

**The David and Barbara Pryor Center
for
Arkansas Oral and Visual History**

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Arkansas Memories Project

J. Chester Johnson
Interviewed by Scott Lunsford
October 28, 2010
Fayetteville, Arkansas

Objective

Oral history is a collection of an individual's memories and opinions. As such, it is subject to the innate fallibility of memory and is susceptible to inaccuracy. All researchers using these interviews should be aware of this reality and are encouraged to seek corroborating documentation when using any oral history interview.

The Pryor Center's objective is to collect audio and video recordings of interviews along with scanned images of family photographs and documents. These donated materials are carefully preserved, catalogued, and deposited in the Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville. The transcripts, audio files, video highlight clips, and photographs are made available on the Pryor Center Web site at <http://pryorcenter.uark.edu>. The Pryor Center recommends that researchers utilize the audio recordings and highlight clips, in addition to the transcripts, to enhance their connection with the interviewee.

Transcript Methodology

The Pryor Center recognizes that we cannot reproduce the spoken word in a written document; however, we strive to produce a transcript that represents the characteristics and unique qualities of the interviewee's speech pattern, style of speech, regional dialect, and personality. For the first twenty minutes of the interview, we attempt to transcribe verbatim all words and utterances that are spoken, such as uhs and ahs, false starts, and repetitions. Some of these elements are omitted after the first twenty minutes to improve readability.

The Pryor Center transcripts are prepared utilizing the *University of Arkansas Style Manual* for proper names, titles, and terms specific to the university. For all other style elements, we refer to the *Pryor Center Style Manual*, which is based primarily on *The Chicago Manual of Style 16th Edition*. We employ the following guidelines for consistency and readability:

- Em dashes separate repeated/false starts and incomplete/redirected sentences.
- Ellipses indicate the interruption of one speaker by another.
- Double underscores indicate two people talking at the same time.
- Italics identify foreign words or terms and words emphasized by the speaker.
- Question marks enclose proper nouns for which we cannot verify the spelling and words that we cannot understand with certainty.

- Brackets enclose
 - italicized annotations of nonverbal sounds, such as laughter, and audible sounds, such as a doorbell ringing;
 - annotations for clarification and identification; and
 - standard English spelling of informal words.
- Commas are used in a conventional manner where possible to aid in readability.

Citation Information

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Scott Lunsford interviewed J. Chester Johnson on October 28, 2010, in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

[00:00:00]

Scott Lunsford: Okay, we're gonna [going to] go ahead and get started.

Chester Johnson: Fine. Good.

SL: Uh—today is October 28. The year is 2010. We're at the Pryor Center here at the University of Arkansas in Mullins Library, and my name is Scott Lunsford. I'll be talking with—uh—J. Chester Johnson. And—um—Chester, we are—um—I've given you a brief explanation of what we're doing. We're audio- and videotaping this—this interview, and it will be permanently archived at the Pryor Center.

CJ: Mh-hmm.

[00:00:33] SL: Uh—some of—uh—a copy of it will be placed in Special Collections here in Mullins Library at the University of Arkansas. Uh—after your review and after your approval—uh—we would like to post this and elements of this interview on the Web for everyone in the whole world to see. And so what I need to ask you now is if it's all right with you that we're recording this interview and that we may use it for archival and educational purposes.

CJ: Certainly.

SL: Okay. Great answer.

CJ: Great. [*Laughs*]

[00:01:04] SL: Thank you. Um—first of all—uh—J.—uh—Chester Johnson, what does the J stand for?

CJ: Uh—the—uh—*J* is for John. Um—many of the—um—men on my father's side of the family were—uh—were named John. I mean, my great-grandfather was John Frank. My grandfather was John Maxie. My father was John Chester. I was named after my father, so it—it—um—it's—so there were so many John—Johns that we took our middle name, [*SL laughs*] so I'm Chester and—but I use *J*—uh—for obvious reasons.

[00:01:48] SL: So—uh—you're actually a junior then.

CJ: I'm a junior, but my father died when I was one . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

CJ: . . . so—um—it was—over time, it became difficult to be a junior when there wasn't a senior.

SL: Right.

CJ: So I just dropped the junior.

SL: Okay.

CJ: So . . .

SL: Um—I usually start with where and when you were born.

CJ: Mh-hmm. Um—I was born on September the twenty-eighth, 1944, in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

SL: Chattanooga. Well, now how soon after that did you come to Arkansas?

CJ: Well, my—um—both my mother Johnson and my father were from Arkansas.

SL: Mh-hmm.

CJ: Um—one—uh—was from McGehee, Arkansas—both of them in the southeast part of the state—McGehee—and—and then my father came from a very small town—um—called Wilmar, which is about ten miles west of Monticello. Um—and my father was in the—uh—the insurance business. Um—he had been just a life insurance salesman . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:03:02] CJ: . . . in southeast Arkansas. Um—and he had come up with this idea that—there was little communication between, in those days, the home office of this—I mean, he was working for Life and Casualty Insurance Company, and the salesman in the field. So he went to the home office in Nashville and said, you know, "What about developing home-office representatives—um—from the main office, and there's this sort of conduit of communication," and why—"Well, I'd like to be your

first one." So the president of the company said, "Hey, that's not a bad idea." So that's what my father did for a few years. And then they moved him from Nashville to Chattanooga, so that he would have more access to sort of the eastern side of the coun—uh—country. But then after being there for a few months—ah—well, after—uh—I was born—they had been there longer [*laughs*—but after—uh—I was born he took a position with American General Insurance Company in Galveston, Texas—um—and moved—uh—the family moved down there. But soon after he—uh—took the new position, he was diagnosed with—uh—cancer. And—um—and it was sort of a—a very rapid form of—of cancer.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:04:36] CJ: Um—and then [*clears throat*] he—uh—he passed away and my mother—uh—I have a brother who is seven years older than I am. And so my mother brought the—brought the two of us to—back to Arkansas with a—in southeast Arkansas into Monticello, which was close to Wilmar. And so—and where his family was from.

SL: Mh-hmm.

CJ: So . . .

SL: So there were relatives there in the Monticello . . .

CJ: Right—area.

SL: . . . area.

CJ: Right. To—to—to help and—uh—'cause—um—you know, she was a—um—young widow, and she needed some assistance and so—and the—my grandparents—um—had—were reasonably well off. I mean, they were—he was a large—well, he had two thousand acres under cultivation, which was reasonably large in that part of the—part of the state. So—um—uh—they helped her as she was—uh—rearing the two of us.

SL: Uh-huh.

CJ: Two boys.

[00:05:39] SL: So—uh—your father's parents then—um—were available to you, growing up. Is that . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: And . . .

CJ: And my mother's parents as well.

SL: Mh-hmm.

CJ: When—soon after my—my father died—uh—and we moved back—um—I spent more time actually with my mother's parents in Little Rock, and my brother spent more time with the—my father's grand—uh—parents in—uh—in Wilmar for a period of time until we sort of got settled and—had a house. And so—

but I—I was very close to my—um—uh—uh—to my mother's parents.

[00:06:24] SL: Well, let's talk about your mother just for a little bit here.

CJ: Yeah.

SL: Um—what was her name and her maiden name?

CJ: Her maiden name was Birch. *B-I-R-C-H*. Um—they're—in the family—I—uh—the—the family owned a—a—a lot of land—the larger family—the Birch family—um—in Tillar and in McGehee—around McGehee.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:06:49] CJ: And—um—they had—um—I—I can just sort of go—a little bit of a history . . .

SL: Sure.

CJ: It's sort of an interesting . . .

SL: Absolutely.

CJ: . . . history, I think. The Birches—um—it—it—it was a—it—*B-I-R-C-H* sounds like it was English, but it was actually German, and—um—uh—so they Americanized a—a German name, which was—and I can't—I mean, they had variations of it. But the family had come through Pennsylvania and—um—and then through the Cumberland Gap, went into Arkansas, and—um—

parents had—apparently their—I don't know all the—I mean, they were—but someone died on the Arkansas River, and then they were—ado—they were sort of taken over by—uh—um—a—a family. And, anyway, they—they—there—there developed—uh—uh—the Birch family in—uh—in southeast Arkansas and—uh—and they became for—uh—farmers, and there are—there are Birches still down in—um—in—um—southeast Arkansas. Um—but that's—she had—she had can—come out of that. I—although that was her—um—um—her father's side—her mother actually had—uh—come from Ruston, Louisiana. And my—my grandfather had—uh—was a railroad engineer and—um—one of his routes was going through Louisiana—uh—even though he was settled and was living in southeast Arkansas. So he had a courtship with a woman named Matthews in—from Ruston, Louisiana. And um—and so—um—uh—she—he brought her up to southeast Arkansas, and so that's my mother's—my mother's side or her mother and—and her father.

[00:08:52] SL: Now what—what—what is your mother's name? I think we got her last name. What . . .

CJ: Well, her name—when she was—her—was Opal Gladys Birch [CJ edit: Gladys Opal Birch]. She didn't like because the initials spelled gob [*laughter*] and so—but—uh—but—uh—that was her—

that was her name.

SL: So she—she went by Opal or Gladys or . . .

CJ: No, she went by Opal.

SL: Opal. Okay.

CJ: Always Opal.

SL: Mh-hmm.

CJ: And then—uh—uh—so anyway . . .

[00:09:24] SL: Uh—so you spent—early on, you spent more time in Little Rock—uh . . .

CJ: I spent a lot of time in Little Rock and they—the—the parent—the grandparents really sort of—I wouldn't say adopted [*laughs*] me, but I spent a lot of time with them early on, and I was very close to my maternal grandparents. I was close to the—my paternal, but they were a little bit more distant figures, and also I didn't—uh—I had not—I didn't spend as much—I just wasn't as close to them as my brother was.

SL: Mh-hmm.

CJ: So . . .

[00:09:56] SL: And—um—did they live in Little Rock, or was there a farm outside of Little Rock?

CJ: No, they lived right in Little Rock. I mean, they—they had lived in McGehee. As I said, my mother grew up in—in McGehee.

SL: Mh-hmm.

CJ: Uh—and there was the [19]27 flood and . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

CJ: . . . all of that and—uh—but they had—they had lived through, but then—um—my father—I mean, my grandfather, as I said, was a railroad engineer, and they—he was relocated to Little Rock.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:10:27] CJ: And—um—they—um—they lived about three blocks from Little Rock Central—um—when—when I was growing up there and—uh—18th Street, I think, and Battery or something like that.

SL: Mh-hmm.

CJ: But . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

CJ: But—uh—anyway, they lived—uh—they lived close—Little Rock Central—and—um . . .

[00:10:47] SL: Well, do you remember much about the—the house there in Little Rock?

CJ: Oh, yes, I remember it very, very well. Um—it was a relatively small house. It was a two-story—uh—house—um—um—with—uh—it's a porch in the back where we used to have break—and

we had breakfast in the—in the back porch. There was a fig tree in the backyard—um—where we used to go out and peel the figs off. But—um—and so we'd have breakfast in the back and—um—but it was—um—it was a modest home, and it had—um—a porch on the front and—um—my grandfather wasn't a great talker, but my grandmother was a—was—was a great talker, and so she used to have a lot of people on the front porch to—you know, to gab. [SL laughs] And—uh—and then you would go in, and the stairs were on the right side, and you'd go up to—and there was—um—um—two bedrooms and a—on the top floor. No bathroom up there, so we had pots [laughs] and—uh . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

CJ: . . . there on the second floor at night to take care—you know, to take care of the needs. But there was one bathroom in the entire house. I remember that and—uh—so—no, I remember it well.

[00:12:14] SL: And the—um—um—they had—uh—all the modern amenities.

CJ: Oh, yeah. Absolutely.

