

## CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY  
The 1930s Migration to the Southern San Joaquin ValleyOral History Program

## Interview Between

|                      |                             |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| INTERVIEWEE:         | Robert Dinwiddie            |
| PLACE OF BIRTH:      | Wylie, Collin County, Texas |
| INTERVIEWER:         | Stacey Jagels               |
| DATES OF INTERVIEWS: | February 18 and 20, 1981    |
| PLACE OF INTERVIEWS: | Visalia, Tulare County      |
| NUMBER OF TAPES:     | 3                           |
| TRANSCRIBER:         | Barbara Mitchell            |

## PREFACE

Mr. Robert Dinwiddie is in his eighties and lives in Visalia, California, where he has resided most of his adult life. Mr. Dinwiddie has a very difficult time hearing and understanding what is being asked. He has medical problems, takes medications and has some good days, some bad. Although he remembers some things, they are often not what is asked for. The interview had to be severely edited because of these problems.

Stacey Jagels  
Interviewer

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## Interview Between

INTERVIEWEE: Robert Dinwiddie (Age: 85 )

INTERVIEWER: Stacey Jagels

DATED: February 18, 1981

S.J.: This is an interview with Robert Dinwiddie for the California State College, Bakersfield CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY Project by Stacey Jagels at 834 West Goshen Avenue, Visalia, California on Wednesday, February 18, 1981 at 10:30 a.m.

S.J.: I thought we'd start first with when and where you were born.

Dinwiddie: I was born on February 7 in a little town called Wylie, Texas.

S.J.: Could you tell me a little bit about your parents? Were they also born in Texas?

Dinwiddie: No, my parents were born in Tennessee.

S.J.: Both of them were born in Tennessee?

Dinwiddie: I think they were born in Memphis, Tennessee. They came from Tennessee. That was their home. They had seven children.

S.J.: Do you know why your parents moved from Tennessee to Texas?

Dinwiddie: Yes. I think they moved because they heard that they could buy land for \$8 an acre in Texas. Tennessee was all settled.

S.J.: Your parents were farmers?

Dinwiddie: Yes.

S.J.: They wanted to come to Texas to find land?

Dinwiddie: Yes. That's what they wanted to do but my mother wouldn't move out to Texas because she said it was too thinly settled. She said that she wasn't going to move out where she didn't have any friends.

S.J.: Did they own land or did they rent land or do sharecropping?

Dinwiddie: I think the way they rented land in those days was the renter would give the owner every third bale as rent when the renter harvested the crops. The landlord got his share when we gathered the crops. How much crops were made was how much he made and how much we made. Of course, I was so small so I can't remember many details of it.

S.J.: Did you say there were seven children in your family?

Dinwiddie: Yes, there were.

S.J.: Were you the oldest?

Dinwiddie: I was the third child.

S.J.: Do you remember helping your father work on the farm?

Dinwiddie: Oh yes. I remember helping him all the time. From the time I was about seven years old.

S.J.: Did you have chores that you were assigned to do every day such as milking cows?

Dinwiddie: Yes, we had cows but my mother did the milking of the cows. We had 640 acres in our pasture and it was cut in two divisions. One was a smaller pasture where we kept the work stock. There was a river that ran through our part of the country called the Clear Fork. Back in them days everybody went fishing around the Fourth of July. That was when the farmers usually took their vacation and there would be seven or eight families who'd take their vacation together at the same time. We had boats.

S.J.: Did you fish a lot when you were a boy?

Dinwiddie: Oh yes. We fished quite a bit.

S.J.: Did you bring the fish home for meals?

Dinwiddie: Yes. We'd have what was called a fish fry on the bank of the river. We'd pick some good shady place where the water was shallow where you could come on a boat and then you could wade out with whatever you had in your boat. A man would clean the fish and dress them and get them ready for frying. We'd spend three or four days on the river and we'd call it a fish fry.

S.J.: This was a vacation.

Dinwiddie: That's right. That came along in July. In July the farmers had their crops all laid by by July 4.

S.J.: Could you tell me something about the house you lived in?

Dinwiddie: I remember laying in a bed a lot of mornings raking the snow off my bed. The facings on the doors were nailed high and they stuck out inside of the house. They weren't closed up on the inside [so snow and wind would get in the house].

