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Arkansas State Police Project

Interview with

Kenneth Brown, Harold Luter, and ***M. L. Tester***
Russellville, Arkansas
25 September 2003

Interviewer: Michael Lindsey

Michael Lindsey: What year did you start in the State Police?

Harold Luter: 1963.

Kenneth Brown: 1961. I came from the Hot Springs Police Department. I worked six years there and got on with the State Police, which was the best thing I ever did. It has good and bad times. I was the only person here [in Russellville], and they were working me to death. Then he [Harold] got here and I hugged him. We have been good friends ever since.

ML: Did you stay in highway patrol your whole career?

KB: Yes.

HL: I spent seventeen years in highway patrol; then I went into criminal investigation [CID] for about seventeen years. We spent all of our time in this area. When we were working, there were not many people [in Pope County] that didn't know Luter and Brown. We had been here for so long. When we started, it was more of a

community thing. Now it doesn't seem that way. People still call us and ask our advice on things. He has been retired for longer than [I have], and he still gets calls. About what he said when I came here—we made $300 a month, and I am not complaining because we came and asked for the job. On holidays we would pool our resources and have a holiday meal. My kids still call him Uncle Kenneth. Forty years later, and it is still Uncle Kenneth.

ML: Since you were the only two State Police here, what was your relationship with the sheriff and the deputy sheriffs?

KB: It was good and bad. If we arrested one of his [the sheriff's] big supporters for DWI [driving while intoxicated], he would try to help him out. We couldn't do anything about it, other than not like it. We did our job. We had some troopers that hung around the sheriff's office, but our job was out on the highway. We didn't hang around town. It was ten-hour shifts . . .

HL: When we started to work, our shift was ten hours a day, six days a week. As a rule, most of the sheriff's office and police departments liked us because we were an extra man. We were always there if they needed help. They didn't have to call—if we heard the call, we would be there. They appreciated us, but occasionally you would get a sheriff who didn't. We outlasted many of them.

KB: I would agree with that.

ML: Being a police officer in Hot Springs is unique. I have read some of the accounts about how influential politics was in Hot Springs. Did you see that influence in the State Police?

KB: No. Politics in the State Police wasn't anything like Hot Springs. I was a rookie

officer there and worked up to sergeant-detective. If you got one of the guys that had a lot of pull, they were going to help him out. That stuff went on for the whole time I was there. Hot Springs is a clean town now. In fact, one of the most beautiful casinos in Hot Springs, the Vapors, is a church now. They probably have some little poolroom gambling, but that is it now. I worked there for six years, and the salary was so low that your wife had to work so you could buy nice things. My dad was a city cop that rode a motorcycle there in the early 1930s. I had two older brothers that were city cops there. All of us got out of it. My older brother was a trooper in Bentonville. My dad was on the city police department for many years, and I asked him what type of motorcycle he rode. He told me it was an Excelsior. I had never heard of any police motorcycles other than an Indian or a Harley Davidson. I looked it up and found it. I asked him if he had ever had any wrecks, and he told me that they used to deliver ice in wagons pulled by horses and one time he slid out when he hit some horse manure. My two other brothers were city police as well. One brother became the chief of police at Rogers after [working for] the State Police. The other brother got out of law enforcement and is a pretty good electrician. My brother who was a trooper in North Arkansas gave a guy a speeding ticket. Now, I don't know what my brother was doing up there [on a day-to-day basis]. So this guy came through the area and I stopped him and wrote him a ticket. Then he got down to Hot Springs and my brother down there stopped him and wrote him a ticket. He asked him if every damn cop in Arkansas was named Brown. [Laughs] There were some hard times for all of us, but I am thankful for my time.

