

Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History
Special Collections Department
University of Arkansas Libraries
365 N. McIlroy Ave.
Fayetteville, AR 72701
(479) 575-5330

This oral history interview is based on the memories and opinions of the subject being interviewed. As such, it is subject to the innate fallibility of memory and is susceptible to inaccuracy. All researchers using this interview should be aware of this reality and are encouraged to seek corroborating documentation when using any oral history interview.

Arkansas State Police Project

Interview with

John Chappelle
9 December 2003

Interviewer: Michael Lindsey

John Chappelle: [Referring to a picture of Tommy Goodwin] This was the major of the highway patrol when I started—Tommy Goodwin. That doesn't look anything like him because he was in the grips of cancer when it was taken. He was the biggest influence on me. In fact, he came back after retiring and [Governor] Frank White put him in as director. He stayed for thirteen or fourteen years, which was longer than anyone else in that position. He had a few good years left in him. The people of Arkansas really got some bang for their buck with that one.

Michael Lindsey: I noticed that you started in 1970. What was your motivation to join the State Police?

JC: I was traveling across north Arkansas for a General Electric and Borg Warner conglomerate. They did financing and floor planning for dealers that sold electronics. You went out and checked floor plans and did public relations for these stores. As part of the public relations duties, if the store had debts they couldn't collect, you would go out and help them. I was a big old boy and had a flat belly

and didn't know what hurt or fear was. I would go over into Oklahoma and up to beer joints with no doors on them and find out where these people were that weren't paying their bills. One time, I found out where this guy lived and went up there to get a freezer back. The door was ajar and no one was home, so I took the appliance dolly off the truck. The people at the store told me they had already tried to get the freezer back from this guy, but I found out later that they never actually tried. They were too scared to even attempt it. The guy's freezer was full of Muscadine and poke salad. I took all of that out and put it in the sink. I pulled [the freezer] out and put it on the dolly and put it on the truck. Nowadays, you wouldn't do something like that, but I assumed that the door had been left open for a reason. Anyway, I went back to secure the house. It was neat as a pin and very clean. I noticed that there was a door that was shut in the back. I announced myself and then went in the door. There was a bag of lime in the room and the guy had used the bathroom and would then get a handful of lime and cover it up. He had gone all the way around the wall and had just started the inside row. I thought right then that I had talked to a bunch of troopers up in northeast Arkansas at a place called Kelly's. There were three or four troopers in there. They asked me to join them for dinner and asked what I did and wondered if I was interested in law enforcement. When they heard what I did they said that I was doing things that were twice as hard as what they were doing. I had always admired the way they looked and their cars. They were always spic and span and carried themselves differently than your typical officer. Prior to going to work [for the State Police], I had to go to Mountain View and get some bills up to

shape. These were mountain people, but I could converse and work with them because I was raised in the same type of environment. Normally I could get what I needed in the form of a post-dated check or the merchandise. The last time I went up there, they were having the folk festival and I met those troopers again. They asked me what I was doing that night and where I was staying. I told them I was staying at the Folk Center, which was where they were staying too. One of the guys asked me to ride with him that night, and I never had so much fun in all of my life. I never saw such camaraderie and attention to duty and professionalism. Right then was when I made up my mind. In 1969 I met a sergeant named Noel Baldrige, who showed me the ropes. I was driving by headquarters on Roosevelt Road in July 1970 and I thought that it was now or never and picked up an application. I talked with my wife and she told me I was gone all the time anyway; at least now I would be home at night. I didn't tell her that we would probably have to move. I was hired in September, but didn't go to troop school immediately. They wanted me to go to college, and I accumulated sixty hours over the next three years. Finally, I just told them that I had to go to troop school. I had been working for three years and I was catching flack and I wanted to go. They signed me up for the 1973 school. I was a seasoned road officer by the time I got there. Gene Donham was my first commander and my best. He had the sidewalls [military-style haircut] and wore the hat all the time. I think he even wore it to the bathroom. He threw me a set of keys and said, "I don't know which car it is, but it is one of those in the back. It is a high powered Plymouth, but it doesn't have a radio in it. The first thing you do is get a pocket full of dimes and you call