S.J.: They were primitive houses?

Dinwiddie: They were just as crummy as could be. It was just like sleeping outdoors.

S.J.: You probably had an outdoor toilet?

Dinwiddie: No, we didn't have any outdoor toilets at all. We'd just dig a hole about five or six feet deep and then we'd build a top over it. Sometimes they'd be almost as far from the house as from here to across the street. The little children used what they called in them days chamber pots, I think.

S.J.: How about other things that you would need in the house such as a stove?

Dinwiddie: We used heating stoves in our house and most of the other people did too. Some used different kinds. One kind of stove was very long and it was made out of solid iron. The other type they had stood on four legs and it stood as tall as you. It was big in the middle and you could put your wood and stuff in there. The ladies had a cook stove set up on four legs about as tall you where your knees would come to and it had a hearth on it.

S.J.: How many rooms did this house have the one you're thinking of?

Dinwiddie: I think we lived in two or three different houses, maybe we'd rent a place for a year and then we'd move to another one. Or sometimes we'd stay there. The longest I can remember us staying in the same house was after I got quite a bit larger. It had three bedrooms or two bedrooms unless you made a pallet. We sometimes made pallets if we had company. We had to spread a quilt or something down on the floor that didn't have any rugs on it. Everybody that I knew had what we call a cellar. This cellar was made to go in when the storms would come for protection. You could pretty near push the houses over, they were so crummy. They had paper stuck in behind where your window sills come out. We'd punch paper behind there to keep the wind and stuff out. Everywhere you'd move you'd have to change that.

S.J.: Everybody else was in the same situation?

Dinwiddie: That's right.

S.J.: Did your father move to try to get a larger farm and more land to work?

Dinwiddie: I had a peculiar family. My mother was a coward to stay by herself. She wanted somebody in the house with her wherever she lived, so we kept a hired hand all the time. Sometimes we kept three or four but going back as far as I can remember we had a man whose name was Jim Cook.

S.J.: He was your hired hand? To help your father?

Dinwiddie: Yes.

S.J.: So your father was doing well enough that he was able to hire Mr. Cook and maybe a few other people during harvest time to help out?

Dinwiddie: Oh yes. We raised broomcorn and all that kind of stuff.

S.J.: Now your father would hire people to help like Mr. Cook but did all the children still help out too?

Dinwiddie: Oh no. When most of them got big enough they went to school.

S.J.: So most of them were in school and probably only helped after school or on weekends.

Dinwiddie: That's right, and on holidays.

S.J.: How about your education? How far did you go in school?

Dinwiddie: I really got an education. I got to the eighth grade.

S.J.: After the eighth grade did you help your father work on the farm?

Dinwiddie: Up until I got married I did. We just farmed cotton and sorghum cane to make syrup out of and sugar cane and stuff like that.

S.J.: Did you have a garden?

Dinwiddie: We had a garden. My dad was a gardener. Sometimes we'd have four or five acres of garden.

S.J.: How about animals? Do you remember the kinds of animals you had?

Dinwiddie: Yes. We lived between two ranches and one handled mules and one handled horses. You could get either one of them to work for their food for a year and then you could sell them for a broke horse or a team of horses or mules.

S.J.: So you could use those animals?

Dinwiddie: We could use them and work them for a year and make a crop with them. Then the owners could take them and sell them as a well broke team.

S.J.: And you had a few head of cattle?

Dinwiddie: Oh yes, but the cattle we owned ourselves.

S.J.: How about pigs?

Dinwiddie: Everybody had pigs.

S.J.: Chickens too?

Dinwiddie: We had way over 300. That was pretty good spending money. Sometimes you could get 15¢ or 20¢ a dozen for the eggs.

S.J.: Do you know if your father ever had any extra money left over after your living expenses? Did you ever have money to do things?

Dinwiddie: Yes, to buy our clothes and all. We wore good clothes because they were all made out of cotton and cotton is warm. We'd have summer clothes just like you do now and then in the winter we'd have heavier clothes and they were all good and warm. But our houses were not any good.

S.J.: Do you know why they didn't build better houses?

