

William Jefferson Clinton History Project

Interview with

George Wright, Jr.

Hope, Arkansas

15 September 2004

Interviewer: Andrew Dowdle

Andrew Dowdle: It is September 15, 2004. I am in Hope, Arkansas, with George Wright, Jr. My first question is when and where were you born?

George Wright, Jr.: Well, I was born on April 8, 1946, in Shreveport, Louisiana. My dad had just gotten back from World War II. He was a physician. The day I was born, he drove up to Hope, Arkansas, and secured a house and moved the family three weeks later. You could say I was born in Shreveport, Louisiana, but my home is Hope, Arkansas. I've been here all my life.

AD: And your parents' names?

GW: George Wright, Sr., and my mother is Clara Wright.

AD: What was the connection that he had to Hope? Had he ever lived here before? What brought him to Hope?

GW: Well, what brought him to Hope is that my dad had a niece who married a guy from Hope, Arkansas. In fact, they were living in Hope, and he talked him into coming to Hope and looking at it as far as a place to start practicing medicine. This was right after he got back from World War II. He actually spent some time in Fouke, Arkansas, between getting out of the service and before he came to Hope because he had a sister who lived there. He just pretty well provided

medical services in Fouke before he could move up and start his practice.

AD: Can you tell me a little bit about growing up during the—I guess you probably wouldn't remember that much of the late 1940s, but during the 1950s and early 1960s?

GW: It was considerably different than growing up here in Hope now [laughs] because—and I'm sure every small town in the United States was similar to this. I could leave my house in the summer as a five- or six- or seven-year-old and be free to roam the neighborhood and go visit neighbors, go downtown, and my parents didn't worry about it.

AD: It kind of sounds like the idyllic small town that you read about or that you see on television or the movies in the 1950s.

GW: No question. It was typical small-town America where parents didn't worry about kids being kidnapped, or crime or anything like that. Everybody knew everybody. Even though back then it was a town of 8,000 population everybody knew pretty well everybody. The neighborhoods were pretty well around the downtown business area, so all the businesses knew the families in the community, and they knew the kids. It was just not a place that you worried too much about your kids getting lost or anything like that. Now, I might have been a lot older than five or six years old when I was roaming. I was probably more like a third or fourth grader. Fair Park was all the way on the other end of town, which, from where I grew up, would have been about a mile and a half. It was nothing to ride a bike over there or walk over to Fair Park where there was a swimming pool [laughs] and all the kids would gather, especially in the summer

time.

AD: Where did you go to school up through the end of high school?

GW: Well, first of all, I started off at Miss Mary's Kindergarten, which was actually about a half block from my house.

AD: So you were really close, then?

GW: Right. That's where Bill Clinton went to kindergarten, by the way.

AD: Yes.

GW: And I then went to Brookwood Elementary, which would have been about three or four blocks from our house. They had neighborhood elementary schools then, so everybody in this part of town—this neighborhood over here—went to Brookwood, and everybody over in the west end of town went to Garland. Everybody in the northwest of town went to Paisley, and everybody in kind of the northeastern part of town went to Oglesby. Those were the four elementary schools in Hope that were operating back in the 1950s and 1960s. From there, you went to junior high. [Elementary] was first through sixth grades. Then you went to junior high, which was seventh, eighth and ninth [grades], which was really on the high school campus. You crossed the street and you went to tenth, eleventh and twelfth [grades]. Those were the schools that I went to: Brookwood Elementary, Hope Junior High School, and Hope High School.

AD: What was the size of the graduating class at Hope during that time period?

GW: My graduating class was 139.

AD: Did you graduate in 1964?

GW: 1964.

AD: Okay. So after that, did you go off to college?

GW: Yes. I first went off to—back then it was called Arkansas State Teachers College in Conway. They later changed it to the University of Central Arkansas. I played football up there one year. I found out that you had to go to class. [Laughter] I didn't make very good grades that first year, so the next year I transferred to Arkansas State [University]. I graduated from Arkansas State in 1969.

AD: When did you come back to Hope?

GW: I moved back to Hope in 1971. I've pretty well been here ever since.

AD: And you kind of mentioned that it's obviously a little bit different now than it would have been thirty-five or forty years ago—that if somebody comes here now, they're really probably not going to get the exact essence or flavor of the town.

GW: Well, yes, you don't get the essence of what the town was in the 1950s or 1960s today because it's so different. You've got to worry about crime. You've got to worry about all the things that even the big cities have to worry about. Today people lock their houses and they lock their cars. They lock anything that they don't want stolen. Back then, it was nothing to sleep with the windows up. It was nothing not to lock your house at all during the day. Everybody pretty well looked after [laughs] everybody else. I can even remember—we lived closed to the railroad tracks, and you had what we used to call "hobos." They were transient folks who jumped trains. They were homeless people who just rode the trains. Well, down by the brickyard they had what we called "Hobo Village," and that's where they would camp out when they would stop over in Hope. But it was

nothing for any day—and just about every day—that one of them would come up to the back of the house and ask for something to eat. We would carry them a plate for them to sit outside and eat a meal. But they weren't going to *bother* you. They weren't going to come steal from you or anything because you were giving them food and taking care of them. [Now] you would worry about somebody who's maybe homeless or down on their luck who's coming through town, or something like that. They might try to break in and steal something nowadays. Back then you didn't worry about it.

