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Arkansas State Police Project

Interview with

Mel Hensley
Scranton, Arkansas
13 August 2003

Interviewer: Michael Lindsey

Michael Lindsey: What was your motivation to join the state police?

Mel Hensley: It was the best thirty years of my life. It was like being on vacation everyday. The whole time I was growing [up] and seeing that blue and white car and the uniform—it was all I wanted to do.

ML: Were you from West Memphis?

MH: No. I was born in Augusta. [I] graduated from Recida, California. [I] went to college in California. I spent just about my whole [early] life in the San Fernando Valley.

ML: How did you get to Arkansas?

MH: All of my kinfolk lived here, and I always intended on moving back. Once I got out of the Army, I did. Wanda [Mr. Hensley's wife] is from here [Scranton]. She hated California, and we came to Arkansas. I was lucky enough to get on with the state police. Back then you had to have contacts and I had one. My dad worked for a County Judge and it all worked out.

ML: Whenever you joined, did they immediately send you to the training academy?

MH: No, I worked over a year before I ever went to the academy. There was no certification back then. Nobody had to be certified. Back then, they would give you a gun, a badge, and a ticket book and away you went.

ML: They immediately assigned you to Crittenden County?

MH: I stayed in Little Rock two and a half months, then I went to Crittenden County. I stayed there my entire time, which is very unusual.

ML: That is very unusual. That is why I thought you were from there [West Memphis, Crittenden County].

MH: Most of the time you just stayed a few years and you were transferred. I did everything [at West Memphis]. I did highway, driver's license, and motor vehicle inspection.

ML: In 1968 Martin Luther King [Jr.] was assassinated [on April 4] and there were riots in Memphis . . .

MH: I was sent to West Memphis in 1969, and we spent the first three or four years with riots in Earle, Forrest City, and Little Rock.

ML: Can you talk a little about that? I have heard of the one at Forrest City where the school kids were upset . . .

MH: That was at Earle where the kids were upset. In fact, the first march was just about all high school students. The city of Earle was divided by railroad tracks with the black section on one side and the white section on the other. If you went underneath the trestle to the left a short distance, there was the city dump, right in the middle of the black side of town. They [black residents] probably had a legi-

itimate complaint about wanting the dump moved. They started protesting [and] marching. As long as it was the Earle folks, they never really had a problem. A couple came in from out of town, Sweet Willie Wine and a man by the name of Greer. [Editor's note: Sweet Willie Wine organized a protest march from Memphis to Little Rock.] We stayed there six or eight weeks. I mean, we stayed there twenty-four hours a day. We slept on cots at the John Deere place, which has since burnt down. Went to Forrest City, went to Marianna, [and] went to Little Rock. I stayed in Forrest City for two or three weeks.

ML: When you went to these places, were you on duty twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week?

MH: Yes. Usually we worked ten- or twelve-hour shifts and then went to sleep. I lived so close, a couple of times I did go home at night. A lot of guys didn't though. I stayed many a night over there, too. We stayed in a motel in Forrest City, but Earle didn't have a motel, so we had to stay in the John Deere place. They had offices upstairs and they set up some cots. Mostly it was just riding around or standing around. You got bored. Occasionally you had to quiet a ruckus, but it was over within thirty minutes.

ML: You just tried to get in the middle and pry them apart?

MH: That was it. We walked down the middle of the street in Forrest City one day with the whites on one side and the blacks on the other and we were right in the middle. I was really hoping they wouldn't decide to come across at the same time because we were out numbered by a long ways. If they aren't armed, what are you going to do?

ML: You are in a bit of a predicament there.

MH: Yes, you just can't start shooting folks. The first day we went to Earle there were at least 200 [demonstrators] and just three of us. There was myself, Glen Bailey—who [later on] got killed—[and] Sergeant Cooper. We were standing on the sidewalk and I said, "Sarge, what are we going to do when they get up here?" He said, "I don't know. We just hope they stop." We were outnumbered by a long ways, and we just couldn't start shooting high school kids. We were lucky. When they got across the street, they just stopped. They sang their songs and carried on for a bit and then went on back up the street. I don't know what would have happened if they kept coming.

ML: I talked with W. A. Tudor about the Sweet Willie Wine walk from Memphis to Little Rock.

MH: Yes. I helped guard Sweet Willie.

ML: He mentioned that behind Sweet Willie's procession there were trucks that sold trinkets. He said that might have been the main reason Sweet Willie wanted to do that [walk].

MH: [Laughs] He probably did. He was a character. We never really had any problems out of him that I remember. We did out of Greer. He was the one that came to Earle that started a lot of it. One night he was jumped on at city hall and he was beaten so bad we had to come get him.

ML: Who jumped who?

MH: The white citizens [jumped Greer]. They hurt him bad. We had several come out of Memphis, but nothing ever really happened. All they [Earle officials] had to

do was say they were going to move the dump, and nothing would have happened. All they [black citizens] wanted was the dump moved, and, looking back on it, it was a legitimate complaint. I never figured out what they were trying to do in Little Rock. A couple hundred would be marching and then they would disappear. We would stand out there and try to guard everything.