Dinwiddie: They didn't know how. The houses were always built way up high off the ground. Your ducks and geese and the ones that you made your feather beds and things out of always sat under the house. They could go under the house at night.

S.J.: You said that you worked for your father until you got married. How old were you when you got married?

Dinwiddie: Nineteen or twenty. I married a girl who was sixteen and we lived together till she got killed in a car accident. We celebrated our fiftieth wedding anniversary and we lacked five days of living together 51 years when she passed away.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1

S.J.: What town did you live in when you got married?

Dinwiddie: Abilene, Texas.

S.J.: And what did you do for a living?

Dinwiddie: I picked cotton. I took fifteen dollars and bought me a four burner oil stove and one little rocker and two or three cane bottom chairs to sit in. We'd just work in the cotton fields and pick cotton for our winter supply of money.

S.J.: How long was it before you and your wife had children?

Dinwiddie: Ruby was the first one. We'd been married eleven months and Ruby was born.

S.J.: How long did you stay in Abilene?

Dinwiddie: Oh, we lived there a long time. I don't remember how long.

S.J.: And you picked cotton all the time you were there or did you have another job after that?

Dinwiddie: That was the only kind of a job that was available to any of us that lived in that community. When the family could get out and work that was where we made our money, except my father and mother. He was working for the Cotton Growers Association. Sometimes they'd make four or five hundred dollars a week.

S.J.: Were you in Oklahoma when the drought and the dust bowl came?

Dinwiddie: I guess I was. I've seen the sand piled up against fences. There were big tumbling weeds that drove up against the fence and then sand would cover it up before it could blow away. I've seen the sand as deep as [two or more feet]. It was all over the country, all over the road and everywhere else. You couldn't go nowhere.

S.J.: What were you doing for a living then?

Dinwiddie: I was in the grocery store business. We bought a grocery store business. We bought a grocery store out. We moved off of the farm and into Carnegie and rented a nice two bedroom home for twelve dollars a month. That was when the great cyclone came. I was married then and had some little children. The storm hit within a mile of my house. Straight across from where I was living a Nazarene preacher was building him a new house and he had just finished this house up. [And the storm came and ruined it.] We all had storm cellars we went in when a storm came. I had one of the nicest storm cellars you ever walked into. It was a large one. You could put twenty people in it. It was concrete all up and down. Inside the cellar we had shelves built in where you could set food. We had a full size bed in there too. We carried a chopping ax down there and a crow bar so if the house blew over on the cellar we could chop our way out. We wouldn't be pinned in there.

S.J.: Did you know about any government programs?

Dinwiddie: Now that was back in the beginning of Franklin Roosevelt. Back in his days and times he killed the cattle by the thousands--had them killed all over the country. They pitched them over in the big gullies and had them cut open and poured coating all over them so nobody could eat them. That was the President of the United States having that done. Now you can call that a sensible man if you want to but I say if there ever was a crazy man in there he was one of them.

S.J.: How about the crop programs? Do you remember hearing about the government paying people not to plant the crops or to plow under their crops?

Dinwiddie: Yes, they'd give you so much to plow under and if you didn't plow it under why they'd charge you for it just the same. They'd have men going around surveying your fields and telling you how much you could plow under and how much you didn't have to plow under.

S.J.: How about tractors at that time? Do you remember very many people using tractors on their land?

Dinwiddie: Yes. This Nazarene preacher that I was telling you about bought a tractor. It would pull three twelve inch plows at one time. One time the wind blew hard enough to make it plow [a few hundred feet]. The man right across the field from that said there was no such thing as storms that would tear a house up and he refused to build a cellar or to go to one of his neighbors'. The storm blew his house [away]. It was one of the first ones. It just rolled like a baseball clear across that field three quarters of a mile, just rolled the house with them inside of it. They all came out alive. The wife broke her jaw from falling from the ceiling and back down to the floor when the house rolled over. She had to have it wired up. I forgot what it did to him but it tore him up pretty bad. This Nazarene preacher had an old cellar there but he hadn't been in it. It had been seven years since he'd been in it. He had a lot of farming tools like mowing machines and cultivators. It scattered them all over the field. It blew the new piano that he bought and scattered it over about four or five miles. Five miles to be exact, we traced it. The wind just stuck the pieces in the ground, just like you went along and planted them.

