CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY
The 1930s Migration to the Southern San Joaquin Valley

Oral History Program

Interview Between

INTERVIEWEE:	William Rintoul
PLACE OF BIRTH:	Taft, Kern County, California
INTERVIEWER:	Stacey Jagels
DATES OF INTERVIEWS:	June 8, 1981
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PREFACE

Mr. Rintoul is a journalist, very articulate and well educated. He speaks with ease about any subject. Mr. Rintoul is the author of articles about the banning of The Grapes of Wrath and fiction about Kern County oil field workers. Some of his publications are included in the limited access file. His interview is an interesting perspective of a Kern County native who observed the events of the 1930s in the San Joaquin Valley.

Stacey Jagels
Interviewer

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INTERVIEWER: Stacey Jagels

DATED: June 8, 1981

S.J.: This is an interview with Bill Rintoul for the California State College, Bakersfield CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY Project by Stacey Jagels at 2721 Beech Street, Bakersfield, California on Monday, June 8, 1981 at 4:30 p.m.

S.J.: I thought we'd start first with your biography.

Rintoul: My name is Bill Rintoul. I was born in Taft [California] on April 30, 1922. My father was a civil engineer who worked for the Water Company in Taft. He was born in Canada and grew up in San Francisco. My mother was born in Missouri and my grandfather, her father, was a railroad man. They lived all through the southwest while she was growing up. I grew up in Taft and attended all the schools through one year of junior college in Taft. Then I went away to the University of California at Berkeley and studied journalism. I got a bachelor's degree in journalism. I served a little over three years in the Army during World War II. When I came back from service in the Army I traveled somewhat and I also worked for a while in the oil fields. Then I got married in 1948 and went back to school in Stanford. I got a master's degree in journalism from Stanford. In the spring of 1949 I set myself up as a free lance writer specializing in writing about oil and gas drilling activity. I've done that ever since. I've earned my living as a free lance writer for the past 32 years.

S.J.: You mentioned in the late 1940s you worked in the oil fields. Was that the first time you had worked in the fields or did you have summertime jobs or something like that?

Rintoul: That was the principal time that I worked in the oil fields. It was in the late 1940s. I did a little bit of work in the oil fields as a kid when I was fifteen or sixteen years old working on weekends, but that was back in 1937 or 1938, probably about 1938.

S.J.: So when you have written fiction about the oil fields and the oil field workers most of that is drawn from your experiences in the late 1940s?

Rintoul: In part, but actually I've been writing nonfiction about the oil fields for some 32 years so in addition to the time I've worked in them I've been associated with people in the oil business, chasing around the oil fields in California, Alaska, the Gulf of Mexico, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and various places. So I've kind of had connections with oil people and the oil business ever since I was a kid.

S.J.: So you've had some contact with people who are actually out working in the field?

Rintoul: Yes, quite a bit. I've had contact with them in California, the north slope of Alaska, the Cook Inlet of Alaska, the Gulf of Mexico, Aberdeen, Scotland and a lot of places.

S.J.: Then you aren't just talking to managers or executives. You were talking to people actually working in the fields?

Rintoul: Yes. I would say that my contacts, the people that I have gotten information from and talked with, have ranged from the lowest guys on the scale to the highest guys on the scale. In certain companies I know people from the president right on down to guys working on drilling rigs. The type of news that I'm dealing with you have to get your news where you can get it. So I cross a lot of lines in the people that I have dealings with.

S.J.: This might be difficult to determine but right now in 1981 do you think very many of the oil field workers are descendants of the people who came from Oklahoma in the 1930s?

Rintoul: That, as you said, would be very difficult to determine, but I would be willing to bet that some are. There's still interplay between here and Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arkansas, Missouri and Texas with people that will come in and work here awhile and move on and work someplace else. That is not uncommon with people, particularly in certain jobs in the oil fields. They've been a pile of places. In effect, they're like somebody who happens to be a seaman or something like that. They ply their trade in a lot of different places. I know people, as an illustration of that, that you could talk to here in Bakersfield who'd worked in Libya or the North Sea or the Gulf of Mexico or off the coast of Africa or down in Brazil or Columbia or just about anywhere. I think that I could tell you somebody who worked there who lives here now. It's not uncommon. I know a guy who is about the same age I am who was telling me one time he had worked in something between 50 and 60 foreign countries. It's just not unusual. They work in a lot of different places.

S.J.: In addition to traveling to different places in the United States

they travel abroad?