SL: Uh—running water . . .

CJ: Oh, yeah.

SL: . . . and electricity.

CJ: All—it was a—everything.

[00:12:23] SL: And did they have a garden in back at all or . . .

CJ: No, not really.

SL: Mh-hmm.

CJ: No, the—only the garage—or I don't remember being in the . . .

SL: M'kay [Okay].

CJ: . . . being in the back.

[00:12:33] SL: Um—all right, well, let's—let's—um—um—well,
maybe we should talk a little bit about your grandmother on
your mother's side.

CJ: Sure.

SL: A great storyteller, you think.

 CJ: Well, she just—she liked to talk.

SL: Uh-huh.

CJ: And it was interesting. She had—she had a—um—she had a
speech impediment, but she—but she—she liked to talk and—
um—and—um—but she was a—she was very—um—she was a
"mother hen." At one point—at—at one point sh—well, when I
was—I spent a lot of time—she would occasionally just—um—
grab me and have—uh—and—and—and we would get on the—on
a train 'cause we had train passes or she had train passes, and
we would go to St. Louis. She had a daughter living up in St.

Louis.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:13:28] CJ: And she would prepare—um—before we'd get home she'd have fried chicken and—and potato salad and whatever, and we would get on the train and—and go up to St. Louis and see the Cardinals. She was a big baseball fan—um—particularly, the St. Louis Cardinals. And—uh—she would do that even on her own. She—and—uh—yeah, she was—um—she was really an unusual woman—um—and—um—there are lots of stories about her. My—my—my father—and I'll—I'll—I'll weave in this story . . .

SL: Okay, good.

CJ: . . . about—but—uh—my father was a minor-league baseball player. Um—he played a number of year—five years in minor league. He was—you know, he never made it to "the show," but—but—um . . .

SL: In Tennessee?

CJ: He—he—no, in Arkansas.

SL: In Arkansas.

CJ: Arkansas.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:14:21] CJ: Arkansas and—well, actually, I think he played most

of it in Texas—minor league when—and he—you know, they'd have to go off and play the games. I think it was in—in Texas. But, anyway—uh—but, I mean, this was full-time. It wasn't ha—you know, part-time. I mean, it was before he became a life insur—insur . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:14:40] CJ: But my grandmaler—uh—my grandmother real—my—my mother's mother really loved my—my—uh—my father. And—uh—during those years when he was playing, which was, you know, like, in the—I assume it was, like, in the [19]20s—um—women didn't go to baseball games . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

CJ: . . . or at least that's the story I heard. I mean, it ?was? . . .

SL: Hmm.

CJ: . . . women would—and so—uh—my—my father was—there was a game somewhere—uh—that she attended. I don't know if it was a local game or not and—um—my father hit a homerun, and she got up, and she—she was also rather—she wasn't particularly tall, but she was a stoutly woman and—um—[*SL laughs*]*—*somebody on the oppos—they were always in small stands and an opposing-team fan said—when she got up and she was screaming for my father, and they said, you know, "Woman,

why don't you go home and take care of where you're supposed to be and take care of the family," and blah, blah, blah.

[00:15:45] And she—she actually took this big person—knocked him [*SL laughs*] out of the stands and—um [*SL laughs*]*—and—uh—there was—my—my mother had six—um—six siblings, and one of them was—and I won't mention it on this [*laughs*] 'cause I—I wouldn't want it to—but one of them was rela—was relatively retarded and—um—and she had—um—and when she was, like, in the second or third grade she had had—she had urinated in the—uh—on the—uh—floor at the school, and the teacher had—um—sort of embarrassed her and made her go mop it up and didn't—or you know, and—but really had embarrassed her. And so—um—uh—the child—the daughter—her daughter came home and told her about it and—um—this was when they were living in McGehee, and my grandmother got a bullwhip and—um—and the—um—person who sold it to her said, "Where are you"—and said, "I'm goin' to school. I'm gonna run off one of the teachers." And—and somehow the teacher heard about this and [*SL laughs*] left town and [*SL laughs*] never—uh—you know, never came back. [*SL laughs*]*

[00:17:06] Um—and then my—and the other story about her is that she—um—there [*clears throat*]*—that I remember and I—*

there's a whole bunch of stories that I—um—again, when they were living—they were living outside of Mc—in McGehee at this time—um—and she was have—she was taking care of all the children, and my father—my grandfather was on—on one of his tours through—you know, in terms of—of the—uh—of being a—a railroad engineer. Um—he was away for a period and—um—somebody—some man was drunk—um—and tried to break into the house—presumably, I guess, to molest her or whatever—and—um—she told him to leave—I mean, to get away from the door. And he kept banging and tryin' [trying] to break in, and she got out—she got a deer rifle and shot through the door, and the next day they f—uh—they found him dead down by the creek behind the house. So she knew how to take care of herself and she—you know, she compu—I remember also being on a—uh—bus with her in Little Rock, just the two of us, and—uh—somehow she got into something with the bus driver, I think. I forget what she did—what caused it. But, you know, she really gave people—and she didn't—she didn't take any guff off of anybody and—uh—that was her real personality [*unclear word*].

[00:18:44] SL: So she could be fierce . . .

CJ: She could be fierce.

SL: . . . when she needed to be.

[00:18:47] CJ: This was sort of leading up to a point I was gonna make, is that she was—um—she loved the Cardinals and—um— one night she was there, [*laughs*] and she—um—uh—she tripped on a—on a beer bottle in—in Busch Stadium, and she sued— um—uh—Busch family and went to trial and all that, so I don't think she got much money out of it, but she—um—um—you know, she just would—um—take things on. And she had—at one point—the—in that tri—not the—I guess it was a trial. I don't know, I was very—I—I was way too young to—um—know about that. But—um—sh—in the sort of description giving—um— testimony of the person's background, she had helped to raise over twenty-three children, which included her own children— seven—plus, you know, grandchildren who had lived with her because of divorces and ultimately coming home and—I mean, the—the—her own daughter or son bringing their grandchildren. So she—you know, they—so she was really a "mother hen."

SL: Mh-hmm.

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:20:01] CJ: And—but was very loving to me, and I'll remember that. And so was our—so was my grandfather. And on the other side—I mean, they—I don't wanna [*want to*] give the impression they weren't, but I—in that sort of particularly formative time, I

remember my maternal grandparents much more than I do my paternal.

[00:20:22] SL: Was your—and—was Opal educated? Did she—how far did her education go? Do you remember or . . .

CJ: Yeah, she went through high school and then, for a short period of time, went to what is now known as the University of Arkansas at Monticello. It was Arkansas A&M. But then she got married and so . . .

SL: Well, still that's pretty progressive . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . for her to pursue that.

[00:20:55] CJ: Well, she was a very good—my mother was a very good basketball player, and so—even though she was short. She played guard, and so that—the school wanted her to play, so she was encouraged to play basketball for Arkansas A&M.

SL: No, this is your mother.

CJ: This is my mother.

[00:21:15] SL: Now what about your grandmother? Did she have any education? Did she . . .

CJ: No, I don't think so.

SL: And probably the same with your maternal grandfather. He didn't attend . . .

CJ: No.

SL: . . . school past . . .

CJ: I don't even know.

SL: . . . public school.

CJ: I know . . .

SL: Don't even know . . .

CJ: . . . nothing about that.

[00:21:30] SL: Okay. Well, now let's go ahead and talk about your father's parents.

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: Now were they—did they actually live on a farm—a working farm?

CJ: No, it was—my grandfather—my paternal grandfather was very interesting. Do you mind if I can just sort of give a little bit of background?

SL: Absolutely.

[00:21:52] CJ: I mean, a very interesting guy. His—he grew up in southwest Arkansas, around—in sort of the Pike City—down in into DeQueen and that area. And he had two brothers, and both of them did well politically and my—his bro—my paternal grandfather's brother was chief justice of the Supreme Court of Arkansas. His name was Cecil Ernest Johnson, and I think this

was—he was chief justice during, like, [19]33, [19]34—
somewhere like that. And then the other brother named Richard
"Dick"—I think that they [CJ edit: he] went by Dick was
representative to the Legislature from Little River County,
Arkansas. I don't even know if that exists, or I don't—I—or
anymore—Little River County [*unclear words*]. [00:23:02] But,
anyway, he was representative from that area. And my
grandfather sort of—and those were the three boys—and he sort
of broke away from that part and—because there was a lot of
family in that area. I mean, and most of 'em [them]—a lot of
'em were lawyers and whatever, and anyway, he didn't follow
that. He was an independent person and ultimately ended up in,
as I said, in Wilmar as the depot agent. I mean, during—as you
know, so much of that time of the [*unclear word*]
—I guess it's the turn of the century or the early part of the twentieth century,
economically and, therefore, socially—demographically—the
whole area—it was driven by railroads. And so he was a depot
agent in Wilmar. And Wilmar, at that time, was much larger on
a relative basis than it is now or even when I was growing up.
So he was a depot agent, and then he started acquiring land in
the area, and eventually he had over two thousand acres in
cultivation. And so he was both farmer and depot agent, and so

they had a home right on—I think it's Highway—I think it's Highway 4, I think. Their home was right in—it was right next to the Methodist Church in Wilmar, and he was a Methodist—had actual—but had actually been an atheist early on. And—but they had a home right there on Highway 4, which would—it led to Monticello on—going east and to Warren on the west. So . . .

[00:25:16] SL: Yeah, the railroads—any time there was a stop, that area [*Trey Marley sniffs*] benefitted from the traffic that . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . and the commerce. And you talked about going from Little Rock to St. Louis. I assume that went through Newport and . . .

CJ: I don't even remember 'cause I was very young at the time. It was before—I think I was—you know, I'm sure I wasn't even five when that happened.

[00:25:43] SL: We were talking with Doyle Rogers. He grew up in Newport . . .

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . and he claimed that as many as fifty trains a day went through Newport in . . .

CJ: Wow.

SL: . . . those days. And, you know, it's kind of a shame that we didn't continue to work with railroad as a mode of transportation

or . . .

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . 'cause it's nothing like it . . .

CJ: No.

SL: Now it's nothing like it was back then, and some folks think we kind of missed the boat in not further developing that as a way of transportation.

CJ: Right.

[00:26:21] SL: The roads just weren't there, so . . .

CJ: No, it's true. 'Course [of course], the difference is—and I live in New York now, and trains are very important to the social and economic fabric of that part of the country. And they use trains as—and, you know, trains are very important. But then, you know, trains depend on a lot—at least the way they've developed—they depend upon density of population, and you know, there's—so there hasn't been that here. And when trucking became so important in—for movement of goods in this part of the country, and it became more—less—you know, it was less expensive or much more efficient to do it that way than the movement of goods only on trains—you know, it sort of fell in . . .

SL: Yeah.

CJ: So . . .

[00:27:19] SL: Road development became the . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . the big . . .

CJ: Right. Exactly.

SL: . . . driving force here.

CJ: That's right. Exactly.

SL: Still plays a role.

CJ: Right. Exactly.

[00:27:27] SL: So we should talk a little bit about your brother, I

think, growing . . .

CJ: Okay.

SL: He's seven years your senior.

CJ: Yes.

SL: And his name . . .

CJ: Is—not surprisingly—John [*laughter*] Maxie Johnson.

SL: John Maxie Johnson.

CJ: Right.

SL: That's an unusual name. Where . . .

CJ: I don't know.

SL: . . . does Maxie come from?

CJ: I have no idea.

SL: Maximilian, I guess, somewhere.

CJ: I don't—I have no idea. I really don't. I don't know how Chester came about. I mean, my father was named Chester, and I know it—in Latin it means encampment or, you know, a—I have no idea. I mean, you know, you have Chesters all throughout the—I mean, in terms of locations in England and what—but, I mean, I don't know. I don't know how Maxie came about as well.