S.J.: Did very many people blame these dust storms on Roosevelt and the government programs that he had to plow under the crops? I've heard some people say that because they plowed under the crops the topsoil blew away.

Dinwiddie: Well, I don't know about that. When the dust storms came it'd cover up the top of the fence posts as high as my head. Big old weeds would blow up against it, then they'd catch sand and stuff.

S.J.: It was during the Depression so was it very hard economically? Did you have a tough time make ends meet?

Dinwiddie: You sure did. The sidewalk out in front of my house was built by the WPA workers. I never was on it but just a half a day in my life.  
[Works Progress Administration]

S.J.: What finally made you decide to leave Oklahoma?

Dinwiddie: That's an easy question. I'd worked all the year trying to raise a crop and when I got through selling my crop that I had raised that year I was living in a little two bedroom house and when I paid my debts up I had exactly \$51 in money to try to go through that cold winter. With

that much money it was impossible. I couldn't be done.

S.J.: So did you head for California then?

Dinwiddie: I headed for Arizona. That's when I went to Arizona and picked cotton and I came out at the end of the cotton picking season with something like \$800. I was crazy enough to move back to Oklahoma and try it again. It didn't work the second time so then I went out and built me a big trailer to go to California. We pulled that big trailer behind us with an old car. It was a big car, a Cadillac.

S.J.: What things did you bring along in the trailer with you? Did you bring any furniture?

Dinwiddie: No. We brought our clothes and two beds, two bed springs and mattresses.

S.J.: Do you remember how long it took you to come to California? How many days on the road?

Dinwiddie: Yes. It was ten or twelve days on the road.

S.J.: What did you do during that time at night for shelter? Did you just pull off to the side of the road and sleep?

Dinwiddie: We pulled off to the side of the road. We had a brand new tent we used. There was a wagon train of us traveling to California. One of the other fellows had a tent too. We stretched up them tents and we all lived together in them.

S.J.: Do you remember how many cars there were all together?

Dinwiddie: No, that first trip we made. There was quite a bunch of them.

S.J.: Do you remember having any car trouble along the way?

Dinwiddie: We were always having car trouble. They didn't build good cars in them days. They hadn't learned enough about building cars.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2

S.J.: How much money did you have when you came here?

Dinwiddie: I had \$800. First I went to cutting oranges around here and it took me a year to find out that I wasn't fond of oranges as I thought I was. I couldn't eat them all. Besides they had them in ricks here when I first came here, just piled up ricks and they were all covered up with oil so you couldn't eat them. They poured oil all over them so you couldn't steal them at night.

S.J.: Was there any reason that you decided to come to California instead of some other state?

Dinwiddie: Yes, there was. I had a friend that had been to California and he was telling me how beautiful it was. A whole bunch of my kinfolk came out here a year before I did and they were telling me what a fine country it was and what a pretty country it was. "It's just like going to heaven," they'd say. So I followed them out here. I came over some of the awfulest roads you ever saw in your life. I came over the Globe Mountains. They're still bad now. The first time we came over here we just had two wheel brakes. That's on the back. No front wheel brakes at all. We came over those Globe Mountains and went down them hills so fast. My oldest boy was big enough that he could help me with the brakes and all. I'd throw the brakes on awhile to slow it down and then he'd loosen up on it going down the mountains. They were terrible and the old road was narrow.

S.J.: Do you remember coming over the Tehachapi Mountains into the Valley? Do you remember what it looked like when you first came?

Dinwiddie: Yes. Some of it was real pretty, some of it wasn't pretty. The Tehachapi Mountains are pretty crooked. Since I've been out here they've got the roads to where you can pass them pretty good now. The first time I came out here there were lots of places that you'd have to stop or back up to pass the cars coming the other way. When I first came out here there weren't any roads over the Sierras and we used to go to the mountains every weekend. My wife got seasick and she would just be in the bed sometimes as long as three or four days after she got over the mountains.

S.J.: Do you remember if California is what you expected it to be? Did you expect it to look like it does?

Dinwiddie: No, I didn't. I thought it was prettier than it really is. But since I got used to it with the kind of cars you've got now these mountains don't amount to nothing.

