

Obama Kansas Heritage Project

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Interviewee: Bill D. Dennett

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NOTE: (Picks up in middle of interview, as first 1 of  
interview is unavailable due to technical error)

BD. And I had a -- I left out a piece. At about -- after -- in December of '42, came home to get married, and I didn't get married. It was a blizzard. (Laughs.) Then, I got married. I finally got married in Las -- Las Vegas, Nevada, but my wife's sister had a -- was in a bad accident, and she had to go to California to take care of her down at Los Angeles, so I wrangled around, got a 5-day pass, was going down there intention of getting married.

Q. To Los Angeles, now?

BD. Huh?

Q. To Los Angeles?

BD. Yeah.

Q. Okay.

BD. And I got down there, we went in to the license bureau, and said -- went to filling out the papers, and I -- well, three day waiting period? Shucks. I don't have the time. (Laughs.) So I got over to the guy who's in charge in there, and I said, "Well, if we got our license today, how long would it be before --" he said, "Oh, it'd be six or seven days." I said, "No, I can't do that." And went back over, and I -- oh, I says -- I reach down -- pulled -- told them to throw my paper in the trash can. I says, "We can't get married." She says, "Why?" I says, "Well, I'll be AWL three days." (Laughs.) "And I don't want that to happen." And we walked out of there, went down to a theatre, and went in there, sit down, watching the movie, and sit there a minute. Well, I noticed when we went in there, across the street was a bus terminal. And oh, little bit, I turned around, I said, "Let's go get married." She says, "Well, you said we couldn't do it." I said, "Yeah, we can." And so we go over to the bus terminal and found out there was a bus leaving right quick to Las Vegas, and she calls her aunt, and sister, and tells everybody she was going to Las Vegas and getting married, and oh, they throwed a fit. They wanted to have the wedding there, but we got on that bus, and was out there, and the next morning we was married in the Frontier Hotel on the balcony, in -- March 9th, 1943.

Q. Mm-hmm. And what year was it when you came -- when you were discharged from the service, what year was that?

BD. Yeah.

Q. After the war, when you came home, what year was that?

BD. Who?

Q. When -- when you were discharged from the service, and came back, what year was that? 194 --

BD. 5.

Q. 5.

BD. 1945.

Q. Okay.

BD. October the -- I don't know what -- 14, 15. I've got my papers yet.

Q. Now, you must have -- did you go to school in Augusta? Is that how you met your wife?

BD. No.

Q. No?

BD. No. (Laughs.) Nah, I don't know.

Q. Well, tell me about your schooling, because you --

BD. Huh?

Q. Tell me about your schooling. You moved around a lot.

BD. Oh, I started school in -- (Laughs.) I always said, my birthday's the second day of September. Well, if it was the on the first Monday that -- I always -- school started first Monday in September, and I hated it because it was on my birthday. (Laughs.) Anyway, I

went -- the first year I was at school, me and two other students, two girls, took first and second grade. We took two grades in one year.

Q. Where?

BD. Huh?

Q. What school?

BD. Gordon. [Butler County, KS]

Q. Okay.

BD. And the funny thing that -- the teachers' names were Gordon, the two Gordon sisters. It was a two-room schoolhouse. The first year that it opened -- and -- (Laughs.)

Q. You must have been a good -- you must have been smart.

BD. Well, I was interested.

Q. Uh-huh.

BD. But by the time I got the -- I was supposed to have -- graduated, which was a year ahead of time, and I (laughs) passed the county exam. See, you had to take a county exam.

Q. Hmm.

BD. But that old teacher flunked me out.

Q. Why?

BD. (Laughs.) Because my daily work wasn't up to standard or something. I never did know exactly what the deal was, but -- well, coming around, it was the next year then, and I told my dad. "Dad" I says, "The only reason she flunked me, I'm the only big boy in school." And

she had the -- the eighth graders, boys, take care of the furnace room. We had a coal furnace, and we had to go down there, and carry out the ashes, and stoke the furnace. (Laughs.) I said, "The only reason she kept me here is so I'd have to work on that furnace." He said, "Well, we'll just send you down to -- you can go down, and stay with Grandma in Douglass, and go to school in Douglass."

Q. So that would have been after eighth -- your -- that would have been ninth grade you were in Douglass?

BD. Yeah, well, it was -- I would had have had to take eighth grade over, eighth and ninth grade, see, which --

Q. Oh.

BD. See, I went clear through school, and have never had a diploma of any kind. (Laughs.) But little discussion, when I went into the service, I thought -- I had three times the amount of credits for graduation. But I liked two: English composition and, I don't -- I don't know, government, I believe it was. I flunked out. That's why I went in the service.

