

James Hamilton Lowry

interviewed by

Mrs. W. A. Schmidt

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Mr. Lowry, partner in the Worth Engravers on Second Street. Full name, James Hamilton Lowry²⁰. My grandmother was born in Mississippi in 1846. She was 19 when the Civil War was over and her family migrated to Texas in 1869. They settled down near Waxahachie in Ellis County where my mother was born some years later. My father's people also came from Mississippi in 1872 on the new railroad which at that time ended at Eagle Ford just west of Dallas. Eagle Ford was a little settlement that was the end of the T&P Railroad at that time; later it came to Fort Worth. My family were pioneers; my father settled here with his family in 1872. They started near Bridgeport in Wise County. They were all farm people. My mother and father settled in Jacksboro for the first year or two of their marriage, then moved to Dallas where I was born. Most of the people who came to Texas were looking for a better life. My grandmothers' first husband died leaving her with two little children. I believe that was either just before or just after they came to Texas. She then married a Methodist minister in Texas by the name of Fount Ray. Recently I ran across a book with Methodist ministers names in it and their history. I found out he was ordained in 1853 near Huntsville. He was an old circuit rider in Ellis County area back in the early days. I've heard my father say that when he was a boy they still had a bell or alarm in Palo Pinto, used when they suspected an Indian raid. My grandmother would tell me about the hard times during the war, when they would hear the Yankees were coming they and their horses would hide along with the Negroes down in the cane. She would tell how she would run out to the front fence and watch the Yankees ride by, how the soldiers would look at her and whistle at her. The slaves stayed around even though they were free at that time. There was very little to buy and they (my grandmother's people) had to make some plans to get the necessities, so they decided to come to Texas, in wagons. I imagine they were happy and felt their lives were better than they were before coming to Texas.

As a young man I decided to get the rest of my education at the University of Texas after having 3 years of college at Waxahachie. I had to work during those years too, besides studying. I went to work for an engraving company in Austin. The company belonged to the newspaper there. After about a year the company wanted me to go to Abilene and manage a small company there. I was there two years.

Incidentally, while I was out there a young man who called himself Larry (later called Lawrence) Welk played his band at the hotel there for room and board two nights a week and would then go to other towns in West Texas for money. You really have to give this man credit for keeping his band together.

Things got so rough during the depression in Abilene that I thought I might do better back in Fort Worth. There had been only two engraving companies in Fort Worth and they had merged, under the name Southwestern Engraving Company. In six months things weren't doing too well but we got this little company going. In the years since, we grew and in 1954 we bought the Southwestern Engraving Company.

In early days we got most of our business from the printers. If you did not get work from printers, you didn't get it at all. Then offset printing got going about that time, and the printers were gradually going over to the offset process. Offset process eliminated the need for plates which is called letterpress. About that time another source of business got started and it turned out to be better than the original business from the printers - that was department store advertising, original art, illustrations. When we started here in 1931, The Fair Department Store, Striplings and Monnigs would occasionally buy an engraving but not very often. In 2 to 3 years they began to get artists on their payrolls and the whole ads were made up of engravings. Now the newspapers have gone from setting type in hot metal to setting it on a form of paper called "photo type". Instead of setting the page up on hot metal, they now paste up pieces of paper, and the newspapers make their own plates on plastic. When the government tells you to change the labeling on a milk carton or some other product, a new plate has to be made for it. A plate has to be made for each page in the yellow page advertising in the phone book for instance. If one word is changed, a new plate has to be made. The procedure for a fashion drawing that would appear in the paper would be that the department store would have an artist who draws the illustration, then it would come to us to have a plate made, to be sent to the newspaper. You transfer the drawing to a metal plate by taking the drawing and make a picture of it with a camera; after you get the negative you sensitise a piece of metal made of magnesium and it is developed just like a picture. In our case we expose it, develop it, with water and where the light didn't get to it the coating on the metal washes off and where the light strikes it hardens and is subjected then to acid.

Incidentally the prices of engraving are not too much higher than in depression days. We pay 4 to 5 times as much for chemicals, metal and labor but the secret is automated equipment and more volume. In the old days a man could etch a plate in 45 minutes, now it only takes 5 to 10 minutes for the same man with automated equipment to etch 4 or 5 plates. When I started this business we made negatives on glass and washed them in silver bath, let it dry - took about 15 minutes to develop one negative.

It's much more economical; for instance the Star Telegram has completely eliminated their stereotyping department. Printing on boxes and milk cartons is done before the boxes are formed, and before the milk cartons are waxed. There is more printing done now than ever before; it's growing by leaps and bounds.

Discussing the pictures I have of dinosaur tracks... Back in the early 30's we used to go to Glen Rose on picnics a lot and ran across these dinosaur tracks so we made pictures of them. Years later I was going through the town and thought I would go out and look at the tracks again - I thought I knew where they were but couldn't find them. I later found out that some college students had lifted these tracks and put them in a museum somewhere. It is where the state park is now. There are some tracks still there and without a doubt there are thousands and thousands of dinosaur tracks in various places down there, and someday they will be uncovered. I made a field trip with the Texas Archeological Association from Abilene. We went out to the county where Sterling City is the county seat to a ranch called old Douthitt ranch. I found a pendant which my associate got excited about; I donated it to the society. He later found Indian graves. There are more but have been covered up with rain and dirt and other things. There are also many artifacts there but are mostly covered up. It's amazing to me how an expert can tell where to find artifacts. My associate, Dr. Russell, would suddenly pull the car off the highway and say "that looks like a good spot", and it never failed. We'd find artifacts or arrowheads of some kind there. All you have to know is - put yourself in the place of the Indians. Where would you stop to establish a camp and make arrowheads, and other supplies? You've got to be near a water supply hear a hill where you can keep a watchful eye. Learn to recognize these places and you can do it too. Dr. Russell was good at it.