S.J.: Were you a little disappointed at first then?

Dinwiddie: Yes, I was. If I didn't have to go back over them to get out of here I would have turned around and moved back to Texas where I belonged.

S.J.: Where did you first go when you came here? Where did you first settle?

Dinwiddie: Tulare was the first place I came to when I came out here. They had a camping place where you could camp and pick cotton. I went there first. Then I got a job later on, the one I enjoyed most, when we were taking our own town with us, just as complete as Visalia. I enjoyed that more than any other and I got to be the foreman over all of the crew. There were 21 of us.

S.J.: That was when you were building the migrant labor camps for the government?

Was that centered at the Linnell Camp?

Dinwiddie: Yes. It's the Linnell Camp. I helped build that.

S.J.: Could you tell me a little bit more about building the camps? What the process was and how you went about it?

Dinwiddie: The buildings that we were moving were twelve feet by fifteen feet long and they were cut in two pieces so they would stack one on top of the other. We'd haul them on these here wagons that we had plus we carried a diesel engine to make the lights for the camp. Every camp had an electric light in it. Then we had a bulldozer that we used to make our roads with and a big diesel engine that pulled that. We graded the streets just like they grade them in Visalia. In fact, we did a better job of it than they do on the street out here in front of me now when it rains. We had a man that kept the diesel engine that he was making the lights with. He took care of it himself. He kept it in tiptop shape all the time. There would be one family to each building unless you had a big family, then you could rent two or three of them if you wanted to. It would cost the migrant people \$1 a month to get a building and they'd get one light in it. One light wouldn't light up much. The one we had was 100 watts and it lighted up one of the buildings out there.

S.J.: Do you remember where the camps were that you built?

Dinwiddie: No, I don't remember where all of them were. Some of them were in Utah.

S.J.: Do you remember building some in southern California by Bakersfield?

Dinwiddie: Yes, we built two out there in Arvin, one in each direction.

S.J.: Do you remember how many you built all together? Quite a few?

Dinwiddie: Oh yes, quite a few. We kept going for about five years.

S.J.: You worked the whole time then?

Dinwiddie: I worked about five and a half years with them.

S.J.: Did you get very good pay for your job?

Dinwiddie: We thought we were robbing the government. We were getting \$12 a day back in those days. The crew had to be fingerprinted and you had to take a government test with your driving. I was fingerprinted and so were all the other boys who worked there. But when you got to where you were going if you didn't have enough men, the extra men you hired didn't have to do that. They didn't have to take fingerprints and things like that. We just hired them because they were just going to be working two or three days or maybe five or six days at a time.

S.J.: Do you remember how long it took you to put a camp together?

Dinwiddie: When we first started it took me a long time to put my part of it together because I thought I had the worst job there was in the world. I was digging the outdoor privies with a crowbar and a pick and shovel. I thought that was the toughest thing that I could get into because some of the ground was just as hard as a rock. Then as I got promoted I got to where I was foreman over the job and then it was a pleasure. They'd take a week or two to put up, they were so slow. One of the boys who worked with me is living in Bakersfield now. His name was White.

S.J.: Did you build all the common facilities for the camps too? I understand they had a laundry room and a recreational room, sometimes a sewing room, common rooms where people could meet together to do things.

Dinwiddie: Yes. They had washing machines and dryers.

S.J.: Did you have time off in between each project?

Dinwiddie: No. We just put one camp up and moved to another spot where it was needed the worst. We didn't put them up in rotation.

S.J.: Where was your family during these five and a half years?

Dinwiddie: Living here in the house in Visalia. I'd come home every six or seven weeks.

S.J.: Did your wife work then?

Dinwiddie: Yes. She worked awhile. She didn't work very long. She worked down at a grocery store.

S.J.: Did you just work five days a week or did you work longer hours?

Dinwiddie: We could work as long as we wanted to. We'd put in about eight or nine hours a day unless we were just finishing up a job or something. Then, time didn't mean nothing to us. We were getting paid by the day by the government to build these.

S.J.: Since you didn't have your family around what did you do in your spare time in the evenings and on weekends when you were not working?