Q. Because you said you went in before the war started.

BD. Yeah, in December, 1940.

Q. So you never went to school in Augusta at all?

BD. No.

Q. No?

BD. Not before that. Well, I started in -- I -- after I spent two years in Douglass, and I took the eighth and ninth grade --

Q. Mm-hmm.

BD. -- and then I come back, and I -- I got a driver's license, and I was hauling kids. Dad bought an old Chevy, and I hauled kids from Gordon to Augusta High School, I don't know, three or four years.

Q. Because Gordon didn't have a high school?

BD. No, eighth grade.

Q. Okay. So you hauled the kids, did you also go to school?

BD. Huh?

Q. Did you also go to school after you hauled them? You stayed and went to school?

BD. Yeah, I went and stayed, but once in a while I'd get disgusted -- and I'd go out and work for a farmer all summer, and make my own money, but when school started, if I went -- was at home -- (Laughs.)

Q. So -- so how -- can you remember how many years you went to -- to Augusta High School, or what year you would have graduated?

BD. Uh, I couldn't tell you for sure. Let's see. I went '36, '37, '38, and '39, and part of '40. I was about six different years, and I went to summer school once. Year got all -- some -- if I didn't like a subject, I wouldn't do it. (Laughs.) And I'm still that way. If I don't like it, I don't do it.

Q. Now, I'm trying to remember when we talked on the phone, you -- you -- we talked a little bit about the years -- what year your -- whether you remembered Madelyn Payne from school, and --

BD. No, I -- I said I knew of her.

Q. Of her.

BD. Yes. I knew of them, and they -- but I had no -- see, I laugh. You know, up here at Cooper Drugstore, well, the, the Kessners and Kappelmanns -- me and my brother had this old Chevy car that Dad had bought from a guy who had hauled kids to school before, and we charged 50 cents a week to haul them to school and back.

Q. Would -- you said you knew of her. Would she have been younger or --

BD. Well, yeah. She's --

Q. She would have been younger or older than you, or ahead of you at school or behind?

BD. I don't remember. Let's see. I tell you -- oh, I can't think of her name. Oh, Nelva Wentz.

Q. Mm-hmm.

BD. She might know.

Q. Mm-hmm. Was -- now, were -- was Nelva your --

BD. They were in -- yeah, they were in the class of '40.

Q. Okay.

BD. '41?

Q. So you were the same -- you were about the same time finishing, only when you finished you went straight into the military -- the National Guard.

BD. I -- I tell you, I think -- I laugh about it yet today. The -- when they published their -- I don't remember, it was '35 -- '30 -- somewhere along there, but I was going down there.

Well, I always drew. I always made sketches, and drawing things, and I think I still got one of them, but the bulldog on that -- when -- I drew it.

Q. Oh, on the yearbook?

BD. Huh?

Q. On the yearbook?

BD. Yeah, on the Douglass senior -- oh, that's for their prom or something. It was --

Q. Oh, okay.

BD. I've got -- I've got one. And I'll tell you something else. I made Christmas cards. Back when my folks was running the grocery store, linoleum cuts, you know --

BD. Mm-hmm.

Q. -- and Mom would take that linoleum cut, and bring them up here to The Gazette office, buy a stack of penny postcards, and have them printed. I've got some of them.

Q. So that was your family's Christmas cards? You still have any?

BD. I -- and you've seen that picture of the museum?

Q. Mm-hmm.

BD. You know what it's off of? It's off of Sandy Evan's drawing. That --

Q. I remember her.

BD. Huh?

Q. I said I remember her. She had -- she had a studio --

BD. She was an artist, and a good one.

Q. Uh-huh.

BD. I always laughed about it. She just opened her first gallery, and she'd print -- made this ink drawing, you know, of the museum, and had a bunch of them, and I got ahold of one of them, so I took -- put it on a piece of mahogany and cut it, and then I went down to her shop, and I took it in and showed it to her, and I said, "I hope you don't sue me for -- for copyright." (Laughs.) And she says, "Well, I didn't know you'd get that much detail in a wood carving." And I said, "Why --" I said, "There's one thing that ain't in there that was in your picture." She hadn't even missed it. Was a -- on the drawing was a basket on there where this cat -- the cat's there, but the basket one I was carving, it had chipped out. I said, "You have a little problems once in a while."

