Interview with Lloyd Bearden

Place of Interview: Bearden Furniture Office, Jacksonville, Texas

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Interviewer: Wynell Pugh

Transcriber: Ann Chandler

TOPIC: TOMATO INDUSTRY IN CHEROKEE COUNTY

WP: Lloyd, can you give me some comments about when and how and where you were connected with the tomato industry in Jacksonville?

LB: Wynell, I guess maybe my recollections go back to probably when I was about eight years old. That was that my family had started being involved in tomato shipping business. My recollection was that it seemed like out in the Corine Community where I was raised that it started off with a kind of a "pinking deal" that they called it that they put these tomatoes kind of in little round circles in those small baskets as best I can remember. I don't know how they were transported out. But I think it was mostly a community thing of the growers getting together. They had in the Fry's Gap Community there was a little depot type of thing, I think, to where a little shipping went out of there from some of those. Then in the early 1930s my dad and my brother, J. D. Bearden and my dad J. O. Bearden, had some little operation down on the end of Commerce Street. "Catfish Row," I think, as they called it. That was my first deal of ever having any experiences around sheds. Of course, I had the very, very important duty back around there of sticking those dad-blamed labels on those lugs. I remember what a mess that was to it.

Thinking back about what the industry has really meant to Cherokee County, there were so many things that were dependent on it. The growers that raised those tomatoes back in those days were independent men and not any large acreage by any one individual. Mostly they had patches of fifty acres maybe or such like that. They actually, this has been what I've heard, and I saw, and what I remembered. Those growers would take seed and what they had were -- I'm no authority on any of this, it's just what I've observed -- and then they grew their plants in hothouses from seed;

then they tookcare and took those out and put them in a cold frame, and that cold frame then started the input back into the community -- the business districts -- because from that deal they had to have their lumber to construct those frames and also they had to buy their cloth. That was big business around those tomato sheets that all the growers used. And so that started pumping money into the economy immediately. By the time that this part was through, it was still cold weather. They had to contend with that, and they would take those plants from the cold frames then and take them out into the fields and then they would take very special care and stalk those tomatoes as they called them with little rods that they put down into the ground, and tie them. They actually just gave a lot of care to it, even going to the fields with barrels of water and individually watering plants.

As far as the part that came on into the shipping, well, that would usually start probably about the end of May and really get into high gear and back in those days, I mean, Jacksonville became a hub of activity. We had the old Liberty Hotel here back in those days and I cannot remember, but it's been -- someone does have the information on it -- but buyers from the East and from Chicago and everything would come in here and really load up. They also brought with them clerical help and then they actually set their offices up over at the Liberty Hotel and then, of course, they would get their Western Union and telephone were really busy in those days because every morning whenever it came time to get the buyers out on the streets, well then they would get the information by wire or else by phone from "across the river," as they referred to it in New York to find out what the price was that they could pay themselves to shippers for the tomatoes that they would be buying from the shippers. Then, of course, the shipper in return, he knew then what he could go and ask his buyers to go out on the street and buy these tomatoes. That was quite a spirited thing.

WP: Was there very much competition in that?

LB: There was very much competition into it. Actually, by that time, the operation that my dad and my brother first started off with was very modest, and then later on, after my dad's death, well my brother really went into the tomato business big-time. And with it you tried to find buyers that not only knew what the grade of tomatoes were and what they were like, but also you found one that had personality and contact and

that growers trusted and that he just had the charisma to get the people to come into the sheds.

WP: Do you remember the names of some of those buyers that had that charisma that was special to you?

LB: Well, I know that the main one -- the buyer that worked with us so many years and everything, also was involved in the furniture business with us as store manager -- is named Tom Acker. Tom had this contact. He knew everybody in the county ; he was actually born down in the Dialville Community, and he had service station business earlier in his life and that way he just knew everybody. Everybody loved Tom. Tom was fair and honest, and he was our buyer. And then the Underwood family -- Grady Underwood was one of our buyers from there. And then Loring Taylor was one of our buyers. And the other sheds that we had back around, they were doing the same thing. Actually it was very competitive in that pricing bit.

WP: I wondered if there were any price wars kind of going -- maybe at the first of the season?

