

*Talking History of Abilene Series*  
Interview of Dr. Rupert N. Richardson  
Interviewed by Mrs. William M. Lewis  
May 18, 1967

*Mrs. Lewis:* Greeting fellow listeners. This is May 18, 1967. I am Mrs. William McKnight Lewis, frequently known as Nena Kate. At the request of Miss Georgia Sanders, chairman of the Historical Survey conducted by the Taylor County Legal Secretaries Association, I'm here to visit with an eminent and much loved historian. He is well known throughout Texas, the Southwest, and nationally among historians. I consider this opportunity both a privilege and a pleasure. Mr. Historian, what is your name?

*Dr. Richardson:* Rupert Norval Richardson.

*Mrs. Lewis:* Where and when were you born?

*Dr. Richardson:* April 28, 1891 near Caddo in Stephens County, Texas.

*Mrs. Lewis:* What is your profession, Dr. Richardson?

*Dr. Richardson:* I've been a teacher and executive of a college the great part of my life.

*Mrs. Lewis:* When did you first see Abilene?

*Dr. Richardson:* It was in 19.....

*Mrs. Lewis:* Tell us something about it.

*Dr. Richardson:* It was in September 1907. We arrived in the early hours. It was nearly getting up time. Folks on the ranches and in the country, but we went to bed at the hotel over near the Texas and Pacific depot. It was just one representative of the hotels there, one porter, calling for hotels and we took him up and went to our hotel on North 1<sup>st</sup> Street. That was in September. I was here to attend Simmons College, September 1907. The following day we went out and talked with President Oscar H. Cooper and had my first view of Simmons College.

*Mrs. Lewis:* Tell us a little bit about Abilene at that time.

*Dr. Richardson:* Well, it was different from now. I don't know how many blocks of paved streets there were, but very few. Indeed, as late as World War I, if you wanted to take a friend auto riding, stay on paved streets, you had all of the stretch of the city from the Texas and Pacific Railroad northward to the present site of the post office, some four or five blocks and then you ran onto gravel streets, possibly mud holes. The town was not built out anything like as far as now. About North 8<sup>th</sup> was the limit of the compact

settlements. Beyond that, house here and there, a farm, pastures and going to Simmons College you rode or walked for a considerable part through the country. The town in other directions was also restricted. I recall that had occasion to Hollis Sanitarium over on the south side and that was near the end of settlements something like a half, perhaps a mile from the Texas-Pacific Depot. They claimed 10,000 people at that time, that is, they hoped they had that many, the Abilenians did, but the census of 1910 revealed that they were short some a thousand to two.

*Mrs. Lewis:* As a student of this region, and the person, who was born, reared here, and made some studies of it, would you tell us something of the history of Abilene? How it, where it got its name, its beginning, and then how it became a rival city with the neighboring towns?

*Dr. Richardson:* It started with the union of the railroad men and cattlemen. They united to mutual advantage. It was to their interest, but it turned out to be to the interest to the public because in running the railroad through here rather than through Belle Plains, south of present day Baird, the site is there today, and Buffalo Gap, south of Abilene, the railroad company saved considerable mileage and a great deal of expense in that they did not have to run their line into the Callahan Divide. These men met at the Hashknife ranch house just west of the present ACC campus overlooking Elm, beg your pardon, Cedar Creek, the bluff on Cedar Creek just north of 13<sup>th</sup> Street where the 13<sup>th</sup> Street crossing is. Was the site of the Hashknife ranch house, which may have been built, was built back in the seventies, not earlier than 1876, I think. The plan was made there for laying out the town. The railroad men left the naming of the town to the cattlemen. One of the noted cattlemen was Clabe W. Merchant. He had driven cattle up the trail to Abilene, Kansas. This section looked much like Abilene, Kansas. The word *Abilene* is biblical. The pronunciation should be, according to the biblical term, –ab-i-len-e., meaning grassy plain. And so the cattlemen and railroad men took the name Abilene from Abilene, Kansas. And in the very beginning, it is interesting, they planned to have a leading town. They believed they'd have a city that would prosper and attain some re-known because they referred to it as the "future great" when there were only a half a dozen tents here in the fall of 1880. This railroad meeting was in 1880. And before the end of 1880 when there was just a few tents here, they spoke of Abilene as the "future great."

