

Talking History of Abilene Series
Interview of Mr. Will Henderson
Interviewed by Mrs. O. D. (Dorothy Jean) Wiseman, Jr.
April 13, 1967
Length of tape: 20 minutes

Mrs. Wiseman: I am Dorothy Jean Wiseman. I am in the KNIT studio, Abilene, Texas, to interview one of the prominent citizens of Abilene. Today is April 13, 1967. This project is being sponsored by the Taylor County Legal Secretaries Association. I am so pleased that I was asked to interview my subject today because he is a person whom I have known and admired for many years. What is your name, sir?

Mr. Henderson: William H. Henderson

Mrs. Wiseman: Would you tell us your age, Mr. Henderson?

Mr. Henderson: Eighty-three, uh, eighty-two.

Mrs. Wiseman: Eighty-two. Were you born in Abilene?

Mr. Henderson: No.

Mrs. Wiseman: Where were you born, Mr. Henderson?

Mr. Henderson: Fayette County

Mrs. Wiseman: Fayette County. Where is this located, please?

Mr. Henderson: LaGrange, Texas.

Mrs. Wiseman: LaGrange, Texas.

Mr. Henderson: That's right.

Mrs. Wiseman: What year did you settle in Abilene?

Mr. Henderson: 1904.

Mrs. Wiseman: Mr. Henderson, how would you compare Abilene, as we know it today, with Abilene that you came to back in 1904?

Mr. Henderson: Well, there was quite a difference in the [unclear] town because back in that day we [unclear] dusty streets and nothing to walk on but just the sand and the dust.

Mrs. Wiseman: What about the businesses in Abilene in 1904?

Mr. Henderson: Well, the businesses....we had quite a few businesses here, nothing to compare to now. Had dry goods stores, grocery stores, saloons, and banks.

Mrs. Wiseman: Could you tell us what banks were here in 1904?

Mr. Henderson: Well, the Farmers and Merchants National Bank, the Steffens and Lowden Bank, and the Citizens Bank.

Mrs. Wiseman: These banks that you've mentioned are now located in the central part of our city. Was this their location in 1904?

Mr. Henderson: No, the Farmers and Merchants National Bank was on South First facing Pine Street. The Citizens National Bank was on Pine Street on the corner you have a freight station. The Steffins and Lowden Bank¹ was on the corner of Pine about Second.

Mrs. Wiseman: Could you tell me about the residential section of Abilene during this time? Exactly what part of our present Abilene was untouched soil?

Mr. Henderson: Well, the south side was the principal part, and then practically in all parts of our town was dusty streets. We had *Oak?* Street was our first street, not paved, but bricked. That was our most proper street.

Mrs. Wiseman: Mr. Henderson, did you attend any of the public or private schools in Abilene?

Mr. Henderson: No.

Mrs. Wiseman: What age were you when you came to Abilene?

Mr. Henderson: Uh, I give myself to be, oh, about fifteen, sixteen, somewhere up to sixteen, seventeen, something like that.

Mrs. Wiseman: Well, then what could a person of sixteen years of age find to do for excitement in Abilene in 1904?

Mr. Henderson: I ran a tailor shop.

Mrs. Wiseman: At age sixteen?

Mr. Henderson: That's right.

Mrs. Wiseman: What did you do for recreation?

Mr. Henderson: Wasn't any recreation back then nothing, but a skating rink. There was a skating rink here.

Mrs. Wiseman: I understand that you and several your friends had a favorite spot here in Abilene that you would go to when you wanted to get away from it all. Would you tell us about this spot?

Mr. Henderson: Well, we had a place down here by the old ice plant, we called the ["red?"] hole." We'd go down there and go swimming. That's about all the recreation we had at the time. We boys would go down and go swimming and have a good time, we'd think.

Mrs. Wiseman: I believe in addition to operating your own tailor shop, you were engaged in several other jobs. Could you tell us what those jobs were?

Mr. Henderson: Well, I worked at the First National Bank, the Farmers and Merchants National Bank at that time. I started there in 1907. Farmers Merchants National Bank. Of course, I worked lots of places, the Campbells Dry Goods Store and places of that sort, but my regular job was at Farmers Merchants National Bank.