in every thirty minutes. Do you know where Sweet Home is?" I said, "No, sir, but I will find it." He said, "There are the keys to the car and you are the law there." He had talked with Baldrige, who said that I didn't need to ride with anyone because I had been riding with him. During this time [riding with Sergeant Baldrige], we had crossed paths with Captain Donham because he rode around at night all the time. I went to Sweet Home, and I will never forget that first stop. I was a lot more nervous that the other guy was, but after that it broke the ice. My favorite run was out on Highway 10, because I lived there. I was forty-five minutes away from the nearest help and I didn't want any. I didn't want to have to worry about anyone else or anyone else to worry about me. You can assess a problem and take action and not worry about loose ends. At Stone's Market, they had a community bulletin board and I would go by first thing when I got on, normally around 4:00 in the afternoon. We worked ten-hour shifts, six days a week. I would go by and check the bulletin board to see where I was supposed to eat. The note would say something like, "John come by and eat at six." Usually they would put down what we would be having for dinner. I became an integral part of the community. I think that is important for the State Police to achieve, but some people didn't like it. I think they were a little jealous. It has to do with what you do and how you do it and your attitude. I did my best to be part of these people's lives. They would call me on Saturdays when they were looking to buy a used car. They valued my opinion, and they got a whole lot less flack from the car salesmen. I was treated like a brother or close relative, which I liked. Every so often, they would yank me out of there and put me on a downtown freeway,

which I hated. Not so much the wrecks, because I enjoyed working accidents, but not twelve a day. I wouldn't go to headquarters and do my accident reports. I would take them home and sit at that Underwood typewriter and knock them out. It would be nearly time to go to work by the time I finished. If I hadn't been twenty-six years old, I couldn't have handled it. I stayed in the highway patrol until 1979 when they had an opening for an undercover CID [Criminal Investigation Division] investigator assigned to the Organized Crime Unit. This was a unit separate from the normal State Police. They had separate headquarters and operated as an independent unit. Those folks wanted me over there. During the time I was on the highway, I had several road accidents. They were all, with the exception of one, resulting from removing a vehicle from the road at speed. We didn't have Pit stops, where you eased up and tapped somebody. I never could get somebody to run thirty-five miles per hour. They might run 135 mph, but not thirty-five. I didn't carry their Model 28 ["Highway Patrolman] Smith and Wesson .357 Magnum. It was uncomfortable to me, even with the oversized grips that Smith [and Wesson] made available. The front site was way too high, and when you opened the door the gun would hit the door. You would see a lot of road officers' doors, if they were working, have a lot of cuts and scrapes in the vinyl or cloth. So I realized right quick that regardless of what anyone said, that model .357 was inadequate and I couldn't afford more adjustable sights. I got a Model 58 Smith and Wesson, which was a .41 Magnum [caliber]. I got that in 1971 from the guy who is now the commander of CID, J. R. Howard. I put rosewood grips and a trigger shoe on it. It had no sights and a bull barrel. I had a special

belt with cartridge slides that fit a .41 Magnum. A few others carried .44 [Magnum pistols], but that was too much. When you rolled your spotlight down to take a car out where there was no traffic, and no houses, you could lay a .41 on the spotlight so that you wouldn't shoot your own hood or fender, but still provided enough punch. Also, it wasn't as heavy a recoil as a .44. I was young and strong, and it was just what I needed. I got into a bunch of shootouts while I was working the road. It got old. I was glad to get out of the highway patrol to try something else for a while, and it fit with my original career plan. The first thing they told me in the Organized Crime Unit was to quit shaving. The next thing you know, I had a full beard and a full head of hair. I didn't know the first thing about buying dope. I had handled dope seizures on the highway, but nothing else. I taught myself the techniques and made it work for me. We had a warehouse over on Bethany Road—something like a 130,000 square feet—and we ran the first sting operation in Arkansas. During that sting operation, we ran the first reverse. This meant that I sold dope to the bad guys instead of buying dope from the bad guys. The statute still has my name on it. That was quite a deal. No one else knew what we were doing. When the sting rolled out, we arrested 365 people. We filled that warehouse up with stolen merchandise. After we made these arrests, we took all of this stuff over to the Hall of Industry at the Arkansas Stock Show grounds. We had troopers all around it, and the way you got in to see if it had your stuff was a police report showing [that you] had been burglarized. You would hear people yell out when they found their property. It was so gratifying to us. There were other highs and lows as well. During this time, I was com-