HL: After he [Kenneth] retired, another guy made sergeant and he told me that he was going to be the best sergeant the State Police ever had. I told him that he couldn't do that because Sergeant Brown was already it. That pissed him off, but I told him like it was. So many people in the State Police have other members of their family in the State Police. He [Kenneth] had a brother, he [ML] had a nephew, and I have three generations in my family in the State Police. I think you will find that in a lot of people. My dad went to work in 1949 or 1950 and worked fifteen years before he died. He worked a year and a half after I stared before he passed away. He had a shotgun that was issued to him, and when he passed away I got it and when I retired my son got it. What Sergeant Brown said about the guy getting a speeding ticket from all the Browns—my son worked in the next county, and he told me that I made it hard on him. He told me that any time he stopped a car, the people told him that I was the best trooper and that I wouldn't have given them a ticket. My son would say, "Well, he isn't here." [Laughs] So it was good and bad, but I felt blessed that I got to work with him.

HL: Talking about ML—if you're ever around President Clinton, don't talk bad about him because he liked him.

ML Tester: I drove him during the first term he was in as governor. I am not saying anything about Hillary. She didn't like us. For instance, I drove her from the [governor's] mansion to Hot Springs, and she didn't say a word to me the whole way. I worked in driver's testing for a while. I stayed in undercover for eight years, which is too long. We went in and made buys. I have been in some tight places. I have almost been shot a couple of times.

I think the only thing that really saved me was that they didn't really know who I was. They might [have thought] I was a narc [narcotics agent], but they didn't really know. I have been checked for wires and they checked [my] driver's license. We were a step ahead of them; we had good fake ones.

HL: What you don't know about ML was that before he went undercover he kept his hair cut really short, his boots shined; and then he let his hair grow out.

MT: It was embarrassing.

HL: He [ML] would go in and buy dope and see a guy that he had given a driver's test to. They didn't recognize him, but it gave him a bit of a "pucker." [Laughs] Something else that needs to be mentioned is that when we went to work, he [Kenneth] and I shared a vehicle for a year and a half. We had a radio that would only talk to headquarters in certain locations within the county. To talk car-to-car you had to pull up beside one another. Now they can talk from here to Little Rock. They have cell phones. We had to depend on the people working with us more than the troopers working today. They didn't understand how we came up. It was nothing to throw four or five [violators] in the car and take them to jail. We didn't have screens in the back. I just put my gun under my left leg and away we went. Talking about backup—whenever I went into the northern part of the county, I asked the Lord to go with me because I knew there wouldn't be any backup. Now, there are four cars that show up at every traffic stop, and that is good. Maybe we paved the way for things that are happening now. We survived and it got better.

KB: We are survivors.

MT: When we were working, we would do anything in the world for [Kenneth]. He was our commander. We were scared of him. [Laughs]

HL: We didn't have comp [compensatory] time [and] we didn't have overtime, but if something came up and I needed to be off, I asked Sergeant Brown and he would help me out.

ML: It seems today that the State Police is controlled more from the top down, instead of from the sergeant level. Is that something that changed later?

KB: If you have a good sergeant, you don't need a captain, unless there is something unusual going on. Leave the sergeant alone if he is doing a good job. We had a captain who was a nut and we had to put up with him. It really broke morale to the men. Those things happen.

ML: Does that speak to the promotion policy of the State Police at that time—where it was based more on who you knew than merit?

HL: To me, your record had a lot to do with it. We had to take a test, and you had to be in the top five to even be considered. The hardest part was getting on the eligibility list. We would study six months or more because we knew that if we didn't get into the top five, we didn't have a chance.

MT: You had a written and an oral test. You had to pass two of them.

HL: During Tommy Goodwin's time, they were testing for sergeant in this area. I was going to take the test, and he told me that I was not only testing for sergeant, but for my job. They were turning my position in to a sergeant's position, and if I didn't make it, I wouldn't have the position there. I had this job for years, and if I

didn't make sergeant, I was gone. I had a guy working in the office with me and he was a master at studying for tests, so I made it.

ML: Were any of you called out for the Fort Chaffee riots in 1980?

MT: I was with Governor [Bill Clinton] and we flew over there. They were burning some of the old barracks, and there were a lot of State Police there. They threw rocks and bricks and busted out a bunch of troopers' windshields. The information we [received] at the governor's office was that [Cuban President Fidel] Castro had turned his bad guys, his criminals, loose and dumped them on [U.S.] President [Jimmy] Carter. These were bad people. They just rioted for no reason. [The U.S. was] feeding and housing them.