Mrs. Wiseman: Well, if you were employed in your own tailor shop and you were employed by Campbell's Department Store and you were employed by the Farmers and Merchants National Bank, what would you estimate your salary to have been back in that time?

Mr. Henderson: Well, I got twenty dollars a month at the bank and Mr. Campbell paid me pretty nice. And then my tailor shop and I done pretty well in the tailor shop, after I got started. It was a hard time to start because people didn't know much about tailor shops at that time. They didn't pay much attention to it, but after I got started I done pretty well.

Mrs. Wiseman: What year did you join the staff and the Farmers and Merchants National Bank?

Mr. Henderson: 1907.

Mrs. Wiseman: 1907. To be employed on a job today, one must take aptitude tests and go for an interview to be employed. Was this required of you in 1907?

Mr. Henderson: No. No, Mr. Keeble² asked me in the morning. I went in to make deposit at the bank I guess about a dollar and a half, maybe two. And he asked me, "Boy, you want to work?" and I told him, "Yes." He took the keys off his side there and handed me a key and I went to work.

Mr. Wiseman: When you started working at the bank, Mr. Henderson, how many other persons were employed?

Mr. Henderson: In the bank we had about ten, I guess, maybe twelve.

Mrs. Wiseman: What time would you usually report for work at the bank?

Mr. Henderson: Four o'clock in the morning.

Mrs. Wiseman: Four o'clock in the morning. Tell me, Mr. Henderson, beginning your day at four in the morning, what could I expect a normal banking day to be like in 1907? Why would you go so early in the morning?

Mr. Henderson: I went early in the morning because by nine, when they opened the bank up, I'd have my work all through.

Mrs. Wiseman: What was your work? [*Mr. Henderson: My work....*] What were you expected to do?

Mr. Henderson: To clean up the bank and have it all set up and straightened up and opened up and I opened up and I was gone.

Mrs. Wiseman: Well, you had mentioned to me once about building a fire and water. You did not have running water and fire in the bank at this time?

Mr. Henderson: Well, at that time, we had a big old wood stove, a coal stove in the center of the bank and, of course, I'd go there and build my fire and get them all straightened and everything warm. Cut it off and it'd stay warm all day.

Mrs. Wiseman: There are several things that I'd like for you to discuss with me, things that happened to you while you were employed at the bank. One of them, in particular, was a flood that happened while you were working there. Could you tell us about that?

Mr. Henderson: Yes, 1910, we had a flood. This town pretty flooded at that time. And the water got in the bank and, of course, I worked all night that night to keep the water from getting into the vault to keep the money safe. I just threw back water out the back all night long.

Mrs. Wiseman: Did you have to do this alone?

Mr. Henderson: Oh yes. Nobody, nobody but me. [*Mrs. Wiseman starts to speak.*] He didn't allow nobody in there, but me, you know.

Mrs. Wiseman: Oh pardon me for interrupting. There was another thing. I believe you went to work one morning or either one afternoon and found the deposits for the day or all of the deposits out in, not locked up. Could you tell us what happened to you when you walked into a situation like this?

Mr. Henderson: Well, I walked into the bank that morning, went down into the cage to clean up, I saw one of the tellers had left his money all out, just left his money just like he had it out for that morning. And the best thing for me to do was to go to call the boss and

tell him what I'd found there. "So well just leave it there, cover it up and leave it and we'll be down directly. " So that was quite exciting to me, for that to happen.

Mrs. Wiseman: You have a story that might be of interest to the citizens of Abilene and it has something to do with "hokey pokey"? I'm not too familiar with the word. I don't know exactly what it means so will you clear this up for me, please. What is "hokey pokey"?

Mr. Henderson: Well, "hokey pokey" is something made in a kind of a cake form. Ice cream, I suppose. One thing about it, it'd take you a long time to eat it up. I guess it's ice cream, but I'm not quite sure what. But in any event, a man who run a cafe here, he made the "hokey pokey." When he put that "hokey pokey" in his wagon and go out in the street, kids from every direction would find him to get these "hokey pokeys."

Mrs. Wiseman: Does this Taylor Avant that you speak of, does he still live in Abilene?

Mr. Henderson: No, he's passed now. His daughter live here. Earsie Lee. Dave and Earsie Brown. That's her father. Earsie, Taylor Avant was Earsie's father.

