

Interview with Payne Rountree. Done by Eric F. Goldman in Mr. Rountree's home, 1807

Breckenridge Street. Austin, Texas

G: Mr. Rountree, we want to get all of the details about the trip to California. Will you tell us, first of all, how many of you went?

R: Five of us.

G: And the names, please?

R: O.B. Summy, Otto Crider, Lyndon, and Tom Crider.

G: And is it correct that you left on July 3rd? Or do you not remember when you left?

R: No, I don't. I know it was in the summertime but I don't remember.

G: Do you know whose idea the trip was?

R: I don't know. We all got together and got to talking about it and we fixed up that old car and took off.

G: Whose car was it, Mr. Rountree?

R: We bought it from Walter Crider.

G: Was he one of the Crider boys?

R: Yeah, he was one of the boys -- an older boy.

G: Was it a Model T Ford?

R: Model T Ford.

G: Was it a sedan or a truck?

R: I don't remember but I believe it was a touring car. And we put a bed on it, you see.

G: On the back of it?

- R: On the back of it. We put a wagon belt on there and a wagon sheet over it. We tore the back seats out. We called it a covered wagon when we got it fixed up.
- G: It was a touring car with two seats in the front and two in the back?
- R: I'm not sure of that but I believe it was and we sawed it off and built a bed on it or it may already have been built on there. That's been so long ago.
- G: One bed, or two beds side by side?
- R: No just a bed on there. Just like a truck.
- G: Did it have what used to be called a rumble seat?
- R: That's been so long ago. I just can't remember.
- G: There is also some confusion, Mr. Rountree, as to how much money you took along with you. Did you all have the same amounts?
- R: Well, pretty close.
- G: Was it about \$15, do you remember or about \$25 dollars a piece?
- R: I think around \$25. About \$25 a piece.
- G: Did you start off with any food or did you buy food along the way?
- R: You got me there. I just don't remember.
- G: Why did you go, Mr. Rountree? What was the purpose, the idea of the trip?
- R: We just wanted to go to California, look around, work.
- G: Mr. Summy said that there were hard times in Johnson City then and he went out there to make some money. Had you been working in Johnson City then? About how old were you then?
- R: Well, let's see, what year was that?
- G: 1924.
- R: I'm 68 now. I must have been about 20, something like that, yes.

G: What had you been working at, Mr. Rountree?

R: I was working at a garage as a mechanic.

G: Did your family live in Johnson City? Were they farmers?

R: No, we had the hotel there in Johnson City.

G: What was the name of the hotel?

R: It was just a hotel. There was no name on it.

G: Was that the only hotel in Johnson City?

R: That's the only one there, yes.

G: Were there many tourists who came to Johnson City?

R: Not very many then.

G: Do you remember whether you had it in mind to take just a trip to California or did you think maybe you would stay there?

R: I didn't know whether I would stay or not.

G: Did Mr. Johnson know whether he was going to stay or not?

R: I couldn't tell you. I couldn't tell you.

G: It was vague whether you were going to stay or not?

R: Yes.

G: Mr. Summy and Mr. Crider have said that they remembered that you started about mid-afternoon. Is that your recollection?

R: I don't remember.

G: Do you remember, could you tell us the route you took?

R: We went from here to El Paso.

G: Where did you spend the first night?

R: I don't know.

G: Do you perhaps remember a Fourth of July picnic that you all had dinner at, a free supper?

R: I have a faint idea of that, but not much.

G: I think it would be more helpful if we went along step by step in this. The first place you remember is El Paso?

R: Well, I remember that's the route we took.

G: Do you remember any talk among yourselves about the fact that El Paso was a big city and that none of you had ever been to a big city before?

R: Yes, we talked about that.

G: Did you draw lots to see who was going to drive in El Paso, do you remember?

R: No. I don't think so.

G: Who did drive in El Paso?

