

Talking History of Abilene Series
Interview of Mrs. Ellouise Cockrell Stevenson and Edith Cockrell Preston
Interviewed by Dr. Rupert Richardson
September 7, 1966
Length of tape: 30 minutes

Dr. Richardson: The Legal Secretaries of Abilene are making recordings of early day history mainly through biographical sketches, autobiographical sketches of persons who know Abilene history and interviews with people who can add to our knowledge of early days. We are very happy this afternoon to have Mrs. Preston and Mrs. Stevenson, who are, who spent a great deal of their lives in Abilene. We will have them give some account of their careers and we'll ask some questions that we hope will be of special interest. Mrs. Stevenson tell us about your career before you came to Abilene. It was rather short, I'm sure, for most of your time has been spent in Abilene.

Mrs. Stevenson: Yes, I was born in Anson at my grandfather's house and I was brought back to Abilene and I have spent the bulk of my life here, except for several years at Austin at school and from several years, not continuously, but intermittently in Massachusetts where we had an old farmstead, which, part of which had been built before the Revolution. Steve's great-great grandfather was the pastor for 50 years in the church in this small New England village and this house in which we lived was where he had a prep school where the boys went away to the various eight colleges, Harvard, Yale, various colleges there in the East. And the old school room has the names of many of the boys scratched with a piece of glass on the panes of the small windows. And the ledges have the marks where the boys chewed the thing up with their knives to put their initials on the ledge.

Dr. Richardson: Now you speak of Steve, that is your late husband?

Mrs. Stevenson: That's right.

Dr. Richardson: Jay McAlister Stevenson.

Mrs. Stevenson: Yes, sir.

Dr. Richardson: Tell us briefly how you met Steve.

Mrs. Stevenson: Well, Steve came to Texas. I forget the year. And he came with his brother, who was in the first stages of tuberculosis. They went to San Antonio. And Louie, his brother, recovered so quickly and so well in the mild air there that Steve was out of a job. Louie went back to Pittsfield, Massachusetts and married and Steve decided to stay on in Texas. He worked for an abstract company in San Antonio and later he attended the Law School at the University of Texas where he met my cousin, T. Bard Woodruff, and when, later on when they, he came back to Sweetwater and he and Bard had on a project, a very ambitious project, which was not, never materialized. But they,

he bought the Jones County Abstract Company and when Bard came over to visit my mother and father, why he brought Steve with him and that was the way we met. In fact, the sixth time I ever saw him....was the time...

Dr. Richardson: Steve was an Abilene lawyer. He was, they say, the only patent lawyer in Abilene.

Mrs. Stevenson: Yes, that's right. He was a patent attorney. And we lived in Washington, D.C. for over two years after we were married and he worked in the patent office there. And he took a master's degree at Georgetown University there in Washington. And then we decided to come back to Texas to live because I, of course, could not live anywhere except in Texas.

Dr. Richardson: Except in Texas. Tell us about your own education. You have to be brief.

Mrs. Stevenson: I will be brief, sir. I was educated. My mother had taught me to read and write, with a blackboard, before I started to school. I went to school in a small four room building where the Salvation Army Headquarters now are and later graduated from the Abilene High School, the top member of a class of five. After that, I went to the University of Texas and took a BA degree in English and Geology.

Dr. Richardson: And you taught in Abilene High School?

Mrs. Stevenson: I taught in Abilene High School one year. I taught in Hico one year. And I didn't like it. I did not feel I was a success as a teacher so I gave up my career and came back home to live with my mother and father and did the farming on this place.

Dr. Richardson: And your father and your mother. Now your father was Fred Cockrell and your grandfather?

Mrs. Stevenson: My father was Fred Cockrell. My grandfather was J. V. Cockrell. He was a district judge in the early days and he was also a congressman from this district, which I believe ran all the way from Weatherford to El Paso or maybe even farther. He was a very big man and they always called him the "jumbo congressman" from the "jumbo district."

Dr. Richardson: He had some very exciting experiences as an early day frontier district judge, this man, your grandfather, J. V. or J. Vardaman, I believe, Vardaman Cockrell. Just, uh, a glimpse of one or two of those.

Mrs. Stevenson: Well, in the early days, he served as district judge on weekdays and on Sundays he preached at some of the smaller communities and one time he went down to the Clear Fork of the Brazos and it was a roaring flood and there were a bunch of cowboys on the opposite shore. Grandpa was in what you call a buckboard at that time and he had two little broom-tailed ponies, half-broken, and the buckboard is much like

present day pickup, but he was looking very much disconcertingly at the roaring waters and so...

Dr. Richardson: This was the Brazos River?