Dinwiddie: I went to a motion picture show or something in the closest town.

S.J.: Was it lonely? Did you miss your family then?

Dinwiddie: Of course I did. Me and another guy had saved money. We were the only guys in our group that saved money. The others didn't care. They just spent it like it was water. Half of them would leave home with not enough money to last until they got back. I never did have to send back after any extra money. I always made mine last me until I did get back.

S.J.: You said you made about \$12 a day. That was doing well.

Dinwiddie: Outsiders were only getting about \$3 a day for cutting oranges by the box. Of course some of them could beat that cutting oranges but there weren't very many of them.

S.J.: Some of your children worked in the crops?

Dinwiddie: Yes.

S.J.: Was that for extra money after school or on weekends?

Dinwiddie: No, if you were making \$14 a day cutting oranges then you were making good money.

S.J.: Did Bruce complete high school?

Dinwiddie: No. I don't think he ever did complete high school. One of my boys, John, went higher in school than any of the others. He was pretty good in figures and he could just about figure anything. Now he's a security guard. He also works at a radiator shop.

S.J.: Do you remember how many children your wife had at home when you were working on these camps?

Dinwiddie: Some of them were working with me building these camps. Then the war broke out and they had to go to war. Wayne and Glen and John, they were all called into the Army. The only ones who went clear through the Army together were J.C. and Bruce. They went clear through the war. They were over there 30 odd months and both were sergeants in the Army. John took the rough end of the bargain. Bruce took a cooking job. He started out as a cook. He was in the Air Force and the others were in the regular Army.

S.J.: When you came out here you didn't immediately get the job building the labor camps, you had to do something else to support your family before you got that job.

Dinwiddie: Before I got that job I was picking cotton.

S.J.: Was that in this area?

Dinwiddie: Yes, around Tulare. Anywhere where we could find a good cotton field.

S.J.: So you had to follow the crops a bit.

Dinwiddie: Yes.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE 1

Session Two February 20, 1981

S.J.: Could you tell me about working in the fields? Perhaps you remember how

much you were paid?

Dinwiddie: After I left Texas and came to California we were paid on an average of 75¢ to \$1 per hundred for picking cotton. Some of the farmers would pay a little more than the others to try to get more pickers over in their field.

S.J.: Was it difficult to find a job picking cotton?

Dinwiddie: No, not a bit. You could just go out here anywhere and find a job. The only thing that hindered you was occasionally there'd be a bunch that would go on strike for higher wages. They'd hear that a farmer was paying maybe \$1 per hundred instead of 75¢ or 75¢ instead of 50¢ and that would cause the farmers to compete against one another to get the picking done. Then there'd be strikers walking out in the road. They weren't allowed to come in this man's field. He was probably guarding his field with a shotgun or something.

S.J.: Were you ever involved in any of the strikes?

Dinwiddie: I never was. When I went out to pick cotton for a man I didn't quit him for nothing as long as he needed me, me and my little ones. I think there were four or us that picked and we were all good cotton pickers. One son could pick 600 pounds of cotton a day by two or three o'clock and he quit for the rest of the day. The same with cutting oranges. He and a Mexican boy were the fastest orange cutters there were in the country. They never were beat.

S.J.: Did you know anyone who was involved in the strike?

Dinwiddie: Oh yes, but most of them are dead.

S.J.: Do you remember if there was any violence connected with the strikes?

Dinwiddie: Oh yes, there was plenty of violence. There was no one that I knew where I picked who got killed or anything like that. The owners of the cotton fields would stay inside their fence. They wouldn't be out on the public road. They'd carry their guns just in case anybody tried to shoot them. I never was in any of them. I was always a peaceful man and I believed if I was hired to do a job my place was on the property where I hired out to work.

S.J.: Do you feel you were paid enough on the job that you did?

Dinwiddie: I was paid whatever my neighbors were getting, maybe 5¢ to 10¢ per hundred difference but not enough to justify my quitting and going over and picking for someone else.

S.J.: Were you able to support your family on that?

Dinwiddie: Oh yes. We were picking 600 pounds a day. I could average that every

day. I could make enough money picking to buy all of our winter clothes and shoes. Sometimes during the best part of the picking season we'd take the children out of school to let them come out and help. They were good cotton pickers too. Everybody else did that too. Then I got a job working for the government.

