

Talking History of Abilene Series
Interview of Phillip Thompson
Interviewed by Eleanor Gerhart (Mrs. Willis P.)
March 19, 1966
Length of tape: 30 minutes

Mrs. Gerhart: This is March 19, 1966, the last day of the celebration of Abilene's 85th birthday and I am Mrs. Willis P. Gerhart, also known as the "Parson's wife." I am a recent comer having lived here only 25 years and it a privilege for me to interview Mr. Phillip Thompson, who was the third baby born in Abilene, July 12th, 1884. Mr. Thompson, what is your earliest recollection of the town of Abilene?

Mr. Thompson: Well, it was on the prairie of West Texas at the end of T - P Railroad, and there were lots of coyotes here and lots of lobo wolves, and a few bear and a few panther and a few buffalo, but with time they all got gone.

Mrs. Gerhart: When did your family first come here?

Mr. Thompson: In 1884, my mother and father moved here in 18 and 84. In February of 1884 and I was born in July, 1884.

Mrs. Gerhart: Would you read that?

Mr. Thompson: My father was Walter J. Thompson, my mother Mamie Belle. They got married at Willis, Texas and they moved to Palestine. My father was bookkeeper for the I & GN¹ Railroad there for a while and then there was a new town started in West Texas named Abilene at the end of the T-P Railroad and an uncle of my mother's bought six lots in Abilene and gave it to them for a wedding present. And soon, why, they come on the T-P Railroad from Mineola to Abilene. [*Whispering in background. Dropped microphone.*] Sorry [*Man in background: Yeah, yeah.*] In February 1884, they arrived, nothing but prairie dogs and level country. And a few buffaloes and muchos coyotes, lobo wolves, occasionally a panther or a bear would come through the country. Antelopes and antelopes and more antelopes. My father resumed his occupation as bookkeeper for the new railroad, T-P, and at that interval the county site was snatched away from Buffalo Gap and moved to the town of Abilene. Well, they needed some new county officers so they had an election and my father was elected the Tax Assessor and Collector. That's far as I go.

Mrs. Gerhart: What were...who were some of your playmates and classmates at school and who were your teachers?

Mr. Thompson: Well, we had a teacher named...first, I started out with a lady named Ms. Martin when I was six years old and I went to her for a year and then I went to the public school and then Ms. G. B. Triplett was my teacher for several years. I was elevated from the third to the fourth and she's elevated at the same time. We went up together until I started in the eighth grade. And Hinda [*spelling?*] Berry was my teacher

in the eighth grade and then from there on a man named [*Engleking, spelling?*] was in the ninth grade and a man named [*Viner?*] was in the tenth and eleventh. And George W. Roach was superintendent of the school.

Mrs. Gerhart: Wasn't some relative of Mr. Will Minter one of your teachers?

Mr. Thompson: Yeah, yeah, Florence Montgomery.

Mrs. Gerhart: What grade did you have her?

Mr. Thompson: I think that was in the seventh or eighth, somewhere along there. That's been so many years ago, I might have forgotten an exact date.

Mrs. Gerhart: And who were your classmates? [*Mr. Thompson: Well.*] You said that there were two schools.

Mr. Thompson: Well, my muy amigo was Stuart Brown and he was a daughter of Ike Brown and Ms. Brown and she... Manley Hanks married Stuart Brown's sister later on.

Mrs. Gerhart: Oh yes. Tell me about the fun you used to have or fun or fights you used to have with the north and south side schools.

Mr. Thompson: The north side and the south side. The railroad divided the town from the east to the west. And people on the north side and the south side were enemies all the time. And they didn't run together, but after they finished their little grade school, well then, they built a high school and the north and the south had to go to the same school. And when we were at school, well, we'd just fight, match and fight and bloody each other's nose. Cripple a fellow pretty badly, but we got over it with time.

Mrs. Gerhart: Didn't you even have a division in your swimming holes?