HL: I didn't go.

KB: I didn't go.

HL: I don't think any of us from here went.

ML: What was the governor's reaction flying over?

MT: I don't remember exactly what the conversation was. Deloin Causey was the captain, and the governor thought that he handled it so well that if he was appointing the director again, he probably would have appointed Captain Causey. He [Governor Clinton] was high on the captain, and he did a good job. He did what he had to [do].

HL: We didn't lose any officers; I don't know about the Cubans.

ML: Has highway patrol changed as far as the duties, or how you performed your duties, since 1960?

KB: I think it has. They have eight-hour shifts now. All I had to do was get out there

and work wrecks and chase speeders.

HL: Sergeant Brown never counted how many tickets I wrote, or how many warnings. Now that is a big thing. Numbers are important. We didn't have that. I don't know if we had as much activity, but we didn't have any problems finding something to do. Now if you don't do the numbers, you get a letter.

ML: Is that something that changed, or was it present throughout your career?

HL: It changed in later years. They started with us—counting your activity. A guy got as much credit writing a speeding ticket as putting a drunk in jail. I never felt good about that, but that was one change that I saw.

MT: I had a current trooper tell me—that knew back when I worked—that I couldn't work today, because when I told someone that he was under arrest and he didn't want to get in the car, I put him in the car and took him to jail. That was what I was supposed to do. I didn't stand around and argue with him. He [the current trooper] told me that I couldn't work now.

HL: They have the camera [in the car] now. It probably helps the officer more than it hurts him—to clear up citizens' complaints.

KB: It is a good job for the money, but you are going to have your bad times. You'll be by yourself on the mountain, and it will be you and him, and he might be half-gorilla.

ML: Do you think that all of the directors that you served under understood that it was you and him . . . ?

KB: Tommy Goodwin was a very good director. He had been shot and had been through a lot of things. He realized what we were doing out here on the highway.

HL: One of the big differences that I have seen is that you work a community and the people know you and ask for your help. They don't do that anymore. The people don't know the officers. One example is that a lady who knew me would call and say that someone was acting up and driving through the yard. I would go up and tell the guy that I was [going] to put him in jail if he didn't leave her alone. He would agree and everyone would be happy.

ML: Why do you think the State Police has gotten away from this?

HL: They [the general public] don't know who the officer is. There is no contact with the people.

MT: We had a director one time—retired from the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation]—named Ralph Scott. He didn't know anything about the State Police or how it operated.

KB: He was a nut.

MT: Yes, exactly. For instance, one time he was driving on I-40 and got on the radio and said, "Any trooper out there, I have got a violator driving in front of me drinking from a bottle. I need some help to get him stopped." Well, there was a trooper nearby who got that car stopped. Sure enough, he was drinking from a bottle—a Coke bottle.

HL: What I said about the people not knowing the troopers is not all the troopers' fault. There has been so much pressure placed on meeting their contact requirements that they don't have time to stop and visit with people. I have been retired three years and people still call me and say that I am the only one they know to call. I know that Kenneth and ML do [get calls such as these], as well. Whose

fault it is, I don't know.

MT: People still call me about drugs, and I refer them to the right person and move on.

HL: Along that line, I get the newspaper every morning, and about a month ago there was a file folder in my newspaper box. On the front of the folder it said, "drug dealer." I opened it up and [there was] a picture of a pickup truck with its license plate visible. I asked my newspaper lady if she left it, but she said she didn't. I reported it to the proper place, and they told me that they were aware of this guy and that he was a drug dealer.

ML: Is there a commander or director who stands out as being better than the others?

HL: Colonel Goodwin was probably our best director.

KB: I think he was.

MT: Yes.

HL: He was one of the toughest people in the world.

MT: He came up through the ranks and retired; then came back as director.

KB: He was a man's man. He talked to you and treated you with respect.

HL: The people out here working hated to go to Little Rock because of the brass and all of that. You could go down there and Colonel Goodwin's office door was always open. You could go in, and he would say, "Luter, give me one of them Lucky Strikes [cigarettes]." I promise you that you can't do that today. Colonel Goodwin would ask about your family and [would] do anything he could to help you.