LB: They would talk around and somebody would try to promise somebody a little something, but there was no collusion. I know of a few tricks. One time a guy told one man, "Just go ahead and bring your tomatoes down to the shed and I'll pay you the highest price ever paid for that day." He never did it any more. For instance, because of this reason -- I think the price was three cents or something like that. That's the truth -- what they were paying for them.

WP: Three cents.

LB: Yes, and someone then said, "Okay, I heard about that you will pay that man what it was." So he gave a dime for a load. It was just really not anything of getting into any war because you couldn't afford it. And I'll tell you why. That was because that price was quoted from across the river in New York and you had to go by what it was or you lost your shirt for the day there.

WP: What were the railroads -- how many railroads were coming through here and how close did the sheds have to be to the railroad?

LB: There were three railroads at the time. Actually I think that the spurs only were. I believe nearly all the place was up and down the I&GN, is what we called it then.

Then SP had some sheds back along their lines up. They just had spurs kind of shot off to the sides a little distance on to it. But there again, coming back to this economy we were talking about -- the shed activity. When, I believe somewhere I've lost where I was wanting to go next, but back into the shed business itself. People that were involved into this, a lot of them were like school teachers. They would be out of school by that time and that gave extra money for them and also you weren't taking away from the other work forces because the people that involved into it, a lot of them were housewives that did the packing of the tomatoes. Of course, you had along that line, you had what they called fruit tramps. And it wasn't a tramp, that was just a term that they used. They were quality people that actually they were packers and things like that that followed the tomato packing season and on up from us from the Valley to us to Arkansas and to Missouri and such. They just gave a lot of work for young people that were right out of school and things like that. They worked on the sheds doing various duties.

WP: When they came into the sheds, how did the process go in the sheds?

LB: You would see lines -- after these buyers had bought those there would be lines of tomatoes backed up in trucks and wagons and lots of things to haul into. The actual shipping would start about ten o'clock in the morning. Then from that time on it went, and I'm talking about a lot of times after midnight that packers would still be packing those tomatoes and getting them on out. But as these trucks and wagons would come into the shed, well, they were packed in bushel baskets, and I think the pound -- it would average about fifty to fifty-five pounds to a bushel. They would set those things on the scale when they first came in and would weigh the in-coming weight. Then as the tomatoes would be taken off of that, they would go back over. Those tomatoes then were poured on to conveyor belts. And the first thing that they would go through was a little washing machine type of deal that cleaned the tomatoes. Then they went on up on a wide conveyor belt and these belts had small holes, large holes, whatever size of tomatoes. Of course, the first holes were the small holes and the smaller tomatoes that were to be graded fell off first into another conveyor belt. That took it to the packers who would be packing that type of tomato. Then you have your next size and then the large sizes. Then the tomatoes that weren't -- the graders had been grading those tomatoes in advance as they were coming through and they

threw them over into another conveyor belt and they returned them back into the end, where the truck that had unloaded pulled up to the next bay and then you take his tomatoes that were rejected because of not being up to grade, weighed them, subtracted it from what it was on the weight when it came in, and then the man collected his money on the net and he had his old tomatoes to go off and do what he wanted with.

WP: He took his culls off?

LB: He took his culls off with him.

WP: You mentioned the baskets and the crates. Do you think that played also an important part?

LB: That was very much involved in our economy. Our material that we had back around here in our pine wasn't the quality pine that you could use for building crates. That was the only thing that was really imported back in here. And we had to buy those mostly from the Northeast up there. Big white pine, and that was shipped in here to build those lugs with. But then, as far as the baskets and things like that, that was big business for our crate factories and all. And that also ran parallel with the peach business and everything else.

WP: The peach business?

LB: The peach business was big. Anyway, it really employed people year-round because they didn't wait until the season started to make those baskets. They had to be made in advance because I don't think you could get over two or three seasons out of a basket. They get torn up with the rough treatment they were taking. There is something else I am missing back into that economy bit, but it just employed so many people.

WP: There were several sheds here. Can you recollect some of the names besides the J. D. Bearden Shed. Can you remember some?

LB: Well, the two Wigg Brothers were here and Bob Tankersley had a shed here and Edwin Brown had a shed here and the Simmons Brothers had a shed here, and O'Keefe, Lyman O'Keefe, had a shed here. And a lot of them had community ties that were the shippers back then.