Rintoul: Yes, that's true. So that, for example, it always seems to come as a surprise to various people when you take them out on a drilling rig and get to talking to them and depending on who you're talking to they can talk very knowledgeably about Libya or Saudi Arabia or Cook Inlet up in Alaska or working out in the North Sea or wherever you want to name. I guess what I'm saying is that it's a nomadic kind of business. I once wrote an article about a guy who had worked for I think it was a little over 30 years, maybe somewhat over 30 years, and he had worked for the same company on the same lease all that time. The reason for writing the article was that that was so unusual that somebody had worked in the same place that length of time.

S.J.: When you were growing up in Taft in the 1930s there was a migration which was rather large from Oklahoma, Texas, Missouri and that area. Were you aware that people were moving into the Taft area from Oklahoma?

Rintoul: No, not really, because we were out of the main stream of things in Taft. There was no major highway that came through town. It was not served by a railroad other than a spur line that was just for freight. There were no passengers. So that life for us was different. It sort of seemed to me that we were somewhat isolated. Taft was strictly an oil town and that was the business that virtually everybody followed. And they didn't feel that much relationship with people that were in the farming business, for example. I knew that people were coming in too because I'd read the papers and that sort of thing. I knew people were coming into Bakersfield or into the farm fields in California. But this was not a particular factor around Taft because we had always had people coming from a lot of different areas in Texas and Oklahoma. In the town itself there was a strong sort of southern or southwestern undercurrent or background. It was like the roots went back to the southwest or to the south and there were such things as Taft's famous policy of not allowing blacks to stay overnight. Well this came up from the south. It was not, incidentally, something that people like myself or my friends were proud of. We felt it was not in keeping with our vision or our interpretation as we were taught of what America was supposed to be. But anyway, there had always been kind of a current of people coming and going. It was like oil was kind of a fraternity and Taft was not so much related to areas in the farming country as it was to other oil towns like Burkburnett or Spindletop or wherever the oil activity was. I knew that people were coming into Arvin and around Bakersfield and Wasco and Shafter, but this never seemed to me to be a factor around Taft. We had people from Oklahoma. We had had them all along. That was where a lot of my friends' parents had come from or where they had come from.

S.J.: So you couldn't really say that the number that came from Oklahoma in 1935 was any greater than the number that came in 1925 or in 1920?

Rintoul: No. And particularly because the oil fields were very depressed at the time. Those were hard times in the oil fields. The Depression of the late 1920s hit the oil fields about a year after it hit most other places. When it first struck the country in 1929 everybody thought oil would be immune to it and for a while everything went along okay. But then when it hit the oil fields in the early 1930s it was a severe depression and it didn't really come out of it until about the time World War II started. It's my recollection that people were working three and four day weeks to try to keep as many people on the job as possible. There basically weren't jobs for anybody if they came into the oil fields. There weren't jobs for the people that were skilled oil workers, much less somebody coming in that had been a farm worker that didn't know anything about working in the oil fields. There wasn't a high level of activity so we were just sort of a backwater place. I just plain had the feeling that it was something that we were about 20 or 30 miles removed from it. It just didn't seem to affect us. The people that I got acquainted with from Texas and Oklahoma were ones that I met in school, particularly the year that I went to junior college in Taft because Taft in effect bought it's junior college football team and they recruited them out of the Los Angeles area and also out of Oklahoma and Texas. They had a dorm where they put them up. So we had a lot of kids going to school there who came from Oklahoma and Texas but that was a different deal. They weren't farm workers. They were football players.

S.J.: They weren't referred to as Okies then?

Rintoul: No, I don't recall the term Okie being used much around Taft. I don't really recall hearing much about it until The Grapes of Wrath came along--that is in the Taft area. I guess people were calling people from Oklahoma Okies just like they called people from Arkansas for many years Arkies. But I don't think either name really had a bum implication. It was in later years that it got to be a derisive or derogatory term.

S.J.: I had one woman who lived in Taft tell me that in the 1930s all of the Okies came out in their jalopies and just took over the town. She gave me the impression that there was this huge migration into Taft and these terrible Okies came in and just literally took things over.