Mrs. Wiseman: Now is this the Earsie that operates now the Dave and Earsie's Barbeque Place that's on Cherry Street?

Mr. Henderson: That's right. That's right.

Mrs. Wiseman: It seems that you had some connection with Simmons College in the early 1900s. Would you share this experience with us? What connection did you have with Simmons?

Mr. Henderson: Well, Simmons College was a very small place at this time. And I used to take my horse and buggy and go out and gather up all the clothes out there and bring them to my late wife. Ms. Henderson would do the washing for Simmons College.

Mrs. Wiseman: You mean you and Mrs. Henderson were able to do all the laundry for Simmons College?

Mr. Henderson: Oh yes, all the laundry for Simmons College.

Mrs. Wiseman: About how many students then did they have enrolled?

Mr. Henderson: I don't know. There were very few buildings out there, but I'd bundle up and bring the clothes in and she'd do the wash.

Mrs. Wiseman: You'd have this completed in one week's time?

Mr. Henderson: That's right.

Mrs. Wiseman: In one week's time. You described to me the excitement and reactions of the citizens of Abilene when the first automobile arrived in Abilene, would you repeat this story, please?

Mr. Henderson: Well, the first automobile I remember ever seeing was coming down through Pine Street in the dust belonged to Mr. George Coates of Albany. He come in here from Albany and [unclear] over at the Farmers and Merchants Bank. It'll be a Franklin,³ something like that, used to make some cars like that, near as I can remember. He wanted to...Mr. George Coates. After that he moved over here on Amarillo Street from Albany.

Mrs. Wiseman: What kind of car was this, do you remember?

Mr. Henderson: Either a [unclear] or a Franklin, I don't remember which, one of the little bigger cars.

Mrs. Wiseman: I can remember you telling me about how he would run up and down the sandy streets and dust would be seen as far as you could look and that rocks would be going everywhere, but the people were so excited that it didn't bother them at all to see the rocks and the sand blow up in their faces because this was the first automobile to come into Abilene.

Mr. Henderson: That's right.

Mrs. Wiseman: You also mentioned that he was going at a rapid rate of speed.

Mr. Henderson: That's right.

Mrs. Wiseman: Could you tell me about how fast would a car go in 1907?

Mr. Henderson: They would go 20 miles an hour maybe 30.

Mrs. Wiseman: Twenty or thirty miles an hour. [*Mr. Henderson: That's right.*] It seems, Mr. Henderson, that your life has been one excitement and experience after another. Were you not one of the first to view the airplane that landed near Simmons College, as it was called in the early 1900s?

Mr. Henderson: Yes, I, the first pilot came here. we.... I might have walked out there, but then again. I might have rode a buggy out there. But went out there and before the police could push us all back, I got a chance to rub my hand across the first car. Seems to me it was just canvas.

Mrs. Wiseman: Was this car now or airplane?

Mr. Henderson: I mean, airplane, I meant to say, airplane.

Mrs. Wiseman: And who was it that pushed you back?

Mr. Henderson: Policeman.

Mrs. Wiseman: Did we really have sheriffs and police chiefs in the early 1900s?

Mr. Henderson: Well, Chief Clinton was police and he had some helpers. Of course, he wasn't out there, Chief Clinton.

Mrs. Wiseman: We think of Abilene as being a part of the Old West and a place that always maintained law and order, why then did they need policeman and helpers?

Mr. Henderson: Well, at that time [*unclear*] were a little rough and Chief Clinton would stand on the street and tell us about what to do, we all about done that 'cause he was kind of rough with us.

Mrs. Wiseman: You mentioned earlier in our conversation about the saloons in operation in Abilene. Did these saloons have the chorus girls, and beverages and the player pianos as we see them on television today?

Mr. Henderson: No. It was much happening in the saloons here, but there wasn't nothing like that going on, you know, all I knowed it. The beverages to drink were beer and whiskey. And out. Nothing like that.

Mrs. Wiseman: Did you frequent these saloons?

Mr. Henderson: No, I guess I wasn't allowed in. [*Laughs*]

Mrs. Wiseman: You say you weren't allowed in it. Were those orders from your wife or the police chief?