AD: I imagine the interstate coming through changed [things] a lot. Approximately when did that come through?

GW: Actually, the latter part of the 1960s was when this stretch of I-30 got completed. When I went off to college, you drove [Highway] 67 all the way through and hit Little Rock. [You went] through downtown Little Rock and then—I can't remember the Conway highway, but it might have been [Highway] 64 or 65—out to Conway. And it took you four and a half hours driving. Now it takes you two and a half hours, and you've got interstate [highway] all the way.

AD: Yes, I was thinking about how long it took me to get from Fayetteville down here. I don't want to think about how long it would take before then.

GW: Right. Our interstates have changed everything. You can get from right here to Dallas, Texas, in three hours, driving seventy-five [miles per hour] without any problem. I mean, gee—and you can be in a *really* metropolitan area then, if you so choose to. I don't much like to drive in that traffic. I get just a little irritated if I'm at a stoplight for more than a minute. [Laughter] I don't do very well in

traffic. But most towns like this—and this town is only 12,000 now, so it has only gone from 8,000 to 12,000 in over forty-something years.

AD: Looking back at the schools in Hope, what is your opinion, knowing what you know now? Also, at the time, what was your opinion when you were growing up?

GW: Well, I obviously think that we had a [good] school system. We had good teachers and if someone wanted to learn and had the ability to learn, they could certainly get a good education in Hope. You can look at a lot of young people who've come out of Hope, Arkansas. I can name a few whose names you would recognize. Mack McLarty, Vince Foster, now-Governor Mike Huckabee.

AD: Yes.

GW: Bill Clinton, up until second grade.

AD: David Watkins.

GW: David Watkins. You know, I could sit down and name lots of people who have gone on and become very successful professional people. I've got a brother who's an attorney here. He's a prosecutor here. I've got a brother who's the geriatrician in northwest Arkansas. In fact, he is the medical director at Schmeiding Center on Aging. You might be familiar with that, being from Fayetteville. Larry has been practicing up there for twenty-seven years. He's kind of the guru in geriatrics in northwest Arkansas. Anybody over sixty-five—in fact, Frank Broyles has been to Larry.

AD: I was going to say I've seen that name in the newspaper on at least a couple of occasions.

GW: He's on TV once a week doing a geriatric-type deal. I mean, you can name case after case of people who have gotten great educations in Hope, Arkansas, and have gone on to become very successful in their fields, and in many towns like Hope—you can get a good education in a small town.

AD: I was going to ask you about. That was my next question. What makes Hope different? If you look at the large number of successful people who came from here—obviously, there are a lot of towns like that, but it seems more prominent. There seems to be more people than you would expect randomly.

GW: Well, I don't know if that's true if you really got down and studied. But I think it's because small towns—and Hope is like this—have a great closeness among everybody. I think that that closeness develops a lot of things. You learn how to deal with people at young ages of all races, all socioeconomic backgrounds. In a small town, it doesn't make any difference if your dad is a doctor or a bricklayer. It doesn't make any difference there. They're basically all on the same level. They're not set up here as all of them—you know, "These doctors are all rich," because they weren't rich. They worked twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and if you put down what they made on an hourly basis, they would have been better off as a plumber. That's the honest truth. My dad once told me that the best year he ever had—now, he practiced until he was seventy-six years old. But he told me, "I love my practice, but the most money I ever made in one year was \$75,000."

AD: Which, if he had been in Dallas or Little Rock . . .

GW: Today, we hire doctors right out of medical school to come and practice in Hope,

Arkansas for \$135,000. That's what we guarantee them, that first year.

[Laughter] So there's a lot of difference there. I probably got off [the subject] a little bit there. But it didn't make any difference what background or who your parents were. All the kids were pretty well a good, cohesive group, and that, I think, as much as anything—you started developing proper ideals. You learned through your association with all these folks. And we had some very successful parents of kids who didn't have any education. They didn't have a good education, but they went out and made a good living and built a company and made—well, I could say that [about] Mack McLarty's grandfather, [because] he didn't have any particular education, but he was *sharp*. He built a business, and Mack's dad came in there and built on that business, and Mack came in there and expanded on that business. I mean, that's the type of thing that you have.

AD: It sounds like there really were, especially in the postwar years, a lot of opportunities in Hope.

GW: There really were. This community was basically timber, cattle, [and] you had row crops more so then than you do now. Now you have poultry, which is a big industry in this part of the country. So those things are really what the foundation of this area is. Other businesses just kind of built off that, but that's your economic foundation for this part of the country. I don't know that it is as great today as it was then, but it certainly was what this community—and, of course, this railroad that came through certainly helped this community grow and thrive because of shipping opportunity there.

AD: One thing that you touched on—we've been asking everybody about race

relations in Hope in the late 1940s and 1950s. What is your view on race relations at that time?

GW: Back when I was growing up there was no integration in the school system.