ing back and forth from Little Rock to get fresh underwear and whatever, and one time there was a divorce order waiting for me. That kind of sends you out flat. That happened again, later, when I was in IA [Internal Affairs]. One day in 1982, I was getting ready to go to federal court in Memphis. I got a letter in the mail letting me know that a sergeant's position was open in Internal Affairs. At the time, it was generally known that if you weren't promoted within seven or eight years, you weren't going to get promoted. There I was twelve years in and I had not even tried to get promoted. So I took a week off and got familiar with all of the test material. I took the test and went before the oral board. Right before taking the test at what was then the new headquarters on Natural Resources Drive, I sat down by a lake, under a shade tree and did my last review. I remember feeling calm and ready and I knocked their eyes out. Within a few days, I was promoted to sergeant. I had to get rid of all of the hair and beard. That caused some consternation with the lady I was married to then because she had never seen me without it. I went to work in the director's office. I had to change my apparel and my whole way of doing things. There was no one there to show me how. The guy that was running IA had left the department. Colonel Goodwin was the director and [he] just told me to get back there and learn it and that it was only a two-year job. I told him, "Colonel, if I had known it was only a two-year job, I wouldn't have done it." He said, "If you stay there any longer than that, the people will stay mad at you the rest of your career." I told him that they wouldn't if you did it right and if you are fair. At the end of two-years, I walked into his office and laid my keys down. He said, "What is this?" I said, "Didn't you say it

was a two year job?" He said, "Don't you have something to do?" So I picked the keys back up and I was in there thirteen years. I went in as a sergeant, made lieutenant in 1989, and was promoted to captain as assistant to the commander of the highway patrol in 1994. The commander was Deloin Causey, who was a highly respected commander from Fort Smith. He just didn't like it down here. He didn't like living or working here and wasn't happy. I came to work one Monday and he was gone. The deferred retirement option program had started, and he just bailed. So Colonel Goodwin asked me what I thought [about a replacement], and I told him that the most outstanding captain at that time was Dan Oldham. He was from Jonesboro. I had worked with him on IA cases and he was very receptive, open, and honest about dealing with his people. This included recommendations for terminations when it was warranted. At that time, troop commanders had the authority to take a man out of service for two weeks without pay. They don't have that now, but they should. Anyway, I told the colonel that Dan Oldham was the man, and he smiled and said, "That is exactly what I think." In the next two or three days it was announced that Dan Oldham was going to be the major. Several other people applied. You have to remember that these troop commanders had their own little world. They have their own little section that is theirs. You do not step off in it, especially if you are from Little Rock. I was able to go to all of the troops and deal with the commanders and assistant commanders and sergeants and troopers as an Internal Affairs investigator. I guess they had enough respect for me that it overrode the Little Rock problems, because I never had any problems moving about. After I went back into highway patrol as assis-

tant commander and got Dan as commander, we moved out to the new headquarters and got John Bailey back as director. I worked with John when he was a young trooper. As a trooper, John was so active. I told him that he had to calm down when he was in the car with me and hold it in check. He was a road hog. He would really hunt and give it hell. The next thing I knew, he was promoted sergeant—my sergeant. We were standing down on [Interstate] 430, down at the end of it, and I told him that I didn't know how to act. He told me to not be mad at him, which I wasn't. I remember turning around to look and seeing a car coming southbound. I looked at Bailey and he looked at me and I said, "Let's go." We jumped in my car and got this car stopped and they had ninety-five pounds of weed. You get to where you can feel it. People may not believe it, but it is true. He [John Bailey] felt it, too. We made the arrest and came back to pick up his car later. He later moved over to the highway police and ran their operation for a while. Bailey came back in 1994 and I was his first promotion. He promoted me to captain. When we went out to the new headquarters—as assistant to the commander of highway patrol, I never worked harder than at any time in my life. During that time, we got into the COPS [Community Oriented Policing Services] grant program because Bailey wanted to establish some sort of rapport with the federal government, increase troop strength, and take advantage of some grants. I put it together and ended up getting three or four commendations on it. We ended up with something like 175 men, and it really worked out good for us because we were way down [in personnel numbers]. Bailey ran on hard times and got released and Tom Mars came in. I was still the assistant commander on highway