Mrs. Stevenson: Yes, sir. And so they, one of the cowboys swam over and they tied one of their lariats onto the front of the buckboard and the horns of their saddles, two of them, and pulled him over the river. So when they got over the flood, he said, "Thank you boys. Thank you very much." And he started to drive off and he turned around and said to them, "What are all you boys doing here on Sunday morning?" And one of them looked at him and sort of grinned and then another one spoke up and says, "Well, I'll tell you what we're here for. We're here to watch that mean old district judge come down here and get drowned in this here river. And we're not a' going to do one thing to help him. He can just drown. He sent so many of our kin to the pen for cattle rustling and horse rustling." And my grandfather turned to him, he had a very gentle, sweet smile and said, "Thank you again boys, but I'm that mean old district judge you're waiting to see drown."

Dr. Richardson: I wonder, in fact, I believe your father, who related that story to me many years ago, indicated those boys knew who he was. It was their sense of humor, that a, the cowboy humor that made them pretend as they did. At least that, that is one interpretation of the story. It was fun to kid the judge. Now your early days in Abilene. You grew up here. What, at what age did you come to Anson? You said you were born in Anson.

Mrs. Stevenson: Oh, I imagine as an infant.

Dr. Richardson: As an infant. Some of the impressions or some incidents of early day Abilene that you have told us about. The, well, what was the big occasion of the year?

Mrs. Stevenson: The big occasion of the year was when the circus came to town.

Dr. Richardson: Might give us some account of that.

Mrs. Stevenson: Well, they, we would get up around three or four o'clock in the morning and go down to watch the unloading and then we'd watch them put up the tents. And there would be three men, at least, with pounding on the same peg. And it was an absolutely rhythmic thing. They never stopped. They never interfered with each other. And they always sent the elephants down Pine Street, in case it had rained, to pound the mud down so the beautiful gold trimmed wagons would not be hurt by the mud or would not be stuck in the mud.

Dr. Richardson: We're sitting here near the shore of Lytle Lake. Tell us about how Lytle Lake came to be.

Mrs. Stevenson: I think it was in 1898 that my father and some associates decided that they wanted to build a lake where the water was clear instead of red. And Lytle Creek

was, at that time, the only clear stream in this area. It has now been so polluted, in those days, the watershed was all pastureland and when the lake filled the water came down clear and beautiful. But now the watershed is farmland and the erosion muddies up the lake so that it takes weeks for it to settle and the, the, um...

Dr. Richardson: Well, that is interesting. Your father organized the company that built Lytle Lake.

Mrs. Stevenson: That is correct, sir. And they borrowed the money from some bank in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. And the men, who were going to loan the money, came down here and it was the first time that I had seen an adult woman in an evening dress when they had this big dinner for these visitors when they came to look over to see what this project was and if it would be a good risk for their money.

Dr. Richardson: I see. This Lytle Lake was to settle the water problem of Abilene forever.

Mrs. Stevenson: So it was hoped.

Dr. Richardson: Yes. What had you done for water before Lytle Lake?

Mrs. Stevenson: Well, there was a small dam that they called the Railroad Dam down on Cedar Creek just south of the T&P rail track. And I remember once when we had had a very dry summer that my father went down there to look at it to see how much water there was. And I went there. And Chief Clinton, who is, many of the people here in Abilene still remember with love and reverence, was standing there. And he turned to my father and said, "I tell you Mr. Fred, if we don't have some rain, I don't know what we're going to do for water. I do hope that none of these firebugs will get started when we are in this shape for water. Well, shortly after that there was a man, who had said that he certainly had no intention of letting his garden and his trees and his grass to die from lack of water even though we had all been urged to use as little water as possible. And there was a fire just west of his house and when the men went in to fight the fire, they bogged down to their shoe tops where he had been keeping alive his grass and his trees and his garden. And they, everybody was, of course, everybody in town know about it because in those days the town was small and even though we had no radar, things get around by the grapevine, as the old saying goes. So that everybody was very much disgusted with him and he was rather boycotted for a while. And I think that ultimately the water situation has been solved here now because we have Lake Kirby, Lake Abilene, Lake Phantom Lake and we still have some water from Lytle Lake, which could be used in an emergency.

Dr. Richardson: Yes, and we are planning to use water from Lake Hubbard and the demand for water still grows. Tell us a little about early day Abilene Library. You had some experience there.

Mrs. Stevenson: Well, I was always an avid reader. I learned to read before I ever went

to school. And I had, I read everything, except the newspaper, I hated the newspaper, and I read all sorts of stuff from philosophy, everything else and trash. And so the, when I was a small child about 12 years old, I should say, I can remember running around the neighborhood to try to sell tickets to local talent shows to get money for the library. And there was a club here called....

Dr. Richardson: Where was the library then?

Mrs. Stevenson: The library at that time was in, on, on the west, just, I think, west side of Pine Street in about the third block in the back of Mrs. Reeves millinery store and they had very inadequate facilities. And later on why they were moved into this building there at the corner of Pine and South Third.

Dr. Richardson: North Third.

Mrs. Stevenson: North Third, I mean. Yes.