Blacks or African-Americans had their school. Caucasians or whites had their school. You didn't integrate that. Now, as most small towns, especially in the South, it seemed like the blacks were in one section of town. They were not as affluent as the large majority of the whites, and that probably carried up from years and years of maybe [limited] educational opportunities or anything like that, but their families would usually work in the factories, and they were not—well, they didn't have the opportunities [that the whites had]. Now, we didn't have—and there were *never* any problems between the blacks and whites back in those days. I knew a few blacks in the community because they either worked in areas where I'd run into them, or like one guy who I really got to know and like when I was a young kid, and I was about five years younger than him, so he was in high school when I was in junior high. But he was one of the better football players at Yeager High School. They played on Saturday night because they used Hope High School Stadium. I used to go over and watch those games because Freeman played in those games, and I knew him. He was a good guy. We remain friends today. And there were several [others], but we never did have the association with them at school to get to know them very well. Probably any town in the South you could go and look in any theater [and] the blacks sat in the balcony. I always thought that was kind of strange. [I thought], "Have they got some kind of disease that they can't sit in the same area that we sit in?" But that was just where

they sat.

AD: But there wasn't any real sense of animosity?

GW: No. I don't think so at all. The other thing I noticed as a young man: all physicians' offices had a white waiting room and a colored waiting room. And that's what they had on the door. All restaurants had a colored section and a white section. And I don't know where all that started, but that's just the way we grew up in the small-town South. They had their section and we had our section. We never did mix that much. Certainly, our parents didn't. Now, when I was growing up, there were four of us kids in the family, and my dad was gone all the time. My mother had a maid. She was a black lady, and she worked for us from—I know I had to be six or seven years old—she was working for my dad after he retired. She worked at our house a couple of days a week, or something like that. I mean, I thought of her just like anybody. [Laughs] She pretty well raised me. But they were kind of the servants, if you will, in the community. They worked in labor jobs and factories and stuff like that. So did white people. In the factory setting there were blacks and whites mixed. But in the social setting, there was not a black/white mix.

AD: [You were] maybe eleven at the time [Little Rock] Central High School desegregated. Do you remember anything about that?

GW: I would've been eleven. You're pretty good at calculating all this. [Laughter] Well, what I do remember is that a family friend was in the [United States] National Guard during that time. In fact, he had gotten into the National Guard right before he got out of high school. At the time he got out of high school—I

think he graduated in 1956—was that summer? No, was that the fall of 1957?

AD: I think it was the fall of 1957 when they did that.

GW: He graduated in the spring of 1957, and he was called to Little Rock in the fall of 1957. I remember that because I knew he was up there. Outside of that—here we are, eleven years old—we don't get too involved in all the current events [laughter] like you would later on in high school.

AD: I guess going to a question about Bill Clinton: when was the first time you met Bill Clinton or that you remember meeting him?

GW: Well, let me kind of go back and give you a little history on that.

AD: Okay.

GW: My father came here in—I guess that would have been May of 1946. His mother was a nurse. His mother worked with my dad helping him get his practice started. Now, if you'll remember . . .

AD: She was Virginia Cassidy then?

GW: Right.

AD: I wasn't sure if she was your father's mother or Virginia Cassidy.

GW: No. Excuse me. I'm sorry. Virginia worked with—actually, at that time she was Virginia Blythe. She was married to William Blythe. If you remember, May or June—somewhere around June, Bill's real father, William Blythe, was killed in a car wreck coming home from Chicago. Virginia was working with my dad at the time. That was before Bill was born. After that happened, and Bill was born, my dad talked Virginia into going to nurse anesthetist school down in Shreveport to get her nurse anesthetist license. She came back here after that and was the nurse

anesthetist at Julia Chester Hospital for several years. By the time Bill was— well, I was too little to remember all that—those stories have been relayed to me. Virginia and my mother—my mother was an RN [registered nurse] also. Virginia, my mother and dad were good friends from the time he got to Hope, Arkansas, because here was a young doctor who's coming out of the military—he was coming up here to practice, and there were about four or five doctors in Hope. Most of them were getting old. And for a new, young doctor to come in, that was a big deal. From the point that—Bill was born in August, so he's four months younger than I am. I remember when we went to kindergarten together. We were at little birthday parties together. We were in kind of the same circles as kids. My mother and dad's association with Virginia tied us in together on a lot of things.

AD: Talk a little bit more about that association, since your father and your mother obviously spent some time with her—what are things that they've told you about her? Things that you want to tell . . .

GW: [Laughter] *Everybody* knows that Virginia was a character. And she didn't become a character after she left Hope, Arkansas! I mean, she was always—but they were good friends. In fact, I can't remember when Roger Clinton came to Hope, but he came down here and had the Buick [automobile dealership]. Back then Hope had a Pontiac store, a Chevrolet store, a Ford store, a Lincoln/Mercury store—what am I leaving out?

AD: Dodge/Chrysler?

GW: Dodge/Chrysler store. Everybody had a little store that might have two or three

cars. [Laughter] They had a parcel—Roger had the Buick place. In fact, I think it was his brother who had the Buick place in Hot Springs.

