not really looking for snakes but just working around the farm, just how often would you see one?

BAH:

Oh, I don't know any regularity, but I would see a half dozen or more every year. Just happened on to them.

DM:

Of course, April first was a good time to see snakes.

BAH:

Yeah, they were just coming out of the dens then. They'd come out and lay around in the sunshine, then go back in the den at night for a week or two, and then they'd start crawling everywhere.

DM:

We were talking about the area west of Fort Worth, the Weatherford area. They tend to be around—the Western Diamondback rattlesnakes—they tend to be around three and a half to four feet long there, but that length varies in different parts of the country. Do you have an idea about how long these snakes would get?

BAH:

The longest ones I've ever seen in that part of the country were six, seven feet long.

DM:

Whew. That's big.

BAH:

But most of them were from, I would say, three to five feet.

DM:

Okay. That is definitely something to watch for.

BAH:

It's a sound that people don't have to be told to listen for. There's an instinct in man and animal when a snake rattles that it's time to move on.

DM:

Did you ever come across the small rattlers? Some people call them pygmy rattlers, some people call them Massasaguas. They look like a Western Diamondback rattlesnake, but just about a foot long—

BAH:

I know what you're talking about, but I've never seen any in the Dickens area.

DM:

Okay. Any other poisonous snakes down there?

BAH:

Not—there might be a few Cottonmouths along some of the streams, but not many. As far as I know there's no Copperheads. Now, in your part of the world, in Weatherford, there might have been Copperheads, I don't know. Not in Dickens County that I'm aware of.

DM:

Especially now there are as the climate is changing, and that's more like East Texas than West Texas in the Weatherford area. It's kind of like it's moving east [correction: west]. Well, another couple of questions about Wichita Community. We were talking about the schools. You mentioned how a lot of these farmsteads were a quarter section. Was that standard?

BAH:

Yeah, a quarter section, half, maybe.

DM:

The Murchison place was pretty big, then.

BAH:

It was, but it was mostly grassland, not farmland there.

DM:

What was farmland was put in what kind of crop?

BAH:

Mainly hay and sorghums. Raised some cotton.

DM:

So it was mostly for stock.

BAH:

Mostly livestock.

DM:

But you had a cash crop also, which was cotton I guess.

BAH:

The Murchison places was tight land. Now just north of there, a half mile to the sand belt started, and the sandy land was good cotton land. And the Murchison place was excellent land if you had a wet year, but the tight land took a lot more rain than the sandy land did. So we quit raising cotton there, and just raised feed stuff until we got irrigation, then we tried cotton again.

DM:

When was the irrigation?

BAH:

The irrigation well was drilled in about 1948.

DM:

This was early.

BAH:

As far as I know, it was the first irrigation well in Dickens County below the Caprock. Now up in McAdoo, of course, they had irrigation on the plains. And this was just a little four-inch well. We built a reservoir and would store the water and then feed it out through an eight-inch line, but it really was never cost-effective.

DM:

This was your Uncle Roland who began this?

BAH:

Yes.

DM:

And you were working with him?

BAH:

I lived with him from the time I was twelve years old until I went in to the army at age twenty-six.

DM:

Right. He made some improvements, didn't he?

BAH:

He made a lot of improvements on the place, and that was through money that came from Aunt Stella. And she was one of the Sands children that never married, was a schoolteacher, and invested in a wildcat oil well in Rusk, and she gave the driller—he came around and said, Ms. Sands, we think we're about to bring in a well, but we're out of money and we got to have more money to finish it up. And she gave them the last fifty dollars she had, and said, "If it don't hit, I'm going to disappear where none of my folks will ever see me. I can't stand the thought of being totally broke." But it did hit, and she had money the rest of her life. She died in 1940.

DM:

Fifty dollars well spent.

