ORAL MEMOIR EXCERPTS

OF

WILLIAM ROBERT "BOB" POAGE

A Series of Interviews Conducted
28 August 1971–22 December 1983

Waco and McLennan County Project

Baylor University
Institute for Oral History

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GENERAL POLICY AND PURPOSES:

A member of the Oral History Association, Baylor's Institute for Oral History (BUIOH) supports and embodies the goals, guidelines, and standards of archival quality prescribed by the national professional association to ensure long-term preservation of memoirs. It is the policy of BUIOH to select memoirists who have been participants and/or eyewitnesses to Texas-related topics selected for oral history research. Their tape-recorded memoirs provide links between the immediate past and the present in a very human way. A scholarly, but relaxed, conversational atmosphere exists during the interview. To encourage completely candid recollections, the memoirist is asked to regard the oral history memoir as a highly personal journal. The transcribed historical document which the finished memoir becomes is the raw material used by historians and professional scholars.

The memoirist may choose to have the memoir:

1. Accessible to the community at large
2. Access limited to portions of memoir
3. Free for use after stipulated time span
4. Accessible at discretion of memoirist
5. Sealed until death of memoirist
6. Sealed until passage of stipulated time period after death of memoirist

MEMOIR PROCEDURE:

Oral history at Baylor follows a prescribed plan which may be briefly outlined:

1. Initial contract with the memoirist
2. Arrangements made for interview(s)
3. Recording of interview(s)
4. Transcribing of tapes in the BUIOH office
5. Editing of transcript(s) by memoirist
6. Finished memoirs: one transcript for the memoirist, one transcript and tape(s) for The Texas Collection. The finished typewritten oral memoir follows the interviewee's stated wishes as reflected in his/her editing of the first transcript(s), with only minor further editorial modifications performed in the BUIOH office in preparing the completed memoir.
LEGAL STATUS: The tapes and transcripts of interviews 15, 16, and 17 (22 April 1981, 27 May 1981, and 24 June 1981) are sealed until two years after the death of W. R. Poage. The agreement was signed on 14 February 1982.

INTERVIEW HISTORIES

INTERVIEWERS: Thomas L. Charlton
Robert T. Miller
Phillip A. Thompson
Institute for Oral History
Baylor University
Waco, Texas

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CHARLTON: Now, your father had his young son in tow that summer.

POAGE: Yes.

CHARLTON: How much did he introduce you around, around the town and within the capitol?

POAGE: Oh, he introduced me to all the members. We had very little contact with the town at that time. It seemed to me—I probably didn't know what was going on, but I didn't see that the members were taking as much, or that the members were getting downtown as much as they did later on. We lived out north of the capitol, ate our meals north of the capitol, rarely went south of the capitol as a matter of fact. Our contacts were all between the capitol and the university, almost entirely.

CHARLTON: That was your bailiwick, then?

POAGE: Yes.

CHARLTON: Back here in Waco, a number of changes occurred during World War I. You mentioned that you were down there for a summer in 1919. What do you recall of the changes that the war brought in the town of Waco?

POAGE: Well, of course, the war brought the camp, Camp MacArthur, and that was the thing that really changed the face of and the spirit of Waco, I think. They built that camp, built it very rapidly. I was working with the engineers in those days. I got a job at two dollars a day and thought that I was getting extremely rich at the thing.
CHARLTON: You were working doing what?

POAGE: Well, I drove the first stake that was ever driven out there on Rich Field, which is now the area where Richfield High School and that part of town. But the airfield was there, and I was driving stakes, carrying a chain, a surveyor's chain, or stadia rods. And with the engineers, we laid off—I was not there when we laid off the first part of the camp. I was at school and—but come the summer, I was working with the engineers there, as I say, at two dollars a day and surveying all around. We did all kinds of surveying and all kinds of work with a level and transit.

I got to inspecting sewer pipe. I handled two hundred carloads of sewer pipe out there. I don't know why they gave me the job, but the engineers put me to it. In those days, you took—they would unload that pipe off of the cars, and I stood there with a stick and hit each joint of pipe as it came off. And you could tell by the sound whether there was a crack in it or not. And that's what I was doing, and that took a whole lot of my time. When I wasn't actually out with the surveying party, that's what I was doing, was testing that sewer pipe. That lasted pretty well all summer.

CHARLTON: What else did you observe in terms of the changes that Rich Field and Camp MacArthur brought? You said a few minutes ago that it changed Waco greatly.

POAGE: Well, business, of course, boomed here. A lot of
construction went on, and lots of new people moved in, and
you didn't—well, Waco ceased to be the kind of country
county seat that it was before, and I guess you could say it
became more of a city.

CHARLTON: How did your family feel about that?