AD: Yes, that's correct.

GW: Okay. So that's how Roger got down here with that. Of course, he met Virginia, and Roger and my dad played poker together. My dad used to love to play cards. Every Wednesday or Tuesday night they would have a poker game in the back of the clinic. He had a poker table back there. Roger Clinton, Byron Heffner, who was a car dealer, Blue Archer, another car dealer, a couple of lawyers, and my dad would play poker. They'd have a big time. I don't know if there was money out on the table. [Laughter] I couldn't tell you about that. But they were all friends. They were friends socially as well as professionally. Of course, Virginia married Roger. I don't guess Roger—he probably didn't adopt Bill until Roger, Jr., was born. I don't know how that worked. I'm pretty sure Bill's name wasn't changed until after he left Hope. We were always thrown together in social situations, and school—we went to kindergarten and first grade together, and then they left and moved to Hot Springs after that.

AD: Your dad must have thought a lot about Virginia's potential to suggest that she go to school to become a nurse anesthetist.

GW: Well, and probably because they only had one nurse anesthetist around here, and that pretty well works them—back in those days you were a physician/surgeon. You did everything. You delivered babies. You did orthopedics. You did general surgery. You did everything that you had the equipment to do it with. So there was Dad and Dr. Lyle and Dr. Branch, and there was Dr. McKenzie and Dr.

Harris and a few of those—they had to do it all. If their patient broke a hip, they pinned the hip. If somebody was pregnant, they did the prenatal stuff, pediatrics, and all of it. But, yes, I guess because he got here, she helped him kind of get established. She was a nurse, and she could help him out. Even though Mother was a nurse, she was busy taking care of two kids. In fact, the first nine months that Dad was in practice, he practiced out of the front of his house. That was his office. He did think that there was a need for a nurse anesthetist, and that that would be a good field for her to be in. He encouraged her, and, of course, my dad was a graduate of LSU [Louisiana State University] Medical School [Baton Rouge], so he got her to go down to Louisiana. I think that was a good program down there. Down in Shreveport is where he had done his internship before he went into the service. So, yes, he thought a lot of her professionally and socially and everything. They were good friends.

AD: Coming back to Bill Clinton—so you knew him, really, until he was about five or six, or so?

GW: I guess in second grade you'd be coming up on seven, wouldn't you?

AD: Right.

GW: But the other thing was that we took two-week vacations. My dad took two weeks off every year. That was just going to be the way it was. He would just shut down his practice and take two weeks off. We'd go to Hot Springs and stay on the lake for two solid weeks. [We did that] until I was through high school. There was where we renewed our friendship each year.

AD: So you're really one of the few people who knew Bill Clinton both in Hope and in

Hot Springs, even though Hot Springs was a little more . . .

GW: Right. He would come out and stay with us on the lake. We'd have a boat, or we'd rent a boat, or somebody we knew up there had a boat. Obviously, he didn't get to fish that much. We would boat and do all those things. Well, particularly, from ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen—in those ages is when we really could ski and do those things [laughs] and have more fun. My dad would turn me—when I was eleven years old I was running all over Lake Hamilton in a ski boat with a thirty-five horsepower [motor] on it. [Laughter]

AD: What was it like growing up with Bill Clinton?

GW: Well, he was an average guy. He was an average good guy. I like Bill a lot. Back from the time he left Hope until I can remember, in our pre-teens and right in there—I thought that he was probably a little bit more clumsy than I was. He was big and I'd say maybe a little pudgy. Maybe I would say that I thought I was more athletic.

AD: Good enough of an athlete to play college football.

GW: Yes, I played one year! [Laughter] That's not too good. Anybody could probably do that. But I thought maybe I was a little bit more athletic. I could probably ski better than him, but I spent more time down there. I mean, he didn't do those things. It was obvious that he looked forward to coming out there and having a good time because he didn't get to do that too [often]. Now, probably after he was fifteen or sixteen years old, when he got a little bit mobile, his circle of friends would probably go out on the lake and ski and do those things. But I probably didn't see him from the time we were sixteen or seventeen years old

until he was running for attorney general.

AD: So there was this period of time—certainly, not quite twenty years—but probably pretty close to it. That would have been about 1962 to about 1976, so about fourteen years. Looking at that, were you surprised that he turned out to have an interest in politics?

GW: No. I wasn't surprised at it. I always thought, with his personality—he was the type of guy who wanted to be everybody's friend, you know? He wanted to be with everybody. He wanted to be involved with any group, and he wanted you to like him. [Laughs] I mean, it's kind of hard *not* to like him. Even back when we were five or six years old, socially we were all together. It was not hard to like the guy because he was a nice guy and fun to be around. Not being around him too much when he was in high school, however, I did realize that the boy was really smart. Back when he was in high school, just on our short association that we had up until I guess by the time we both got mobile and were driving cars and stuff that—from that point on—we didn't see each other until about fourteen years later.

AD: Yes, because your paths kind of turned.

GW: Yes. From sixteen to—it wouldn't have been fourteen because he was elected attorney general at, what, twenty-eight?

AD: I think he was elected in 1976.

