

Talking History of Abilene Series
Interview of Dr. Willis P. Gerhart
Interviewed by Mrs. Bro (Roy Helen) Mingus
February 28, 1966

Mrs. Mingus: The Taylor County Legal Secretaries Association is giving to Abilene a memorable gift for its 85th birthday, mainly, a talking history to be presented to the library and gathered from some of the people who have helped and watched Abilene grow. The growth of Abilene and the Big Country did not happen overnight, but through the years, developed by men, such as the one I am visiting with today. I am Roy Helen Mingus, the wife of John A. "Bro" Mingus and Bro is a member of a pioneer family so that makes us both "old timers" ourselves. I am a legal secretary for Mr. Jack Sayles and Mr. Roger Garrett and I'm real happy to have a part in this historical project. Today is February 28th, 1966 and it is my treat to be visiting with the dean of local ministers, Dr. Willis P. Gerhart, formally, but he is known in mansion and shack, to old and young, saint and sinner, as Willis, the "little rector" or "the parson" so it is just real difficult to call him anything else. On hand to help us with our interview today is Mr. John E. Turner, one of the finest engineers in Texas. And so, Dr. Gerhart when did you first come to Abilene?

Dr. Gerhart: I came in February, February 22nd of 1920. That was Washington's Birthday, of course.

Mrs. Mingus: It surely was. And in what capacity did you come here and why?

Dr. Gerhart: To be the rector of the Heavenly Rest Episcopal Church which had been vacant for some time. And it stood on Third and Orange, the corner there, where the First Baptist Church is now.

Mrs. Mingus: Yes. And where were you born, Dr. Gerhart?

Dr. Gerhart: I was born in Clarksville, Tennessee. The, uh, in the room and, of course, the house where Dorothy Dix was born that wrote the "Lovelorn."¹

Mrs. Mingus: "The Lovelorn Advisor."

Dr. Gerhart: Yeah.

Mrs. Mingus: Do you mind telling us your age today? Even though we all know you are ageless, for the record, let's have it?

Dr. Gerhart: Well, I was born on November the 30th, 1889.

Mrs. Mingus: And what was your school in preparation for the ministry?

Dr. Gerhart: Well, I went to the University of the South at Sewanee. And, of course, we think that is the property of the Episcopal Church and we think the world all of it.

Mrs. Mingus: And when you first came to Abilene to this historical landmark church, do you recall some of the names of your early members?

Dr. Gerhart: Well, I remember, of course, I remember them all. The church, I got a letter at once from Ms. Thompson, who lived out at Sterling City on Mr. Dillworth Parramore's ranch, saying that she'd be in town to show me, introduce me to all the people and tell me the ones that we had to get up a class to confirm. But the first morning that I was here, I went over, Mr. Batjer met me at the depot.

Mrs. Mingus: Was that Mr. E. G. Batjer?

Dr. Gerhart: E. G. Batjer. And that was at, across the, he took me over to the hotel.

Mrs. Mingus: What was the name of the hotel?

Dr. Gerhart: The Grace Hotel. But it is now the Drake. And they informed me that I could stay only three nights because the town was so crowded.

Mrs. Mingus: Why was it so crowded?

Dr. Gerhart: Well, on account of the discovery of oil at Eastland and Ranger. But there was in, towards the, there was a terrible drought in this country.

Mrs. Mingus: That's probably why they had no minister or rector.

Dr. Gerhart: That was it because Mr. Batjer told me the man that left used to take forty cents out of the plate and put a piece of paper in there.

Mrs. Mingus: An IOU. [*Laughs*]

Dr. Gerhart: Yeah.

Mrs. Mingus: Well, what about the Scarborough family?

Dr. Gerhart: Oh, Mrs. Scarborough had just recently been confirmed and the Sunday I arrived, bishop came down. This was Friday, Thursday that I arrived, I believe, and on the following Sunday, the bishop was here, Bishop Temple from Amarillo, to greet me and install me and that Sunday Mrs. Fred Cockrell was confirmed. Ms. Scarborough had already been confirmed.

Mrs. Mingus: She'd already been confirmed.

Dr. Gerhart: Yeah, but soon, soon we went out to look for candidates for the next class and Mrs. Thompson... I complained about the mud because it rained finally.