Dr. Richardson: Pine and North Third. When did the Carnegie Library, how do we get to that? At least, it came in the early years of the century.

Mrs. Stevenson: Abilene was always a great Women's Club town. I remember that my aunt, Mrs. J. E. Cockrell, who lived here, and she and my father and Mr. H. H. Tillett were, had a law firm together, organized the first Shakespeare Club that we had in Abilene. Later, they moved to Carlsbad, New Mexico and then to Dallas, Texas. But from that time on, and, of course, we all know of the beautiful club house that the women have here and how much it has contributed to the pleasure and development of the cultural side of life in this town. But in those days, there was no club house, there was just a small library and through the efforts of the club women, I think my aunt Ella Cockrell, then she was, was very active in acquiring the present Carnegie Library.

Dr. Richardson: Tell us about some of the early day merchants you knew and the stores here and maybe some, I believe, there are some famous places and saloons and in places where, in restaurants where they had lively parties.

Mrs. Stevenson: Well, there was... This happened to me when I was a small child. It used to be that merchants, who carried farm implements, set them out on the curb of the sidewalk, and I saw this man, he was nicely dressed in a seersucker suit and a straw hat. And I thought he was walking in a rather peculiar manner. But just about the time he got opposite this display of farm implements, why he fell down and became quite involved in the cultivator. And this made a terrific impact upon me, even though at the time, I had no idea that he was just plain drunk. But he had come out of the saloon just ahead of where I was walking. And in those days, Abilene was wide open. They had several saloons and many of the saloon keepers were some of the most respected and liked men in Abilene. There was no minor served, no drunk man could stay in the saloon, and even though in the so-called Prohibition days, why everybody knew just where was the best place to get liquor if they wanted it and the one then that came in, all of these well-respectable, well-

liked citizens had these saloons. Then came in the flashy type of saloon keeper, high stepping horses, good looking women, and, uh, trash I'd call them and they had their saloon here. I'll name no names here. They might sue me for libel. They're probably still alive.

Mrs. Preston: Yes.

Mrs. Stevenson: But I remember that everybody was so disgusted and no respectable girl in town would ever date any one of them. They were practically outcasts as far as any social life was concerned because they came from, I think, Dallas or some of the larger towns, where a man with lots of money and a high stepping horse and a good looking cart was just available to almost any girl he wanted to date.

Dr. Richardson: Mrs. Preston, where were you born?

Mrs. Preston: I was born in Sherman, Texas in 18th of December, 1883. My parents had met and loved and married there. My father was a Washington and Lee graduate, law graduate.

Dr. Richardson: Yes.

Mrs. Preston: And my father's people had come from Warrensburg, Missouri. It was always a political family. And he came out....

Dr. Richardson: And you have an uncle who was a United States Senator from Missouri?

Mrs. Preston: Yes, he was for many years, he was one of oldest in the number of years....

Dr. Richardson: What was his name?

Mrs. Preston: Francis Marion Cockrell.

Dr. Richardson: Francis M. Cockrell

Mrs. Preston: Uh huh.

Dr. Richardson: Widely known, when the century was young.

Mrs. Preston: That's right.

Dr. Richardson: He visited Abilene once. Many times perhaps. I saw him once in early day Abilene. What are some of your recollections of this town that we all love so well?

Mrs. Preston: Well, I, my sister has so ably told all of the most interesting things that have happened so it will not be necessary for me to add anything to it, except that I have

lived in foreign countries for about twenty-three or twenty-five years. My husband was an architect and engineer and we lived in Rio de Janeiro.

Dr. Richardson: Oh, yes.

Mrs. Preston: And our children came to the United States to school. Our oldest boy went to Worcester Academy for four years then he went to Yale University for four years and graduated in mechanical engineering. We are indebted to my honorable loving sister's husband, Jay McCalister Stevenson, for our sons going to Yale University.

Dr. Richardson: That's fine. Where do you live now?

Mrs. Preston: I live in my father's-mother's homestead that we built.

Dr. Richardson: When was that house built?

Mrs. Preston: That house was built in 19....

Dr. Richardson: At about?

Mrs. Preston: About 1900 and three, 1903.

Dr. Richardson: Yes. It was the earliest residence in all this section.

Mrs. Preston: Yes.

Dr. Richardson: It has always been a most interesting and impressive place because of fruits and gardens.

Mrs. Preston: Yes.

Dr. Richardson: Especially in the days of your father.

Mrs. Preston: Oh, my father was a great gardener and he loved to plant things and work in the yard and all of his experiment with things and his grapevines and his fig trees were the among things....

Dr. Richardson: Yes. I have fig trees in my yard and grapes that I got from your father nearly forty years ago. We thank you, Mrs. Preston and Mrs. Stevenson, for this most interesting interview. This is Rupert N. Richardson, who has been interviewing these distinguished Abilenians in the interest of recording history. This is the 7th day of September 1966.