GW: So 1962 to 1976—I sure thought he was younger.

AD: He ran for Congress in 1974 and barely lost, and then in 1976 he ran and became attorney general, and 1978 became governor.

GW: Was he thirty years old when he became . . .

AD: Yes, I think that sounds . . .

GW: I thought he was twenty-eight when he became attorney general, but maybe not.

AD: Yes, maybe.

GW: That probably was. He ran for Congress when he was twenty-eight years old, and then was elected attorney general when he was thirty. Anyway, that's when we got re-associated. Of course, Hope was kind of his hometown, too. He knew a lot of people down here. Charles Walker, who is an attorney here, and I were kind of his county coordinators for the attorney general years and the first couple of times as governor. So we helped him out down in this part of the state. One interesting note: when I first figured out how smart he was, was when he ran for attorney general the first time. I was carrying him around Hope and introducing him to people. Some he remembered and some he didn't—from family ties and [so on]—one day we were in the lobby of the Citizens Bank [and] we were walking through, and another friend of mine who had a music store in Hope—about my age and about Bill's age—was over standing in line. So I said, "Bill, come over here. I want you to meet Jake Honea. He has a music store here." I introduced them and they visited briefly. We went through and met a lot of other folks, and went to the courthouse and different places—anywhere you could run into people, that's where we went. Two years later, after he was elected and had been in office for a couple of years, Jake Honea and I were going to Little Rock. So on the way up there, I said, "Jake, I've got to run by Bill's office. I've got to see him a minute." We were going up there for some [reason]. I can't remember

what we were going to Little Rock for, but we had some business up there. So we pulled in the parking lot of the attorney general's office, and Bill was walking out of the office. I saw him and walked straight over to him and shook hands. He looked at Jake and said, "Jake, good to see you again. I met you at a bank down in Hope a couple of years ago." Well, Jake Honea nearly passed out because he couldn't believe it—"How in the world did he remember my name? I could hardly remember *his!*" [Laughter] Bill had that—I don't know if it's a [photographic] memory. I don't know if he just worked hard at it. I think he worked pretty hard at trying to remember names and faces and stuff, but, still, when you talk about the number of people that you meet in a statewide race. And it might have been an isolated incident, but I don't think so. But he could walk up and recall his name without me even saying, "Do you remember Jake?" I thought that was pretty phenomenal.

AD: That's pretty impressive.

GW: Yes, and Jake was impressed.

AD: Well, who wouldn't be impressed?

GW: Yes. I'm not sure that he could do that now—just take a random town and run into a face that he sees and put a name with it right there because he has met so many people all over the world. [Laughs]

AD: It's interesting. I don't know how many people have had stories like that about people he's met once, and years later . . .

GW: That's right. I mean, I know he works at it because when we would leave a place, he would say, "I met—" And he'd write it down. "I met—" and "I met—" He

does this. He would write it down. He would write whoever we met. Like that Citizens Bank—he'd write it down and what he did. He'd make himself notes. Now, I don't know if he ever looked at that note again, but it probably put some kind of image in his mind. I know that if I write something down, chances are I'm going to remember it a little bit longer. I'm not going to remember it *two* years later [laughs], but chances are I'm going to remember it a little bit longer. But that impressed me that he could remember that.

AD: So when he began to kind of rise to statewide prominence in the attorney general's race, and when he was running for governor the first time, how did people in Hope react to him? What were their feelings, generally speaking?

GW: Well, they liked him. They thought he was a very bright young star of the Democratic Party. They could see that. The guy has charisma. It's the electricity that surrounds him. I mean, when he walks in—you know what I'm talking about?

AD: Right.

GW: It's just kind of electric. Plus, he's very, very bright. From his social aspects, he knew the proper things to say to people, the way to carry himself, and the way to do things. Everybody liked him. Down here they're going to like him more. But even down here and even in the state of Arkansas...

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

GW: . . . [there are a] certain number of people who don't like him. You either love Bill Clinton or you hate him. There wasn't any middle ground, and that was

evident as he got into the national scene and everything. But, still, for a boy from Hope, Arkansas, [the fact that he] was able to go to a national campaign and win the highest office in the country is pretty impressive. I remember when he decided he was going to run for president, and made that announcement. At the time, I was working for one of Mack McLarty's stores, Hope Auto in Hope. Mack called me one time and he said Bill was going to be down at a fund raiser at Texarkana. "I want you to go over there and tell him 'hi,' give him this money," and all this kind of good stuff. "Just tell him that we're behind him one hundred percent." I said, "Mack, he didn't ask me if he should run for this office. I'd have told him 'No. I think you're *crazy*.'" [Laughter] But anyway, he did, and the rest of it is history. Not that I could [know] that back in grade school and those years, but you could always—from after he was back in Arkansas and he ran for attorney general—see that the guy was something special, you know, as far as new blood, or whatever, in the political process. Of course, all the Baby Boomers—that was one of their [own] rising to the top in the political arena, so that was pretty impressive and pretty special.