ML: You mentioned Glen Bailey. Do you have any memories on how he was killed?

MH: I was at home, but I went to the hospital and he was still alive when I went into the emergency room. [State Police Trooper] Wicker [and I were at the hospital]. He was still alive when we went in there. They threw us out in about five seconds. I don't really think the guy [that shot Glen] had any intentions of shooting anybody. Glen was in an unmarked car and all he had was a blue light on the dash. He met the guy coming south on Highway 55 and I think he was running like— well, I drove his car back, and the radar was still blinking on 106 [miles per hour—mph]—he had clocked him at 106. Glen turned around and started south behind him. He called and Larry Jackson [another trooper]—it really unnerved Larry, he always wanted to quit after that—blocked the exit ramp at Marion. The Ford came off the exit ramp and came down to him. Jackson pulled in front of him and he stopped. When he hit him [Jackson] he got out and turned to run. By then, Glen had pulled up behind him, got out and had walked right there at him. When he turned around there, he [Glen] was and I think he just threw up the gun and shot. I don't think he intended to kill him. A short time thereafter, we all had vests. He shot him with a rinky-dink .32 caliber, which wouldn't have staggered him if he had a vest on. He [Glen] walked over and got into a deputy's car and

the deputy drove him to the emergency room. Somebody called as soon as it happened. I jumped in the car and ran down there and another trooper, Wicker, was pulling in as I got there. We went into the emergency room just as they were bringing him in. He was still alive and talking—mumbling. It pierced his heart and they couldn't stop the bleeding and he bled to death. Glen was a good guy.

ML: You mentioned that they issued bulletproof vests after that. Tell me about some other ways technology changed while you were there.

MH: Did they ever tell you about the cars? The first car I had [a Plymouth], cost \$3,797 and had a 383 [cubic inch engine]. It would run 140 [mph] any day you wanted to go, especially at night. [Reviewed photo album containing clippings and pictures.]

ML: Do you think these accounts are accurate [regarding newspaper stories of Glen Bailey's death and racial unrest in east Arkansas]?

MH: Yes.

ML: Did you have any problems working with the sheriffs?

MH: No, I could work with any of them. I did have a problem with an election later on where I got fired. They [State Police Commission] voted to fire three of us, but we took them to federal court and beat them.

ML: Some sort of politicking deal?

MH: Yes. We worked so many wrecks, you wouldn't believe it.

ML: I probably wouldn't believe the carnage you saw.

MH: Some of it was tough. [Referring to a newspaper story with a crashed patrol car on the front page] One day I was giving driver tests in Hughes, and it was about

time for me to be heading north. A Marianna police car was heading north, too, [and was hit by a train]. The engineer saw a white and blue car [similar to a state police patrol car] and called it in and said he hit a state trooper. Sergeant Cooper jumped up and called everybody and reached everybody but me. He said, “Where is Mel?” They told him I was giving driver’s tests and they were sure that it was me that got hit by the train. They went down there at 200 miles an hour. Of course, it wasn’t [me]. After they got there and knew it wasn’t me, they still couldn’t find me. I drove right up to them and said, “What are you all doing here?” [Laughs] [During my time] they changed the state police cars, uniforms, [and] weapons from the revolver to the automatic.

ML: What did you think about that change [revolver to automatic]?

MH: You know, by then it didn’t really matter. If I could qualify with it, it didn’t make a difference to me.

ML: What did you think when she [Barbara Carr] was hired [referring to newspaper clipping]?

MH: I figured, “If she can do it, then all right.” During the time I was at West Memphis, we had three females. The first one that came there, Terry Whitely, did a good job. She was a good trooper. The second [one] wasn’t. She showed that she was afraid. I told her that I got scared too, but you can’t show that you are afraid. If you do, you are in trouble. I told her to either find an office job or get over it. There is one over there now, and she does all right. I got in serious trouble over that picture [newspaper clipping of auto accident with Mel Hensley standing in the background]. I had to sit in the front row of troop meetings for the

next six months because we didn't have our hats on. [The wreck] threw the truck driver out the window and we ran over there [without putting on hats]. After we found out he was all right, we were just standing there. Captain Dwight Galloway was upset.

ML: What did you think about that car [picture of first white with blue stripe Chevrolet Caprice]?

MH: I hated it. It was a piece of junk. That car was no good. It took a while to get used [to it] and I didn't like the white [color]. I thought it looked like the city police— [it looked] Mickey Mouse [meaning, a poorly-made car]. But, after a while, we got used to them. You had to roll with the flow. I thought I had a picture of our short-sleeve shirts.

ML: When did they start that? I remember reading something about it occurring in the 1980s.