Q. (Laughs.) Have to go with the grain of the wood.

BD. And oh, I've carved a lot of animals. I'll never forget one time, ol' Don Williamson and Doc, we'd -- a bunch of us would get together, and they was talking about their wood carvings and they said, "What have you been doing lately?" "Oh, I've been burning hair." (Laughs.) They looked at me. "Well, that stinks, don't it?" I says, "Yeah, smells like pine." (Laughs.) I had burned the hair on the -- a bear.

Q. Oh. (Laughs.)

BD. I carved a bear out, and burning hair. It's marvelous how you can take a -- one of them little wood burning irons.

Q. Uh-huh.

BD. And I always laugh. Don and them, they went over to Wichita to the college and took a course on wood burning technique. Well, they -- they had to get some special irons. Well, one -- well, we was all working together one day, says, "Well, you don't have no special irons." I said, "Yeah, every one of mine's special. They're -- they're not a \$1.98 soldering irons, they're the cheapest I can buy." And I said, "I take the tip of them and make one that fits for what I'm going -- I take a little piece of copper tubing, make it shaped like the leaf I want, or -- well, one, I shape it, put it on there, and then I just --" (Laughs.)

Q. Create your own.

BD. I'd -- I've ground rocks. I've prospected.

Q. Done lots of things.

BD. I just -- there's more gold out there than they've ever found.

Q. But you've always come back to Augusta?

BD. There's gold -- there's -- down there at Mulvane, that sandpit that they -- down there where we used to pump water out of there in the droughts in the 50s, there's gold in that. (Laughs.) It may be a small amount, but rigged up a deal, went down there and tried it out, but my gosh, you'd have to move 10 ton of it to get enough to pay.

Q. Ah. (Laughs.) Not enough to get rich from it.

BD. No. Well, when you stop and think where it came from, it's pretty fine. Roll down that Arkansas River all the way from the Rocky Mountains. (Laughs.)

Q. So why do you suppose other people have grown up and left small towns? What keeps you here? Why did you stay in Augusta? Why do you think some other people left?

BD. Well, Augusta has problems. Every time we get any industries, why, a lot of the ordinances -- I don't understand them, but they are just -- I don't know. They --

Q. So it's jobs?

BD. Jobs is one thing. About only -- see we -- we get a good industry going here, the first thing some bigger outfit turns around, buys them out, moves them out. That's what happened to Loadcraft Trailer. That's what happened to several other deals. The last refining unit we had here was -- it just -- too many -- too many ordinances.

Q. But you stay. Why do you -- why did you stay, you think?

BD. Well, didn't have anywhere else to go.

Q. Well, you worked on -- I haven't asked you yet about working on the railroad, because you worked on the railroad, for what, 36 years; is that right?

BD. Yes.

Q. Tell -- tell us a little about that.

BD. Well, I -- I told you I come home in '45, but dad-in-law thought I was going to be a farmer with him, and I didn't want no part of farming.

I'd worked for farmers before, and I knew they was seven days a week, daylight to dark, so I wanted to get a degree in art, and I filled out the papers, got everything ready to go, got a job with McCormick Armstrong, advertising agency. The day I showed up to go to work the guy that had the job before come home from service. They had to give it back to him, so I was out of a job yet.

Q. And that was going to be how you paid for school too?

BD. Yeah, I was going to go to Wichita U in art and learn a little more on commercial art. Anyway, I -- well, I was getting desperate, and I seen a place that was hiring on the railroad, so I went down there, and I hired out. Went to work January 2nd, 1946. Didn't start on the first day -- that was a holiday. My first day of work was a holiday. (Laughs.)

Q. (Laughs.)

BD. Anyway, I worked on the sections here in Augusta, and then Douglass, in Winfield, in Mulvane, but I -- I worked two, and then in '47 I went to working as a machine operator, running the track machinery, and I ran nearly every kind of a piece of track machinery they ever had.

Q. So what kinds of machinery would that be in? What would they do?

BD. Well, there's so many different ones. You got wrenchers, you got jacks, you got cranes, and motor cars, and all kinds of equipment. Tampers, you see --

Q. So you operated the machinery itself?

BD. Yeah. The operator's the one that pushes the buttons.