AD: Obviously, there is a lot of pride that Hope has in Bill Clinton. You look and see the signs around here just coming into town. When did the town really kind of reclaim him? Not that he was ostracized or anything, but when did that identity really become reforged? Was it when he was running for attorney general at the beginning, or was it just something that gradually grew?

GW: Probably from the time he started running for attorney general. He got that, and they said, "Hey, here's a guy from Hope who's attorney general. He's got family

here.” And then governor, but, really, when the town really started showing how proud they were, I think, was the time that he came down here and he did a spot in front of the Hope railroad station. I don’t know that he used that phrase, “A place called Hope,” but that’s when they could see that this guy could very likely [laughs] be president of the United States. And who’d ever think that a person from Hope, Arkansas—or from *Arkansas*—could ever be president?

AD: When did it dawn on you that he was going to be the next president back in 1991 and 1992?

GW: It probably didn’t dawn on me until I went to his inauguration. [Laughter]

AD: So it took a while to sink in.

GW: I said, “Gee! I can’t believe that he’s gotten here!” You know, really, if you ever sit down—and you might have sat down and talked with him. But if you sit down and talk with the guy, you realize how bright he really is. I agree with some things. I don’t agree with all the things—all his political views, or whatever. But I know that his heart is right, and I know that he thinks he can make a difference, and he can do things to help average Americans. And I believe he did that. It’s just amazing to sit there and watch him over those years because that’s all I did was kind of watch him in amazement of what he was able to accomplish.

AD: So what is it like having one of your childhood friends as president? I guess that’s one of the first questions I should have asked. [Laughs]

GW: Well, like I say, it dawned on me when I was walking around all the festivities surrounding the inauguration for president of the United States. Everybody there was celebrating that. And I thought, “Here’s a guy I’ve known since I was a

young child, and he's the president of the United States. And, not only that, I guess the most powerful person in the world." Not that I think that he would ever say that or ever indicate in any way that he puts his pants on any different than you and I. But here was a guy [laughs] who was in that position. It was *amazing* to me that all the celebration that went on—and I'm sure that goes for every president until the inauguration, that same celebration, because the people who were supporting *their* man won, and they were there celebrating. It is an awesome feeling to think that here you are—not only have you been childhood friends, but friends and family have been friends, and he's the president of the [laughs] United States.

AD: One thing that seems really interesting is how many people who were friends with him at one time who stayed friends decades and decades later—and the strength of that bond—that there just seemed to be so many people who have been friends with him for such a long period of time. There's a large amount of loyalty and a very strong bond that people have.

GW: Well, I think that's true for anybody who grows up in small-town America, especially in the South. I think that their bond is much greater than if you grow up in a metro area and you don't feel that closeness. But once you have a bond with someone and they grow up and go away and do whatever, you still have that bond to them. And when they're successful at whatever they do, you celebrate. That's why I think that the high school reunions are so well-attended, especially, I would imagine, in every small town in Arkansas or the southern part of the United States. People can't wait to get back home to see the people they grew up in their

formative years with, and to be able to visit with them because they haven't seen them in years, and to be able to celebrate their successes. Or to celebrate that they're still able to be there. [Laughter] You know, it's coming up on our fortieth class reunion. [At] our thirtieth class reunion, Bill was president. It just so happened that Hot Springs High School had their thirty-year class reunion the night that Hope High School had their thirty-year class reunion. He called us, and, of course, we had this set up. We knew it a week beforehand, but he called and we had a speaker phone set up. There were three of us who carried on the conversation, but the whole rest of our class got to listen. We had a good conversation between the president of the United States, who was actually our age, and at one time our classmate. He called us on our thirtieth class reunion. That was kind of neat.

AD: One of the things that's also kind of interesting—I've asked people about this, and no one has really thought that they've had a good answer yet. The fact that there are some people who have such high levels of animosity toward Bill Clinton. Do you have any explanation?

GW: The only thing that I can think of is that—I'm sure you know people, but there is—it seems to me that these people would be jealous of this person's successes and accomplishments. Maybe they're jealous because they didn't know him very well, or [have] animosity toward him because he didn't call them by name, or something like that. But it's more jealousy than anything else. They're jealous because he's such a brilliant individual. Or maybe they don't agree with his politics, or something. But most of it stems, I think, from jealousy. That's just

my personal opinion.

AD: It's kind of interesting because some people have also brought up that you hear people who don't know him talk about him being somebody who's a fake or a phony, but, again, people who know him seem to vehemently disagree with that.

GW: Well, there's no question about that. If you ever got to know Bill Clinton, you'd obviously know that he's not a fake or a phony because he would look you square in the eyes and talk to you like he's known you all his life. And that's just his personality. He will do that every time. He never looks past someone to look at somebody else unless he's already acknowledged that person's presence and talked to them, or whatever. I would think that just because they don't know it. They've never sat down and had a conversation with him; therefore, if you don't know someone, maybe—and I don't think he brings that air across. To me he doesn't, but maybe with somebody who's just sitting back there and watching and has never met him and never knew [him then] maybe they would think that. I don't know.

AD: Kind of jumping out of order here, but going back a little bit—one of the questions we've been asking everybody is: were you surprised when he lost his first attempt at re-election as governor?