[00:28:14] SL: Well, is he still with us or . . .

CJ: He's with us. He was—as I said, he was seven years older, and he became a vascular surgeon and moved to Arizona and was a—lived there for a number of years and was a very successful vascular surgeon. And then about ten years ago, he moved back to Arkansas. His wife is from Arkansas, and they moved back to her hometown, which is in Lake Village across from Greenville. And that's where he's living now, so . . .

[00:29:00] SL: Well, was there—because of the age difference, I know it's much—has a greater impact early—in the early years than it does in later years. Were you close with your brother, growing up? Did you do . . .

CJ: I was reasonably . . .

SL: . . . things together, or was he . . .

[00:29:16] CJ: I was reasonably close to my brother. I wouldn't say



we were over, but you know, seven years is a long—is a—quite a age difference. I clearly looked up to him, and I think in those years he was definitely a good role model for me. He was a good student. He was always courteous and respectful, and I—you know, I—without a father, I think that was helpful 'cause my mother never remarried. And so there wasn't really a male influence other than my brother in my life for a period of time. But then, you know, you find mentors.

SL: Sure.

CJ: And some mentors are good, and some are bad. [*Laughter*] But [*SL laughs*]*—so—but he was definitely a mentor for me, and a—over a period of time. And we stayed—oh, we stayed close for a very long period.*

[00:30:30] SL: Well, let's talk a little about Monticello . . .

CJ: Okay.

SL: . . . and growing up in Monticello. First of all . . .

CJ: Can I mention one thing, though?

SL: Yeah, absolutely.

[00:30:37] CJ: I wanna go back for just one—'cause I wouldn't wanna miss this. Some of my—I mean, I—my sort of early visions of—and sort of consciousness occurred in Wilmar. I mean, I really—I—my—'cause after my—as I said, my father

died in Wilmar and after they brought him back from Galveston—but I remember the house in Wilmar very well. It had a very—you know, it was a large—it was a relatively large home, and it had a big backyard where—you know, there were chickens that if there was some special event, they would—you know, I actually remember seeing my aunt and my grandmother chasing down chickens and cutting the heads off, you know, to have fresh chickens. And there was a back porch where people—where, actually, when it would be a hot night, the—everyone would sleep on the back porch 'cause it was all screened in. And—but—and they also had help, and I remember being sort of—being handled and being looked after by a number of women—African American women—and it—but those were sort of—I really do—those were—I have visions of consciousness—sort of the—my—that sort of a mom—those were sort of moments—my earliest memories.

[00:32:28] SL: Good. I was goin' to ask you . . .

CJ: And so . . .

SL: . . . about your earliest memories. So when did you leave Wilmar? How old were you when y'all left?

CJ: Well, see—as I said, we moved around a lot in terms of three locations—in terms of—my mother didn't work, and so she lived

on Social Security and then had had some life insurance when my father died. But we had a—and she had some farm income from inheritance that my father had in terms of farm from his father. And so we spent time in Wilmar—Monticello, where we had a—where my mother—we had a small house—and then Little Rock. And so it was sort of a three-pronged home life that we—so it's a—so I have visions of all three places.

SL: Okay.

CJ: So . . .

[00:33:24] SL: So did you—I mean, so Wilmar was kind of in your life all through growing . . .

CJ: All through up until my grandfather died [*clears throat*]*—both of my grandfathers—my father died when I was one and my grandfathers—both of my grandfathers died before I was, like, five. Four or five. And so my paternal, who wasn't—after he died, the—my aunt, who never got married and lived with her mother, moved from Wilmar to Monticello 'cause Monticello was—you know, was—Wilmar just didn't have the accommodations, and she—my grandmother was getting older and they wanted to close to medical services and all that kind of stuff. So they moved into—they built a brick house—blonde brick house—right by a county courthouse in Drew County in*

Monticello. It was—Monticello is the county seat—Drew County. And so that—and they sold the house off in Wilmar and moved. So we didn't spend any time after that. And when—that's after I was, like, five years old in Wilmar.

[00:34:43] SL: But you can—you do have imagery that you conjure around that Wilmar house and . . .

CJ: Oh—and the experiences and the farm. Our—my grandfather, when—before—I mean, when I was young, very—he used to occasionally put us in wagons and take us over the farm—mule-drawn wagons and just a—as he wanted to inspect the farms and that sort of thing. And—you know, I would go to sleep under trees out—apple trees and all kinds of stuff. And so, you know, I have great—I have real good memories about that. Good memories.

[00:35:22] SL: So the house in Wilmar—you mentioned the sleeping porch.

CJ: Right.

SL: Screened-in sleeping porch . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . was very common.

CJ: Right.

SL: And some form of garden in the back.

CJ: I think there was. I just remember [*laughs*]*—*I have this*—*these visions of the chickens being back there, and infrequently, for special occasions, they would . . .

[00:35:51] SL: Do you remember if the house in Wilmar had a telephone?

CJ: Oh, well, sure*—*yes, it did. Yeah.

SL: Good. So there was electricity and . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . running water . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . I would assume.

CJ: Yep.

SL: And the stove was probably gas or . . .

CJ: You got me on that.

SL: Got you on that?

CJ: I mean, I'm sure it was 'cause I don't think it was wood-burning, if that's what you're referring to. But I just*—*I don't remember.

[00:36:21] SL: What about ice? Do you remember if there was a refrigerator that was . . .

CJ: I think we had . . .

SL: . . . plugged in?

CJ: . . . a refrigerator. Yeah.

SL: So you had refrigeration.

CJ: ?It's that we must?—you know, it would've been electrical, I guess.

[00:36:31] SL: And the street out front—was it dirt or paved?

CJ: Well, that leads to a little story. The . . .

SL: Good. [*Laughter*]

CJ: When—it was—when—for the most of the time it was gravel, but then—and I—it's a very vivid memory because—that you raise this—I was—when I was, like—it was before they had moved, but it was after my grandfather had died. I was still, like, five or six years old. And I don't know what possessed me, but one day I—you know, in a small town—and Monticello was a very small town—they—the parents play zone defense, you know. I mean, if the kids'd move from one—they'd go from one house to another, and you know, it's—yeah, you know, [*claps hands*] the children are their—or the children—or their children whose parents owned the lot, you know. So, anyway, I—some—I decided that [CJ edit: I] was gonna walk the train tracks from Wilmar—I mean, from Monticello to Wilmar, and I got maybe a quarter of the way. And I decided, "Well, that wasn't"—so I went over to the highway, and it was being paved. And I was only five or six then. I just saw this [*SL laughs*]—you know, I

was thumbing my way. So I was thumbing to get to Wilmar, and I got picked up. And as it turned out, it was the Bradley County sheriff, and he asked me where I was going. I said, "I'm goin' to my grandmother's in Wilmar." And—but I remember very distinctly that that was being paved at that time when I made my trip to Wilmar, which my mother made me pay for it. I mean

[laughs] . . .

[00:38:25] SL: And what was the . . .

CJ: *[Laughs]* It was the . . .

SL: . . . debt levied on you there?

CJ: Yeah, it was—well, actually, the interesting thing is I got there, and my mother was fit to be tied and—'cause she was still in Wilmar and my—and they called her to tell her I had made it, and it—'cause she had wondered where I had wandered off to. And they said, "Please don't punish him too much because, you know, he re—he wanted to come here, and he wanted to see us, and it would communicate the wrong thing." So she just ca—well, so she came over actually and—to Wilmar, and she punished me. She—I—but it wasn't too severe, but I think the reason it wasn't too severe is because my aunt and my grandmother interceded on my behalf.

SL: [*Laughter*] Well, you know, I can remember, early on, my mother and the switch. She'd take a . . .

[00:39:21] CJ: Well, I remember the switch well. [*SL laughs*]
Right. And the knots on the switch . . .

SL: Yes. Uh-huh.

CJ: . . . and whelps coming up as a result of 'em. Right.

SL: On the legs?

CJ: Right or . . .

SL: Yeah.

CJ: . . . yeah, on the thighs or whatever. Exactly. So [*SL laughs*] I remember that well. [*Laughter*]

SL: Okay, so . . .

CJ: I'm sorry. You wanted to go—but I didn't wanna miss this story.

SL: Oh, no, there is no [*CJ laughs*—like I said earlier, there are no wrong answers or . . .

CJ: Okay.

SL: . . . no . . .

CJ: All right.

SL: . . . incorrect paths here.

CJ: Okay. Okay.

SL: It—we talk about whatever . . .

CJ: Okay.

SL: . . . comes up.

CJ: Okay.

SL: It's . . .

CJ: Good.

[00:39:51] SL: It's a kinda [kind of] like the Archeological Survey.

We're kind of dusting off memories. We're . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . tryin' to . . .

CJ: Exactly.

SL: . . . to raise them up and . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . and so anything that comes up is . . .

CJ: Okay, good.

SL: . . . is fair game and . . .

CJ: Good.

SL: . . . and valuable.

CJ: Okay.

[00:40:05] SL: The—so this is what a—this is kind of what I'm

getting a sense of in your earliest years.

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: It sounds like you were surrounded mostly by women. Is that fair?

CJ: Oh, that's fair. It's fair. Yeah, I was.

[00:40:23] SL: And in Wilmar, it also sounds like there was—
culturally speaking, you mentioned African American women
and . . .

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . and having those images. So I'm going to assume that
some of that was in place, growing up—servants or nannies or
maids or folks that helped . . .

CJ: Not . . .

SL: . . . raise children.

CJ: Not really. It wasn't so much we—up—that was the case up till
about the—when I was five or six when my aunt and my
grandmother moved from Wilmar to Monticello, and it didn't
happen after that. Prior to it, yes, but up to five or six—'cause I
do remember African American women coming in and takin' care
of me and takin' care of—you know, doing cleaning and doing—
I'm talkin' 'bout [about] in Wilmar.

SL: Yes.

CJ: In Wilmar.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:41:24] CJ: Taking care of the house and doing cooking and that
sort of thing. But after the family moved from Wilmar to

Monticello, that wasn't—and my mother really wasn't financially able to have any assistance when we were in Monticello. And also, she was a—my mother was a very private person, and she maintained a—and she wanted to do everything herself, so she did. And we—and the house was really very small that we grew up in in Monticello, so . . .

[00:42:02] SL: Well, so do you remember—were you assigned duties or chores at the house, early on?

CJ: Yes and no. I mean, I would—they were largely ad hoc. I didn't have—you know, if I would need to go to the grocery store, I would have to take out the garbage, help with freezing ice cream or—but—and cleaning up my room or that sort of thing. But it—you know, beyond sort of the normal, there wasn't anything exceptional about it.

[00:42:44] SL: Let's talk about freezing ice cream . . .

CJ: Okay.

SL: . . . for the sake of those that don't know what is meant by freezing ice cream.

CJ: Okay.

SL: I'm assuming you're talking homemade ice cream that you . . .

CJ: Homemade ice cream.

SL: . . . that you are cranking in a . . .

CJ: Cranking.

SL: . . . in a . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . canister and . . .

[00:42:58] CJ: And there was—exactly. And there were some—my brother used to crank more than I did because he was much larger, but I'd—you know, he was older and—but I used to have to sit on it, and [*laughter*] it would get my bottom pretty cold. See, you know, we'd wanna keep it down so that the ice and the salt—it would—you know, you'd have the salt on top, and that would cause the ice to get colder, and so you wanted to push the ice down. So someone needed to be sitting on it, so—or at least that's what I was told. I needed [*laughs*]*—*I don't know if it was inflicting punishment or not, but I would sit on the—as the crank would have to—and we had ice cream almost—it was generally every week. And we would—and various kinds. I mean, I know—vanilla and peach and strawberry, depending on what was available.