POAGE: Well, they didn't want it. They didn't—of course,
they didn't like it and felt they were better off not to
have it and would have much preferred not to have had the
fort here, but they realized that they had to have them
somewhere. And there wasn't any real complaint about it in
either my family or very many others. Most of the people
accepted it much, much better, I think, then, than they
accept those kinds of things now. They recognized that the
nation was at war and that we had to make these adjustments
if we were going to win it. And, of course, we were fight­
ing that war to win it, unlike the Vietnamese war. We did
everything we could to win it and every--almost everybody--
there were a few people who felt friendly with Germany,
generally of German descent. There were some of those and,
of course, at that time--

CHARLTON: How many German Americans and people interested
in Central Europe were there in the Waco area that you knew
about?

POAGE: Quite a number down toward Riesel and Westphalia and
areas of that kind, and many of those people felt that we
weren't being neutral, even before we got into the war.
And, of course, I think that those of us who look back know we were not very neutral, that the United States pretty well sided with the Allies from the very beginning and that we did take a good many stands that weren't just even-handed as between the contestants because we wanted to see the Allies win.

CHARLTON: Some of these things were discussed in your family then?

POAGE: Yes, they were. Yes, although—although our family was all for the Allies and all for the war, I mean for the American entrance to the war. When that came along, when—well, it was that same summer that we were talking about—I graduated from high school.

CHARLTON: Let's see, we entered the war in April of 1917.

POAGE: Seventeen, yes, and I graduated from high school the next year. I was seventeen years old when we entered. Then, when I graduated, I tried to get in the Navy. I was one of those who thought that I wanted to sail the seas, and they turned me down on color-blindness. In those days, tests were given by yarns. They had 144 different yarns that they put in the box. They'd pull one out and say, What's this color? or they'd tell you, Pick out the greens and that sort of thing. Well, I couldn't—was and I still am, of course, red-green color blind. I guess that's the most common kind of color blindness. And I couldn't pick them out. And they turned me down, and then I got to work.
for these engineers, but as fall came along, why, obviously, I knew I ought to be doing something. And I finally succeeded in really just memorizing that box of yarns. You'd get to where you'd get acquainted with them. You'd know what this is just by looking at it, regardless of the color of it, and at last I could pass his examination. Of course, the recruiting officer let me hang around there, and I at last passed his examination along in the fall of the year and came here to Baylor attached to the SATC but actually as a member of the Navy.

The Navy had about thirty midshipmen up here who were attached to the Student Army Training Corps for training. And we lived down there at old Cowden Hall down Fifth Street there which is now where the education building of the First Baptist Church stands. But they had Cowden and Maggie Houston halls there, which was the original Baylor University in Waco. And I spent the fall living there with eight men in a room there, and we had a coal stove to keep us warm right in the middle of it. We slept on cots around it.

CHARLTON: How eager were you young men to get in the war per se?

POAGE: I wasn't eager. I wasn't a bit eager, but I felt that it was up to us to win that war, and we had to do it. I mean, I didn't get into it because I felt that it was something that we—it was going to be an enjoyable lark at all. Some of them were. Some of them, I must say, looked
forward to it. I never did. In fact, I was—I won't say reluctant because I didn't have to get into it then. I wasn't drafted, but then, I--well, I just felt that, that we should get into it.

CHARLTON: Mr. Poage, my associate, Mr. Phillip Thompson, would like to ask a question.

POAGE: Certainly.

PHILLIP A. THOMPSON: In December of 1916, Woodrow Wilson campaigned as the president who kept us out of war. And then, five months later, here he is declaring war. How much of a psychological adjustment was that for the people in Central Texas to go from neutrality to a wartime?

POAGE: I don't recall that it had, that they looked upon it as the great change that we now look upon it because, of course, Mr. Wilson pointed to the German submarine campaign; and the people resented the German campaign. I think the people were right along with the president on that. They wanted to stay out of the war; the first two years of the war, we were always hoping that it would come to an end and so on. But it hadn't, and the Germans began the submarine campaign, and along with it I think there was a lot of American resentment. I think that the people moved just as fast as the president did.

THOMPSON: What kind of an impact did the famous Zimmermann telegram make in--

POAGE: Did what?
THOMPSON: The Zimmermann telegram, when the Germans wrote to the Mexicans and says, If you will join us, we might give you territories in the United States?

POAGE: Yes, it—I know what it was. It had considerable impact, I think, in this part of the country. I wouldn't try to judge anywhere else, but certainly, there was still a lot of feeling here that the Germans might—that the Germans might invade through Mexico. I don't know how they would have gotten there. They couldn't have actually moved any large number of troops in those days. They didn't have the capacity to do it. But we didn't realize that.

CHARLTON: Was the Zimmermann note much discussed here in Waco?