GW: I was surprised because he was a friend of mine, and I certainly didn't want him to lose. But at the same time, he was running for his second term as governor, and I was running for state representative for Hempstead County against a one-term democratic incumbent. He lost and I lost. [Laughter] And I've never run again. I learned my lesson. I know you had one opportunity to have me to serve

[laughs]—but I thought he—I was surprised he lost, but then when you start thinking about it, he got blamed for some of the things—yes, he did, and he initiated—but it was certainly something that probably had to be done. What he got beat over was basically two issues: car tags and Cubans. The Cubans [laughs]—was it [during President Jimmy] Carter’s [Administration]?

AD: Okay.

GW: And, you know, he was a democrat and a Southern democratic governor. He obviously told the president that, “Yes, we’ve got a facility. We can put them in at Fort Chaffee.” Nobody in northwest Arkansas liked that idea. The car tag deal was “Either we’re going to have to go up on gas taxes,” which nobody wanted to pay any higher gas taxes, “or we’re going to have to go from \$4 for license and raise it to a fee that we can afford to do some of these things. We’re going to have to do one of the two. We can’t operate without doing that.” So the old-timers—going from \$4 to \$25 was a ridiculous jump. Those two things right there, some of the older hands—who maybe had some really good political allies—they got him beat [him] on that. It wasn’t the republicans who beat him. It was moderate democrats who voted for Frank White that beat him. Yes, I was a little surprised at that, but Bill realized that there were some other things, too. And some of the things that I remember a lot of people in this part of the state saying that he had those three or four folks on his staff up there who didn’t have enough cow dung on their boots to understand what goes on in these rural counties. They were talking about what we used to call the “three whiz kids.” They were on his first staff, if you’ll remember that and look back. I’m trying to

think if I can remember their names. Well, Rudy Moore was one. He was one of the staff members. He's up in northwest Arkansas. Is he in Fayetteville?

AD: I think he is.

GW: Rudy was one. I liked Rudy. I liked them all. [Laughs] But they were really bright guys and maybe a little ahead of the times on some of the things that they helped the Clinton [gubernatorial] administration initiate, and maybe they didn't relate so much to the common folks in Arkansas. Those were some of the things that got Bill beat. And what he did—when he decided he would run for it again, he went around to all the counties way before deciding to run and had what I call a town meeting. They brought everybody in there and he said, "Look, guys, I obviously messed up. I'm here to ask your opinions on what y'all [you all] think." He took all those, and he probably kept hearing the same thing. [Laughs] He took all that and then he ran again, of course, and beat Frank White the second time.

AD: Were you surprised that he ran again?

GW: No. At that point in his career, Bill Clinton was going to totally be a public servant from then on. He was going to be in politics. He liked the things he was able to accomplish and get done, and I think a lot of it was progressive in Arkansas moving in the right area in some of the programs that they were doing. No, I wasn't surprised. I knew he'd be back. I didn't know if he'd run for governor again, but he was going to be in politics in some capacity. Anyway, the second time he ran for governor and was elected, he appointed me to the Arkansas Development Finance Authority Board. It used to be the Arkansas Development

Housing Authority Board. They got all the bond money for different low-interest home loans. Then they expanded that in about 1985, and it went to the Arkansas Development Finance Authority and gave broader authority to issue bonds and finance a lot of things. It really brought a lot of money into the state of Arkansas through bond issues. That not only helped in housing, but helped in bringing industry and a lot of things here. I served on that board until 1990. He asked me if I wanted to be reappointed after my seven-year term. I said, “Look, Bill, it doesn’t pay anything, number one. Number two, I think I’ve served my state for seven years. And, number three, you’ve got other folks that you need to appoint to commissions. I appreciate the opportunity, and I’ve enjoyed this great education that I’ve gotten through my service on the commission, but, hey, I’ve got to take care of business back home, too.” [Laughs] But I did serve on that as the chairman from—well, 1985 and 1986, which was the last year it was the old Development Housing Authority, up until the year it changed to the Arkansas Development Finance Authority. I also had to—because of that situation, I had to testify before the Senate Subcommittee on Whitewater. [Laughs]

AD: Oh! [Laughs]

GW: That was interesting, too. Anyway, I’ve just gotten off course there.

AD: Is there anything that you would—I’m trying to think of anything that you think people would be surprised about Bill Clinton if they knew.

GW: Surprised if they knew.

AD: Yes, or any kind of interesting stories that you can think back on.

GW: Well, I think that most of the things have been said over the years and in

publications—I don't know that anybody would consider this a big surprise because people are awkward and clumsy sometimes at a young age, and you might have heard this story. When he was in kindergarten at Miss Mary's Kindergarten, he was jumping rope one day on the playground. In fact, I was probably on one end of the rope. I can't remember that, but I do remember that he caught one of his cowboy boot heels on the rope and broke his leg.

AD: Yes, I think Joe Purvis had mentioned that. Yes.