*Mrs. Lewis:* Well, doctor, in the early history of Abilene when it was with its rival cities, could you tell us a little about that as well as the cattle trail that did go through Abilene?

*Dr. Richardson:* The cattle trail went through Abilene, at least for a period, commonly known as the *Western Trail* or the *Dodge City Trail*, leading from central and southern Texas northward to Dodge City, Kansas and indeed on into Nebraska and states beyond. It was used extensively in the 1880s after the more noted trail, the Chisholm Trail, came up through central Texas, had pretty well gone out of use. The, Abilene was a cattle center, many cattle shipped from here and many cattle driven by here on their way to Dodge City even after the railroad was built. Indeed, there wasn't any Abilene until after the Texas and Pacific Railroad was built. Abilene came into existence in early 1881. The

noted author, cattleman, he was both, the greatest rider, I think, the cattle industry has had, was Andy Adams. In one of his books, I think he calls it *The Outlet*, he tells of sitting on his horse in the vicinity of Buffalo Gap on the Callahan Divide and looking northward towards the Texas and Pacific railroad. This was about 1883. He counted nine herds of cattle that he could see. He had the aid of his glasses that he carried and he estimated that there were not less than a thousand head in each herd. So that he was looking there on, at least, ten thousand head of cattle. Now some of those cattle, I repeat, were shipped out of Abilene. Most of them, however, were driven on across the Texas and Pacific railroad on northward out of Texas at Doan's Store, north of present day Vernon on to Dodge City, Kansas where they were shipped over the Santa Fe to eastern markets and some went on, indeed, as far north as Montana.

*Mrs. Lewis:* Well, you've seen lots of changes in Abilene since you first came to Abilene in 1907. To what do you attribute many of these changes?

*Dr. Richardson:* Oh, the people mainly. Abilene has not had any great natural advantage. No waterway, no gateway provided by nature or the environment. In the early days, even as late as the early years in the twentieth century, several cities were rivals of Abilene, expected to surpass it. Stamford on the north, a new town that was born about the beginning of the twentieth century, some 20 years younger than Abilene, grew very rapidly. It was a beautiful town and in respect to percentage it surpassed Abilene in growth very, very rapidly for several years. Stamford expected to become the city of this section of Texas when I came to West Texas in 1907. Likewise Sweetwater was a rival. Sweetwater got the Santa Fe railroad in 1913 and '14. It was believed that that would make Sweetwater the leading city of this section. Still Abilene remained, continued to be a little larger, continued to grow a little more than its neighbors and it has grown even to this day. I would say first of all about Abilene, it was a good place to live. And has been very, it has been sought by many persons seeking homes. Likewise, it had a very lively highway committee. I could name numbers of individuals, who have had a share in that, the building of the highways into and out of Abilene. Judge Ely of this city was state highway commissioner under Governor Dan Moody when the pattern of Texas highways was being set. I do not think that Judge Ely used his office to special aid of Abilene, but it didn't hurt Abilene to have Judge Ely on the Texas Highway Commission. And there were local committees working through all these years getting strategic highways for Abilene. Oil came to West Texas or the western part of central Texas as we really are. Unfortunately, so I say, there were no great oil fields near Abilene, but they were close enough to enable Abilene to profit from the developments they brought. People selling out of their oil field homes, disposing of their oil field properties, and moving away for better facilities came to Abilene. We'll not forget the colleges: Simmons College, McMurry, and Abilene Christian College. Abilene Christian College established in the early years of this century, McMurry in 1923. These schools made school facilities unusually good for Abilene. And so it has been that Abilenians have used the means in their hands quite well. You can't name any one factor that has made the city grow.

*Mrs. Lewis:* It's been a....

*Dr. Richardson:* Of course, excuse me....

*Mrs. Lewis:* It's been a multiple of factors.

*Dr. Richardson:* A multiple of factors. We must not leave out the military. They certainly, in World War II, Camp Barkeley brought tens of thousands of troops to the vicinity and tens of thousands of other persons linked with the troops or with the camp one way or other. And still we all recall that after Camp Barkeley was deactivated and everything virtually moved away and there were predictions that Abilene would settle back and take on certain features of a ghost town. Abilene just kept on growing. Then more recently ...

*Mrs. Lewis:* Came the air base.

*Dr. Richardson:* The air base, Dyess Air Force Base has added to its growth.