MT: He understood what we were going through.

HL: He died a hard death. He had cancer, and actually died several times and they

brought him back. He was a tough man and a fine friend.

MT: He was my "den mother" when I went through the academy in 1966. He was a lieutenant then, and we just thought the world of him. I bet that everyone who worked under him would agree. We loved him.

KB: Luter's car broke down and I called Little Rock and told them. The wrecker wasn't available, so I got a tow-bar and connected it to his car and went down to headquarters on Roosevelt Road where there was a maintenance shop. When we got ready to turn, his [Harold's] car was right up there with us. I gassed it real good and got it out of that kink and we shot in there and stopped. The person in charge of the shop was named Brown—no relation—and he came out there and started cussing. I gave him a cussing that nobody wanted to take. Luter's eyes were so big. Then I went over to Tommy Goodwin's office and told him what I did. I told him that I gave this guy a cussing, and he told me not to worry about it and just to go on back to Russellville. I never heard another word about it. That old man [the maintenance employee] thought he ran the whole thing.

MT: He [the maintenance employee] didn't like to see anybody come in with any kind of car trouble.

HL: Another part to that story was [that there was] a little guy who was over there working on a car, and [he] heard the cussing Sergeant Brown gave to this guy. The little guy always chewed a cigar. He came over later and told me that if I ever needed anything just to let him know. [Laughs]

ML: Are there any cars that stick out as being good cars?

HL: My first [car] had about 120,000 miles on it, and that was after we [Kenneth and

Harold] shared a car for a year or so. I was [as] happy as I could be. It was a big thing to me to get a new car. Everybody back then was just happy to get a new car.

KB: The first car that I got was a blue 1961 Ford that had [belonged to a trooper] in Fort Smith. It was solid blue and a two-door [model]. All four tires were bare, and it had black asphalt all along the side. This guy had been a criminal investigator and was not well-liked. Before Luter got here, I had to share a car with another guy. I got four new tires from headquarters and I used about a gallon of kerosene getting the asphalt off. I drove that car for quite a while. I never understood why that guy did that when he had been working for so many years.

HL: When you say Sergeant Brown—you could see yourself in the reflection of his boots. His uniform was always clean. His car was always clean. That was one of the things everybody commented on. He made it tough on me because I wasn't that big on shining boots. If you stayed here, you had to.

MT: I remember the first car I was issued. It was solid white with a red torpedo light. When you turned the car on, you had to wait a while to let the radio warm up. You didn't just get in and start talking. Some of the troopers had—although I was never this fortunate—a 47-10. It was a county radio. If the sheriff liked you, they would put one of their radios in your car. I saw a big dent in this car that I got and found out that this radio had blown up and caused the dent. These radios had tubes and, apparently, it had blown up.

HL: One of the cars that I remember most was a Plymouth that would run about 140 or 160 miles per hour.

MT: It had a four-forty [a 440 cubic inch] maximum engine.

HL: Yes. I don't know if I was the first person up here to get one, but when I got off [work], some off the other troopers would want to borrow my car. Jack Porter would come and get my car.

KB: I had a Plymouth—it was a marked car—and I would stop somebody and the driver would say, "Your car is on fire." I would turn around and smoke would be pouring out of the hood. It was because the exhaust manifold was next to the head gasket manifold and it would get so hot it would cause the gasket to leak. It would cause a fire. Many a time I thought, "Why don't I just let it burn?" [Laughs]

HL: Many times you would be parked on the side of the interstate and you would catch the grass on fire.

MT: We got air-conditioning when Governor [Winthrop] Rockefeller was there. He believed that the troopers worked too many hours and that we deserved air-conditioning, and we got it. We went to forty-hour work weeks during his tenure, as well. Of course, you probably worked longer than this [due to calls].

HL: We wore long-sleeved shirts all the time. [The cars had] no air-conditioning [and] no commercial radio. I remember some of us would get an air-conditioner that hung down under the dash, and we were the kings of the world.

MT: When I was on the Fort Smith Police Department, I remember the troopers wearing starched shirts. They would go to work in July, and within fifteen minutes their shirts would be wet with sweat.