Rintoul: Well, I guess that is just a different version than what I would give you. Two people look at the same thing and see it differently. But I never did see it that way. It seemed to me that the population in Taft was pretty stable all of the time when I was a kid. And actually Taft never got the growth after the war that other places got. People always came and went in the oil fields but it was not related so much to a migration from Oklahoma. It was the way the oil fields always worked. The people went where there was work and companies transferred them around and then they would get tired of

one place and move on to another. I don't recall any particular hostility to people from Oklahoma because there was too broad a base of people from there. That's simply my impression. It was kind of like who was going to raise their voice against somebody from Oklahoma. You would start next on somebody from Texas or Arkansas and everybody in Taft was from someplace else. The town dated from about 1910 and I remember my dad took out a small insurance on my brothers and myself and the guy that wrote the policy, this was probably sometime in the 1930s when he wrote this policy, when he asked where we were born--we were born in Taft--he remarked that it was one of the first times he ever wrote a policy for anybody born in Taft. People weren't born in Taft. Everybody came from someplace else. The someplace else dating back into pre-World War I was often Missouri. There was a strong influx of people from Missouri. What happened in the oil fields was that somebody would come out from Oklahoma or Missouri, maybe some little town back there in the Ozarks and they would get a job. If they were a good worker and things worked out, they would write back and say there's work out here and then their friends and relatives would come out. If the guy enjoyed a good reputation the company would hire the friends and relatives. So that was the background. A lot of people came out from a specific area because somebody had come out and worked here. My wife's family both her mother and father were from the Ozarks in Arkansas and we've gone back there to visit a number of times. It's always been interesting to me sitting around talking to these people like some of the relatives that are wearing coveralls and appear to be agriculture types living in small towns there in the Ozarks. They can talk very knowledgeably about the depth of wells in the Ventura field and drilling conditions here because most of them have worked out here at one time or another. They don't all stay but an awful lot of them have worked out here.

S.J.: Then you don't remember any problems if other people talked about it.

Rintoul: No, I don't. I really don't. I remember maybe one or two kids that came to school. I remember one kid that came from Tennessee when I was in grammar school in Taft and he didn't know how to tell time and some kids made fun of him on that account. Other than that I don't remember. Another one of the things I do remember is the number of kids that came to school barefooted in those days. That wasn't because they were trendy or anything like that. It was because their folks didn't have enough money to buy them shoes. I remember also that during the Depression a lot of kids I played with, a lot of kids I knew, came to school without any money to buy a candy bar or anything else. I know one family over there, they all turned out quite well, who existed pretty much on oatmeal mush. It was all they could afford. Times were genuinely hard. I don't remember any great group of people coming in. The thing is I don't know how they would have absorbed them if they had come in. People that were already there were having a bad enough time. We all see things differently.

S.J.: Of course. Do you remember going to Bakersfield very often?

Rintoul: Yes, quite a little bit. When I was a small kid people worked five and a half days a week and my father got off work on Saturday at lunch time so Saturday afternoon and Sunday was the time off. For one reason or another, this was true of my folks and I think it was true of a number of other people, it was kind of a common thing on a Saturday afternoon to load up the car and come into Bakersfield to shop because the stores were bigger and maybe there were elements of an outing. It was kind of like a once a week trip to come into Bakersfield to go shopping on a Saturday afternoon. So we came into Bakersfield quite often.

S.J.: Do you remember hearing anything or seeing things to do with people who had migrated from Oklahoma?

Rintoul: I think that about the first thing that I began to remember or to be aware of was probably about in 1935 or 1936, sometime in there. This is kind of peripheral. When I was a kid I was very interested in professional boxing and used to read everything. It was a big sport then, more so than now, kind of a different sport. It enjoyed more prestige maybe than it does now. Anyway, I started a collection of pictures of autographed prizefighters and in doing this I got acquainted with a number of guys. I was a kid. I started it in the eighth grade and continued it through several years of high school. I got acquainted as pen pals with some professional boxers and one of them was a professional boxer who had bought his folks a ranch out by Shafter. I was too young to drive or have a driver's license but my oldest brother used to drive me out to his ranch when he was home to visit with him. He actually held one version of the world's championship in his weight category. He was a featherweight boxer. He was a very nice fellow. On this ranch I think they were growing cotton. He was telling me one time that they had trouble with the people they hired to work, that they were not very reliable workers. If they said they would be there they wouldn't necessarily be there and things like that. I've thought about it since then and I don't really know whether the problem was that they didn't pay very much so people tried to get something else or whether they were undernourished and incapable of working very hard or whether they were simply not good workers to begin with. I don't know. I do recall that his comments were kind of along the line that most of them that they had hired didn't work out very well.