POAGE: Yes, I think so. Not so much the note as—as the idea of what the Germans might do, and we kept—it was a constant feeling that somehow or another Germany could get an army into—into Mexico or could develop the Mexicans into a real fighting force, which I don't think there was any real possibility of doing because Mexico was still badly divided themselves. But in those days, it seemed quite real that—the possibility of an invasion from the south. And I think it had a good deal to do with the feeling here.

CHARLTON: The war was no longer over there; it was possibly over here.

POAGE: That's right, that's right. We felt that it might very well move across the Rio Grande, right up into our
country.

CHARLTON: After the military camps were built, Mr. Poage, what else happened there that you saw?

POAGE: Well, of course, after the camps--

CHARLTON: How often were you out in that area of town, and what did you observe?

POAGE: Well, I was out there every day during the summer-time when I was working with the engineers. I was out there every day. Frankly, I don't think that you recognize the changes that are taking place at the moment they are taking place near as much as you do later on, and I'm sure I didn't. I saw them build buildings, and it didn't mean too much to me. I later saw the troops training, and that meant a whole lot more to me. I remember very well--I suppose that it was in--that it was in 1917--of seeing the whole division--that was the Thirty-second Division from Wisconsin and--Wisconsin and Michigan that was here. And they had a maneuver that took them out across the old Walker's Crossing bridge. I was out at that time on the hill--well, I'd been hunting all night is what I'd been doing--and it was morning, and I remember sitting up there on that hill and watching that division crossing that bridge, marching up there. And it impressed me so greatly; I always see that picture. There was twenty thousand men in that march. Of course, I didn't stay to see it all, but it was tremendously impressive to me, far more than the construction of those
buildings out there.

CHARLTON: What did that scene tell you about the community, about the nation, and about the world at that time?

POAGE: It told me that we was going to whip the Germans. And I think that's exactly what the people were feeling at that time. There wasn't any of this feeling like we saw in Vietnam of, Well, now, we're just fighting a limited fight. We were in it, putting everything we had in it to bring it to an end just as quick as we could, and we figured that the only way to end it was to completely destroy the German military force.

CHARLTON: How well did the people of Waco accept all of these strangers who suddenly came to town connected with the military camps?

POAGE: I think they accepted them wonderfully well. And I think it was because of that same spirit, that they felt that they—we've got to do something; we've got to do it now, and we've got to accept whatever inconvenience it causes; we've got to take it to bring this thing to an end. Now, there wasn't any such feeling during the Vietnam War. I don't know of anybody who felt that there was any real pressure on them.

CHARLTON: Any opposition to the war in Waco that you can recall?

POAGE: Only some of the German people who felt that we were not being fair with—with Germany.
CHARLTON: Now, they had felt earlier that the U.S. had not been neutral. What about after the declaration of war? What do you recall of their activities?

POAGE: I don't recall any of them—I don't recall any of them really engaging in any sabotage or anything of that kind, but there was some reluctance on their part to support the war effort; that is, to buy war bonds, which were becoming one of the big things during World War I.

CHARLTON: Liberty Bonds.

POAGE: Yes, Liberty Bonds, selling Liberty Bonds. And there was a reluctance on their part to buy any of them. Speakers would want to go into those communities, and they wouldn't welcome them. There was no violence in this part of the country that I can recall, but there was just a plain reluctance to back things on the part of a substantial group.

CHARLTON: Now, there were new laws passed in Congress dealing with espionage and sedition and trading with the enemies. What do you recall of that in Waco?

POAGE: I don't recall that it had any particular impact here. There was nobody who could trade with the enemy here. There was--there just wasn't much opportunity for those laws to have very much effect in Central Texas. Of course, you had to be on the seacoast or border or something or other to--pretty well to--for those laws to apply to you in those days.
CHARLTON: Were they discussed in high school and in college, though, in town?

POAGE: No, I don't think so. I don't recall it. There was very little discussion of it there. They were accepted with very little protest of any kind.

CHARLTON: Mr. Poage, we've been talking about how your interest in public affairs developed. You became, of course, directly involved in public affairs just after 1920, but what can you tell us concerning the overall impact of the war on your thinking and your interest in public affairs?

POAGE: It probably didn't have as much effect as--maybe as much as it should have. I find that so many of those big things--we don't understand them fully at the time they're taking place, and we wonder why they didn't have a greater impact on us at the time. And the reason is, of course, is that we didn't appreciate the importance of what was taking place at the time. And I think that was very true; I think it was more true then than it is now because we didn't have the media that we have today. We didn't get the information and the reviews and so on that we get today.

CHARLTON: How much did you know of Mr. Wilson's peace efforts at the end of the war?

POAGE: Oh, we knew a good deal, but it was always, say, a week late. We'd get--the old Literary Digest would have comments on it. That was the kind of thing that we got in