HL: They had us vote on whether we would wear short-sleeved shirts, and Kenneth

and I voted no. I just don't think they look as good. We wore the neckties and long-sleeved shirts.

KB: After I made sergeant, they gave me a gold four-door Plymouth. I would go down the interstate and wouldn't be wearing my hat, but they [other drivers] would make me as a state trooper. Headquarters was pushing us on radar and speed on the interstate, so I asked if I could go to a friend's body shop and have them paint the top of the car white. It worked. When they [other drivers] saw the two-tone [paint job], they had no idea it was a police car.

HL: We would get out and work radar on the interstate. Sergeant Brown would be back up the road in his car with the radar. He would clock them [speeders] and call down, "Green Oldsmobile—eighty-five [miles per hour]," [or], "Black Ford—eighty [mph]." None of these cars ever came by. Finally, he said, "Red Plymouth—eighty-five [mph]," and it came by. It turned out he was colorblind! [Laughs] He didn't even know it. The only color he could recognize was red. We told him to send us the fast red ones. Then, lo and behold, he got a Plymouth—fire engine red—police car.

ML: [To MT] What years did you work undercover?

MT: From 1979 to 1987.

ML: I talked with another guy who worked undercover in 1976, and he said that during the first years they had no "buy money." It was unorganized and under-funded. Was it still that way during your time?

MT: Somewhat. They just turned us loose. There are things that you don't do, like when they passed the bong [pipe] around. You can simulate smoking a joint, but

a bong is a different thing. I called my sergeant and asked him what to do. He said that I needn't be doing that. Later on, the State Police was going to drug test all the narcs. Sure, they were bound to find something because we were around the smoke every day. You had to sit there and breathe that. We bowed up on them and said, "If you are going to test the narcs, then you need to test everybody." They backed down because they didn't want to test everyone. I had a sergeant named Dale Best, and he sent me to Texarkana and left me there. I lived in a motel in Texarkana for six months—out of an ice chest. You have to remind yourself that you are a trooper. You lived two lives. I was asked one time by a lieutenant—who had heard that I was a good narc who made good buys—how I did it. I told him it was partly because of the way I was raised. When I was a kid—I remember this bootlegger who would sell us whiskey. It was the same thing. I just went in there and played their game.

HL: You all probably remember that when we went to work, you never heard about drugs. Maybe marijuana, but that didn't come along until years later. Now, so many of our resources are devoted to narcotics.

MT: We bought out of a [Pontiac] Trans Am in Fort Smith. The dealer almost had it paid for, and the State Police seized it and paid it off. I drove it for a couple of years. The feds moved in and we worked with them and began seizing property. We set up surveillance on a marijuana patch in Logan County for almost a month before they came back. One morning around the break of day, I was sitting there about half asleep and I heard them come up. They were watering [the marijuana plants]. When they got through, one came up by me and I hollered, "State Po-

lice!" I got one of them and I was walking him out and he asked me what he would get out of this [arrest]. I told him five or ten years. He said, "Well, that will just give me more time to study the Bible and serve the Lord." [Laughs] They all get religion when you catch them.

HL: Tell him about the time we were on surveillance over in Yell County.

MT: We knew they were watering, and I needed to find out how much water was in the barrels for my report. We pulled up and I asked him [Harold] for his gun. Harold was surprised that I didn't have my gun, but I was used to not carrying one because I didn't want one on me when I made my buys. I went up there and checked, and there was water in the barrels. When I got back, I told him to stay until I get out of the area—"You follow me out after I have gotten down the road a bit." I started out and directly I heard a big dog bark. A dog had gotten after him. [Laughs]

HL: We had been sitting there all day hearing this little dog yipping. When he [ML] left, here came the big boy! There are a lot of good stories.

MT: Once you retire, you are history. You are a nobody. I remember when I was working, if I ran into a retiree—[from] city, state, or wherever—I had the highest respect for him. I knew what he had been through. It doesn't seem like we have that anymore.

KB: I had a city police officer that I hadn't seen in several years ago stop by, and it made me feel good that he still remembers me.

[End of interview]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]