S.J.: He'd described these workers as people from Oklahoma, Okies or migrant workers?

Rintoul: Migrants. I believed he described them mainly as migrants. He came from Texas and so once again it was a matter of when you came out as to whether you were an Okie or a migrant. My in-laws came out in the early 1920s. It's kind of like it is up in Alaska now. That's the worst place I ever saw for somebody. If you go up there now, sooner or later in any conversation when you came to Alaska is going to come up. Somebody who came yesterday will look down on you for coming today

as a total outlander and stranger. Then you find somebody that's been up there 30 and 40 years. They totally discount anybody who came after 1940 or something. But it's the same thing. It all depends on when your folks came over on the ship.

S.J.: Do you remember ever seeing people working in the fields when you were driving along the country roads in Bakersfield?

Rintoul: Yes, I do. I learned to drive probably in 1938 or 1939. I remember my folks let me take the car one time and I loaded a couple of friends and we went roaring off. It must have been after 1939 because I remember we were driving out around Buttonwillow watching people work in the fields. That was a different world to us. We never identified with that. They didn't have any farm fields anywhere near where we were. If we identified with anything it would have been working in the oil fields. That was the type of thing we knew. Anyway, I remember kidding this one guy and saying as we went past these fields I was going to shout out that he was John Steinbeck getting more information and see if they'd lynch him or what would happen. We were just kidding around. Then when I worked in the oil fields for a while I worked on a survey project where we were working around Delano and out around a place called Alpaugh. We were running this survey right through the farm fields. That's about the closest I've ever come to it.

S.J.: Did you ever hear anything about the conditions?

Rintoul: Yes. I read the papers and they made it sound like they weren't so good. My uncle worked in the gas field up at Trico so in going up there we went through Shafter and Wasco. They had a big labor camp there. I think it was at Shafter and you drove right past it. You could plainly see that they weren't living very well in there.

S.J.: The government camp?

Rintoul: Yes. I think it was the government camp. It was a government camp and I think that it was there at Shafter. I remember the camp because it looked like there were very poor living conditions. We weren't living all that well in Taft either but I mean it was a notch way below that. Then also I remember seeing people living in tents and stuff like that.

S.J.: Camped beside the road under a bridge or something like that?

Rintoul: Yes. I saw some of that too. In Taft we had what they call a Hoover City. They had them in a lot of places. They were just cardboard shacks and people out of work were trying to get by as best they could. It's my impression that most of it was just an extension of Hoover City. Somebody who didn't have anything and was living in a tent or darn near on the ground. They just didn't have anything.

S.J.: The people who lived in this Hoover City in Taft, do you know who these people were? Were they people who had been in Taft and had been hard hit by the Depression?

Rintoul: I don't really know. But when I was a kid and Hoover City was in full flourish I remember very well where it was and what it looked like. My dad took me out there one time and told me to take a good look at it and to never forget it. I took a good look at it and I have never forgotten it. It was my impression that there were a lot of people [in that situation]. You would see a freight train go past and it was generally loaded with people who thought maybe it was better someplace else. They didn't have anything where they were and they were trying to go somewhere there was any possibility of a job. So I think that even though Taft was off the beaten track they came through there too. I know that you had an awful lot of people coming to your door through those years that wanted a little food. Most of them would offer to work. Generally they would offer to do some little chore if you would give them some food because they didn't have anything. It was sort of like a great floating population that was on the road trying to look for something a little better. I had a friend that hit the road, a kid a year or two older than I was, and he traveled all the way back down to Tennessee or somewhere. He said there were soup kitchens so you wouldn't starve but there wasn't anything anywhere. It wasn't any better. There wasn't any bright spot. You would think it's a little better over the hill. [You] get over the hill and find it's just as bad, so everybody tried to keep moving. But you wouldn't believe the freight trains in those days. I think of that sometimes when I get stopped on one of these crossings and you watch the train go by and there isn't anyone in those empty boxcars. I've seen the day when they were loaded. The whole train was loaded. There might be several hundred people just trying to go somewhere where things might be better. I don't think they ever found anyplace where it was any better.

S.J.: These people weren't necessarily from the Dust Bowl area. This was a universal thing.

Rintoul: It was a universal thing. I think they were from all over. They had the Veterans March on Washington and a lot of stuff like that. People were hurting. You look at the figures now. It's kind of unbelievable. I think the unemployment rate was something like 40 or 60 percent. It wasn't like ten or fifteen. It was kind of like Mexico is now, just a great pool of people that don't have jobs.