BAH:

She had already invested some, I don't know how much, but that last fifty was her part in bringing the well in. That thing, for many years produced money. When she died she willed it to her brothers and sisters. My grandmother, of course, was the closest one to her, and she got a double portion of it. And she let Roland use that money to improve the place there.

DM:

So he irrigated, he built a reservoir—what else?

BAH:

Exterminated all the mesquite. By the time I went in to the army, that place was mesquite free, and now it's grown up again.

DM:

How did he do it?

BAH:

Through chaining, through poisoning, root cutting. He tried a little of all that. The clearing of it, of the big mesquite that was on the place was done with two Caterpillars with a big chain between them like they use in ship anchors, and they just chained them down. Of course, that did not kill the mesquite. It would sprout back from the root.

DM:

So it broke off, it didn't pull up the root and everything?

BAH:

Well, a few of them would pull up, but most of them would break off. That cleared the top brush, and then they'd spray the sprouts with 245-T, I suppose was what finally got rid of the mesquite. But he pretty well had the place free from mesquite when I went in to the army in 1954.

DM:

And now it's back.

BAH:

Now it's back.

DM:

[Looking at a photograph of the Murchison Farm] Okay. Oh yeah, oh yeah, I can see it.

BAH:

So there was no mesquite there when the Murchisons first came. Or very little, anyway.

DM:

What is your thought on how the mesquite came in so thick?

BAH:

It spread through beans, and cattle eating the beans and they were not digested. You can find little clumps of mesquite and then one or two survive and make more beans. That's the main way it was spread.

DM:

How about salt cedar in that country?

BAH:

Very little salt cedar. Now a little further north along the Pease River there's a lot of it.

DM:

And then juniper. What's the juniper situation out there, and how did it—

BAH:

Are you calling what I call cedar, juniper?

DM:

Cedar, mm-hm.

BAH:

In the breaks, just east of Dickens, there's a lot of cedar and it never gets real big, but it's been there ever since I remember. But it does destroy grassland, and it's hard to get rid of.

DM:

But you remember it from when you were a kid?

BAH:

Oh, yes. It just grew in places. We didn't have cedar in the Murchison place. None that I know of, but in the break land just east of Dickens there a lot of cedar, and from there on south and east, a lot of it.

DM:

Did you ever see antelope yourself or did you just hear about them in that country?

BAH:

When Carlene and I first married in 1957, there was a band of antelope around Matador. The Matador Ranch had brought in resupply antelope, and they ranged from Matador to over just east of Crosbyton. There was a playa lake right on top of the Caprock where the highway going east of Crosbyton and just before you drop off the Caprock, the antelope would be around that lake. And they ranged there from it back to Matador. Pretty good band of them, but they seem to have all disappeared now.

DM:

They sure don't like the thick country. They don't like the thickly wooded.

BAH:

No, they like open territory. And I've seen a lot of antelope further west out in New Mexico and all.

DM:

You see a small band near Flat-top Mesa on the way down to Snyder. You know, that big mesa—

BAH:

Yeah, I know what you're talking about. I've never seen the antelope there.

DM:

You really have to watch for them and sometimes they're out and sometimes they're not, but you can still see a few there.

BAH:

But deer and now feral hogs are the big thing in the Dickens area. People talk about them all the time, how much damage they cause.

DM:

Big changes.

BAH:

But you see deer blinds all over the place now, a lot of deer.

DM:

It's mule deer, I take it. Is there also whitetail there?

BAH:

There's whitetail.

DM:

Is there?

BAH:

Sure are.

DM:

Do you think there's more whitetail or more mule deer?

BAH:

I think more whitetail.

DM:

Really?

BAH:

But I never saw a deer in Dickens County until after I came back from the army. And they've restocked now. I did—the last year I farmed in Dickens County in 1954, I walked across my cotton patch one morning—had a cotton place—we had a quarter section about five miles away from the Murchison place, and I walked across there and I got to noticing the cotton leaves laying on the ground. There's two sets of deer tracks: one large, one smaller. And the stems were gone but the leaves were laying on the ground. Those deer walking across would bite off the stem and drop the leaf. And I tracked them all the way across, but I never saw the deer, I just saw the tracks. I never really saw a deer in Dickens County until I came back from the army.