Mrs. Mingus: Finally, it rained and broke the ground. [*Laughs*]

Dr. Gerhart: Yeah. But, the mud was so deep. And she said, "Don't complain about the mud 'cause we love mud in this country."

Mrs. Mingus: Oh, I bet.

Dr. Gerhart: Sign of rain, you know.

Mrs. Mingus: What about the Stith family?

Dr. Gerhart: Oh yes. Mr. Stith and Charley Motz were the prominent in the Church and Judge Hill.

Mrs. Mingus: The Creswells?

Dr. Gerhart: And the Creswells and Mrs. Alexander and Ms. Creswell sang in the choir and Mrs. Claude Gill. And the Bowditchs were active. But the dearest one of all in the Church was Mother Bentley. She was the daughter of General Tom Green and had known Sam Houston. So I never grew tired of talking with her. She seemed to have read everything that was ever written.

Mrs. Mingus: I see. Well, what about the Gorsuch family?

Dr. Gerhart: Oh yeah. Nan Gorsuch sang in the choir. We had a wonderful choir really and the Keebles were here.

Mrs. Mingus: The Keans

Dr. Gerhart: Ms. Kean, Ms. Kean gave me a list of people to go to see the first morning and on this list were Miss Mary Ann, Miss Mary Francis, and Miss Anna Hall at Hardin-Simmons University. So I went out there looking for them, and everybody sort of smiled, and [*chuckles*] they were the two girl's dormitories.

Mrs. Mingus: Oh. [*Laughs*] They were institutions.

Dr. Gerhart: Yeah.

Mrs. Mingus: And now where did you live in those early days after they ran you out of the Grace Hotel?

Dr. Gerhart: Well, the three days at the Grace Hotel, that was three days grace, but I went over to the church. There was a parsonage that had been moved, a house that had

been moved around over town considerably. And it was right behind the little stone church. And it had six rooms and a back porch. And because of the young men that were coming into the town so fast, and they couldn't get any place to stay, we put two double beds in every room and on the back porch. And so we just had a great crowd there.

Mrs. Mingus: So you didn't live alone then?

Dr. Gerhart: No. They were lots of fun and there was one, I remember particularly. Joe, Joe Hollinquest. Joe had been here for some time and had made a great many friends.

Mrs. Mingus: Well, he probably introduced you to a great many people.

Dr. Gerhart: He introduced me to a great many people, who I've enjoyed tremendously since and still do enjoy.

Mrs. Mingus: Well, I can see...

Dr. Gerhart: Now Price Campbell was in the church and he brought in Dan Gallagher.

Mrs. Mingus: The Hollis family, were they in the church?

Dr. Gerhart: Oh yeah. Dan Gallagher. Mr. Fry brought in Dan Gallagher from up north because he wanted to get somebody connected with the utilities that wasn't from A & M.

Mrs. Mingus: [Laughs] Oh. Well,...

Dr. Gerhart: The Hollises, Ms. Hollis was, has been the greatest help in the world in the church and I can't begin to name 'em all.

Mrs. Mingus: No, you can't.

Dr. Gerhart: The Bowyer family, Judge Scarborough was lots of help and pleasure. And then Ms. Norwood. One of the first people to be confirmed in the church, among the first, was Worth Norwood. And, so Ms. Norwood, we had her energy and intelligence in the church. And the Batjer family...

Mrs. Mingus: Yes now, well, we can't just mention them all, but....

Dr. Gerhart: J. Campbell Jones, the Walshes, and Jack Young and his family.

Mrs. Mingus: And so many. But now since you had all these people living with you, were you lonely enough to get married?

Dr. Gerhart: Well, it was about twenty years before I got married. And the way it happened was this lady came to preach on, to speak. She was a speaker and she came on

the day after Easter. And that, of course, having just gone through Lent and I didn't have an assistant and we had, people wanted almost daily services. And one time I preached on Friday and Dr. Knox, the Presbyterian minister, came over and said, "Saw in the paper that you preached on Friday. " Said, "I want you to stop that." [*Mrs. Mingus laughs*] You see he was a friend of our family He had been to school in Clarksville where I was raised. He said "Gerhart, you're going to stay here and they're going to get tired of you, without you preaching during the week." [*Chuckles*]

Mrs. Mingus: Well now...