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S.J.: You were involved in a government project in the 1930s?

Rintoul: Yes. The old Buena Vista Lake was a playa lake that normally had water in it and all around there were hills like the Elk Hills or the Buena Vista Hills. There was Indian habitation apparently going back hundreds of years. But the Indians were long gone by the time that I was growing

up in Taft. We used to go out and hunt and find Indian arrowheads and beads. In the winter of 1933 and 1934 the government sponsored a project out there under the direction of the Smithsonian Institute where they dug up the mound at the foot of Buena Vista Hills and cataloged what they found and did it in a scientific fashion. But the people that they hired to do the digging were all the unemployed oil workers. At the time it happened there was no publicity or hint around Taft that it was simply a make-work project. Years later when I went into the library files as an adult to read about it they described Taft as one of the hardest hit areas in the country by the Depression. It was a winter relief measure to make work for people to put them back to work. They were limited to the amount of money they could earn or the hours they could work and it was a pittance. I've forgotten how much it was. It was maybe $30 a month. It was not very much money at any rate. It was simply a relief measure and these were not Okies or Arkies or anything. They were just unemployed California oil workers.

S.J.: Times were really that rough then?

Rintoul: They were bad all over. It's my recollection that as late as 1938 and 1939 people were not back to working full schedules. They wanted to put as many people back to work, the oil companies did, as they could so they had them working three and four day weeks. Interestingly enough, I've read about thoughts of doing that again to solve unemployment by making the work week short. You just work three or four days and they keep a maximum number of people working.

S.J.: Were very many people so bad off that they would be forced to take aid from the government?

Rintoul: Yes. They were. In the case of my father-in-law they got sacks from the government. They were apparently foodstuffs. There were relief programs and there were some things from the government and some of it you might call private charity, such as the barbers in Taft had a deal where if the kid was too poor to pay for a haircut they would cut it for nothing. It sounds kind of strange now but some kids that I was very friendly with their fathers lost their jobs. And the market collapsed and they not only lost their jobs but they lost what savings they had. In one instance, some kids that I played with who were my close friends couldn't have any lunch. They went to school but their mother couldn't give them any money. They had no money to give them and a school lunch cost about a quarter or something like that. They had precious little to eat otherwise. I've thought of the irony of it sometimes. Nowadays you have to struggle to avoid overeating. Everybody is trying to watch their weight. When I was a kid there were an awful lot of people that struggled to get something to eat. It just wasn't that easy sometimes.

S.J.: So it was fairly common for people to take aid from the government.

Rintoul: It was around Taft.

S.J.: Were you embarrassed about that?

Rintoul: Yes. When Roosevelt came along they had the Works Progress Administration [WPA]. They had make-work kind of stuff where they built up trails up in the mountains. Then they had the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] for kids. I knew kids that were in that. In effect, it was just the government hiring them. They had a program that a lot of the work they were doing was something that private enterprise wasn't about to do, such as improving a national park or something like that. The same was true with their authors and artists program where they had them writing guides to California because they were all starving too. It just seemed like nobody was doing that well in those days. We were lucky. My dad's salary was cut but he had a job so he worked through the Depression. On the other hand my memory of those years is not entirely unpleasant. It would have been unpleasant for the ones involved but we always had a lot of relatives living with us. The ones that had a job had to take in the ones that didn't have a job. Most of those old houses over in Taft sat on wooden blocks. They didn't even build them on a foundation. They just threw them together in a hurry because they didn't know how long the town would be there. My recollection of those years is mainly of all the relatives that were always living with us. We pretty nearly always had a full house. In looking back I think my dad was probably long-suffering because they basically were my mother's relatives.

S.J.: You mentioned that you had read about the migration into the Central Valley. Do you remember the kinds of things you read in the paper about these people?

Rintoul: Yes. It was beginning to show up in the papers. We took the Bakersfield Californian and the Los Angeles Times and it was showing up there. A lot of people were on the road and coming to California and there were a lot of problems. I don't remember anything specifically that I read. It's like you read now of trouble in El Salvador. It's something that's in the paper and you read it and remembered that you'd read it but you didn't necessarily remember everything you'd read about it.

S.J.: Do you remember if negative things were said about these people?