Mr. Thompson: Well, yeah, the Little Cedar Creek ran through the east part of town and on the south side they had a swimming pool. They had two holes in the creek. The water was red, very red and muddy, and "Big Texas" and "Little Texas." Then the creek flowed on under the railroad and went over on the north side and over there, the north side boys had a swimming pool named *Roots*. The reason it's named *Roots* is a big elm tree and the wash and the flood washed the water off, washed the dirt off the roots and left the roots. That's where the north side boys went in and they dared not to come on the south side and we didn't go on the north. [*Both laugh.*] We were enemies all the time and are today.

Mrs. Gerhart: Oh no you're not [*Mr. Thompson laughs.*] because I know that one of your good friends today is Mr. Lon Steffens...

Mr. Thompson: Yes, Lon's a friend of mine.

Mrs. Gerhart: ...who went to the north side.

Mr. Thompson: If we should meet, we might have a fight.

Mrs. Gerhart: I doubt it. [*Mr. Thompson laughs.*] I fear for Lon if he should fight you. Tell me, the most accurate history of the early years of the little stone Church of the Heavenly Rest was written by your mother. [*Mr. Thompson: Yes.*] What could you add to that? Have you any anecdotes, such as getting ready for church?

Mr. Thompson: Well, yes. That was back in the horse and buggy days and on Saturday, we'd curry the horse and grease the buggy, that is, grease the axle to the buggy, the spindle and get it back together. Well, then the next morning, we'd hitch the horse to the surrey and we'd go to the Episcopalian Church. Oh, it was about a mile, I'll say, and my father drove the horse and my mother would sit on the front seat of the buggy. And I had two brothers, the three of us on the back seat.

Mrs. Gerhart: What did you grease the axles with?

Mr. Thompson: With, with a castor oil. [*Mrs. Gerhart: Ooh.*] The wheels, we'd grease the spindles with castor oil.

Mrs. Gerhart: And then you'd go to church and what did you do after church?

Mr. Thompson: Well, after church was over with, that would be twelve o'clock and then on the road to our house, why there was a boarding house named the Adams House. And they set a meal there with a long table in the big dining room and benches on each side. And the price of the meal was twenty-five cents per person. So our family paid a dollar and a quarter for the noon meal on Sunday. And then my father owned a section of land out southeast, southwest of town and he had some cattle on it. We'd ride out there in the surrey in the afternoon and look at these cattle and salt them. So then we'd come back home.

Mrs. Gerhart: You used to do something other than go to prayer meeting Wednesday night, what did you do then?

Mr. Thompson: Well, lady, I have, I just couldn't answer that question right off the bat.

Mrs. Gerhart: Didn't you say something about washing?

Mr. Thompson: Oh yeah. On Wednesday night. Yeah. Well, that back, that was way back yonder. At that time also, why Abilene didn't have any water system, no electric lights and there was a man had a dug well down in this red creek, named Cedar Creek. Had a dug well and he had a water wagon and the bed of the wagon was made out of lumber, out of pine, out of cypress. And he had two little mules that he drove to this wagon and he went around over town delivering water to people. He charged twenty-five cents a barrel.

Mrs. Gerhart: Where did the barrels come from?

Mr. Thompson: Well, there were lots of saloons here then, lots of saloons and pretty women, and they had whiskey barrels pretty often. The barrel cost a dollar and you get this whiskey barrel, take it home and knock the top out of it and then Mr. Campbell would come around, they had alleys in those days, come around in the alley and fill your barrel with water, but water was just pretty short and you didn't bathe in it because it was just made for cooking and washing dishes that was all. Well, on Wednesday night, we'd have a family foot washing. My mother would wash her feet first and then my father and then Charlie. Charlie was older than I was. Then I'd take it and then Tab. It was in a tin tub, a round tin tub. And then on Saturday night, why, we took a bath, a family bath. We'd have enough water to bathe in. My mother'd be first, then my father, and Charlie and me and then Tab.

Mrs. Gerhart: All in the same water?

Mr. Thompson: Yes, ma'am.

Mrs. Gerhart: Goodness. After playing in the red mud and sand, it must have been hard on your youngest brother. Well, when did Abilene get its first water?