Mr. Henderson: That was orders from the police chief. No youngsters had no business in a saloon.

Mrs. Wiseman: Oh, that's right. At this time, you said you were what 16 or 17 years of age? [*Mr. Henderson: Yes.*] A person wishing to make a deposit in a bank today can drive up to a teller window and transact his banking needs. How does this compare with 1909 to 1912?

Mr. Henderson: Well, we drove up, back in those days, you drive up to a hitch post. If you [*unclear*] to the Farmers and Merchants Bank, you drive up there then I take over the horses and hold them until you want to leave to the park. There's no such thing as a "drive-in."

Mrs. Wiseman: What was required of a person that wanted to make a deposit? Did they have to sign notes as we do today? Or sign signature cards? What was required of a person? Did they have all the forms that we're using today in making deposits?

Mr. Henderson: Oh yeah, we had the same forms.

Mrs. Wiseman: How long were you employed by First National Bank?

Mr. Henderson: Fifty-three years.

Mrs. Wiseman: Fifty-three years. [*Mr. Henderson: Uh huh.*] When did you retire from the bank, Mr. Henderson?

Mr. Henderson: 1960.

Mrs. Wiseman: 1960. What have you been doing with your time and yourself since retirement?

Mr. Henderson: Well, I put most of my time in church work and charitable work with the cancer drive and stuff like that. You know, keep going.

Mrs. Wiseman: Could you tell us something about the home owners that were in Abilene in 1904? Did they have many persons in Abilene owning homes?

Mr. Henderson: No, very few owned their own homes.

Mrs. Wiseman: Could you tell us about how many families would be in this number?

Mr. Henderson: About ten. About ten families.

Mrs. Wiseman: What was the population of Abilene in 1904? Can you remember?

Mr. Henderson: I guess we had about 4000 people here then.

Mrs. Wiseman: About 4000.

Mr. Henderson: Everybody, counting everybody.

Mrs. Wiseman: All right, knowing Abilene as we see it today, what would you have to say about Abilene as compared to Abilene in 1904?

Mr. Henderson: Well, it been great change made in Abilene since that time. I happened to be here to see it go along to an extent. I'm proud to be here to see it grow.

Mrs. Wiseman: It seems from our conversation, Mr. Henderson, that it has always fallen your lot to be one of the first. You were one of the first to see the first car come to

Abilene and you were one of the first to see the landing of the airplane and I believe you were one of the first Negroes to vote absentee ballot in Taylor County, [*Mr. Henderson: That's right*] and you were one of the first ever to serve on a grand jury. Is this true?

Mr. Henderson: That's right.

Mrs. Wiseman: In checking an article from the *Abilene Reporter-News*, February 12, this was in the beginning of the planning stage of our high school here in Abilene, the account of a letter from the superintendent of schools requesting the citizens to submit a name for the Negro High School. There were two names that were submitted. One was Dan Beverly, who no longer lives, and Will Henderson and I believe the date on this was February 12, 1951. The letter was submitted by a Mrs. B. B. Childress, who at that time was a resident of Abilene. She no longer lives here. How did this election come about?

Mr. Henderson: Well, they named the school after Carl Woodson. They named the school after Mr. Woodson. That's all right.

Mrs. Wiseman: Even though you did not win the election, I feel that it has quite an honor to even have your name submitted, to even know that the people of the community would think that much of you to submit your name. It has been such a pleasure for me to sit and interview you today for the Taylor County Legal Secretaries Association and to have you become a part of the *Talking History of Abilene*. Thank you so very much, Mr. Henderson.

Mr. Henderson: Thank you.

¹ The Steffins and Lowden Bank is listed in *the 1907-8 Directory of Abilene* as the Commercial National Bank.

² William R. Keeble was the assistant cashier at the Farmers and Merchants National Bank in 1907. (*Directory of Abilene, Texas, 1907-8*. Fort Worth Directory Company, Press of Texas Printing Co., p. 94)

³ The Franklin motor car was manufactured in New York from 1902 to 1934. It was invented by John Wilkinson, an engineer, and manufactured by H. H. Franklin, an industrialist. The earliest models had a distinctive barrel shaped hood and were air rather than water cooled. See en.wikipedia.org for description or clrc.org for photograph.