Rintoul: I don't recall. I recall that they were basically anti-anybody. I think my recollection of them is more like it was just reporting. You would pick up the paper and you would see where some guy froze to death in a boxcar back in Michigan and in his effects they found the Congressional Medal of Honor or something like that. Some guy that a few years back had been a war hero and this was what he had come to. Somebody advertised a job and there were 7,000 guys that applied for it. The tenor of what you read was--and this was just part of it--that there were these people coming from Oklahoma and Texas. Their farms or land got blown away. They got in that Dust Bowl trouble. They were just more people in trouble. There were the guys that were working on drilling rigs and they didn't have any jobs too so it was part of a

bigger picture.

S.J.: You don't remember that these stories were particularly heart wrenching in view of what was happening to everyone else?

Rintoul: Yes. I always thought they were heart wrenching. I always felt sorry for somebody. It's like when my dad took me out and said to look at Hoover City and never to forget it. That was probably about 1931 or 1932. I realized from that and from the people that came to your door that you were lucky if you had a house or if you had a place to live. We never owned our house. But if you had a place to live and if your father had a job you weren't starving. It was pretty plain [that] a lot of people were hurting pretty bad. I don't think anybody felt very good about it. I just felt sorry for people who didn't have anything.

S.J.: Do you remember reading about particular problems in Bakersfield? A lot of people have complained that mothers from Oklahoma came out and had their children in Kern General which was a county hospital, a free hospital, and that Kern County taxpayers were paying for these people who were not residents.

Rintoul: No. I don't really remember reading that when I was a kid but I do remember reading it when I did the research in the 1960s on that series of articles I wrote on the banning of The Grapes of Wrath. That's where I remember it from. I don't remember it from when I was a kid. So apparently it didn't make that big of an impression on me. But it is in those papers because I saw them as an adult when I went back into the microfilm and read them. And I would have seen those papers at the time but it apparently didn't make that big of an impression.

S.J.: This might be kind of difficult but could you say why the people would have been so upset by this migration?

Rintoul: No. I don't think that's all that difficult. In a way it's kind of like the house that I live in here in Bakersfield. We've lived here for about thirty years and this used to be an open field of pasture out here where we're living where they grew alfalfa and cattle roamed and it was bucolic and pretty and all that. So in the late 1940s they subdivided it and built these houses and I'm glad I got my house and I live here. But in back of us there used to be a canal and open country and cattle so that I could step out here to the alley and instead of seeing houses I saw open country and a kind of pretty rural scene. Then they came along and moved the canal out farther and leveled the land and built a lot of houses. My feeling at the time, I realize that this was irrational, was that I wish they had stopped after I got mine and not torn up the rest of it. What I'm trying to say is I think it's that old story that as soon as you get yours, then you would just as soon stop in place and not tear up anymore ground or bring somebody else in because you see them as a threat. Historically you see the guy who

comes in hungry and broke as a threat, a guy that somehow or another is going to threaten you or your job. He may be hungrier or he may be willing to work for less or he may be able to do the job better than you can do it. So I think basically that you see the last guy to arrive, the last guy to get off the boat or off the freight train or whatever, as a threat to what you've got.

S.J.: But there were people coming into Taft at that time and it sounds as though the people in Taft didn't become terribly upset.

Rintoul: I don't know how many people were coming in.

S.J.: Perhaps it's all in the numbers?

Rintoul: I think it's probably in numbers because I really don't think there were that many people coming in because the town was small and there weren't jobs there. If somebody came in they would not be apt to stay because there was just not anything happening there.

S.J.: Possibly it was this huge number of people that scared the people in Bakersfield.

Rintoul: Yes. That's where you have the point. Let me give you another example of that. It was like during World War II where they put a base in near a town. I was in an Infantry Division and there's about 14,000 or 15,000 guys in that. They put the Infantry camp somewhere near a town of about 3,000 or 4,000 population and the town was afraid. They'd look out and see there were more of us than there were of them. So I think you have a point there. It's the numbers. When you look up and you see there's just not two or three people there, there's 300 or 400 that came in on that last caravan or piled off that freight train, and they don't have anything. They're hungry and they don't have anything and you've got something, maybe. It may not be very much, but you look at them and you're going to be scared. It think that's what it is. You see them as a threat to whatever it is you've got. You see them as a threat to it. And they complained, as in the newspaper report, about somebody destitute coming in and having a baby out at Kern General Hospital and the taxpayers footing the bill. In a way, people get exercised about that. I think it goes deeper than that. I think it's partly maybe money but I think basically they see them as a threat. It's the same thing now when you bring in the Vietnamese boat people. Here's somebody coming in that's hungry and they're liable to work harder than you're willing to work and for less money and the first thing you know why you're going to have some trouble. Then after a while they get their stake and move up the ladder a little and then the next group will be a bunch of Cambodians and they'll be afraid of them. They won't care for them. It's sort of an old story.