R: Well, now, I'm going to tell you the truth, I think I did. And when we got to Los Angeles they all suggested that I drive because I had been driving more than the other boys.

G: As you remember it, would you just tell us the route? You went from Johnson City to El Paso and then what other places do you remember?

R: Up through New Mexico, Deming, I believe it was. And then on out through Arizona. We crossed the Guadalupe River at Blythe.

G: That's the Guadalupe River?

R: Yes. They ferried us across on an old ferry.

G: They did ferry you across? And then where did you go?

R: We went up in the Tahachapee Mountains and then Otha Summy and I, we left the boys there.

G: And you and Summy were the first to leave and you left at what place?

R: Tahachapee. There was a cement factory up there.

G: And you went to work in the cement factory?

R: No. I didn't work there. I went right on over in the San Joaquin Valley. Summy had a brother over there and he and I boarded a bus and went over there and went to work there.

G: So that left three fellows...

R: The other three in Tahachapee.

G: Now the other three, when did each of them stop the trip?

R: They stopped there at Tahachapee. All of them did.

G: But I meant you two, Summy and you, went off to the Valley to work. What happened to the other three?

R: Well, I don't know. I didn't see them anymore.

G: What happened to the automobile?

R: We parked it alongside a railroad track and left it.

G: Just let it sit there? Was it sort of beat up by then?

R: Yes, nobody wanted to bother with it. We just walked off and left it.

G: Do you remember what year that car was?

R: Oh, it was a pretty old car when we got it.

G: Do you remember how much Walter Crider had paid for it?

R: No, but I think we paid him \$25 for it.

G: You five boys paid \$25 for it?

R: We did. We bought it, paid \$5 apiece for it.

G: Okay. It's my fault but I don't have it straight yet. You said you and Summy got off and went to work in the Valley. What did you go to work doing?

R: Well, I drove a watermelon wagon.

G: On a fruit ranch?

R: Yes.

G: What did Summy do?

R: He worked on a farm there. I think we picked grapes and fruit and stuff. First one thing and then another.

G: Now you don't know anything about what Mr. Johnson did from the point that you got off and you lost track of him?

R: Yeas, that's right.

G: Let's go back to the trip itself. It's our impression from talking to the other men that it was a very gay trip. You fellows had a very good time.

R: Oh, yes, we had a lot of fun.

G: A lot of fun and you sang and talked and so forth. Do you remember any of the songs that you sang, by any chance?

R: No, I don't. That's over forty years ago.

G: It sure is. Do you remember what you talked about?

R: Well, we were a little worried about whether we were going to get work or not when we got there, I know that.

G: Did you talk about the scenery? Was the scenery pretty?

R: Yes, it was pretty scenery.

G: Do you remember any part of the scenery that especially struck you?

R: No, not any particular one.

G: Lyndon Johnson was a great practical jokester. Did he play any practical jokes on the trip?

R: Well, yes, when we got to Sheffield.

G: What state was that in?

R: It's in Texas. When we got there, we pulled off the side of the road and were going to get something. I don't remember what, perhaps something to eat. Three guys came up to our wagon and they wanted to know if we wanted to play some poker. We told them, no, we didn't think we would. One of them said, "Well, we're going over the hill to get some whiskey and if you all want to play a little poker, why we'll have a little poker game." So we told them, no, and we took off. It was just about sundown then. About dark, there were car lights showed up behind us and Lyndon commenced to hurrah Otho Summy. Otho he's a pretty scarey kind of a guy you know, easy to scare.

G: I don't understand one word, that word hurrah.

R: He was telling him that these guys were following us. So he wouldn't let us stop. We just kept going, and we went until about 11 o'clock that night.

G: You were afraid they were going to rob you and take your money?

R: No, Lyndon was teasing Otho.

G: Oh, I see.

R: Making him think that that's what was going to happen. So we stopped and we saw Otho way off down and he was burying bill money. We all give our money to him and he was burying the money down there.