Mr. Thompson: I don't remember. [*Mrs. Gerhart: ... and lake.*] I don't remember the year, but a man named Bob Malone, that had come from down in East Texas to Abilene and he put in the water system and the light system. He was employed by the city to do that so after that then why they had water.

Mrs. Gerhart: As I recall your mother had something to do with the building of the library. [*Mr. Thompson: That's right.*] Tell us about that. Who went with her to...

Mr. Thompson: Well, she also was one of the main stems building the Heavenly Rest Church. She and Ms. Stith and, uh Ms. Steffens and quite a number of other women, but my mother was one of the main ones.

Mrs. Gerhart: And then the library?

Mr. Thompson: Well, the library. They found out that Abilene should have a library with time and didn't anybody have any money to build it with so my mother and Ms. Henry Sayles went to Chicago to see Mr. Carnegie to get him to donate some money to build a library. So with that money, they bought the residence of Will Stith and Ms. Stith and they built a library there, a city library.

Mrs. Gerhart: I imagine that is the red brick building that I knew when I, was up as the library before this new one that we have... [*Mr. Thompson: Yes ma'am. That's correct.*] ...because they called that the Carnegie Library.

Mr. Thompson: Yes ma'am. [*Break in tape. Drops microphone.*]

Mrs. Gerhart: What....

Mr. Gerhart: After I finished school, well then, my father was cashier of Steffens and Lowden Bank. So after I finished school, I worked there a couple of years, 1902 and '03. And one time, they didn't have telephones in those days and Jim Lowden was president of the bank. So George Berry, they had a sub-bank in Merkel, and George Berry needed some money, needed some cash, some currency and so he sent Mr. Lowden a telegram from Merkel to Abilene to "Send me a thousand dollars in currency." So Mr. Lowden sent him some ten dollar bills, ten dollar bills and five dollar bills and it added on up to a thousand dollars. And so there wasn't any automobiles in those days and Jim Lowden says, "Phillip," says Mr. Jim Lowden, "Phillip, go to Fulwiler's livery stable and get you a horse and buggy and come back here. I want you to make a trip for me." So I went to Fulwiler's livery stable and got a horse and buggy and come back. And Mr. Lowden says, "Put this under the buggy seat and take it to George Berry up in Merkel, seventeen miles." So I took it up there. George was expecting it. I knew George Berry and so I gave him that thousand dollars. Well then, I went to the wagon yard and unhitched the horse and fed him and then after that I come back to Abilene. That was a whole day's trip.

Mrs. Gerhart: Hmm. Goodness. Thirty-four miles and now we can do it in 34 minutes up and down.

Mr. Thompson: Cut that off. [*Break in tape.*] And antelope galore, coyotes.

Mrs. Gerhart: Did you see herds of buffalo?

Mr. Thompson: Oh yes. I saw a few buffalo that were still remaining. They'd come in the fall when it got winter up on the Plains. They'd drift down in go in through Buffalo Gap south of the mountains.

Mrs. Gerhart: And that's where Buffalo Gap...

Mr. Thompson: That's where it got its name.

Mrs. Gerhart: Oh, that's interesting. But no Indians around with them, to shoot them.

Mr. Thompson: No, no, the Indians were not here at that time. [*Break in tape*]

Mrs. Gerhart: What were you going to say about the railroad?

Mr. Thompson: Well, this was the end of the railroad. And there wasn't ... when people had to ship from the south, west, and north, they'd come to Abilene to ship. They had about ten acres here in the stock pen. That was the biggest thing there was. And the train burned wood and coal. They'd leave Fort Worth in the morning and come through

Thurber and there was a coal mine there and they'd pick up a load of coal and then they'd come on to Eastland and Cisco. That was a post oak country, they'd put on a load of wood. So they burned wood and coal and when they got out here then that was the end of the railroad. Why, they'd load cattle here. At that time, twenty-five cars of livestock was a big loaded train. That's all they could pull. So they'd water the cattle down on Cedar Creek and then they'd load them at the stocks pens. And we kids, us kids, all of us, there wasn't but a handful here, we'd go down there while they was loading the cattle and then when the train left why it was going uphill from here east a couple of miles, there was a man out there named Minny [?]Wicks that had a house right by the railroad. And it was two miles there so us kids we'd get on, we called it "riding the rods." We'd get down under the train on top of these rods and ride it two miles out just for the trip and then we'd walk back. [*Mrs. Gerhart: Oh.*] That was it. We had lots of fun doing that.