S.J.: How about some of these stereotypes such as the word Okie or the idea that all Okies were dirty, used vulgar language, were lazy, slovenly people?

Rintoul: Yes. There was a stereotype. There was a stereotype and to a point, a degree, I suspect it still exists. When you use the term Okie on the surface you're referring to a point of origin maybe but I think basically what you're referring to may not have anything to do with where the person was born or came from. You're saying he's an Okie-type. He doesn't have to come from Oklahoma. Basically what you're saying is he's apt to use crude and vulgar language and be shiftless and not a reliable worker and have a whole pile of kids and a mattress on the car, et cetera. You're talking about the stereotype. But they [Okies] do the same thing. I've heard them use the term Mexican. It depends on the way you put the accent on it. You can pretty well tell if it's fighting words or if somebody is referring to the point of origin. And I think most of the time it's sort of like fighting words, it's derogatory.

S.J.: Do you remember the word 'Okie' being used much at that time?

Rintoul: The odd thing is that I remember it more, maybe my sensibilities weren't what they ought to be but I remember it more after World War II than I do before it. The war started and the shipyards started booming and a lot of people who hadn't had a decent job in a long time got a decent job, such as at Hunter's Point. A lot of Okies and Arkies lived out at Hunter's Point long before it became black country. It seemed to me you used to hear the term Okie all the time then but I don't really recall it all that much back in the 1930s. I don't know, maybe I was sheltered or something. Maybe I've just forgotten everything.

S.J.: Do you remember the stereotype? Do you remember talking about them?

Rintoul: Yes. I remember the stereotype. A lot that called attention to that was The Grapes of Wrath. That kind of was the focal point.

S.J.: It drew everything together?

Rintoul: It drew it together. It put it in writing.

S.J.: You read The Grapes of Wrath when you were in high school?

Rintoul: Yes. It came out in 1939 and I would have been a senior in high school when I read it. I had read several John Steinbeck books before that and I liked his writing. I started reading and I was a kind of a busy reader when I was a kid. I kind of made a transition from books with not much substance when I was in grammar school [to literature]. When I got to high school I had a good English teacher and I had friends that recommended books and I started reading good books with some literary value. I started reading Steinbeck and I like his work. When the library got The Grapes of Wrath I read it right away. I was certainly one of the first people in Taft to read it. As I read it I thought it was quite interesting because it was one of the few books I had ever read that talked about country that I knew anything about. Most of what I read was remote from any experience I had or any area

that I knew. So I found it quite interesting and thought it was a very powerful book. Then months later somebody apparently called it to the attention of the Supervisors and that's when the excitement started.

S.J.: When you first read the book, you knew of the stereotype of the Okie and then you read Steinbeck. Did you feel that this was a true stereotype, that Steinbeck's idea of what an Okie family was like was really true to life?

Rintoul: I was inclined to think that it probably was kind of true to life. I didn't really think it was all that derogatory. It sounded like a lot of people I knew. Around the oil fields people generally didn't wear dress suits and their English was not all that good. They were good people and all that but they were kind of like diamonds in the rough you might say. They hadn't all taken English in college and that sort of thing. It just sounded to me like a lot of people I knew. I had the feeling I could name various people that he could have used as his role models. I wasn't outraged by anything I read in it other than the fact that I was sympathetic to the people who were in that jam. I was sympathetic to it and it sounded to me like he told a pretty good story.

S.J.: Then all the publicity started about it. Could you tell me a little bit more about that? Do you remember reading in the papers about the Board of Supervisors and the Library banning the book?

Rintoul: Yes. It came to light that they had banned the book and people kind of chose up sides and my folks asked me what the book was all about. They hadn't read it. My wife said later that her folks hadn't read it but then they managed to get a copy and read it. They never read books much or anything. My mother read. My dad didn't do much reading. Then, because I read it, everybody would ask me, "What's it about?" or, "What does he say in it? What's the story in the thing?" So I did enjoy the notoriety or the fleeting moment of fame of knowing something about something that people were talking about. I had read the book so I was quite happy to talk about it to anybody that would talk about it with me.