G: He was carrying the money for all of you?

R: Yes.

G: Was that the only time you buried the money? Some of these stories say that each night you buried the money.

R: I think he did, yes. But that one particular night we noticed it.

G: Do you remember any other stories like that from the trip?

R: Well, on the way there was a big whirlwind, I think it was out in Arizona. Man, the dust was just flying. Summy said, "Drive and let's get in that and get cooled off." When we got in it, we just took that old wagon seat and turned it around and around, threw our suitcase out, scattered our clothes all over the road and we got them all together and got started. We drove, oh, I guess, a good ways and saw another one. Summy said, "Slow down and let that one go by." He didn't want any more of it.

G: Do you remember any more stories?

R: That's about the only thing I remember. I couldn't ever forget that.

G: Mr. Summy told us that on the whole trip you never, as far as he remembers, despite the fact that it was an old car and that you had only paid \$25 for it, that you never had any trouble with the car and did not even have a blowout.

R: No, we didn't have a bit of trouble.

G: This a great advertisement for Ford automobile of 40 years ago. When you fellows wanted some food, what did you do --did you stop and make it or buy it?

R: We cooked along the road, cooked up stuff, and then ate it.

G: What did you eat?

R: I don't remember. That's been too long ago.

G: Did you buy some food and then cook it?

R: I'm sure we did.

G: Who was the cook?

R: All of us, I think.

G: Did Lyndon Johnson ever cook?

R: Yes, he cooked.

G: Was he a good cook?



R: Yes, pretty good.

G: About driving the automobile, who did the most driving --you did, didn't you?

R: Well, I did most of the driving.

G: Because you were the most experienced driver?

R: Well, I had driven quite a bit, driven trucks all the time.

G: Next to you, who did most of the driving? Did Lyndon Johnson do much of the driving?

R: He did quite a bit, yes.

G: Was he a good driver?

R: Yes, he was a good driver. We weren't scared of him.

G: He was the kid in the bunch, the youngest?

R: Yes, he was the youngest.

G: On the trip, do you remember him talking about what he wanted to be in the world? Or what he hoped to be?

R: Well, we talked about so many things that I just don't remember.

G: Did he ever talk about wanting to be a politician that you remember? A senator or a congressman?

R: I can't remember.

G: When it came time to sleep at night, you never stayed at a hotel, did you?

R: No.

G: So you pulled off the road and slept in a field.

R: On the ground.

G: What did you do, just stretch out a piece of canvas or just sleep on the ground?

R: No, we had some bedding along.

G: Did one of you stay up and watch or did all of you go to sleep.

R: No, we all went to sleep. We weren't scared.

G: Did it rain any of those nights?

R: I don't think it did. I don't remember, but I don't believe it did. I don't think it rained a bit.

G: A few more questions, please. You have been very helpful. The trip itself was, as you remember it, mainly just to go to California? It wasn't as much to look for jobs, it was just to have a good time and go to California?

R: Well, we knew we had to work when we got out there.

G: But the main thing was just...

R: Just prowling around, looking around.

G: Wasn't Lyndon Johnson awfully young to take off for California? Did his parents approve of this?

R: Yes.

G: They did, both his parents?

R: Yes.

G: Did you know his parents?

R: Oh, yes.

G: And they thought it was a good thing for him to get out in the world?

R: Yes, they thought it'd be a good experience for him to see what things were like when he got out on his own.

G: You knew him as a friend around town there, didn't you?

R: Yes.

G: Would you tell us any stories you remember about Lyndon Johnson around town?

R: Well, I'll tell you a good one. We took him snipe hunting.

G: What is snipe hunting?

R: That is in Johnson City. You've heard of snipe hunting, haven't you?

G: No.

R: Well, they hold a sack and there aren't any snipe but you go out there and you hold the sack. He was only nine or ten years old, I guess, and he was holding the sack. He didn't hold it long and in a little while he began to call. He had an old dog and he began to call that old dog.