DM:

They did make a comeback, and they came back in full force.

BAH:

There's a lot of them now.

DM:

I've heard two suggestions for why they disappeared. One is the overhunting, which is obvious, the other is the screwworm, which they eradicated.

BAH:

The eradication of screwworms probably had a lot to do with it.

DM:

Now, irrigating the gyp water and putting it in on the cotton crop—did you ever hear any talk about maybe salt saturation in the soil or a long-term problem with that?

BAH:

The old-timers had a theory that it would saturate the ground and destroy the land, but that was not proven. The irrigation we did worked. If you put the water on, the crops would grow. And we never could tell—now, it will turn the ground white where the gyp settles, but it didn't seem to hurt anything.

DM:

I just don't know.

BAH:

The best watermelons I ever raised in my life were right close to that irrigation well. I plowed me a furrow on a level where from end to end, it was level, and I could fill that furrow with water and it'd soak out on both sides and I'd plant watermelons on each side of it and raised an abundance of watermelons that way.

DM:

What else did you raise out there?

BAH:

Primarily alfalfa, but we did raise a good garden. We tried some irrigation of cotton, but it never was really successful. And the gophers were the big culprit. When we bench-leveled the land and were going to flood and raise alfalfa, the gophers would dig in there, and you'd fill a place with water and go back and it's empty—had gone through the gopher hole to somewhere else. They were just really the biggest problem we had to irrigation.

DM:

They're still plenty thick around our place I know. What about the other farms in the area? Did they pretty much do the same thing? Were they mostly stock farms, small cash crop, or—

BAH:

Mostly cotton crops and a mixture of stock. Now, depending on the part of the county, part of it was strictly farm and part of it was more stock farming. Mainly stock farm.

DM:

What kind of cattle? Was it all Hereford early on, or were there—?

BAH:

Mainly Hereford, but there were always mixed breeds. People had Jerseys and Guernseys for milk cows, and they would cross with the Herefords, and then later on, Angus began to come in. But primarily Herford.

DM:

When would you say Angus began to come in in that country?

BAH:

Probably in the fifties, because when I left to go in the army in 1955, it was almost total Hereford and crossbreeds.

DM:

And then did that country see any exotic breeds come in eventually?

BAH:

I think possibly some, but not a whole lot. One veterinarian that I knew said we'd call Holsteins exotic if there weren't so many of them, but what isn't.

DM:

(laughs) But I'm talking about Brahma or Limousin, or some of those. Maybe some Asian breeds.

BAH:

There were some Limousin, but mostly, as far as I know, Dickens County has stuck with the Hereford and Angus pretty well through the years.

DM:

It's big horse country now, too.

BAH:

It is. It's getting to be more of a horse country all the time.

DM:

As far as the communities are concerned, we've talked about the schools. What about churches? Were there local churches—was there a church in the Wichita community?

BAH:

There was no church building that I'm aware of, but they did hold church services in the schoolhouse. Both the first Wichita school, which was on the Murchison place, and then in the new Wichita school, over west of there, there were church services out there on up into the forties, close to the wartime.

DM:

Were there denominational services, or inter-denominational services, or what?

BAH:

The Church of Christ had services more in the Wichita than anyone else, but there would be some inter-denominational. And then at Croton, there was a Baptist church at Croton that was a pretty strong church.

DM:

Did they have their own building?

BAH:

They had their own building there.

DM:

Can you tell me where Croton is from the Wichita?

BAH:

It'd be northwest, about six or eight miles.

DM:

Is there a farm-to-market that goes up there now, or is it accessible?

BAH:

Just east of Dickens, about four miles, there's a farm-to-market road up through Croton on to east Afton and over to Dumont.