Mrs. Gerhart: [*Laughs*] When did the railroad go on to Merkel or Sweetwater?

Mr. Thompson: Well, it went into Merkel and Sweetwater there then. [*Mrs. Gerhart: Oh.*] But west of here on to Pecos City and Colorado City, why, they didn't have any railroad at that time, but they had water there and people lived along the banks of the rivers. With time, two, three, four, five years, why it built on out to west. And then after it got out as far as Big Spring, well they made a division there, and then they ran a train from Abilene on out to Big Spring. So they put in a turntable out there to turn the engine around. And then the train coming from the west to the east would get here in the morning and going from Fort Worth on to west you'd get here four o'clock in the afternoon. And everybody in town would drive down there in their buggies to see the train come in. And there at the depot, they had a two-story hotel there, a railroad hotel, and then out in the corner there of the platform they had a little lunch stand. And they waited twenty minutes to have a meal here, so some people get off and go the lunch stand and get a cup of coffee and then the others, why, would go into the hotel and eat a meal. Mz Hollis, that's Dr. Lon Hollis' mother, operated the hotel. [*Mrs. Gerhart: Oh really.*] So, and Dr. Hollis was a sister to Blanche Hollis and Minnie Hollis. And that's...

Mrs. Gerhart: Well, was that Lonnie's, Dr. Lonnie's father [*Mr. Thompson: That's it.*] and he was a doctor, a medical doctor too?

Mr. Thompson: Yes, ma'am. He had these four children. There was Elva May Hollis, and Mary Vernon Hanks, and Lonnie Hollis and Scott Hollis and [*Mrs. Gerhart: Bea.*] Bea Hollis.

Mrs. Gerhart: And they're all living now and they're a part of our citizenry.

Mr. Thompson: Yes. Well, I could tell you a whole lot more, but I could tell you as long as a rope, but then I expect they're running out of pressure there. [*Mrs. Gerhart laughs.*] Well, cut it off a minute and rest a minute, I may have something else to tell you.

Mrs. Gerhart: Mr. Thompson, on the Pine Street, I suppose it was called then in the early days? Was it, the Main Street. [*Mr. Thompson: Yes, it was the same, Pine.*] Well, did they have gravel walks or did they have [*Mr. Thompson: No ma'am.*] .. board?

Mr. Thompson: No, they built....For part of the town, for a block or two, they had plank sidewalks.

Mrs. Gerhart: And the other just mud?

Mr. Thompson: That's it.

Mrs. Gerhart: And you were here when Dr. Simmons came. Tell us a little about him.

Mr. Thompson: Well, I was here before Dr. Simmons was. And he come along and they decided that they needed a college so the Baptists built a college. That's it, they started off with the Baptists. Parramores and Merchants were the main stems in the Baptist church. So anyhow, I don't know whether they took up with a collection or not, but they started building Simmons College. And with time they got one building built. And then to transport to that that was before the automobile days or any kind of days so they operated a hack. It wasn't a real stagecoach, but it was a hack. And ordinarily why they had two horses hitched to it to come into town to pick the children up. If, by chance, it ever did rain and that was seldom, they hitch four horses to the hack to transport the children.

Mrs. Gerhart: Through the mud.

Mr. Thompson: That's it, through the mud. I was here. I know what I'm talking about.

Mrs. Gerhart: Did you go to Simmons?

Mr. Thompson: No, ma'am.

Mrs. Gerhart: No, where did you go after Abilene High School?

Mr. Thompson: Well, I finished Abilene High School and then I worked in Steffens and Lowden Bank for two years and then I went to A & M College of Texas.

Mrs. Gerhart: Oh yes, A & M.

Mr. Thompson: Yes, ma'am.

Mrs. Gerhart: And is that where you learned to be a rancher?