G: Do you remember the dog's name?

R: Jip. He called old Jip and we were watching him and old Jip came to him. He didn't want him to get lost or anything. That old dog took him right home.

G: Led him home?

R: Led Lyndon home.

G: You mean he had figured out by then that you had played a joke on him?

R: Yes, and it didn't take him long to do it, either. I'd say about five minutes, maybe. He was pretty quick.

G: Are there any other stories that you remember?

R: Well, I can't remember any more right now.

G: What did you all do with yourself? What did you play? How did you have fun? What went on?

R: I don't know. He was a little younger than I was. We didn't do too much together. Oh, yes, we used to give him a nickel to pop his ears. You know, he had...

G: I don't understand that.

R: You catch his ear like that and pop it, you see. You'd give him a nickel and he'd stand there and tears would come in his eyes and he'd still stand there because he wanted that nickel.

G: He had a lot of jobs around town, didn't he? Like most of you fellows?

R: Yes, he'd do anything that he could get to do.

G: Would you say that his family was a poor family or a comfortable family?

R: An average family, I'd say.

G: How did the father make a living? He was in the legislature and he sold a little real estate, I believe.

R: Yes, he dealt in real estate.

G: Did he farm much?

R: I don't know. His farming was before I knew him.

G: Didn't they farm a little on the side of the Johnson City house? Some peanut hay along the side there.

R: I don't know. I don't remember seeing any farm there.

G: I wonder if you could remember how much money you had when you went to California?

R: I think we had about \$25 each.

G: How much did it cost you to get to California?

R: We had some money left when we got out there. I don't remember how much.

G: Do you remember how many days the trip took?

R: It took a whole week to go out there.

G: When you got back to Johnson City did you fellows talk about the trip and do you remember Lyndon Johnson's saying anything about it?

R: No, I don't.

G: When you left for California from Johnson City did a group gather to see you off?

R: Yes.

G: Where was that? Can you tell us what happened?

R: Right on the street there was a whole bunch of guys.

G: On Main Street?

R: Yes, on Main Street.

G: Near anyone's house?

R: No, it was out on the main street where the business is.

G: So a bunch of fellows came out there. Did you have any signs on the car?

R: No, I don't think so

G: And, what'd they do -- any yelling?

R: They said goodbye and we took off.

G: Did the parents come out to see you off?

R: I don't remember. I don't believe so.

G: Was it unusual for young fellows to do things like this in those days?

R: Yes, I'd say so.

G: How did the idea come about? And how was it that this young man -- he was about ten years younger than you -- how did he come to join you on this trip?

R: I think we asked him if he wanted to go, if his parents would consent. You see, we needed someone to go along with us. It was pretty expensive. He cooperated and everything was all right.

G: He was a pretty popular fellow with you all, wasn't he?

R: Oh, yes.

G: What did you like about him?

R: I don't know. He just seemed like a good boy.

G: Did any of you have the slightest idea that he might end up being a very famous man? If you were going to pick the fellow in town who you thought was going to go the furthest, who would you have picked?

R: Well, I don't know. He'd have been a pretty good one.

G: You might have picked him?

R: I don't know. He was just smart, vigorous and had a lot of energy.

G: When he was sitting there talking to you in the automobile, did he talk swiftly, did he talk with a lot of expression? Did he talk the way he talks now?

R: Well, not quite as slowly as he talks now.

G: Did he have a lot of Texas drawl?

R: No, I don't think so. Not too much. Of course, since I'm a Texan, I wouldn't know too much. I wouldn't say he talked in an excitable way.

G: Is there anything else you remember about Lyndon Johnson that you would like to put into the record?

R: I think that's about all.

G: Thank you very much, sir. You have been extremely helpful.

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Mrs Payne Rountree Lomax  
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Accepted Samuel H. Hays  
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