Dr. Gerhart: That was good advice.

Mrs. Mingus: It was. Now how did you meet your wife?

Dr. Gerhart: She came on Easter Monday and I was at low ebb. My resistance was down. And she was lecturing the ladies. And...

Mrs. Mingus: In what capacity was she working for the church?

Dr. Gerhart: She worked for the United Thank Offering. And they paid her a salary and she got a lot more salary than I did, but she was tired of living out of a suitcase. [*Both laugh*] That was the way it came about. And my, our little boy Harry came and used to bath him and put him in the chair, you know, all in white, he looked so pretty, you could eat him up. I said I never intend to be without a baby.

Mrs. Mingus: Well, what was Eleanor's maiden name?

Dr. Gerhart: Eleanor, Miss Eleanor Duel.

Mrs. Mingus: And your children's names are what?

Dr. Gerhart: Harry, Carter, and John Duel

Mrs. Mingus: And you and Eleanor reside where here in Abilene?

Dr. Gerhart: 1350 Highland. We never have moved out on Minter Lane.

Mrs. Mingus: Well I say, neither have I. After you served the congregation for 25 years, the rectory gave you and, the vestry, rather, gave you and Eleanor a testimonial dinner at the Wooten Hotel. And do you remember the toastmaster?

Dr. Gerhart: Max Bentley, of course, always. He was a perpetual toastmaster, but he was a good one.

Mrs. Mingus: He was a good member of your church.

Dr. Gerhart: Oh yeah. Bright and shining light.

Mrs. Mingus: And at that dinner, Dr. Jenkins said something so nice to you and you said something to me about the Jenkins family....

Dr. Gerhart: Well, the Jenkins lived next door there. They moved in Mother Paxton and Mr. George Paxton lived in the house east of us. And they were wonderful neighbors. And Ma Paxton would bring, she'd be over there if I was sick in bed with a pot of soup before I thought anybody knew I was sick. And they moved and the Jenkins moved in that house. And so it was hot in those days, we didn't have air conditioning. And you know, it wasn't too bad. But we moved out of the houses onto the porches.

Mrs. Mingus: On to the back porches.

Dr. Gerhart: ...and yards. And the Jenkins all slept on the porch. And we, I slept on the porch. And you could hear every word they said. And I'll give you my word, I never heard them raise their voices or say a cross word.

Mrs. Mingus: That's a tribute to Christianity, isn't it? I understand that you were the first Abilene minister to broadcast a sermon, Dr. Gerhart. Is that right?

Dr. Gerhart: Well, I think that's true, but it created, you know, something new. It's kind of a breakthrough, you know, that they, uh...

Mrs. Mingus: The other ...How did the other ministers react?

Dr. Gerhart: The other ministers all wanted to know how I got on. Well, it wasn't, I'm sort of a fraud, you know, there wasn't any expense to it at all, they, but I let on like it was terribly expensive. *[Both laugh]* Scare 'em off, see? Then we used to go down to the mountain there at Buffalo, at Cedar Gap and climb up there. It was quite an effort. And the boys went with me and we just had a big time.

Mrs. Mingus: Well, I guess the other ministers weren't envious enough of you that they failed to elect you president of the Abilene Ministerial Association, because you were that at one time, weren't you?

Dr. Gerhart: Yeah. We used to have a good time in the Ministerial Alliance just always did, but we didn't... The town I came from, Chattanooga, all the colored men, the colored preachers belonged to the Ministerial Alliance, but that wasn't true here, but we had some, we had some wonderful colored preachers in town.

Mrs. Mingus: You served on various boards too, to help the city in a civic and cultural way. The Red Cross chapter?

Dr. Gerhart: Yes, the Red Cross. We worked hard on that. And the TB Association because there had been tuberculosis in my family and I was supposed to have died with

it. [*Laughs*] But we worked hard at that. And I used to go out and speak to all the different, uh, and to the labor unions that was my, they were the ones that I drew. And I enjoyed it and made a lot of friends that way.

Mrs. Mingus: You probably learned that way as well as from the prayer book about all sorts and conditions of men, didn't you?

Dr. Gerhart: Yes, they, uh, I still have a great many friends that I made in the labor unions.

Mrs. Mingus: You told...