S.J.: What was the first home you had here?

Dinwiddie: The first place I had in California I didn't own. It was a place that I was renting.

S.J.: Do you remember what it looked like? How large it was? How many rooms?

Dinwiddie: It had about three at the most. I had children and they had to have rooms.

S.J.: Did the house have hot water?

Dinwiddie: Yes. We had hot water sometimes, if the house wasn't too old.

S.J.: Well how about when you were working in the fields? Was there ever any money left over after you paid for your food and the essentials?

Dinwiddie: Well, we made enough to live on. That's all.

S.J.: Was it difficult making ends meet?

Dinwiddie: No. I never had any trouble with that.

S.J.: How about when you started working for the government building the camps did you make more money then? Were things a little bit easier?

Dinwiddie: Oh yes, I made about four or five times as much. [I] made some good money then.

S.J.: Why don't we get back to your work when you were in the fields? How did you know where to find work? Was it just by word of mouth or did people send out flyers that told where the work was? How did you know exactly where to go to find work in the fields?

Dinwiddie: They had little ads in the newspapers. They'd tell you where the cotton field was and how to get there.

S.J.: When you were picking cotton did you pick cotton very far away from this area? Or was it usually right around here?

Dinwiddie: There was a farm right here close where we picked cotton and it belonged to the government, the land did. They had a 500 acre field and they were raising cotton. You'd pick cotton there and they furnished your house to live in for \$8 a month, a two bedroom home.

S.J.: Did you live there?

Dinwiddie: Oh yes, I did. I lived there until I went to work for the government and when I went to work for the government they made me move out. They said I couldn't work for the government and live in a government house.

S.J.: When you lived on this government land in the house and you picked cotton for the government did you get better pay than when you picked cotton for an independent farmer?

Dinwiddie: Yes, we were supposed to get about a nickel a pound more.

S.J.: Do you remember very much about the way the growers and farmers treated you?

Dinwiddie: Oh yes, they treated us well. There was no trouble there.

S.J.: I've heard that sometimes when the workers would bring their sacks of cotton up to the scales to be weighed there were some farmers who were dishonest and would try to cheat the workers out of their pay. Do you remember hearing anything like that?

Dinwiddie: No. I never had nobody do me that way. I've heard of it. If you could actually see a picture of the people and how things were run back in those days why you'd see how that was easily done.

S.J.: What do you mean?

Dinwiddie: You weighed your cotton on a pair of scales. They could put a little extra lead in the bottom of the scale that weighed it. It was a thing that hung down and it was loaded with lead at the bottom to make the scale balance at a certain weight. The pea could be loaded to where it would weigh heavier or it could be dug out to where it would weigh lighter. There were some that did cheat that way but then you'd probably work for a man almost all year before you'd ever find out that they had it that way. It would be so little that you wouldn't notice it, a pound here and a pound there.

S.J.: Did they pay you every day?

Dinwiddie: Some of them did. Some of them paid you at the scales every day when you weighed. All of them didn't do that. Some of them just paid you once a week.

S.J.: Did they pay you cash? I've heard some people were given tickets or tokens and they were only allowed to use these at certain stores.

Dinwiddie: They did. They had tokens.

I learned to do carpenter work when I was living in Texas. I got in with a carpenter and went to doing carpenter work in my spare time. When I went to doing carpenter work of course I made more money than I could picking cotton or anything else back in them days.

S.J.: Did you try to get work as a carpenter out here in California?

Dinwiddie: I did. I built this house.

S.J.: Were the wages much better?

Dinwiddie: Oh yes, the wages were better.

S.J.: When you told me about building those camps last time you mentioned that you were paid \$12 a day. Did you feel the work you were doing was worth \$12 a day?

Dinwiddie: Yes, I did. It was hard work. Building a house is hard work. If you don't think it is just try to look at the pieces that go into it.

S.J.: Did all of the fellows who worked with you work very hard too?

Dinwiddie: Sure we did. We all worked just the same.

S.J.: What did you do after your government job ended?

Dinwiddie: I was in the restaurant business here in Visalia. I used to run a big restaurant here. I ran it by myself for a while and it got so big I couldn't handle it and I went to hiring help.