patrol at the time. They were having some serious problems over in the Family Protection Unit. There were some contractual issues with the DHS [Department of Human Services]. The State Police were supposed to be at eighty-five percent compliance on nine categories, and they were in the cellar. I got a call on the cell phone and it was Dan Oldham. He asked me if I was in my uniform, which I was, and then told me to make sure and wear my hat and come on over to Waffle House. I said, "What Waffle House?" He said, "The one on the property here at Geyer Springs [Road]." Mars always liked to go over there and have lunch. I didn't want to go over there, but I went anyway. I had a real problem wearing the hat. It was not because I wasn't proud of it, because I was, but those old felt hats were so hot. Even the straw hats were hot. Folks in the country called us the "big hat law." Anyway, I was walking over there with my hat in my hand and I was thinking about the last time I didn't wear my hat. Gene Donham was my commander and I was on patrol on Highway 10. I saw the white bass breaking all along that dam. I stopped [and] put my flashers on. I always carried my fishing rod in the car, and I dug it out of the back and went down there. I had two big, female white bass on the bank with my boot on them and I had another on my line. It was a spinning rod, and it was bowed up. The fish probably weighed two or two and a half pounds. They were good fish. Then I heard this whining noise. There was one thing that emitted that sound: the loudspeaker on an unmarked Ford. I knew it was unmarked because the loudspeaker wouldn't make that sound if it came from the light bar speaker; only through the grill speaker will it make that squeal. I looked up and the sun was setting right behind this midnight blue

Ford and there was Gene Donham. And he had his hat on. He reached up and picked the microphone up and I thought, "I am done. I am going to be working midnights at McGehee or Eudora." He said, "Trooper! Get your hat on!" Then he drove off. I went and got my hat and caught two or three more. [Laughs] Anyway, Mars and Oldham and some other guys were at the Waffle House and they asked me to take over the Family Protection Unit. They told me I would be promoted to major. I didn't know anything about family protection. Within ten months we were one hundred percent on three categories, and the lowest category of the six remaining categories was eighty-eight percent. One of the deals I made with Colonel Mars was that as soon as I got this unit meeting its contractual limits, I wanted to be transferred somewhere else. Colonel Mars asked me if I wanted to go back to highway patrol, and I told him that the best thing he could do for one of these troop commanders would be to promote him to major of the highway patrol, not CID or any of the others, but highway patrol. CID and highway patrol travel two separate paths. The CID guys didn't want to have anything to do with highway patrol. I told Colonel Mars that he had a pool of twelve troop commanders that are second to none. I knew that Major Tyler would be retiring in two or three months, and he ran the Administrative Services division. This division had the new radio system, it had hiring and training, [and] it had all of the recruit issues and regulatory service issues dealing with handgun licenses and used car licenses. It was an excellent position as far as staff, location, and importance. Its significance had been downplayed over the years. One of the things they suffered from was a guy out in the field would get married and not tell Little

Rock, or have a child and not tell Little Rock. If they wanted the wife or child on the health care insurance and to be taken care of, then they had better be talking with Little Rock. Also, they were still not working under a consent decree. They had a health care plan that was floundering, but we got that straightened out and got it back in the black. Major Wayne Eddy was an important part of that. He knew the consent decree and the health plan better than anyone. I told Colonel Melton that he needed to promote then-Captain Eddy to Major, otherwise he was going to leave and the State Police would have had to pay a lot more consulting fees than a major's salary to Wayne. He had the keys to the kingdom on those two items. On July 1, 1997, I joined the DROP program, which gave me five years until retirement. When I first started working, I would get paid every two weeks and I think I took home under \$100 a week. I don't know how I made it. You got a travel allowance, and that would have to go for a house payment. It taught you how to be resourceful. It made a little more of you down deep where it counts, and you utilized this on your job. When I left in June of 2002, most everybody came to the retirement party. I was so proud. I sat on Sunday night, the last day of June, and watched myself tick off the clock. Everything you do and say while you are in the State Police, you are judged by, and people will remember. This is especially true in a job where other people depend on you to help them out of life-threatening situations. I remember I went to Jackson, Mississippi, to an IA seminar. There were representatives from thirty-six states there. They introduced me and had me stand up and then asked me to introduce my subordinates. I told him that there weren't any. He asked me if they didn't come and