S.J.: What was your personal feeling about the banning of the book? Did you have an opinion on that?

Rintoul: Yes. I thought it was outrageous. In looking back on my education, it seemed like we were taught stuff that was wrong. According to the yardstick that they gave us in school that wasn't the way to behave. We were taught that this was a free country and that something like that was against what we stood for. I never heard any of the kids I knew say they were in favor of banning the book. We were just taught that that was not right. They had books that they didn't let kids check out, like a grammar school kid, but to out and out ban a book so even an adult wasn't suppose to read it seemed outrageous. It seemed

like it went against what the country was all about. The country wasn't set up to operate that way.

S.J.: Do you have any explanation why the people in Bakersfield felt so strongly? They say that it was because everyone across the country would read this book and think everyone in Kern County was like that. They didn't want them to think that. But do you think there is something more to it?

Rintoul: No, not really. In a way, I think it's the same thing when Johnny Carson implies or says that Bakersfield is Hicksville, USA. There are people like the Mayor who rise up and want to get him out here to presumably show him it isn't by showing him Buck Owens or whatever. It would pretty much prove his point. I think they overreacted. There are firey people. I think probably there were some people maybe of wealth and position that felt they themselves had been taken to task in it and they struck back at it. I think maybe they owned a couple of Supervisors or something, so the next thing you know why they're going to ban the book.

S.J.: It just got out of control then?

Rintoul: It got out of control, I think. And then in the end they claimed they didn't ban the book but that sounded to me like the usual story that after something happens everybody claims it didn't happen. If you were there you know it did happen. So I don't know. I don't think there was any great support for banning it that I ever saw. I never heard anybody say that they ought to ban books around here. Maybe I just have one viewpoint. Maybe I tended to associate with people who saw things the way I did. I suppose you do but that was my viewpoint on it.

S.J.: Most people had no knowledge of Kern County or the San Joaquin Valley. When they thought of California they thought of Los Angeles or San Francisco. When many people read this book by Steinbeck, especially when it was made into a movie and then when it received the publicity, they believed everything Steinbeck wrote.

Rintoul: The movie was very good, incidentally. It was a darn good movie. As a matter of fact, it was one of my favorites. They still bring it back on TV from time to time. I've seen it a number of times. There were a lot of people who never heard of this neck of the woods and then all of a sudden something's in a book that some people interpret as derogatory about it.

S.J.: A lot of people from other parts of the country might have read the book and thought that's exactly the way things happened. And a lot of people could dispute that.

Rintoul: Yes, they could have. I know that.

S.J.: As a writer maybe you could say something about the novelist's right

to artistic license. Steinbeck did do some research but it was also a novel.

Rintoul: He made the trip. I understand he made the trip out and he frequented the camps.

S.J.: He went from camp to camp in California and lived with these people the way they did. But he was writing a novel and as an artist he wanted to write something interesting and he needed to sell a book.

Rintoul: I think if you read the stuff that Steinbeck had written before The Grapes of Wrath I think you could see that The Grapes of Wrath was not a departure for him. It was just sort of natural progression for a guy that was writing the sort of thing he wrote. With the exception of his very first book, the books that he'd written--Of Mice and Men and In Dubious Battle--that it was almost like it was a natural progression for him to write the book that he wrote. So his viewpoint was pretty well known and should not have come as a surprise to anybody. As far as what he said happened and what somebody else said happened, it seemed like Steinbeck as a citizen had the right to write anything he wanted to write and anybody else who didn't like what he wrote had the right to write anything they wanted to write. And if they didn't like what he wrote, let them write their version.

S.J.: Do you think part of the problem might have been that some people, especially those that aren't very well educated, don't understand the difference between a novel and a piece of nonfiction, a piece of history? Some people said, "He had no right to write that. It didn't really happen." They didn't understand the concept of a novel.

Rintoul: Yes. I think you have a point there too. They don't understand fiction. In a sense, Steinbeck was trying to capture the essence of the whole thing. He probably did that better than anybody else. Sometimes maybe the way to do it is with nonfiction. Certain things that are nonfiction capture it better than any made-up story about something. But in another way it's the artist's prerogative, his privilege. I think he's the guy that sat down and spent the time writing it and made the trip out with the people that were coming and lived in the labor camps and that. So maybe his version is a little different from somebody else's. Let them write their version. Let the people that read it decide who's telling the truth and who isn't.

END OF INTERVIEW

INDEX