*Mrs. Lewis:* Well, I think that covers some of those things that we'd like to know about. We're still on changes. What about the change in the countryside?

*Dr. Richardson:* Well, it has changed even since I first saw it. I recall in 1907 the campus of Simmons College, at night, we frequently heard coyotes yelping out in the big pastures a half mile or so away. We do not hear that anymore. The country has been plowed under that that is arable and the grazing lands have been appropriated and grazed more fully, more intensively. The country is, in one respect, brush has come in thicker than it was in the early days of the century. The pioneers, those who saw it before I ever saw it, often say that there were no mesquites or very, in the flats, the uplands. I think their memory tricks them a little because we have records of explorers, who bring out the fact that there were mesquites throughout these uplands, but they were thin and the country was prevailing prairie, except along the streams.

*Mrs. Lewis:* That's right.

*Dr. Richardson:* Brush has come in except, of course, where farms prevail. And the good lands have been farmed and are still in farms. And in spite of the shortage of rain and droughts, such as we are having now, they make good crops. The land is exceedingly productive.

*Mrs. Lewis:* May I ask a fair or unfair question concerning people? Now, you said you think that's the one thing that made Abilene. Who are some of the outstanding contributors to Abilene's growth over the period of time that you have been here?

*Dr. Richardson:* Well, I think of the, the early day leaders in business. Men, such as Jim Radford, and Mr. Wooten, Horace Wooten, and the, ... Of course, when we come to later days, it's hard single men out, Mr. Swenson, still of our city, although he is not as active as he once was.

*Mrs. Lewis:* They were dreamers....

*Dr. Richardson:* ....a great community builder.

*Mrs. Lewis:* They were...

*Dr. Richardson:* The late Jim Wagstaff was a great builder.

*Mrs. Lewis:* What about Mr. T.C. Cameron, C.W. Bacon, some of those. They had visions of a larger, Dr. Jim Alexander and Mr. Guitar. They had visions of a larger...

*Dr. Richardson:* You are passing me on that. *(She laughs.)* You had anticipated me on that and you had thought of these men.

*Mrs. Lewis:* Yes

*Dr. Richardson:* It is quite true. We might name dozens...

*Mrs. Lewis:* Of others, that's right, but...

*Dr. Richardson:*...had their share.

*Mrs. Lewis:* As a person, who came later than you, 1918, to live, I remember they were men who were pushing Abilene.

*Dr. Richardson:* Yes, they were indeed.

*Mrs. Lewis:* Dr. Richardson, there are others too who have contributed to the growth of Abilene both in the educational field, the professional field and the business, would you talk about some of your knowledge in relation to those gentlemen?

*Dr. Richardson:* Well, we need to mention just a few cattlemen, not many because our time is limited, but I think of the late J. H. Parramore, who was distinguished as a cattleman and a city builder and was such of loyal friend of Simmons College. Also we've mentioned his associate in business, C. W. Merchant. Mr. Parramore and Mr. Merchant maintained the San Simon Cattle Company, which carried on its work in Arizona and also other sections of the southwest.

*Mrs. Lewis:* You also need to cast Mr. Cowden along with that group.

*Dr. Richardson:* Yes, we mentioned the Cowdens, a very prominent in the cattle story and the Scarboroughs. Then we, I think of some lawyers that have had a great share in the building of Abilene. James P. Stinson did not come here at a very early date, but he served very well after he came. He was prominent in politics, chairman of the Democratic committee in Taylor County. He founded the Victory Bible Class, which is still carried on. I think also of Dallas Scarborough, who is widely known as a lawyer of

distinction and a unique person. And we come to the educators or schoolmen. We've mentioned Dr. O. H. Cooper. Jefferson Davis Sandefer, President of Simmons College, was a great leader and builder. Dr. Hunt, J. W. Hunt, founder and president of McMurry College, rendered distinguished service to Abilene and to the cause of higher education. Likewise, Dr. Sewell, long president of Abilene Christian College, was a city builder. And then we come to the doctors of the city. L. W. Hollis, father of Mrs. Bernard Hanks, who passed away just yesterday, was a great doctor, widely known, and provided hospital services, sanitarium, when there were none other in Abilene. Likewise, Dr. J. M. Alexander. Among dentists, I think of your father, Dr. H. H. Ramsey and Dr. Ray Maddox and a dozen others we might name.

*Mrs. Lewis:* What women of Abilene do you recall, who made contributions to our community?