Dr. Gerhart: The YMCA, but I get more pleasure out of the YMCA now because every day I go over there and swim...

Mrs. Mingus: And...

Dr. Gerhart: ...and the Taylor County Chapter for Infantile Paralysis. That...we had a time promoting that. And... Then I had, uh, a Boy Scout troop. They used to say that it was the first troop in town, but it wasn't. Mr. Wagstaff had a troop before that, but it had become extinct as many scout troops do. We had about 60 boys in it and Will Meadow [*or Minter?*] was in charge.

Mrs. Mingus: Oh, is that right?

Dr. Gerhart: Yeah, he was the biggest boy. And he was the best that you ever saw at running the troop. He had a good troop, 60 boys, but they, it was. We turned it into, we didn't bother with the scout manual much. [*Laughs*] We turned it into an athletic club.

Mrs. Mingus: Well fine. Now you mentioned someone's name in connection with the Welfare Board the other day, a Mrs....

Dr. Gerhart: Mrs. Smith, Mrs Bernal [?] Smith.

Mrs. Mingus: And...

Dr. Gerhart: Who did, who made a great contribution to the life of this town. And we, there was, the Poor House then was run by a Mrs. Tidwell and she was really good and...

Mrs. Mingus: She had a very popular house, I bet.

Dr. Gerhart: No, it was a, we called it the County Farm, I believe. It wasn't a farm though. But it was, and Mr. Gallagher was the treasurer of that, the perpetual treasurer of everything.

Mrs. Mingus: Did Mr. Gill, was he on that board?

Dr. Gerhart: Oh yes, Mr. Gill represented the Episcopal Church for years on that board. And he never missed. And it was a most valuable service. In that, the paper didn't mention that when it wrote him up.

Mrs. Mingus: Well, you know a lot of things that the paper hasn't mentioned.

Dr. Gerhart: Now among, in the early days there, we had, oh yes, art...

Mrs. Mingus: You pioneered the art field. Weren't you the first president of the Fine Arts Museum?

Dr. Gerhart: Well, I don't deserve any credit for that because Miss. A. M. Carpenter was the driving force in the organization of the museum.

Mrs. Mingus: Well, when was Mrs. Morgan Jones the president?

Dr. Gerhart: She followed me. When they got rid of me, they got Mz. Jones and then we started going to town.

Mrs. Mingus: When you were the president, Mr. V.C. Perini was on that board, wasn't he?

Dr. Gerhart: Yes, vice-president and Ms. Radford the vice-president. Thelma Andrews kept the records.

Mrs. Mingus: And there's that Mr. Gallagher again.

Dr. Gerhart: Mr. Gallagher, the treasurer. And he was also the treasurer for that welfare outfit.

Mrs. Mingus: Well, I'm glad Mr. George Fry brought him to Abilene.

Dr. Gerhart: Yeah. Now...

Mrs. Mingus: You served on the Censor Board.

Dr. Gerhart: No, not much, but put Ms. Cockrell on that [*both laugh*] because she liked to sit through the movies. But, um, I could hardly ever sit through a movie and can't yet.

Mrs. Mingus: Well, tell me about the development of sports in Abilene.

Dr. Gerhart: Well, when I first arrived Mr. Shotwell was the coach in 1920 and everybody that came, we were running up for the State Championship, and everybody that came could stand up on one side of the field. And that was one time when I knew more about what was going on than most of the other people so I appointed myself to

lecture to the parents. Mr. and Mrs. John Guitar and several others that came out there too. I explained that you had four chances to go ten yards, see?

Mrs. Mingus: I see.

Dr. Gerhart: And they, well, it was wonderful how they caught on. And we ran up you know, over and over again, we, we ran for the State Championship and won it.

Mrs. Mingus: Do you remember who won, who started an interest in the *Golden Gloves* here in Abilene?

Dr. Gerhart: Well, that was Al Sayles promoted the *Golden Gloves* and he invited me to come over there and made me the bell ringer. And I have considered myself the most experienced and best ringer in the Big Country. And the other night, they asked, had me ring the bell again.

Mrs. Mingus: Your old job back.

Dr. Gerhart: Yeah.

Mrs. Mingus: Now you steered your parish through the great building fund for the new church, which is located now where, Dr. Gerhart?