MH: Summertime was hard on troopers in south Arkansas, or anywhere in Arkansas. You wore the tie [and] the long-sleeve shirt. The only thing we changed was the hat. We went from a felt hat to a straw hat. It was really difficult. You are out to work a wreck for an hour and you are wringing wet. You wore these wool shirts and they were hot. So we kept on [asking for changes to dress code]. Harp was director, so we had a statewide vote and it came back that we lost. I asked the captain how bad [we had lost] and he said sixty percent approved the change, but you had to have two-thirds. They didn't say that [to begin with]. Eventually we did change. I didn't think it took away from the uniform.

ML: What did you think about the [Taurus?] Model 66, the .357?

MH: The revolver? It was a good weapon. If you had to shoot somebody and you shot him with that it was going to hurt someone. I liked the automatic.

ML: More than the others?

MH: Yes, probably. I never had any problems qualifying with it.

ML: Do you think any of the female troopers had problems qualifying with the .357?

MH: I never noticed. I know that Terry didn't. She is a good officer. She was an EMT [Emergency Medical Technician] She had no hesitation. She is over at Jonesboro now. [Referring to newspaper clipping on local race for sheriff]. This is the one we got in trouble for.

ML: It was a local deal?

MH: Yes. A retired trooper, Busby, was running for sheriff. The local [state] senator didn't like him because they were supporting someone else. There was nothing to it. Busby was actually a distant cousin of mine, and we worked together. He retired and ran for sheriff. I took a day off and he asked me to lunch. We went and ate and ran around. He told me he was going to stop and put up a [political] sign on a corner. I was off [duty]. I was in Levis and I was [dressed like] a civilian. He pounded in a post and we stuck a sign on there and we were off. He took me home and dropped me off. There was nothing to it, except the local senator got mad. Somebody told him I was out helping Busby, which I really wasn't. They ran a big investigation and come to find out the other two were the same way. We all liked Busby. He was one of us. One had given him money. They had a vote in Little Rock and they fired us. I just happened to have a good friend who was friends with [Governor Bill] Clinton and he [the friend] said not too worry about

it and that they weren't going to fire me. He called Clinton and in a couple of days he [the friend] said, "Don't worry about it; you are going to be suspended." I was suspended for two weeks. I wound up getting my money back because we sued them. According to state law, the state police can't do anything [in politics]. Before that, Clinton had put out a directive extending this [ban on political involvement] to all state employees. It went through the chain of command. The colonel had initialed it and signed it. The lieutenant colonel had initialed it and signed it. The highway patrol commander had sent it to all of the troops and told them to make sure everyone was aware of it. What it said was no duty time [could be spent on politics].

ML: It seems like it would be against your constitutional rights to not allow it other times [off duty].

MH: At the time, Clinton was running for president and we subpoenaed him to court. He signed a document telling them that what we said was true, because he wasn't coming to court. Since then, the senator [that tried to get me fired] has come by and talked to me.

ML: Were promotions political?

MH: Yes, it was a lot of politics. Some of them were good promotions, but some weren't. Most of the time, you had to move. You rarely could make sergeant and not move. When I was a corporal, we had a captain one time that—I was making almost as much money as [he was]. He had made the rank, but he hadn't stayed in the pay plan long enough. He had moved all around the state, too. I never spent a lot of time trying [to receive a promotion].

ML: Another wreck at I-40 Bridge [referring to a newspaper clipping of wrecked state police patrol car on I-40 at West Memphis]? That seems like a bad place.

MH: Yes, it is where I-40 and I-55 come together. For a long time they only had the one bridge, the I-55 Bridge. Then they built the I-40 Bridge. It was bad. Across the bridge there was a small median between the two lanes. There were a lot of head-ons [wrecks]. In fact, I watched one. It killed an elderly couple. There was a little curve at the end of the bridge, just a slight curve. This car moved over and bumped the wheels of a semi and jumped him off across the median strip. I could see what was going to happen. It left about fifty yards of skid marks before they hit and about 150 backwards. Of course, they were dead before I got out of the car. [Referring to pictures] They changed the star, but they changed back because nobody liked it. They changed [the inlay] from the silver to gold.

ML: Do you remember when you got your first radar?

MH: We had one radar for everybody to use, and you had to put your name on a list. It was stationary. It had a gauge that went up to 120 [mph] and a hand that looked like a clock. You pushed a button and the back plate hit the hand and pressed it up against the glass. After a couple of months, the spring would get a little weak and you would take off and you could watch the hand start to drop back. By the time you had them stopped, you couldn't show them how fast they were going. Radar has improved a lot. Then we had the one that you hung out of the window. You had to keep a constant speed when you were clocking them. If you sped up or slowed down you would screw them every time. There are probably many a folk who got a radar ticket that didn't need one. When you turned it on and set it

at seventy [mph], anything over seventy would start it buzzing and lock the speed in. Well, the first car that might get to you might not be the one you clocked. You could have picked up one that was running a lot faster [farther] down the road. I am sure there are a lot of people that got tickets that shouldn't have.

[End of Interview]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]