GW: Yes, Purvis was there, too. [Laughter] And several others. Vince Foster was there, too. Mack McLarty was there. Several interesting pictures of some of Miss Mary's Kindergarten group—you start looking around at some of those pictures, and there are folks who were on his staff when he was president of the United States. [Laughs]

AD: It's a really interesting group of people. Is there anything else you'd like to add? Is there anything we've not touched on?

GW: I don't know if there's—oh, socially, I think I've always been a little surprised, but not really. I've gone out with him socially before when he was governor, and I can see why, but Bill Clinton doesn't drink very much. I mean, he might have a glass of wine, but that would probably be all he would have during the night, while everybody else is drinking and toasting and everything. He has a better time [laughs] talking to everyone else.

AD: That's interesting. I've never heard that before.

GW: Maybe other people think that he was a social animal who hit the beer and wine and whatever. But I've been around him on a several occasions and seen him

drink maybe one glass of wine. He was busy shaking hands and visiting with people and talking and doing what he does and having a good time. But unlike some of us—we're going to have to have a beer or a glass of wine all the time. [Laughter] But he has a good time without it. No, I think we've pretty well covered most everything that I can think of.

AD: It's kind of interesting. Everybody says that they're sure that they'll come up with something later, but nobody has yet. [Laughs]

GW: Well, you might come up with things—hey, this might be interesting. If you do have your e-mail down there, I will e-mail you if I can think of something else that might be interesting for you.

AD: I'd like to thank you for your time. This has been a very interesting interview.

GW: Well, I don't know how interesting it is to talk to somebody from Hope, Arkansas. We obviously like Hope or we wouldn't have stayed around here all these years. And Bill likes Hope. Oh, one other thing I wanted to tell you while we're here. My dad died in 1997. Bill was the sitting president. His Uncle Buddy died at the same time, so the president of the United States was in Hope, Arkansas, to bury his uncle on the day they buried my dad. Bill called me from the White House the night before. He called me and my brothers, and the family was over there. They said, "You have a call from the president of the United States." "Okay." [Laughs] So I got on the phone, and the operator said, "Would you hold for the president?" "Certainly." [Laughs] So he came on and said, "George, I sure was sorry to hear about your dad. Man, I just wanted to call you." I said, "Bill, I appreciate that. I realize that your Uncle Buddy died. I know that

you've got obligations and everything." He said, "Well, I am going to be in Hope tomorrow. If your family is going to be gathered somewhere in the morning tomorrow, I'd like to come by and visit them." I said, "Well, you don't have to do that. You've got other things to do." He said, "I would like to come by and visit with the family if that's possible." I said, "Well, sure." So I got off the phone. I considered that a personal phone call. I do call Bill "Mr. President," but in that personal phone call, my brother, Larry, noticed that when he came on the phone, I said "Bill." And he said, "I can't *believe* that you didn't call him Mr. President." And I said, "Well, he didn't call me Mr. Wright, either." [Laughter] That was the first telephone call. But the next day he did come over, and we were all over at my brother's house.

AD: Right.

GW: Well, my brother's house is right across the street—that bigger house sitting off—but at 7:30 in the morning the Secret Service knocked on my brother's door. They said, "Mr. Wright, I have to look through the house and look at the area and do all this stuff," and they had seven or eight Secret Service guys who kind of combed the area. He didn't get there until about 9:00, so they were sitting out there until then. But he drove up and stayed forty-five minutes to an hour and visited with the family and everything. He didn't have to do that. I mean, that goes back to the family and the personal relationship that my family and myself and we all had with each other. That goes back to your roots, because he certainly didn't have to do that. I really was impressed by that because so many times you have good intentions of doing something. And when you're the

president of the United States, you certainly can't do everything that you *want* to do. But he made time to do that and scheduled that and came over there and visited family, when his own family—he was there the whole day doing the funeral, but his own family—he visited with them and had obligations, too.

AD: That sounds like someone who's incredibly thoughtful.

GW: Right. And he is. That's what I say—people who don't know him don't understand that about him. If you ever get to know him, you're going to *like* him.

[Laughter] It's that simple. At least that's the way I feel. I had forgotten about that, but I did want to relay that to you. My whole family was impressed by it.

The whole community of Hope was impressed by it. That was neat. There were only about three times when he came back to Hope, and they were all for funerals.

[Laughter] Vince Foster's funeral, his mother's funeral, his Uncle Buddy's funeral. While he was president of the United States he came to Hope three times, that I can remember.

AD: I'm trying to think what was the last time—that "60 Minutes" [television] interview?

GW: Yes. And, you know, I think I was at Fort Chaffee for about two weeks or a week and a half during that time. I didn't even know he was going to be down here. I hadn't seen him since my dad's funeral. Now that he's gone through that [heart] bypass [surgery]—see, I'm fifty-eight years old. I'm actually older than he is. I haven't had to have a bypass yet. Maybe he needs to start drinking a couple of glasses of wine every night [laughter] and he won't have that problem. Drinking won't clog up his arteries. Maybe he needs to quit eating all those Big Macs.

[Laughs] Anyway, it's kind of neat having a childhood friend who became president of the United States.

AD: Well, I'd like to thank you for your time. That last story was very good.

GW: Well, I'm glad I remembered to relay that.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Cheri Pearce]

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