SL: What was being . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . harvested at the time.

CJ: Exactly.

SL: And available.

CJ: It was great. It was really nice.

[00:44:09] SL: And, you know, the reason why you probably had to sit on that is—first of all, the cream is in a canister that's . . .

CJ: Right, right.

SL: . . . within another canister.

CJ: Right.

SL: And that interior canister is surrounded by ice.

CJ: Right.

SL: And you put salt on it to accelerate the . . .

CJ: The—right.

SL: . . . the . . .

CJ: The temperature—drop in . . .

SL: . . . the drop in the temperature. And as the cream hardens, it becomes harder to crank. You're . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . constantly spinning that interior canister . . .

CJ: Right, right.

[00:44:40] SL: . . . so it gets an even cooling. I would venture to say as a youngster, you probably—if you did cranking, you probably did the early cranking before it got . . .

CJ: Yeah, it is true—until—and then, later, as I got a little—I got

larger and older, then I would—I'd do my fair share of cranking.

[*Unclear words*].

[00:45:02] SL: Do you have any—can you remember how long it took to . . .

CJ: It took a long time. I would—you know, and again, when you're growing up, time tends to be glacial [*SL laughs*] and—but I'm sure—and so it sounds longer. But I would say, you know, to do it right, it was probably a good forty-five minutes to an hour. Something like that.

[00:45:25] SL: So you—it was almost a weekly staple, then, in your diet. It wasn't just for Fourth of July or . . .

CJ: No, no.

SL: . . . birthdays or . . .

CJ: We wouldn't do that. I mean, obviously, dead of the winter and we—'cause we—you wouldn't be doing that outside, but we—it sort of diminished in importance. But in the spring and summer and fall, we would—very frequently—I would say mostly on a weekly basis.

[00:45:56] SL: So back to helpin' around the house—so your mother did all the cooking.

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: And did she always do the dishes after a meal?

CJ: No.

SL: Did you . . .

CJ: I mean, we helped . . .

SL: You did . . .

CJ: We helped in a lot . . .

SL: . . . dry and . . .

[00:46:12] CJ: Right. Yeah, we did. But she—you know, Mother had a very—she had a certain—well, two things in response to that. One is that our schoolwork was always very important, and she said, "You know, we all have our responsibilities." And she was very intent on my brother and I doing well in school, and so she said, "You know, I don't mind doing a lot of the chores, but you've gotta [got to] do well in school." And so that was an important thing. Secondly, her mother was a real fi—a real cook. I mean, the—my grand—my maternal grandma—and—but my mother was really no—she—I think she was a better cook than what she used to say. I mean, she's—and so, you know, there—we would go out frequently at night and get a burger or get chicken-fried steak or something like that, although she prepared very frequently, but I mean, she never thought of herself as really being a cook. And it was something she didn't really like to do. But she—you know, she—I thought

she did—I think she did a good job. But those were two things, I mean, she was—so there were less because of the—when we would go out and have food—you know, we'd go to the local cafe or whatever in town—so there wasn't that much to do . . .

SL: Right.

[00:48:03] CJ: . . . in terms of cleaning up at night. And then during the day, when we were at school, we—you know, that wasn't part of it. So it wasn't—often there wasn't much to do. Now in terms of the clothing and—you know, washing the clothes and the ironing and that sort of thing, she—that was a big responsibility. But—and then, occasionally, we would help on the laundry and that sort of thing, but I don't wanna give the impression they were [*unclear word*] chores 'cause there weren't. She didn't think of it that way. She wanted us to have our—she wanted us to have time to work on our schoolwork.

[00:48:40] SL: Did you and—did your brother and yourself—did y'all have separate bedrooms, or did you share a bedroom with your brother, or do you remember?

CJ: We had separate bedrooms.

SL: And were you—was it required . . .

CJ: Well, let me back up.

SL: Okay.

[00:48:05] CJ: Yeah, we had separate bedrooms. The reason I'm saying is that sort of—things shifted. When my brother went to college, then I sort of inherited the room. And so it was my room. So, I mean, yeah, we—but we didn't—you know, we—because there was such an age difference, we didn't sort of compete over rooms, if you . . .

SL: Right.

CJ: . . . know what I mean.

[00:49:24] SL: Right. So did you make your own bed? Were you responsible for . . .

CJ: Yeah, generally. Yeah.

SL: Uh-huh. Well, what about . . .

CJ: Although I will say this—you know, one of the interesting that—when it'd get cold—and I think this is probably interesting—we had this routine, and I assume that a lot of people did it, but it would—in terms of making beds and—but my mother used to put big stones on the heaters and heat up the stones and then put the stones in flannel wrapping and then put them in the bottom of the bed, so that you'd have foot warmers. And it would all—and she would always do that when it would get cold. And so we would—you know, we'd have to—the following day when we'd be making up our beds, we'd have to take care of

that. But that was always a fond memory, having a warm
[laughs] [Unclear words].

[00:50:19] SL: I have to tell you, that doesn't happen anymore that
I'm . . .

CJ: I'm sure.

SL: . . . that I'm aware of.

CJ: I'm sure that's right.

SL: That's pioneer . . .

CJ: Mh-hmm. Right, right.

SL: . . . stuff there.

CJ: Right. Exactly.

[00:50:37] SL: That's great. Well, what about—let's say that you're
having—so you ate the school lunch in the—from the school
cafeteria.

CJ: Right.

SL: You didn't pack your own lunch. What about breakfast? Were
y'all expected to be at the table at a certain time for breakfast,
or was breakfast kind of running out the door before going to
school? How did that work?

[00:51:01] CJ: Oh, my. Well, in part, it depended on the age. I
remember early on having a full breakfast, but then as I got
older and I had responsibilities at school, which used to start

early, and whether it was athletics or whatever the time of sitting down and having a real breakfast diminished. And so—and I don't remember those—having—sitting down after, let's say, I got into junior high. I remember—you know, I mean, Mother would fix a m—the breakfast, but I would sit, eat quickly, and leave.

SL: M'kay.

CJ: And—but, you know, when I was—earlier in my life—in grammar school and even earlier—I remember sitting down and spending time around the—you know, at breakfast time, but not later, because school became such a focus of our lives. I'm talkin' 'bout both my brother and myself that—and it would start early. And I'm [CJ edit: not] talkin' 'bout classes but just getting there and doing whatever we did.

[00:52:28] SL: You haven't mentioned anything about church or religion. Was that ever a part of the household? Did—were you church members or—how . . .

CJ: Well, I—it—I'm gonna tell a little bit of a long story, okay?

SL: Good.

[00:52:46] CJ: This is a long story. My—I did not—my—the  grandparents—let me put it this way—my maternal grandparents were really not religious at all. I don't think they were spiritual,

particularly. I make a distinction. You probably know this. The line that those people who are religious fear hell, but those who are spiritual have already been there. [SL laughs] And I don't think they were either. [00:53:14] And I remember the stories about my grandfather saying, you know, "Don't worry about when—'cause with seven kids, where are they—where is—where are they gonna be buried?" Give you an idea of how strong my mother is, they ended up being buried in Monticello, even [CJ edit: though] they had no connection with Monticello [laughter] at all. But, anyway [SL laughs]—and he'd say, "Well, you know, we're like dogs. Just throw 'em out in the backyard." And so he—and then on my father's side, my grandmother was very religious, and my aunt was very religious. My grandfather became very religious, but when he was much younger, he actually used to break—he was such an atheist that he used to break up camp meetings and, I mean, he and—he had four or five associates that they would go in revivalist meetings and ride horses through the church to break up the—but, eventually, sort of almost had a St. Paul kind of conversion in Wilmar, and he became a very devoted—and—but my mother was not religious. And after my father died, she sort of took a anti-God approach. She was very disappointed about my father dying. He died—I

didn't mention this, but it was sort of obvious when I was young—he died when he was only forty. He died when I was a [laughs]—he was only forty when he died. And for a number of years my mother blamed God for that and was very—'cause she never remarried and never had—you know, sort of that and that sort of thing. So it was a—now she would take the two of us to church to Sunday school. She would drop us off, and so—but I think she did that more as a social thing than was a religious thing. And we had—we belonged to the Methodist Church and the *M-Y* . . .

SL: MYF.

[00:55:29] CJ: MYF. And we always went there, and it was important to her that we attended church. But she would come infrequently. Now later in her life, she became—she started going to church and spending time at church, which was probably more social at that time than religious. But she was not—she didn't have deep religious convictions. And so it was—the church was important for me in terms of I—'cause it's always been—it developed into an important component of my life—my adult life. But it was not through—it was really more of an independent journey than one fostered by . . .

SL: Indoctrination.

CJ: . . . by—right.

SL: Yeah.

CJ: Exactly.

SL: Mh-hmm. Well, I like to kinda concentrate on the home environment before I ever get you to public schools.

CJ: Right.

[00:56:30] SL: But let's talk a—just briefly about radio. Did your house in Monticello have radio? Do you remember a radio in your home, growing up?



CJ: Yes, although not—I remember when the T—when TV came.

SL: Ah.

CJ: But—and I remember that when I was growing up in Wilmar—whenever I was in Wilmar—or in Little Rock, people'd sit around and listen to the radio. I was never particularly interested in listenin' to the radio for some reason. It didn't occupy—and then we were—I think we were one of the last to actually have a TV put in our—even on our street. But then that sort of began to occupy us. Radio never had quite the influence on us in terms of the external world and what was going on and all the radio programs. Now I would listen to baseball games. Sporting events over the radio. But I was never quite—I was never really addicted to it, and I don't think that my mother was

particularly—but then when the TV came, life changed. I mean, our—where we had meals and—it changed dramatically. I mean, we got TV trays, and [*SL sniffs*] the meals were centered around *District Attorney* or whatever was on and . . .

SL: *Perry Mason*.

CJ: *Perry Mason* [*SL laughs*] or whatever the highway program with Broderick Crawford was. I forget what that was.

SL: Oh, yeah.

CJ: Um . . .

SL: What was that? Something—fifty-nine, maybe, or . . .

CJ: I don't remember, but I remember, you know . . .

SL: Yeah, sure.

[00:58:26] CJ: But the—it was around those kinds of programs that we—that I—that evening meals were focused. So—'cause we had to be home by five thirty. I mean, that was—Mother always served meals at five thirty, so—and she would always say, "If you're not here by five thirty, you will—you're not gonna eat." So we always had the—so . . .

SL: That's good, though, I mean . . .

CJ: Yeah.

SL: I—that's a rule that was respected . . .

CJ: Right, right.

SL: . . . as long as you were in that home.

CJ: Right. Exactly.

SL: I mean—you know, if she's gonna take you out to eat or [*CJ laughs*] go to the trouble of preparing a meal, you'd better be there. [*Laughs*]

CJ: That's right. Exactly. So that was true.

SL: That's pretty common.

CJ: Yeah.

SL: That's pretty . . .

CJ: Right.

[00:59:07] SL: . . . common to—but it does sound like there wasn't anything very formal about your meals. I mean, was grace ever said at the [*claps hands*] table?

CJ: Yeah. Well, for special meals we tended to. And, you know, it's always sort of an ambivalent kind of thing because—and when you were asking about religion—because we had a certain—I don't remember it now—I remember certain of the words 'cause some of them came from the Psalms. But we actually had a prayer that we had to give, and we had to recite it. And when it was a regular—I mean, we didn't do it when we would eat on our TV trays, but if it was sort of a special Sunday meal—and we didn't always have a special Sunday meal—but we would gather

whenever we would—and she would expect either my brother or myself to repeat this prayer. And I don't—I actually don't know why, but I don't re—"number our days and apply our hearts unto wisdom" was part of it, and that's—comes out of the Psalms. But—and I do remember that, but the rest of it I'm not familiar with. [01:00:30] But we—it was very interesting. You know, I mean, she had—she made it clear that she was not religious, but she wanted us to say a prayer. [*Laughs*] That sort of dichotomy. Sort of interesting.