I told him that they didn't exist. I was the only one in IA. He asked me how many people were in the department and I told him 750. He was shocked. They all came to me and asked how in the hell I did it. Up to that point, I didn't know I was doing the difficult, if not impossible. I never got a helper and I never wanted one, just like the highway. Someway or other, those guys didn't do much while I was in IA. After a little while, there wasn't much reason for me to go out. They saw that the light at the end of the tunnel was me and they didn't want any of that. I felt that they were commissioned law enforcement officers and they were supposed to have enough sense to respond and act in such a way that they wouldn't bring discredit upon themselves or this agency. If they chose to do it another way, then I would respond appropriately. If they go down, the department suffers. The first real lesson in psychology that I got was when I went out and found some minor infraction on a guy and I would see him later and he would turn away and not look at me. He knew that I knew what he had done, and he had projected his anger onto me. He looked at me with a closed, cold face. I would get in his face and let him know that he had to get over his little attitude, and that seemed make him turn around. Invariably, they would come by my office in a few days to apologize.

ML: Was the organized crime unit mainly focused on narcotics?

JC: Yes, narcotics and recovering stolen property. We would target criminal operatives in the area. We involved ourselves in the Dixie Mafia, which was a close-knit, high-powered organization that made a lot of money and hurt a lot of people.

[Editor's note: The Dixie Mafia was a criminal organization operating primarily

in the southern States. Its focus was primarily on moving stolen merchandise for profit.] It had a lot of people under its control. We got into a number of large fly-ins that transported a massive amount of dope. You would be running trying to catch a plane. I can't tell you how many nights I have spent on various airfields. Other things that I think about were when Tommy Robinson chained up those inmates at the sheriff's office in Little Rock and threatened to shoot us. Some of those guys working for him would shoot another cop. We got one of their guys in with us [undercover CID] so we could show them how to run a sting operation. The only problem was that he wouldn't turn the money in. [Laughs] He got put in the penitentiary. We participated in the Calaveras County, California, jumping frog contest. The Arkansas entry was a frog that I caught on Mann Road. It was a hot, steamy night and he jumped right in my hands. I held him, and it was like holding a baby. I took him over to the governor's mansion. It was about midnight and the commander, W. A. Tudor, came out and asked what a man had to do to get a good night's sleep in his own house. I thought that I was done for, but then he saw this frog. He said, "What in the hell are you doing with that!" I told him that he had advertised for one, and I only worked at night, so here was his frog. I had never seen a frog jump as far as this one had. It jumped from the center line to the other side of the road ditch. I bet it was thirty feet. He asked me if I was serious—his hair was lying flat on one side—I told him I was. He told me to bring that sucker in. He was feeling [the frog's] legs and thinking about frying them up. I took him in the kitchen, and one of the underlings had gone and brought grass back for the frog to eat. I told him that frogs don't eat grass. They

eat bugs. So he went out and got a bunch of bugs for the frog to eat. That frog was as happy as a lark. I told them to keep that frog fit and not to feed him too much. On the way over to the mansion I had the frog on the transmission hump and I could tell when he was about to croak because his second set of eyelids would come down. When this was happening I would key the microphone and hold it to the frog! I had a convoy of troopers behind and they were running all over the road [from laughing]. That was the year that the Arkansas entry won the jumping contest. I have never seen anything jump that far or high. His legs were eighteen or twenty inches long and solid muscle.

[End of Interview]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]

[JD]