S.J.: How long did you do that?

Dinwiddie: We were in that two years, I guess.

S.J.: Do you remember if World War II changed things very much for you and your family?

Dinwiddie: Oh sure it did. World War II just tore everything up. I had two boys in the Army, John and Bruce. Bruce was in aeronautics and J.C. was in the infantry and the infantry was the one that got the worst of the war. It never pays.

END OF TAPE 3, SIDE 1

S.J.: Did the war change things very much for you here in California?

Dinwiddie: I think when the war hit it changed everybody's life. I don't think the ones in the war came back the same people they were when they left.

S.J.: Did you ever wonder why you were able to get a job picking cotton in the fields and later for the government and why these other people didn't seem to be able to find work?

Dinwiddie: No, I can't tell you. I just figured that I happened to be among the lucky ones and got a better job than they did.

S.J.: Do you think they tried as hard as you did to find work?

Dinwiddie: Perhaps they did but maybe they were handicapped to start with.

S.J.: Do you remember if very many of these migrants who had difficulty finding jobs and had no money took government aid? What we would call welfare now?

Dinwiddie: Yes, I remember a lot of them did that. They called it WPA [Works Progress Administration] then.

S.J.: Did you ever take government aid?

Dinwiddie: They gave away beans and potatoes, stuff like that. I took one commodity.

S.J.: Just one time then?

Dinwiddie: Just one time. That was all I ever took. I got off of it and got a job and went to work.

S.J.: But you say there were a lot of Okies who did take government aid and perhaps many more times than once.

Dinwiddie: Well, we still got them that take aid.

S.J.: Some of the people who lived here in California thought that people came from Oklahoma and Texas just to get the commodities and the check from the WPA.

Dinwiddie: No, there weren't some that came here purposely to get that, not any that I knew of. Who'd want to come and get something like that on purpose? Can you imagine anybody wanting to take something like that if they didn't have to?

S.J.: Do you remember any hostility towards the Okies?

Dinwiddie: Yes, we had hostility.

S.J.: Do you remember anything happening to you?

Dinwiddie: No, nobody ever bothered me. My family was never bothered because we didn't bother anybody else.

S.J.: Do you remember any violence associated with the farm workers?

Dinwiddie: I remember some of them having fights. I never did have any but I remember some that did have fights and they would call the law from Visalia out sometimes to break them up. The Visalia law would come into one of those camps and break it up. They weren't allowed to though

that was for the government to take care of. They had to select their own protection.

S.J.: When you were first here in California did you make friends right away with people who were in the same position you were in? Did you feel pretty comfortable here?

Dinwiddie: Why sure I did.

S.J.: Have you seen or read The Grapes of Wrath?

Dinwiddie: Yes.

S.J.: Do you think that the picture that Steinbeck painted of the Okies was the way it really was? Do you think his book was true?

Dinwiddie: Yes, I do. I think his book was very true. I don't think he muddled up a bit of it. I think every word was as true as it could be.

S.J.: How about the way Steinbeck made the Joad family look very crude and ignorant?

Dinwiddie: Well, most all of them were kind of crude and ignorant as far as education is concerned. We didn't have no school teachers then. You couldn't hardly find a school teacher that knew any more than you did.

S.J.: Do you think your life has been better than it would have been had you stayed in Oklahoma?

Dinwiddie: No, I don't know.

S.J.: Are you glad that you came to California?

Dinwiddie: Sure, I'm glad I came to California because this country is so much warmer. You can get through the winter without having to keep a fire every morning.

S.J.: Did you ever consider going back to Oklahoma?

Dinwiddie: No. Lately I've thought if I ever move away from here I might go back there but it would be due to my brother because he lives in Oklahoma.

END OF INTERVIEW

[NO QUESTIONNAIRE SUBMITTED]

Dinwiddie  
b. Memphis, Tennessee

b. Memphis, Tennessee

Robert Dinwiddie  
b. 1896, Wylie, Collin Co.,  
Texas  
Education: 8th grade

m. 1916 →

Bertha Dinwiddie

---

Ruby

Wayne

Glen

John

Bruce

Ruth

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