SL: Well . . .

Trey Marley: Scott, we need to change tapes.

SL: Okay.

[Tape stopped]

[01:00:43] SL: Listen, Chester, we're on our second tape. Second hour.

CJ: Very good.

SL: You've survived the victimization [*CJ laughs*] of the Pryor Center process here . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . for at least a good hour.

CJ: Good.

SL: You know, and it's not uncommon after we take a break for folks

to go, "Oh! You know what? I really wanna tell this story."

CJ: Right.

[01:01:05] SL: And Trey mentioned an interest in the story that we just kind of had a cursory reference to in your relatives migrating to Arkansas and the Arkansas River being a part of it, and there was apparently some death that happened on the river that . . .

CJ: Yeah, I—this is the story I was told. Now, you know, I don't—it hasn't been—it wasn't so documented or—but it—I—the one thing I loved to do when I was growing up was listen to stories about family members and that sort of thing. I just loved it. I just loved to hear it, and it's just part of my DNA to—and I remember the story where—I went—I'd told you about the Birches coming through Pennsylvania, going through the Cumberland Gap, and then into Arkansas, and that was a sort of a common—or a number of people coming through into Arkansas. And so the family—it ended up being one particular family, the Birch family, and there were mother and father and two sons. And they were in—on the Arkansas River, and they were going down the Arkansas River. [01:02:29] I don't know exactly where they got into the Arkansas River, but they—and a storm came up or something happened, and the boat either

capsized or they fell overboard. The parents fell overboard. And then these two boys were orphaned, and there was a couple on the—with their family on this particular boat going down the Arkansas River. And so they took these two boys, who were Birch boys, and they got off in Tillar or somewhere around Tillar or McGehee, and those two boys were reared, and out of those two boys became the Birch family. And I don't know whether that's true or not. I do know that it was told apocryphally or whatever and through the family. And I heard it, and I listened, and it was part of my memory bank. But the reason I didn't sort of go into it in detail—'cause I don't have any of—I don't have documentation about that. And I have a lot of documentation on the other side of my family. I sorta became the—I'm more of sort of the historian on that sort of the—and also that part of the family—the Johnson part of the family and Hanna, who was—my grandmother's name was Hanna—they documented things a lot more than the other—the—my mother's family.

[01:04:07] SL: So do you even know the name of the family that adopted your—I guess these are your grand—your . . .

CJ: These were much later—I don't—I mean—it was a long—'cause the Birches had—were in a family—an established family—before Arkansas became a state. So this happened—may—you

know . . .

SL: A long, long time ago.

CJ: . . . a long time ago. A very long time ago. So . . .

[01:04:33] SL: Okay. Now we were also talkin' about—I kind of surmise that in your early years you were surrounded by women. And I know that has an influence—whoever is around . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . you when you're growing up, and it sticks with you and will have an influence. But you mentioned that your—up until the time of your grandfathers'—on both sides—deaths—and they were not far apart.

CJ: Right.

SL: They were an influence on you as well. Is that . . .

CJ: Right, right.

SL: So you wanna . . .

CJ: Yeah, my . . .

SL: . . . talk a little bit about that?

[01:05:11] CJ: My maternal grandfather, Alonzo Birch—when I was living with them in Little Rock, he sort of took me under his wing, and he just spent—he had recently retired from the railroad, and he just spent a lot of time with me. And I'd

remember him. I remember sitting in his lap. I remember pulling his ears and all that kind of stuff. And he was a—and so he was very physically and emotionally attentive and communicative. My paternal grandfather was a real presence. I mean, he was big. He was much taller than I am, and he was heavy. And, you know, not obese, but he was—you know, he was a solid man. And—but he was a real presence, and he wasn't particularly demonstrative. But—so there was considerable influence. But then when they died, by the time I was, you know, five years old, I'd lost my father and both of my grandfathers. [01:06:44] So—and you're right, I was sort of surrounded by women, but out of that sort of thing—and, actually, Faulkner has written about it—when women—you know, there becomes sort of an idealization of men. And Faulkner wrote about it as it was after the Civil War, and so many men who died and families were left without men, and women sort of idealized men in certain ways. I'm not sayin' it was a sexual problem, I'm just sayin'—I mean, I'm—and I'm just saying—or a woman problem, I'm just saying that it happens, and there was an idealization about men in among the women that I—not so much my grand—my maternal grandmother, but certainly on the Johnson side there was. And my mother did it

as well. So I sort of lived—and I think it contributed to my eventually being interested in the arts because there is a connection between sort of idealization issues and building that into one's perception, and then the perception sort of moves into analogies and art forms. [01:08:06] And I think that had a lot to do with my development in terms of ultimately becoming a poet, was sort of these images of men and what they were and what they weren't and how one is to be a man in the world. And so—and I eventually got to a point, and I realized that a lot of this was not true, [*SL laughs*] and it was out of that non—the recognition of the untruth of it that my work started to develop integrity—a lot more integrity. Well, you know, I'm talkin' about when I was a teenager [*unclear word*] 'cause I started seeing through a lot of this and—of this idealization. And so the truth of my own work began to take idealization into account, but it became an important component in my art and has over a long period of time. And I've written pieces related to that, and I'm not goin' way—I'm not accelerating forward in terms of this discussion, but I've written—I wrote a—I've—I still—I've actually—one of my more important recent pieces is a conversation between myself and my father, and I know it's filtered through, you know, the images that my mother and my

grandmother and my aunt sort of all worked into it. So,
anyway . . .

[01:09:44] SL: That's really complex. There's [*laughs*] so much . . .

CJ: I'm sorry, but I . . .

SL: No, no, but [*CJ laughs*] you know, I keep—I'm thinking, "Okay,
well, you know, the male figure is kinda the breadwinner" . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . "in early years."

CJ: Exactly.

SL: "Going all the way back, they were the hunter-gatherers. They
put the" . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . "food on the table. There's some kind of exaltation about
survival" . . .

CJ: Right.

[01:10:09] SL: . . . "that"—I think this goes way, way back. And
then there's that Southern part of it, too . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . that you only find in hardscrabble lineage, and so it—that is
interesting.

CJ: Right, and I'm sorry to just go through it, but—and I may not
been very articulate about it. But I just wanted to focus on that

is a reality and is a reality in my life, and it's a reality that I think has led to an important component of my own writing. My own poetry. And I know it is because it still vibrates in focus. I mean, here I am, sixty-six years old, and one piece that I've recently finished is called "Pater Magnificus", which is, you know, the Magnificent Father in Latin. And it's a—it's really a piece—a long piece on this sort of contrived discussion between the reality of my father and the idealized version of it. And so—but I just—I wanted to comment on it when—because I realized that I had not really talked about—sorta—the continuing male presence even after my grandfathers died and my father died—after five, they—it wasn't as though the males weren't there. They were definitely there, they were just not in—you know, in bodily form. So . . .

SL: That's a really good observation on your part, I think.

CJ: Thank you.

[01:11:59] SL: Okay, so is there anything about those preschool days? I mean . . .

CJ: Hmm?

SL: . . . you have a vivid memory of the chickens being prepared. Was there ever any—a hog day? Did you ever experience a hog day where they scalded hogs or . . .

CJ: Uh-um.

SL: . . . smokers where they—or fruit cellars or canning or any of that . . .

CJ: Oh, there were a lot of canning that would go on, both in Little Rock and also in Wilmar. And also—what is—the gelatin—the sort of—jellies and . . .

SL: Jams and . . .

CJ: . . . and jams. And that was always sort of a function of the kitchen in both places. And—but nothing like—you know, in terms of the smoking of hams and that sort of thing.

SL: Okay.

CJ: It was not part of it.

[01:13:11] SL: In—what about creeks and rivers early on? Did you ever spend much time as a child around a river or a creek or lake or pond? Did you ever pick up on fishing or just swimming or . . .

CJ: Now bear in mind that I just—or I was—yes, swimming was—but, you know, with no father . . .

SL: Yes.

CJ: . . . the opportunities of going fishing and hunting and that sort of thing were very much reduced. And, particularly, since my mother actually didn't—she never had any male friends or

anything like that—so hunting and fishing was really not an exercise that the family participated in. Now I used to go fishing occasionally with my friends, you know, later on. Very little hunting. My mother didn't allow a gun in the house, and she just wouldn't—she wouldn't tolerate it, and so hunting was sort of not frowned upon, but it was just not encouraged. And I really never went hunting. And I think my brother went sometimes on occasion, but I never really did. And I—but I'd go fishing on occasion. Now living where I did, the Mississippi River obviously had a—you know, was a very important component [*laughs*] running along—Monticello's right on the edge of the Delta. It's not right—it's right on the edge of the Delta. It's right—you know, in that sort of the Monticello—you know, that little table—little hill. That's what it means in Latin, so—and so—but, you know, it's sort of—it—the—its presence had a—it had an effect, I mean, you know, both economically because to the east of us it was all—there was all of this very rich land that had been dumped from—you know, over the years out of the—you know, in terms of the related alluvial effect.

[01:15:38] SL: And when you've talked about farmland being under cultivation, are you mostly talking cotton?

CJ: Cotton—also wheat. And we—and—but the thing is that the—

there were federal restrictions put on—I—as I said, my grandfather owned land that had a lot in cultivation, but then there was restrictions put at various points in agricultural history. I don't know exactly when, but maybe in the [19]30s or [19]40s or something like that. And so he just got paid for not growing their crops and—but we still had the land. Then he converted them into pine—into tree farms and that—mostly, you know, pine. 'Cause they're—they—pine will grow more rapidly than hardwood. And there was a creek that ran through part of the area that we owned outside of Wilmar, but the dominant—I mean, sort of mythologically it was always "The Big Muddy," so . . .

SL: Yeah.

CJ: . . . which was not far away.

[01:16:58] SL: Well, okay, let's go back to Monticello then and your entering of public schooling and the culture there of Monticello at the time.

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: This would be early [19]50s, I would guess—late [19]40s.



CJ: Yeah, I was born in [19]44, so I would've started to school in, like, you know, [19]50—first grade. But the interesting—one aspect I haven't really talked about—I—but I should before we

break away from that is where—we lived—as I said, we had a small home. I grew up in a small home. And we lived in an area which was very much adjacent to the African American community. And a lot of the people that I played with—a lot of the boys that I played with, early on before school, were African American boys in that era, playing. So, you know, it was a little bit of a surprise when I go to my school, and the African American boys go to their school, and our communication really suffered after that. [01:18:38] I mean, I just—I—you know, we maintained relation—and there was a big field behind my house where we used to play baseball together, and it was a—you know, it was very much an [*laughs*] integrated game. And so we continued, even though we—and we'd—I'd go to my school, and they would go to their schools, but after school, we would frequently play together 'cause we were, you know—but I remember that being a—an interesting sort of development where I—from where [*laughs*] I lived, how that came—and when I went to school—and my friends eventually became all white as opposed to being sort of shared white and black before I go to school—before I entered school. So that's a—that was an important cognitive change for me, and over time, we developed—?I'd? developed less friendship and less—we played

less ball and less—you know, together. I'm talkin' about the African Americans and myself and—because of—you know, schools have 'em—you develop your social fabric out of—and your community out of your school.

[01:20:07] SL: That's—you know, that's a very poignant observation about how segregation changed things for folks.