Mr. Thompson: No. After I left A & M College, I come back here to Abilene and spent a year and during that time I worked for J. M. Radford in the wholesale grocery store, right under Mr. Radford's thumb. And there was a boy from Pecos County come here,

they were originally from Abilene, but they went to Pecos County and got a ranch of 200 sections, that's 30 miles square. And there was one of the boys there that come here and he and the Sherbino boy. Dr. Sherbino was one of the early doctors here and he had three boys: Merrill and Newell and Jerome. And Merrill and Newell went down in Pecos County. They first worked out Colorado City with this man named Arthur Anderson. And in that days, there was no fences and people just drifted so Mr. Anderson had some 10,000 sheep and they drifted off down into the Pecos country, west of Sheffield down in that country. It was an open country and a good country, but short on water. Mr. Anderson drilled a couple of wells down there and they stayed down there for several years. And one of the boys come back here one time and Newell Sherbino was here so my mother give me a dinner for Newell Sherbino and Will Harrell and Mr. Ellis. Mr. Ellis was an Episcopal preacher here at that time. So Bill Harrell said to me, "Phillip, why don't you leave town? Come down there and be with us on the ranch and take up eight sections of School Land and learn the sheep business. You'd like it," he says. "I do and you'd like it too." Well, wasn't long after that until Bill Harrell wrote me a letter and said they needed a bookkeeper on the ranch. And for me to come down there and keep books. As I had worked for Steffens and Lowden and Jim Radford, I's kind of a bookkeeper. So I went down there and kept books on the ranch the first year, but I wasn't learning anything about the sheep business being at the ranch house so I told Mr. Anderson I wanted to quit keep booking and learn the sheep business. So then I become a sheep rustler and I rustled sheep eight years for Mr. Anderson. He paid me twenty-five dollars a month. And I didn't have any house nor tent nor nothing, just a roll-up bed and a slicker and a saddle, that's all.

Mrs. Gerhart: Did he give you your food too?

Mr. Thompson: Yes, we had it. He bought beans by the ton, flour by the ton, coffee by the thousand pounds and such as that. It was 100 miles from the ranch to the railroad and he operated with freight wagons. And took 'em a week, eight days, ten days to go from the ranch down to Sanderson. Took a day to load and then a week to come back. That was all done with freight wagons.

Mrs. Gerhart: Do you remember any of the comparative costs of food?

Mr. Thompson: Well, all we had was beans and he bought pinto beans by the ton. They had beans and it was smoked bacon, great big coarse bacon. A sack of it would weigh 200 pounds. There'd be six or eight pieces in that sack. And coffee come in 100 pound boxes. Be a package of, there'd be 100 pounds in a box. And Arbuckle was the main kind used. There was also Lion's Coffee, but we bought Arbuckle because one thing was in Arbuckle at the factory where it was packed, why there was girls working in that factory and on the end of a package a little pasteboard slip on the inside, well, these girls would write their name on it. My name is Sarah, Sarah Smith. The fellow that opens this package write to me and we'll become sweethearts and we might get married. [*Mrs. Gerhart: Oh, I see.*] Well that happened for eight years and I answered lots of letters, lots of those cards and I got letters from quite a number of 'em.

Mrs. Gerhart: [*Laughing.*] Did you ever send your picture?

Mr. Thompson: No, wasn't any place to take a picture. We just out in the woods and nothing. No...

Mrs. Gerhart: But you didn't find Mrs., pretty Mrs. Thompson? [*Mr. Thompson: No.*] On one of those....

Mr. Thompson: No, she was in another country at that time. Ordinarily fellas marry girls in their same town, but I was born in Abilene and went over across the Pecos River and then I come back to San Angelo and I was ranching then in Sterling County and she was a school teacher from the Waco country. And we got together and then I got her a job in San Angelo teaching school and she taught three years and during that time why we courted quite a bit. It's 65 miles from the Sterling County ranch there to San Angelo and I go in every few days to see her 'cause she needed my attention and at that time there was a number of bachelors there. Two of them named Pat and Ren [?] Jackson, brothers, and they were pretty well fixed. And so I introduced these boys to them, to her and ol' Pat paid her attention and when I was gone to the ranch, Pat went with her and he'd bring her chocolate candy when he'd come to see her. And I didn't like candy, so I said, [*Mrs. Gerhart laughs.*] and so when I'd come in, ol' Pat would stay away and I'd have the run for a day or so or two or three. And then when I'd leave, well, Pat would show up. When I got there, she'd have a box, three or four boxes of pound box of chocolate candy Pat brought her and I'd eat Pat's candy, [*Mrs. Gerhart: Good.*] but I didn't like chocolate.