Q. (Laughs.)

BD. That's what they amount to today. I got -- I got so tickled here, oh, a year or two ago. They brought in a new machine, a Plasser, and I'd worked on one of them, oh, back 10-15 years before. And this Plasser, it was a new automated tamper, everything, and it was built by a German company in Canada and I -- I'd run a lot of jacks, and electric, and Fairmont, and different company machines, but that Plasser -- that was one of the sorriest ones, and I wouldn't run it. Well, when they brought that one in, I said, "Well, I hope they finally got all the bugs out of this machine." He says, "Why?" I says, "Well, I told them it was probably 10 years ago, before, I'd worked on one." I said, "It was broke down more than it would run."

(Laughs.)

Q. (Laughs.)

BD. I said -- anyway, the -- this operator, "I don't know, Bill." he says. I broke him in as an operator years before, and he says, "Well, you never had a machine like this. It's air conditioned, temperature control." And I started laughing at him. He says, "Well, what's so funny about that?" I said, "They didn't -- the company didn't put that in there for you." He said, "Well, what do you mean?" I said, "They put it in there for the doggone computer. It has to be taken care of or it'll quit." (Laughs.) And he sat there a minute and said, "I never even thought of that." (Laughs.) I said you

notice them other machines that don't have a computer in them don't have this kind of a cabin. It's all computer operated.

Q. Yeah.

BD. Is -- in there you can push what elevation, how many inches you want, and how long -- how many tamps.

Q. So you must have operated some of that computerized equipment before you retired?

BD. Huh?

Q. You must have operated some of that computerized equipment.

BD. Oh, yes. One of the most dangerous ones I operated was pulling that long rail, 1,400 feet long, 136 pound rail, and that's 136 pounds every three feet, see, off of a train load, a rail -- hook into it, pull it through these deals and down, fasten it down on the ground, then the engine gets behind and pushes the cars out from under it. (Laughs.) 1,400 feet, that's a quarter of a mile of rail.

Q. Wow, that's a lot. So before you did this, you said you started out working on the sections. What was that? What was that? What kind of work was that when you said you worked on sections? Are you talking laying track?

BD. Well -- well -- well, the track maintenance.

Q. Mm-hmm.

BD. The maintenance way is a department of the railroad. It's a -- they were divided in sections. About it -- and the sections usually had a four to five men on a foreman, and sometimes there was more, depended

on how long their -- how many miles the -- the section was. And they maintained the track, like, from Augusta to Douglass. The -- the Gordon section was there in Gordon. They took care of it -- Augusta -- to it from AugustBD. Well, then they had -- during the war, they moved the headquarter from Gordon, up here, to Augusta and ran clear to Winfield. Well, then they got to cutting off section after section, and expanded, because we was getting machines to do the work. They had -- when I first went to work, you had a pick, a shovel, and a fork, bars, and wrenches, but by the time I quit, they didn't even use them anymore. It was all power tools off a big truck.

Q. So how many of those railroad lines still run today? Are they -- are they all still in operation?

BD. Oh, yeah. Well, a lot of the branch lines are not in operation, like the one from, oh, McPherson out to, oh, Marion. I don't think that line's in there, and there's a lot of them lines like that one. I -- I heard one the other day that I didn't realize they still had it, part of it, and that's up there by Abilene, and they -- they still run a -- an excursion locomotive over it.

Q. Oh, for tourists?

BD. Uh, there's one -- one big deal that I got in on while I was railroading, and I've always laughed about it, because the railroad company, uh, brought ice and iron into Abilene, and for over a month before that, they took two or three of us extra gangs that we had

doing branch line work, and put us in Abilene cleaning the place up, and fixing the track, and everything, set ups for the cars, you know, the presidential train, and all that election -- all that election stuff. Okay. We put up lights, and raked the yard down with white gravel, everything. Well, the week that they was having that, I called into the office. I said, "Well, I'm not running any machine out here." And I said, "How about me taking my two weeks' vacation now? You won't have to have anybody relieve me." Boy that suited the clerk right quick. She goes, "Well, that'd be just fine." Says, "You go ahead and take your vacation." So when they had the big day up there, when Ike was -- I was on vacation. When I come back, these other operators said, "Well, how'd you get out of it?" I said, "Well, I took my vacation." "Why'd you do that?" (Laughs.) And I says, "Because I didn't want to have to dump all that potties under the cars." (Laughs.) And them guys said, "How did you know we was going to?" I said, "I knew just as well as could be it wasn't -- it wasn't going to be any laborers. They'd already cut them back. It wasn't going to be nothing but the machine operators, which they had to pay a bunch of their salary anyway." I said, "We was going to be stuck with nothing but them cans under all them coaches." (Laughs.)