WP: Were the Pattons also . . . ?

LB: Yes.

WP: It seemed that I remember seeing that on some building around here.

LB: Yes, Mr. Patton had his shed operation, too. That covered, I think, most of the shippers. I'm just thinking, but I really don't think -- I'll bet you there wasn't over probably fifteen - twenty shipping sheds in here. So you see what a load that those things had to maintain.

WP: They really put them out then. When they did the grading, did they wrap the tomatoes then, and did the paper that they wrapped them in or whatever substance, did that play any part in our economy here?

LB: No, that tissue, as we referred to it, of course, was probably another source that you had to bring back in. But those packers, as those tomatoes went down those conveyor belts from where the graders had been pitching them into, well then, they started packing those things right in a hurry because they got paid by piece. As they finished those things, they had little rollers on another conveyor belt that they put them on to and then they would slowly go on down to where they had the persons that put the lids on top of those crates and everything.

WP: So it was really an assembly line?

LB: It was an assembly line all the way. And then from that part after the man put the crate on to it, it took another set of rollers right on into the boxcars, those refrigerated cars. We had a lot of our carpenters here that took time off from their -- they kind of built their time back around so that they would be available for the season. They got in there and did all the workmanship of loading those tomatoes in there and then crating them in fashion to where they wouldn't -- in the shipping it, whenever the boxcars jammed each other, they wouldn't be flying all over the place. They really put them in there right. Those boxcars, after they would be finished, you always had a switch engine that was running up and down the tracks and they would go and pick up those cars and take them on down to the ice plant. Then when they got down there, that ice plant had to work twenty-four hours around the clock icing those cars whenever they got down there. When they were ready, they sent out what you'd call a train load of tomatoes the next morning.

WP: That is just amazing. One of the things I wanted to ask about too, was just the economy in Jacksonville. Like the retail stores. Was that about the booming part of

the year for the retail stores?

LB: Well, I'll put it in this fashion -- being a retailer, we always felt the impact of the tomato season time. In good years and things like that, people pretty well had in mind, as I said, a lot of this was additional income that the people were getting in about a six-week period back around there. And that's whenever things really boomed. People had been waiting for a refrigerator or a new suit or a new dress or something like that, well, then that really stocked it into our economy because lots of money came in. That money all came, whenever you look at it, it was all "found" money because it came in from outside sources, from up in the far Eastern states where the tomatoes were shipped and things like that. It was new money that came into the economy here.

WP: That was really the good times. How did then the weather affect the business? I would assume.

LB: When it came down to the tomato shipping time period, as the saying goes, "Time waits for no one." Whenever the tomatoes were ready. By that, I didn't mention a minute ago, though, but of course, it is naturally assumed that this was a green wrap situation. And those tomatoes were pulled whether it was raining or not and they were brought on into town and those tomatoe sheds operated. That time of the year, we were mostly though with the May showers, April showers and such. But the weather whenever it came time to ship, we shipped; we packed; we worked.

WP: Shipped anyway.

LB: Yes.

WP: The only thing then that could affect it then would have been . . .

LB: Trying to get them out of the field. That growing period back around there, that was always a worry to the growers because they didn't know whether or not that hail would really be a demon whenever it hit.

WP: Well, what I was really wondering was, what would you think would be the reason that the industry played out in Jacksonville?

LB: I have just heard say, I know that I heard some of the shippers -- I was around them quite a bit and involved -- now, this is my theory, but earlier in this conversation I mentioned to you about the pride and what was done with these deals and raising

them from seed -- incidentally, you see things spin off from one thing to the other, but this is just my own theory, but I know that back around in the New Summerfield area, and I didn't mention Mr. Damon Raney -- he was a big shipper out of the Reklaw area -- and Mr. J. P. Acker was a big shipper down in Rusk. But it became big business like at the New Summerfield area for these people to start raising these plants and things like that. They started shipping those plants to other areas back out of there and I've just always felt like that was the basis back there that really set off. I'm not meddling into somebody else's business, but I believe that was a stepping stone back there to get into other fields because they really grew those tomato plants out there for the growers. And answering your question -- I think then a lot of times, they started trying to get these early plants out of the Valley and I can't buy it, I don't think the soil was used up because we are still getting quality tomatoes out of here right now. The quality of the soil . . .