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: There's that almost innocence before public school—before you started attending schools. Now I'm going to assume that you probably didn't have any African Americans at the church that you went to every Sunday.

CJ: No.

SL: Once you became aware of the separation [*TM sniffs*], though—did you start seeing other signs of that around Monticello? I mean, were there fountains? Were there restaurants where African American . . .

[01:20:50] CJ: Oh, it was very much a segregated community. I just think by virtue of where I was—we were physically living that I had an ability before I was—before going to school—of developing friendships that were not allowed to survive because of the separation in terms of where we were educated. But it was dominant. I mean, it was very dominant. And blacks had

their place, and I mean, it was very sad and very [*unclear words*]*—*you know, but it was the sort of thing that, you know, it was—and I—I'm—this sounds, you know, parochial. It was just a matter—you know, it was the accepted practice.

SL: That's correct.

[01:21:44] CJ: It was just accepted practice and—on everybody's part—and a very sad set of circumstances. But looking back, I miss the fact that I was not able to continue the relationships that I developed before school—and even developing after school in a sense of—as I said, of playing together in the field behind my house and playing baseball and that sort of thing together, but that diminished over time, and we just developed. And by the time I was in the ninth grade, I'd—all of the sort of social relationships that had developed with African Americans had disappeared.

[01:22:34] SL: Well, and they also, you know, were taken down the path of developing their own . . .

CJ: Right. Absolutely.

SL: . . . segregated relationships.

CJ: Absolutely.

SL: So that is the sad result. That's very unfortunate.



[01:22:54] CJ: Right. Now later on—and I don't wanna forget—I

went back to Monticello, and I taught in the black children's school. I don't know if I—you know that.

SL: I am aware of that.

CJ: [*Unclear words*] And—yeah, I—and I really think that there's something that's sort of—reason I wanted to do it is sorta—probably to try to recapture something, you know, I mean, that I lost an important—at one point, I wrote something along—you know, that I went—that this was the culture was right next to us that I knew nothing about. And I felt that I had lost that ability—that I'd lost the opportunity when we went our separate ways in terms of education, so I went back, and I taught the sixth through the twelfth grades, and it was a wonderful—it was a really wonderful experience. It was right before integration of secondary education, and it was a—and I feel good I did that. I mean, I felt like it was—I mean, you can't redo things that you lost, you know, a long time ago. [01:24:05] You can't—but you can't recapture that. But, you know, you—it nourished my realization I had lost something substantial earlier in my life by living in the—living within that culture, in which I did. I was—now, you know, I'm not only teaching the sixth through the twelfth grades but going to all the basketball games and going on—being the chaperone on very—games away from Monticello

and—which was—so, anyway, I mean, it was . . .

SL: That's . . .

CJ: . . . fascinating.

SL: Probably talking mid-, late [19]60s. Is that . . .

CJ: [Nineteen] seventy.

SL: [Nineteen] seventy.

CJ: Mh-hmm. 1970.

SL: [Nineteen] seventy. And so in 1970, there was still—they were still segregated or was . . .

CJ: Let's see, it may . . .

SL: . . . it just a predominantly black . . .

CJ: . . . have been in [19]69. [Nineteen] sixty-nine and [19]70. It was that [*unclear word*]-in that [19]69, [19]70. I'm sorry.

Yeah. No, they—it was—no, they had not—they were still—it was still separated, and it was, like, a year before integration.

And I think I wanted to live it before it was all—it had been . . .

SL: Right.

CJ: . . . forgotten. It had been . . .

SL: Right.

[01:25:28] CJ: . . . forgotten because it was gonna be dominated, and it was dominated. I mean, it had—you know, it took—they—when the schools came together, the—rather than it being

the Drew Lions, it stayed the Monticello Billies—if you know what I mean. I mean . . .

SL: Yes.

CJ: . . . it was Monticello Billies, but—and rather than it being gold and purple, it stay—you know, it was blue and white and . . .

SL: Yeah.

CJ: You know, I'm not making judgment, I'm just sayin' that's . . .

SL: That's . . .

CJ: . . . what happened.

SL: . . . what happened.

[01:25:56] CJ: And so that whole—there was a culture that just sort of was dispersed after the integration, and it wasn't—I don't know, I wanted—I'm glad I did it, I'll put it [*laughs*]*—it's a short [unclear word]*.

[01:26:11] SL: Well, what was the name of the school that you taught at?

CJ: It was Drew High.

SL: Drew High.

CJ: Right.

SL: Of . . .

CJ: Of, obviously, Drew County. In Drew High and . . .

[01:26:21] SL: And how large a school was that?

CJ: Well, it was relatively small—probably no more than maybe forty students in the senior class. I'm talkin'—we're talkin' 'bout the African American school, right?

SL: Yes. Uh-huh.

CJ: Something like that. Probably forty or so, and—it had a great history. I mean, the—there had been a prisoner of war camp in Drew County, and after the camps shut down, there were these buildings that were still, you know, available. And then . . .

SL: This is World War II?

CJ: Yeah.

SL: Okay.

CJ: And the African American families—they were—they had a piece of property and they—you know, they took these buildings, and they turned them into Drew. And so that—you know, it was a great history of that—of the African American community in Drew County and in Monticello.

[01:27:28] CJ: Were you the only Caucasian . . .

CJ: No, we had two other . . .

SL: . . . staff member?

CJ: . . . we had two other . . .

SL: Two others?

CJ: Two. Yeah, two other teachers there.

SL: And the—you were well received . . .

CJ: Very well received.

SL: . . . by the students and . . .

CJ: Very well received.

SL: . . . the administration there?

CJ: Yeah, very well received.

[01:27:45] SL: Did you ever experience any recoil from the
Caucasian [*dog barks*] side of the community for doing that?

CJ: Yes, I did, but it was—this is a—I—I'd like to tell sort of a quick
story on that.

SL: Absolutely.

CJ: If—it's really interesting. I remember one day—I never cut off—I
was very much into my teaching. [*Laughs*] I really enjoyed it
and I—it was a great time, and I got—I loved the—being a
chaperone and going to ball games and all that kind of stuff, but
that's—I maintained close relations with friends and
acquaintances in the Caucasian community. [01:28:36] And I
remember one night going out to place where they trained
horses and just happened a fellow I was with, who was a
friend—we go in, and one person had been drinking a little bit,
and he starts attacking me about—first of all, he talks about the
way I looked and I—my hair was a little longer. And then he

starts attacking me about what I'm—what I was doing in terms of the teaching. And then he started to physically come after me, and one of the—I just fortunately, as far as I [*rustling sounds*] was concerned—and this was a big guy and angry—frustrated, for whatever reason and whatever. And he was coming after me. And there was another young man there older than I—about six or seven years older—about my brother's age—who had been the center for the Denver Broncos . . .

SL: [*Laughs*] Now that's handy.

[01:30:00] CJ: And he just stood in the way—and his name was Mike Nichols—and he stood in the way, and he said, "No, this isn't gonna happen." And so I left and let them carry on whatever they were doing. But it—the reason I'm saying I wanted to tell the story is it wasn't all one direction. I mean, there were people who knew what I was doing and why I was doing it and that I felt good about doing what I—and there were friends who wouldn't on the surface be supportive, but in the instant where there needed to be support, they supported me. And whether that was out of love of me or realizing that what I was trying to do was, what I should be trying to do, or whatever the motivation there was support. So it wasn't just a constant sort of good and evil. It's—you know, there was an—there

was . . .

SL: Undercurrents.

CJ: There were many, many undercurrents beyond just the issue of someone coming after me for what I was doing.

[01:31:25] SL: You didn't experience any, oh, concerns from the African American community, though. They—you were—your effort was welcomed in that community . . .

CJ: Yeah.

SL: . . . too. There weren't—you didn't experience any problems . . .

CJ: No, I actually didn't. I know they're—you know, one would think that that was a possibility, but not—I didn't experience any of that. Actually, to fill out the story a little bit, the—there was a special mayoral election, and I—and a bunch of people came to me and asked if, you know, it would be—here I was, teaching an African American school. I was a person—I grew up in Monticello. "Why don't you run for mayor?" I ran for mayor. And we were putting together or trying to put together sort of a confluence of young Caucasians and black community, and it scared a lot—'cause it [CJ edit: I] was young—I mean, this was before integration of the public schools, so there were a lot of people who got sort of upset. And I won't mention now 'cause I don't want to interfere with names or anything like that, but they

brought—but a politician who had been out of office for a while—
very, very popular—he came back to run against me, and I lost
the election, obviously. And looking at it historically, you know,
I don't know what I would've done if I'd [*laughter*] won that.
But anyway—yeah, I did . . .

SL: The poetry may have changed.

[01:33:18] CJ: Yeah, exactly, so—or—you know, but whatever. It's
a—it was a very interesting time. It was really—it was a
fascinating time. And I know we sort of evolved from my home
[*laughs*] . . .

SL: That's all right. We'll . . .

CJ: . . . on East . . .

SL: I'm very . . .

CJ: . . . Shelton Street . . .

SL: I'm very handy . . .

CJ: . . . to this.

SL: . . . with flashbacks. [*CJ laughs*] So we'll . . .

CJ: It's a nice . . .

SL: . . . we'll get back to your time—your introduction into the public
school systems at . . .

CJ: Okay.

[01:33:43] SL: . . . Monticello. How large a town was Monticello

when you were in grade school? Do you remember?

CJ: Oh, very well. The sign on the city limits was four thousand, five hundred and one.

SL: That's a pretty good size, actually . . .

CJ: Right, right.

SL: . . . for a rural community.

CJ: Right, yeah. Well, bear in mind, you know, we always—we had the Arkansas A&M at the time which became, you know, the University of Arkansas at Monticello. So, you know, that always added a little bit ?up here? 'cause a lot of the students and the faculty members who lived in Monticello and that sort of thing, so—and we also had rug mills in town. Burlington was always—was there and Owens. I think that's Owen's—a rug mill was there, so that gave a little bit of support to the community in terms of—yeah, but you're right, it was—we were larger than Warren; we were larger than McGehee and Dermott, Star City, Hamburg. We were not as large, I don't think, as Crossett, but generally they—we were larger than the other immediately surrounding communities.

[01:35:01] SL: So I'm assuming that you walked to school. Is that right?

CJ: I walked to school unless it was bad weather, and Mother would

drive me. And then as I got older, I rode a bicycle to school. And I actually—I never had a car when I was in school, but I rode a bicycle even up when I was a senior in high school. So I—so we—I lived on—I lived with—I mean, from the time I was, you know, I started riding a bicycle, that was how I got to school.

[01:35:40] SL: Was that kind of unusual then for kids to ride bicycles to school or do you—and not ever have a car or . . .

CJ: Well, a lot of my friends had cars, but you know, we didn't have a lot of money, and so—and I felt very comfortable with a bicycle. I really liked it. We didn't have bicycle racks in school if that's what you mean. I mean, there were never that many bicycles. But I enjoyed it. I mean, it was just—it was a—and it was really a sense of freedom.

[01:36:18] SL: There probably wasn't that—it was probably very unusual for a bicycle to be stolen as well. I mean . . .

CJ: Yeah, that's right.

SL: I know, growin' up here in Fayetteville, we never locked our doors to anything. The . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . front door was always unlocked. The cars were always unlocked. The bicycles were out in the yard and . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . there just wasn't that going on, early on.

CJ: No. No, there wasn't.

SL: And I would assume it would be the same in Monticello.

CJ: Right.

[01:36:46] SL: [*TM coughs*] Okay, so you're in first grade. Is that . . .

CJ: Mh-hmm. I didn't go to kindergarten. I don't think there was a kindergarten in Monticello at that time. So I went into first grade and . . .

[01:37:01] SL: Do you remember your first day?