*Dr. Richardson:* Well, I mention an outstanding businesswoman, Mrs. Bradfield.

*Mrs. Lewis:* Yes.

*Dr. Richardson:* Likewise, Mrs. Scarborough, has been active in the public affairs of Abilene.

*Mrs. Lewis:* She's probably organized more, more contributing organizations in Abilene, at least as far as I know.

*Dr. Richardson:* I'm sure she has organized more groups toward contributing to the social and economic or business legacy.

*Mrs. Lewis:* And cultural. She was the one who organized the TB Association. She also - the American Association for University Women, the Pan-Hellenic in Abilene, the Historical Society.

*Dr. Richardson:* She had a share in establishing the West Texas Historical Association.

*Mrs. Lewis:* A share in that. Yes. And then she established the library at McMurry where people can go and look up their ancestry. And I think to bring it up to date, you might mention the contribution that Mrs. L. E. Dudley has made.

*Dr. Richardson:* Yes, very capable as a member of the Texas State Historical Survey Committee. She's most widely known in that connection and also in club work.

*Mrs. Lewis:* In club work.

*Dr. Richardson:* The women's organization of Texas Women's Clubs.

*Mrs. Lewis:* Well, what do you predict for our Abilene in the future?

*Dr. Richardson:* I predict Abilene's continuous growth. Nothing spectacular. No booms. But if people continue loyally and persistently toward promoting the city, it should become a larger city and even a better place to live.

*Mrs. Lewis:* Thinking back, we haven't mentioned the weather in West Texas and somehow I, as a daughter of a dentist, we could have more one winter and during the year, if it rained, people could pay their dental bill and if it didn't. How has the drought affected us, at various times? Do you remember any historical incidents associated with drought that might be worth recording?

*Dr. Richardson:* Two historical *drouths* (*his pronunciation*) I mean two *drouths* that impressed themselves on people more than others. The very early days of 1885, '86, and '87, three years of below normal rainfall, '86 was the worst one, impressed the pioneers greatly and did bring about some suffering. The *drouth* of 1917 and '18 was even severer than that of the eighties, but the effects were not so acute. And the worst drought in our history was that of the 1950s, but our economy had become so diversified that the hit from that *drouth* was not felt as were those other *drouths*. Certainly those *drouths* hurt because a big segment of our economy is agricultural and when the crops are not made and sold and the cattle are not fattened and marketed then there is something missing in our economy.

*Mrs. Lewis:* In our economy.

*Dr. Richardson:* It affects everybody.

*Mrs. Lewis:* It affects everyone. As a child, I remember so many towns had *springs* attached to their names and they've lost them now. And my father said that people settled where there was water and springs. What's happened to those springs?

*Dr. Richardson:* The main thing that has happened to the springs is that the water does not get in the ground as it once did and the reason that it does not get into the ground is the land has been grazed and vegetation taken off of it so that water runs off of the ground much as we see water off a duck's back. You can't have springs unless water goes into the ground. In some places, springs have been brought back, in part at least, by growing much vegetation so that on the land so that water is held on it and permitted to seep into the earth, go down and strike a hard rock strata and then accumulate and form an underground stream that breaks out as a spring.

*Mrs. Lewis:* There is one other question that I think I'd like to ask, your thinking concerning the way people dress and behave now as compared to 1907 and on through.

*Dr. Richardson:* Oh, dress is different. (*Both laugh.*) Certainly we wouldn't want it other than different. Perhaps it is more sensible today than it was when the century was young. I can recall seeing young women on the tennis courts playing tennis with skirts that almost drug the ground. That was sheer nonsense, as we all would agree, so I do not know that there is anything of great importance about the dress. Likewise, other

characteristics of people, people of all generations are much the same, basically much alike. We can point out today certain trends, if we're alarmists, that would destroy us, such as, increase in crime, increase in the use of dopes and unwholesome drugs, but we have to believe that we are versatile and courageous and wise enough to offset, to meet and to overcome those trends. We've had them in the past and we'll have them in the future.

*Mrs. Lewis:* I agree with you. Dr. Richardson, thank you for this visit. It's been very gratifying. I'm confident that it will fulfill the purpose of the legal secretaries' project in preserving for posterity something of the region both you and I love. Thank you for sharing your rich experiences.

*Dr. Richardson:* It's been a privilege to have been here.