Dr. Gerhart: Well, we got the property and the house that belonged to Mr., Judge and Mrs. K. K. Leggett. (Well, where Ms. Percy Jones and Mrs. Vickert were raised and Kade Leggett.) And it's the highest spot, we say, in the county. There might be another spot three or four feet higher, but it's a nice place to put a church. Now it's on a holy hill. And we had lots of pleasure building that church. Now one man said ... I said, "I want...Lend me this book. It's got pictures of early oil wells." Said, "I want to put an oil well in the window." "Oh," he said, "You wouldn't do that." And I said, "Well, I certainly would. How else would we have gotten such a fine church?" [*Laughs*] But the oil industry contributed tremendously to the growth and development of this town and to the personnel, personnel of the people, the fine people that... Mr. Ungren and Mr., uh, oh any number of the...

Mrs. Mingus: Any number of our oil men.

Dr. Gerhart: Any number of our oil men. Perini and just great numbers of them that helped us build this church.

Mrs. Mingus: You served there until you retirement at the latter part of 1957, didn't you?

Dr. Gerhart: Yeah, but you forgot about the dinner. You said back there about the dinner. Do you know what they gave me at the dinner?

Mrs. Mingus: What did they give you?

Dr. Gerhart: Well, they gave me an insurance policy, paid so much a month after I retired and I'm still getting that and boy, that's really good.

Mrs. Mingus: That's a lasting gift.

Dr. Gerhart: Yeah. And then it goes on. Mrs. Gerhart will get it after I'm gone.

Mrs. Mingus: Well, who is the present rector of the congregation?

Dr. Gerhart: Mr. Bill Lewis was largely responsible for that. Mr. Densor, E. P. Densor is the vigorous rector of the church now. And he was formerly my curate.

Mrs. Mingus: Well, Dr. Gerhart, like so many have helped in the growth of Abilene and we can't mention them all. Neither can I mention all the wonderful awards and merits of award you have won because of your service to our area, but I do want to ask you how you felt at the first *Book of Golden Deeds* banquet sponsored by the Abilene Exchange Club last, oh I think it was in October, 1964, when the State Exchange Club president, Rally Brown, was leading up to the recipient of the award, and I sat there and watched your face, and I'm just wondering how you felt when he announced that the recipient of the first Golden Deeds award was YOU.

Dr. Gerhart: Well, I thought sure it would be Pete Shaw, but it wasn't.

Mrs. Mingus: Nib Shaw.

Dr. Gerhart: Nib Shaw, but, it, I felt that there was a terrible lot of exaggeration [*both laugh*] that went on there.

Mrs. Mingus: That's what you said. And you nearly missed that banquet because that was just another time when you said that you felt that you had to visit a sick friend so you were late in getting there. I'm glad that you got there for that part. So, Dr. Gerhart retired to circulate and he has certainly continued to help others and you've done some traveling, haven't you?

Dr. Gerhart: Well, I've been most fortunate in the lovely trips that we've had.

Mrs. Mingus: I hear you are also writing your memoirs. What is that book going to be entitled?

Dr. Gerhart: Well we, I've decided finally on the *Unvarnished Truth*. It will be just what happened to a little preacher that came out here to Texas. He fully intended and wanted to go to the foreign field, but didn't have enough nerve. And so, this was my expedition, you see into the... It was the early days. The first, one of the first calls I had, sick calls, was to the OK Wagon Yard which stood now was where the Windsor Hotel stands now where we are broadcasting and the ... I've seen this town grow and the other day, a year

ago, was down there when they gave Claude Gill a party and Judge Caldwell and all the old timers were there and they looked around at me to say something. And I said, “Well,” I said, “Here we are. We’ve spent our days here and I just can’t imagine spending your life with a better bunch of people.”

Mrs. Mingus: And one of the reasons that I am so happy to have this interview with you is that you told me after we had finished lunch the other day that you wanted to mention those men because you said, “I haven’t spent my life just with my congregation, but with Abilene.” And so Dr. Willis P. Gerhart and I, Roy Helen Mingus, feel so honored to be the first on this *Talking History* tape to wish Abilene a happy 85th birthday.

¹ Dorothy Dix (1861-1951) was the pseudonym of Elizabeth Meriwether Gilmer, who wrote one of the first syndicated advice columns providing advice on love and marriage.