CJ: No, I don't remember my first day, but I remember most [*laughter*] of my first grade, is at the end of the year I remember waiting until all of the students left the room. It was our very last day. And I remember all the students leaving, and I walked up to—Mrs. Ferrell was my first grade teacher—and I was sheepish about it. I can—I don't know why, but I was very sheepish, and I said, "Did I pass?" And she says, "Oh, yes, Chester, you passed. Don't worry about it [*unclear words*]."
[*Laughter*] Boy, and my last day—I don't remember much about—I remember playing a lot and all that kind of stuff, but I—that's what [*laughs*—that sort of crystallizes in my head.

[Unclear words].

[01:37:53] SL: Well, you may have—had heard conversations at home about your older brothers' progress in school and . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . what's passing and what's not passing . . .

CJ: Right. Exactly.

SL: . . . and what to . . .

CJ: That's true. That's right.

SL: You probably . . .

CJ: And I really hadn't shown my mettle, and my brother was a very good student and obviously didn't wanna be—I didn't wanna let the family down, of course, and if I had failed it would have been [SL laughs]—and, oh, my God. So I [laughter]—it was important that I went to the second grade.

[01:38:26] SL: Well, so did you have a—when did the—you know, I know that you have a history of library attendance, early on. Is that right?

CJ: Yeah.

SL: There was a public library in Monticello. Is that . . .

CJ: Yeah, you've done research. That's interesting. [Laughs]

SL: A little bit. I try not to . . .

CJ: [Laughs] That's great.

SL: . . . do any harm, but . . .

CJ: That's great.

[01:38:50] SL: So when did you start the journey into the library world? I mean, was that later on—junior high school or . . .

CJ: No, I didn't.

SL: . . . did it start happening in grade school?

CJ: I started—I wasn't—I'd—I think I used to—I would do it sort of in the latter part of the grade school—certainly, by the time I was in junior high. The library really—it was on Main Street, and Monticello had a great library system. It was the Southeast Arkansas District Library, and so you know, we got—we just got more books and all that kind of stuff. And it just became a fascinating place for me, and I remember I wouldn't tell everybody about it. I don't know—it was . . .

[01:39:47] SL: Oh, I'm sure it was too nerdy. [*Laughs*]

CJ: Yeah, it was [*laughter*—so I wouldn't—I'd take my bicycle, and I'd drive—you know, I'd ride my bicycle up to—but I wouldn't—I really wouldn't tell anybody that I was going to the library. And it became an important part—I mean, I—and even later years as I would go into the library and check things out and all that, I still wouldn't tell anybody about it. And—but it was a—it was an important—formative—and I also sort of got led into it a little bit

because my aunt and my grandmother, after they moved from Wilmar to Monticello, and they lived by the—the courthouse was right next to their home, and then across the street was the library. And so it was sort of a natural thing and my aunt, who had not had a really full life on her own, although she never—didn't—but, you know, she was sort of a caretaker, and she took care of everyone. She took care of the—you know, of her parents and then—and her mother, and she took care us and all that kinda—she was a real sort of a caretaker. And she used to really take full advantage, so she buried herself, sort of, in books often when she had the chance to. So she was always three and four books at a time, and she would go across the street and come back, so I got introduced to that. It was sort of a natural progression.

SL: That notion.

[01:41:24] CJ: Progression that way. And so—and then—and I just got interested in terms of going in and seeing what was there. I mean, you know, that was—sort of was the first level of interest, just—"Well, what is this? I mean, what do they have here?" And so I would go through and check the shelves and figure out what I, you know, I'd be interested in. And then get big books and they—you know, I would never read but, I mean, sort of flip

through, and so I—you know, it's a physical sort of thing, you know, initially.

[01:41:59] SL: Well, it's a different environment, too. It's a . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . different kind of building.

CJ: Right, right.

SL: It's a different kind of experience.

CJ: Right.

SL: It's quiet, for one thing.

CJ: Right. Exactly. Right. Exactly.

SL: And it's kind of still. There's not people runnin' around or . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: So it's a different place.

CJ: Right, right.

[01:42:19] SL: Well, okay, let's get back to grade school. We'll—did you have—what did you discover in grade school as far as an interest goes? I know it's kind of impossible to know exactly what influences and what makes us do or points us in our direction . . .

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . of interest. But was there a particular subject or a particular teacher or a particular moment in your grade schooling that you

thought, "Well, now, this is kind of neat," or "I'd like to know more about this," or—was there something that happened for you in grade school?

CJ: Wow. I just found it all—I found it—I enjoyed school. I enjoyed grade school, and it was—but it was—I think I enjoyed it more on the [*laughs*] social thing—the social aspect of it than I did necessarily with the subject because the subjects at least initially—they were—I was interested, but I found sort of the social interaction stuff really, I mean, fun. And developing relationships and tryin' just figure people out 'cause, I mean, I was really fascinated with sort of the social stuff. I realized, I think, early on, I had a decent facility with math. I think I—and that sort of came through—and also realized that I was considerably different from—well, I don't know how personal—you don't . . .

SL: No.

CJ: . . . mind my going into it.

SL: No, I . . .

CJ: We can just cut . . .

SL: Everything.

CJ: . . . it out, so . . .

SL: Everything is . . .



[01:44:27] CJ: But it was very interesting. I realized that I was different from being sort of a well-mannered kind of guy that I—you know, I—I'd get in fights, and I'd get sent home from school. It's not like the guy goin' to—you know, goin' to the library and saying, "Oh"—and then being—I didn't act like that. I mean, I got—I—you know, I got in trouble, and I got kicked out a few times at school. And, you know, I would go by, and I would—my aunt worked—my—the—my aunt, who I've talked about several times, who lived—you know, had lived in Wilmar and moved over—she—and she had been a teacher, but also, at least at this point, she worked at a furniture store. And I always prevailed upon her to intercede on my behalf [*SL laughs*] with my mother when I would get kicked out of school. And it wasn't like it was every day, but it—you know, it was rather—it happened more than once. And she would frequently intercede and—but she also would work with me on my homework whenever I needed it. [01:45:51] But it was—I'm just saying, the formative years were not so much subject matter as just learning more about who I was and how I dealt with other people. And fighting was one aspect of it; playing sports being another; being a good student. I mean, I—you know, I didn't wanna do poorly. But there was more than just the schoolwork

that I was focused on. And I wouldn't go home, either. I mean, it was inter—I loved home, but I was so much into social stuff. [01:46:40] And at one point we didn't have a car, and Mother used to have to send taxis after me because I just—you know, I would carry on the social stuff from grade school into afternoon. And I would spend time, and I wouldn't come home, and so—I know this is—you ask me one question, and I'm answering in a different way, but that was really the formative—it was a—it was more social. And then later, as I got more interested in the subject matter in junior high and high school, that's when I really got focused on academic stuff. I was not really—I wasn't immediately enthralled with the books in—when I was in grade school.

[01:47:35] SL: So I know on my report card in grade school there was always a citizenship grade, and I don't think I ever got a U, but I think I got a few S-minuses.

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: So your report card may've had a U or two or . . .

CJ: Very—no, it wouldn't have a U. I think I would get, like, an S-minus [*SL laughs*] with comments.

SL: Yes.

CJ: That's what I would look out for [*SL laughs*] when I would get

my report card is saying—you know, not just—it would be the grade, but it would be the comments. And, you know, "Chester can pay more attention. He leaves the—you know, he leaves the room"—'cause you could—you know, you could say you have to go to the bathroom, and you'd leave for several—you know, for a while. [*SL laughs*] "And he leaves more often than he should be leaving," and you know, that sort of stuff.

SL: Yeah.

[01:48:35] CJ: So—but, no, that's what I was fearful of, of what—whatever—what were the comments 'cause they—my mother always paid a great deal attention to that.

SL: Well, did you have one protagonist classmate, or were there a few relationships that would always bring about these . . .

[01:48:54] CJ: Well, there was a seminal change that happened when I was, like, in the fifth grade.

SL: Okay.

CJ: And that was—there was a consolidation of schools. There was a small school north of Monticello about ten miles called Montongo.

SL: Okay. [*Laughs*]

[01:49:15] CJ: And Montongo was consolidated with Monticello.

And Montongo had a bunch of guys who thought that they would rule the roost, and I was not gonna let that happen [*SL laughs*],

of course. And this—so in the fifth grade, we had lots of fights—in the room, outside the room—and I remember one of my very closest friends, Warren Stephenson—he li—his house—lived—was right across the street from the school, and we thought—all of us thought—the folks from Montongo and I thought that if we fought over there, the school couldn't come and get us. Well, we [*clears throat*] learned that wasn't the case. So we'd go up—we'd get off, and we'd fight over there and the school teacher [*coughs*—excuse me. Can I have . . .

SL: Yeah, sure.

[01:50:09] CJ: [*Opens a bottle of water and drinks*] And break it up and bring us back to the school. But—and that was seminal event. And, yeah, I—you know, I think we eventually came to a truce. I actually remember some of the guy—you know, Lavell Wilbanks and a person named Clyde Hammill. And they were—you know, they were supposed to be the real toughies, and I remember takin' 'em on. And [*laughter*] so . . .

SL: Well, you know, there is a—and this has come up in some of our other interviews—that fighting just kind of happened. It was like what kids did. I mean . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: And it—and in some cases, even among friends or sometimes

you became friends after a fight. After you've . . .

CJ: Right, I agree with that.

SL: . . . scraped around with each other and . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . there's a respect that happens and a bond . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . because [*laughs*] you've been through a fight, and you know, I'm not talking arguments, I'm talking fists . . .

CJ: Oh, no, I agree with that.

SL: . . . and wrestling . . .

CJ: I agree.

SL: . . . and being thrown on the ground . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . and . . .

[01:51:23] CJ: Well, they—there's a certain—it's like, you know, a test. I mean, it's like you've both met the test, that there's a commonality of having seen—you know, seen a challenge and met it. And there—so there becomes a mutual respect that you're—that you've shared an embattlement that others haven't shared. So that—yeah, I think that's exactly—but that also doesn't mean that you won't fight, you know, a month later either.

SL: Right.

CJ: And for the same reasons that you fought this month. So . . .

[01:52:03] SL: Well, so do you think most of these conflicts were mostly territorial in nature—tryin' to be the dominant male figure . . .

CJ: Yeah.

SL: . . . or . . .

CJ: Well, yeah, but territorial in the sense of who was going to control the atmosphere, you know. I mean, not just territorial here but, you know, if I'm—how you're relating to me is—"Am I going to submit to your way of presenting yourself, or are you gonna submit to mine?" And, you know, we never ultimately do either one, but [*SL laughs*] it—but that's the assumption, and therefore, you know, you're—and not that your masculinity's on the line, but there's a certain amount of that, too, that plays a role. But I actually did—my closest friends I actually never had any fights with. And never have. But there were a number of people that I did have fights with, as I indicated during that time.

[01:53:26] SL: Did you have a favorite teacher in grade school?

CJ: I had several favorite teachers in grade school, and they tended to be—well, I said my first grade teacher, I do remember I liked

her a lot—Mrs. Ferrell.

SL: Ferrell. Mh-hmm.

CJ: And then I had—my fifth grade teacher was Mrs. White, and I know she—you wouldn't get by with that stuff. I mean, I—but she would let me memorize stuff that would—she went to the same church that—she was a Methodist. I went to the Methodist Church. And so she used to have a program at the Methodist Church where children were expected to make a presentation or whatever, and she used to encourage me to memorize quite a lot of stuff. And so she used to let me out of school—let me out of class to work on memorization. And I got—you know, I—she sorta—because she did that, I sort of got—"She's not bad, you know. She"—so [SL laughs] I felt a closeness with her. And then my sixth grade teacher—it was a real story—she had taught my father. She was a very old teacher but very strong willed and energetic—Mrs. Cantor was her name—and—but she had taught my father, she'd taught my brother, and she taught me. And [SL laughs] so there [laughs]—she was a good teacher. She—there was a level of expectation there.