DM:

I see, okay. Do you know of any remnant of Croton now, any buildings up there?

BAH:

There's still some houses there, but I don't think there are any of the original buildings. There was a Croton store and a gin, but they're no longer there.

DM:

Was there ever a gin at Wichita?

BAH:

No. Not to my knowledge.

DM:

Where would you take your cotton?

BAH:

Dickens.

DM:

Dickens.

BAH:

There were two gins in Dickens in the 1940s. It's hard to believe, but I remember. One of them was not very active and was phased out pretty soon, but there was one active gin in Dickens up until the time I left there in 1955.

DM:

The school building at Wichita Community—it had Church of Christ, it had an inter-denominational service. Did they switch out weeks or how did they do that? Or did the Church of Christ have it for a couple of years and then the other came in?

BAH:

No, it was primarily just them in my time down there. Now, in the earlier days everybody together had church, whatever preacher came along. They'd hold church in the school house, but the only organized services I can remember were the Church of Christ that met in the new Wichita school.

DM:

Okay. I've often wondered how that worked, and maybe you can tell me. I hear about these schools that were used as churches, and one week one preacher would come in, and another week another preacher would come in. But who was organizing that? How did they know that

the building would be available for a service this week? Was there someone that said, "Well, it's available this week," or "you can come the next week."

BAH:

I don't really know on that. I know that when we lived out west of Levelland, we went to a Union church, they called it. It was Methodist and the BMA Baptist. The Southern Baptists had their own church there in the community. We had two Sundays a month that the Methodist preacher would come. One Sunday a month that the BMA Baptist preacher would come, and then on the other Sunday, we would usually go to Sunday School and then go over to the Southern Baptists for preaching services.

DM:

Okay, all right. But there was a regular schedule at least?

BAH:

A regular schedule in those church buildings, but that wasn't in school buildings. So I don't know who scheduled the school buildings.

DM:

Well, what else was the school building used for besides school and church services?

BAH:

Oh, weddings and community gatherings. I remember hearing about one Christmas program they had at the first Wichita school, had a Christmas tree and the whole community turned out and brought their gifts and put on the Christmas tree, had lighted candles on the tree, and someone put a Roman candle on there that caught fire from one of those candles. And my granddad, John A. Murchison, grabbed a Roman candle and shot it out the door to keep from burning the schoolhouse down, and whatever kid that belonged to said, John shot my Roman candle and I didn't get anything! So that was before my time, of course. He died six months before I was born, so I never met him, just heard these stories.

DM:

Were community Christmas celebrations common, do you think? Did you hear of others?

BAH:

Oh, yeah. They were common back in those days.

DM:

How nice. Were they school-associated? Where the school grades would present a program?

BAH:

In places, they might have been, but mainly it was church organizations. In that community where there was no organized church, the schoolhouse was community center, and that's where they had them.

DM:

Would they typically have a Christmas tree and maybe someone spoke or some kind of program?

BAH:

Oh, yeah. Christmas tree and have the little kids to do their thing, and then have Santa Claus, all that.

DM:

How nice.

BAH:

That was pretty common.

DM:

I guess you'd go get a cedar for a Christmas tree maybe, huh?

BAH:

Sometimes, yes. Yeah, there were a few cedars over in the Dickens breaks that were big enough for Christmas trees.

DM:

Well, I have so many more questions for you, but I need to shut it off for today. Is there anything you need to add just to cap off some of the things that we've talked about so far?

BAH:

Well, we started out in Marmoutier, France, and got to Dickens County—

DM:

We've made some progress.

BAH:

I was born in Dickens County, folks moved to Anton when I was just about a year old or a year and a half, and then to Levelland for five years, and then back to Dickens when I was twelve years old. So we probably need to cover some of that.

DM:

That's where we're going to start next time, if you don't mind. We're going to start on you next time.

BAH:

That's good.

DM:

We'll, I'll go ahead and shut this off.

End of interview.



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