Mrs. Gerhart: [*Laughs*] Tell me....

Mr. Thompson: So with time, time rocked along and I's in the sheep business and I had 5000 ewes on hand and the time got along pretty close to lambing, that's something that happens in the Angelo country, and I asked her one day, one night, I said "Which one of us is going to get you, me or Pat." And she says, "One that asks first." And so I went on back to the ranch then that night, seventy-five miles. Got to thinking about it. I think ol' Pat might ask her first so I turned around and come back. And the next morning, I rang the bell at daylight and she went to the door and said, "Well, I thought you was going to the ranch." I said, "Well, I did, but I lost lots of sleep on the road and back and I thought ol' Pat might ask first so I've come back to ask for you." [*Mrs. Gerhart laughs.*] "And if by chance we get married, why I'm going to lose you or a lamb crop, one or the other. And if I get you, I'll save the lamb crop." [*Mrs. Gerhart: Laughs*] And so we got married then. An Episcopal preacher married us. A preacher named Whittle. So we got married and went to the ranch. Every now and then we'd come back to San Angelo, but we spent six years out there. During that time, after we'd been married three years, we had a daughter born, named Patsy.

Mrs. Gerhart: Now that is the girl about whom you were speaking earlier?

Mr. Thompson: Well, we brought a picture of her a while ago.

Mrs. Gerhart: Yes, tell me before this tape runs out. There was no newspaper in Abilene?

Mr. Thompson: No, ma'am.

Mrs. Gerhart: How did they get their news?

Mr. Thompson: Well on the T-P Railroad in the afternoon, the *Dallas News* would come out. Everybody....

Mrs. Gerhart: Every day?

Mr. Thompson: Every day. And come out here and then they'd turn around and go back the next morning. That was before they had a station on west. When they got to Big Spring, then they put in a division there and made a, had a turntable and turned the engine around and go back. The same train would go back the next day.

Mrs. Gerhart: Well, tell me too, did Abilene have a hospital at those early first days?

Mr. Thompson: [Laughs] No ma'am. No ma'am.

Mrs. Gerhart: But they had several doctors?

Mr. Thompson: Well, there were several doctors: Dr. Rodman; Dr. Grizzard; and Dr. Wallace; [*Mrs. Gerhart:* Dr. Hollis?] Dr. Hollis, yeah.

Mrs. Gerhart: What about Dr. Jim Alexander?

Mr. Thompson: Well, Jim was just a young chap in those days, but he come along later on and he become quite a doctor and a surgeon and he had a brother named Mac and Mac was the doctor and Jim was the surgeon. Jim put in the hospital out there and a man named Jack Estes from Clyde and he was the uncle to Billy Sol. So Jack was quite a, quite a surgeon and he and Jim, why doctored the people, cut their legs off and such as that.

Mrs. Gerhart: Well, did they have offices or did they come to your homes?

Mr. Thompson: Well, in those years, doctors had a horse and buggies and they were not so busy, they'd come to your home. And when Jim started that hospital, why he stayed there most of the time, but then if necessary he'd get out and make a circle and run his buggy to wherever it might be.

Mrs. Gerhart: Like the country doctors.

Mr. Thompson: That's right.

Tape ends.

¹ The International and Great Northern Railroad Company (I & GN) was formed in 1873 through a merger of the Great Northern Railroad Company and the International Railroad Company. The Great Northern Railroad had completed a line from Houston to Palestine, Texas by 1872 and the International Railroad had completed a line from Herne to Palestine at the same time (www.tshaonline.org).