WP: Are there many growers still here? And how do they ship them if there are still growers?

LB: Believe it or not, be still have quite a few people growing tomatoes. They kind of have a little co-op situation going and they have an operation over on Alabama Street over there now. One shed. I think they might be having those tomatoes trucked out of here instead of rails, rather. There's a lot of people growing their tomatoes and they just have their own co-op and have them trucked out and sold to markets. I don't know how far out the state they go with them. Whether they just cover the Dallas - Fort Worth market or what. But there is some of it there. But for the demise of the tomato deal like we knew it, I just really don't know. I just heard the shippers say that it just seemed like the quality and everything of what was in the past no longer existed and it just, as the saying goes round old Cherokee County talk was that it just petered out, I guess you would say.

WP: If you were going to talk about or discuss the most pleasant memories around the tomato times, the boom times, what would you think would be the most pleasant part of the whole thing?

LB: Well, I guess I would hate to say this, I always dreaded that worse new _____, my God.

WP: Would you like to tell me the unpleasant, too?

LB: I said a minute ago that we would start off at ten o'clock in the morning. I was in another level that started earlier and then worked a lots later than that at night, too. Because after the sheds shut down at night, you had to take all your manifests and go down to the depot, as we called it, down there, and give them your manifest of what you had in your cars, and how many lugs and all that stuff was in there. By the time you drug into the house and got into bed, it was time to get back up and take a shower.

WP: And get ready to go again.

LB: And come again, so, I don't know whether or not that you could say how much enjoyment you had out of it. I would say that really there was a certain satisfaction to seeing the economy get such a boost to it. And it was also money into my own pocket along with other people. So that was rewarding within itself back there.

WP: So the most unpleasant part was the end of the day?

LB: I don't know, there might have been a little horseplay back around on the tomato sheds, but it was mostly hard work, and everybody working on there, it wasn't time to stand and stare at the ceiling. They were busy; everybody on the shed. Hands moving every direction in the world.

WP: Well, is there anything that you can think of that we haven't covered as far as your memories around the . . .?

LB: No, I know that, as I mentioned a minute ago, a lot of preparation in advance had to be done, just like the crate factories, and their play into things. We called them lugs, all those things that were shipped into. And those lugs had to be all built beforehand. I don't know if I've ever looked up to see what Webster says is the definition of shook, but it was always that the shook had to be brought in by freight cars and unloaded. That was the material that we used to build the crates with as I said earlier, had to be imported in from other places.

WP: So, do you recollect hearing anybody say about the time that they first started with the pink deal? I was really interested in that. I never really heard anybody say . . .

LB: They called it "round packing" and I saw that when I was speaking of when I was seven or eight years old. That's about the first time that I got involved. I've been involved in the tomato business ever since then, but I saw them do that ring packing

back there, they called it the "pinking" deal is what they called it. I couldn't really truthfully tell you, but I'm sure that that Fry's Gap shipping point had something to do out of our community out there with it. And it seemed to me like Craft out here had something similar to that, too.

WP: I didn't really expand on the canning industry, but I understand there were several canning plants and maybe even a ketchup plant. Do you remember?

LB: I remember there was one canning plant in particular because I know that my brother J. D. sold tomatoes to them out there and then you mentioned ketchup, I remember vaguely something about a ketchup plant, but I don't remember the name.

WP: Or where it was?

LB: No, I sure don't, but I never ate a can of tomatoes until I was old enough to vote after I got through - - - . I think that the money was placed in these buckets for the ladies and men that peeled them, and they peeled them by hand. That's as graphic as I want to get with my description.

WP: If there is not anything else you can think of. This has really been a nice chat.

LB: I really don't think of anything further. I know that a lot of friendships of people that came in here, there were always ties back to the community from these buyers that came in from the other states and things like that and there was always correspondence until recent years. I'm nearly sure that all the shippers are just about gone. Passed on.

WP: I really appreciate and I'm sure the Cherokee County Historical Commission really appreciates. This has really been an overview of the tomato industry. I think it has just been excellent.

LB: Wynell, I appreciate your talking to me. I'm not an authority on it. I just watched what was going on.

WP: You did pretty good. Thank you.

END OF TAPE