Q. You were thinking ahead.

BD. And so I -- yeah, I was thinking ahead and I -- oh, my ol' buddy -- ol' Dick Mayo says, "Well, why didn't you tell me?" (Laughs.) The day was busy.

Q. So, well, why do you think the railroad has meant to Augusta? Is it a part of the -- an important part of the --

BD. Well, that's the funny thing about it. The railroads built this country, but they got a lot for it. A lot of people never realized that lots of them right-of-ways that we went through on land condemnation, or something like that, they got in some -- some of the territory, they got 20 miles each side of the track up on the branch lines, up there where -- in the Mennonite area, around McPherson and Lindsborg, and off up in there -- all them areas. All them farmers that was in there, that -- a lot of that was railroad land: Rock Island's, and Union Pacific's, Santa Fe's. They brought people from overseas over here to homestead on this.

Q. So they made money by --

BD. See, some places it was from the center of the track for a mile, and then other places it was 10. Out in the panhandle of Oklahoma, it was out there about 20 miles on each side of the track.

Q. How about -- how about around here?

BD. Well, this one place here I was telling you about, out there at Soldier's --

Q. Mm-hmm.

BD. The Soldier Post Office --

Q. Where you were born?

BD. Yeah. Okay. They had a regular war over that. Well, it wasn't a few years later, they went to drilling oil wells out across that

country. And that was in -- oh, in the 50s. Late 40s and 50s -- and one day we was riding on a motor cart, and ol' foreman says, "Well, looky there. They're drilling that well right against the right-of-way fence." Says, "We better measure that." And I started laughing at him, and then he says, "Well, what's the matter?" I said, "It ain't going to do you any good." And he says, "Why?" I says, "Ain't nobody got mineral rights here." We was on a land condemnation, and then -- and then the one -- the landowner or nobody, they had no mineral rights. They took the right-of-way through there -- through that cut and stuff, and --

Q. So when you say land condemned nation --

BD. Mm-hmm.

Q. I'm not --

BD. It was big stock yards all over out there. It was time and time again. I'll never forget, in the 30s, they'd bring in train loads of cattle that would drive here from -- the big ranchers would buy dollar or so heads of cattle in Texas, and New Mexico, Arizona, and they'd ship them up here, unload them, and drive them out to pasture. I's always laughed about one time, they unloaded a bunch there in Gordon, and there was nothing but sandburs growing, two kinds: The Mexican type, settin' low, and the grassy. That's about all there was growing. It was so dry. They unloaded them cattle, and they eat sandburs and all. They had their nose plugged full of thorns, and they was eating

it. They was hungry. And they stripped the highway out of the old cut road clear into Latham and off over in the hills.

Q. Mm-hmm.

BD. There goes another train by.

Q. I was going to say, I hear one right now. You can feel it, too.

BD. I like to see them trains going by. (Laughs.)

Q. Makes you think of -- just a good comforting sound?

BD. Huh?

Q. Why do you like to hear the trains go by? Why?

BD. Why? They're still paying my -- sending me my paycheck!

Q. Ah. (Laughs.)

BD. You don't know why? I -- I don't have no social security. All I've got's railroad retirement.

Q. Oh, yeah?

BD. Yeah. (Laughs.)

Q. Well, we about worn you out?

BD. Yeah. I've set here about as long as I can set in one place.

Q. Well, it was very --

BD. I've been sitting down here about a lot of the stuff I knew about.

Q. Yeah. Is there anything we should ask you about that we shouldn't -- that we didn't?

BD. Oh, I don't know. My wife says I get to telling about tall tales and I don't know when to shut up.

Q. And she's heard them all.

BD. I -- I get so tickled with her. I walk off and leave my glasses laying somewhere, or my cane's hanging in the other room, or something, and I'm griping about it. "Well, don't blame me. It's not my fault."  
(Laughs.) I -- I never said it was her fault. (Laughs.) She blames herself for everything. I get so disgusted.

Q. Well, we'll -- nothing else you wanted to ask, Steve? We'll -- we'll wrap it up and let you get on with your day, but we sure thank you for your time.

BD. I've got -- well, my time, I'd probably be sitting, dozing, in the easy chair at home.

Q. Well, this was more fun than that.

BD. She --

Q. Did you carve your cane?

BD. What?

Q. I see your cane is carved. Did you do that?

BD. It's about to wear out. One time it had silver rings all up and down it, but they don't stay together too good. Yeah, I've got -- I got an idea for a cane. I'm going -- I'm going make one out of either stainless steel or aluminum.

Q. Mm-hmm.

[END]