SL: A legacy.

[01:55:23] CJ: Yeah. So you had to [SL laughs]—you know, you had to deal with that. But she was wonderful. She was actually

absolutely wonderful. So those were my grade school—you know, the—those were the ones I remember. I mean, I can probably tell you—I can tell you my other three teachers. Maybe I shouldn't, but [*laughs*] I didn't feel quite as—there was a—Miss Carmichael was my second grade teacher. My third grade teacher was Mrs. Moore. And my fourth grade teacher was Mrs. Law, and you know, I don't have anything—I'm just saying there wasn't anything that I particularly resonate when I think back as the other three. So . . .

SL: Mh-hmm. Okay, so grades one through six. You're immersed in a—very much a segregated culture now.

CJ: Right.

SL: And you are learning probably a little bit about testosterone . . .

CJ: Mh-hmm.

[01:56:31] SL: . . . at that point. It's at the advent of that. Did—as far as the town goes, the town I'm assuming had a movie theater somewhere in it.

CJ: Yeah.

SL: And did you start going to movies early on during your grade school years?

CJ: Oh, yeah.

SL: A dime, fifteen cents to get in?

CJ: Well, originally, it was seven cents. [*Laughter*] Seven cents to get in. Well, at least on Saturdays you'd go, and you—and the—our—all of our—we would tend to go to the movies on Saturdays. And . . .

[01:57:06] SL: Do you remember the name of the theater?

CJ: Yeah, Drew Theater.

SL: Drew Theater. Okay.

CJ: Right. And then we had—for a period of time we had Dixie Theater in town, but then a Jane Russell movie came to town, and it burned down, so they [*laughs*] . . .

SL: So hot, huh?

CJ: It was so hot. [*Laughter*] So that burned down.

SL: Do you remember . . .

CJ: And I only went to Dixie a few times.

[01:57:33] SL: Do you remember the first film you saw? [*CJ drinks water*] or do you—was it . . .

CJ: Generally, it—they always had to be—you know, there—it was always Westerns that we—on Saturdays they were always Westerns. And Johnny Mack Brown and the Cisco Kid and Gene Autry and Roy Rogers and all of that. And then there was some guy who was always—who had this space suit on—ever—whatever the—John . . .

SL: Flash Gordon.

CJ: Yeah, I guess that was . . .

[01:58:06] SL: Mh-hmm. Mh-hmm. And were African Americans allowed in the theater? In the balcony, I would assume?

CJ: In the balcony. In the balcony.

SL: So you were . . .

CJ: And your only interface with African American was when, you know, they would be taking the stairs up to the theater and as you were leaving. And they had their own facilities. I think they must've had the facilities upstairs. I don't know. I'm talkin' 'bout bathroom facilities.

SL: Yes.

[01:58:41] CJ: And I think, on occasion, you know, they would come down and get popcorn and candy and that sort of thing, but there was very little relationship there or dialogue that would occur. So, no, it was very, very segregated. Very segregated.

SL: Mh-hmm. So . . .

CJ: But we—Saturdays, though—I mean, just sort of to give a fill out of the thing—Saturdays were always a big day and friends would get together, and [*sniffs*] we'd probably leave home at seven o'clock and wouldn't get back until—till dinner time. And it was—you know, we'd—and, again, the zone defense wherever

we would go. [*Sniffs*] But we—but the movies were central to it and then going to the five-and-dime or Sterling.

SL: Yeah.

CJ: We had both in town, and those—you know, they occupied a lot of—and then go to the drugstore and, you know, at certain point they started putting those sort of nudie magazines in or at least—you know, and you'd flip through those. [*SL laughs*] And on Saturday—that was your occupation on Saturday.

[01:59:59] SL: Did the drugstore have a soda fountain in it?

CJ: No, but there was a foun—there was sort of the equivalent at Jordon's [pronounced Jer-din's], which was a—it was a cafe. I mean, it's spelled Jordon [pronounced Jor-din], but . . .

SL: They pronounce it Jordon [pronounced Jer-din].

CJ: . . . in Monticello, it's Jordon [pronounced Jer-din]. And before that it had been Jolly's. So that was sort of a hangout place for everyone.

SL: Did the—I'm goin' . . .

TM: Scott, we need to change tapes.

SL: Okay.

[Tape stopped]

[02:00:28] SL: Chester, we're on our third tape.

CJ: Wow.

SL: It's going pretty quickly, isn't it?

CJ: Yes, it is.

SL: And we haven't even gotten you [*CJ laughs*]*—*we're just now starting to get you out of grade school, so [*laughter*] we're having a good time.

CJ: Yes.

SL: And I appreciate you giving us this time, and I will . . .

CJ: My pleasure.

SL: . . . look forward to your returning and . . .

CJ: Good. I'd like to do it.

SL: . . . maybe planning a visit around our time together instead of kinda just . . .

CJ: Right. No . . .

SL: . . . squeeze . . .

CJ: . . . I*—*that's fine.

SL: . . . squeezing our time . . .

CJ: That's good.

SL: . . . together in on . . .

CJ: I'd like to do that.

SL: . . . the schedule.

CJ: I'd like to do that.

SL: Well, you're telling wonderful stories and . . .

CJ: Well, thank you.

[02:01:02] SL: . . . we don't have any Monticello stories yet, so [CJ laughs] [snapping sound] . . .

CJ: Good.

[02:01:06] SL: It's been mentioned in a few interviews but no real stories. [CJ drinks water] We had been talking about movies and the theater and the culture at the time—the segregation. Most towns only had one theater.

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: Maybe two—if it was a large two, three. But there was that segregation that happened 'tween [between] the balcony and the audience level . . .

CJ: Right.

[02:01:35] SL: . . . in front of the screen. We have mentioned a couple of restaurants and the drugstore. Did the African American community—did it have its own name, or was it just a part of Monticello? Was it called a certain area or name or . . .

CJ: There was a—there was one—the African American community was located in two distinct areas. One was close to where I lived, which was more—it's sort of the eastern part of the—of town—and then there was a place called Vinegar Hill—*V-I-N-E-G-A-R*—Vinegar Hill. And that had more of a location. There

was—in terms of it being absolutely segregated. Where I grew up, it was le—I mean, it was clearly [*laughs*] segregated, but you know, as I said, I lived—you know, African Americans lived right behind me, and we shared this hou—I mean, this playground.

SL: Field. Mh-hmm.

[02:02:53] CJ: And then there was—and early on we had played around in an area called Godfrey's Ditch [*laughs*], which was—it was actually a sewage ditch, but it didn't matter to us. I mean, we—you know, we played around—there were little bushes and—I mean, where a long area of bush and weeds, and you could—you know, you could just play in that area very extensively and dream all kinds of—you know, and make tunnels and all that kind of stuff. And so we used to do that. African American kids and I would—you know, we—and I would be there, and they were other—I mean, clearly other white kids doin' the same thing. But there was, like—there—let me put that—there was more integration or at least—than in—where we were where—than Vinegar Hill, which Vinegar Hill was—you know, it was a—it was the African American—and no Caucasian family lived within—I don't know—two hundred yards—three hundred yards of that.

[02:04:06] SL: Were either of the communities large enough to support their own businesses, or was all commerce white-driven and varying degrees of accommodation for the African American community? I mean, did . . .

CJ: More the latter than the former. I mean, there were little—there was a—you know, there was a funeral home. Black funeral home. There was—you know, like, stands where you could go and get Cokes and candy and that sort of thing. But there was never real black enterprise, per se. It was dominated by, you know, the white culture.

[02:04:54] SL: Black church.

CJ: Black church. Absolutely. Several black churches. Several black churches in town. But—and I have to say, I've gone to Monticello in the—not frequently, but I'd go to—and that hasn't really changed. I mean, you go—I go to the Methodist Church now. I'm Episcopalian now, but I—when I go home, my—I'll—you know, it's Methodist Church.

SL: Sure.

CJ: And the last time I was there, I—there were—there was no black families in there. I mean, there just hasn't been integration of the churches and, you know—hey, I'm not making any judgment. I'm just saying it doesn't happen, so it hasn't

happened.

SL: Well, there has to be a desire for that to happen . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . and a need . . .

CJ: Right.

[02:05:44] SL: . . . for that to happen. Well, as long as we're in this mode of those relationships, as you were growing up, were there every any—did you ever see any evidence of, like, the Klan or it—I was so fascinated by your grandfather—or was it your great-grandfather that would interrupt the revivals . . .

CJ: Church services. Right.

SL: . . . and church services. Was there ever any kind of activism as far as segregation goes or . . .



CJ: Well, yes. Now I—the Klan was not active—at least I didn't see evidence of it. But we were—it was almost like a generation or at least apart from that. I mean, I know that my grandfather had been a member—my maternal grandfather before moving to Little Rock was a member of the Klan. And somehow he had [*clears throat*] participated in the Lepanto—wasn't there—there was a Lepanto race riot, right?

SL: Mh-hmm.

CJ: And I think he participated in that. And I heard nothing on my

father's side about that, but I did on my mother's side. And she used to make comments about, you know, it wasn't just a race-oriented organization, that the Klan, at least in McGehee, would use it as ways of fathers doing right by their families and this and that or the other. I don't know. I'm just tellin' you the stories I received.

SL: Yeah, sure.

[02:07:49] CJ: But, no, the Klan wasn't active. On the other hand, it was very segregated, and it was forcefully segregated. I remember when I was about fourteen years old, and it riveted my memory. I was at cafe. My—and I don't know whether my mother was with me or whether—and it was on the outskirts of town. It was on—going down Highway 81, which—there's a—on the outskirts of town, there's Highway 4 and 81 that cross and 4 goes to Wilmar and 81 goes to Star City. And there was a cafe out—and a black man came in this cafe, and he was obviously in distress—I mean, some kind of distress—and he was looking for a restroom and the proprietor, you know, started yelling at him and, you know, using the N word and, you know, "You can't come in here," and just ran—you know, and I was just—I was—you know, I had lived in the environment, but I hadn't seen sort of the virulent mode of it or the expression of it or its

personality. I just hadn't seen it in that way. I was just—I was astounded. I was absolutely astounded me. [*Laughs*] It was a—but I remembered it. It really had an amazing effect on me. And the other was—I think I mentioned that my maternal grandparents lived three blocks from Central, and as I said, we used to spend a lot of time going up there. And I remember when Central—you know, when the—[19]50s when that—when the Central High crisis occurred and how all those people—I mean, people who looked like me, you know, did what they were doing, and [*unclear word*] you know, and I've become [*unclear words*]. I know Ernie Green and others who were—I don't know if you've interviewed Ernie.

SL: We've—we videotaped him . . .

CJ: Oh, have you?

SL: . . . and the Nine.

CJ: Oh, great.

SL: It was not—we haven't had any interviews with them, but we've covered their events and done . . .

CJ: Oh, okay.

SL: . . . multicamera shoots and . . .

[02:10:36] CJ: Well, I know Ernie. We've known each other for a long time. And—but my point is that that was also sort of a

really crystallized event in seeing that. That affected me, you know. And . . .

SL: So did you experience any of that firsthand, or was it just by television or . . .

CJ: Television and also by being—I mean, we wouldn't—I—when I would visit my grandparents, they wouldn't let us go out, you know—get in—and they kept us in during all of that stuff, so we—I never—other than just seeing people and seein' 'em on TV and see 'em walking down the street, you know, in front of my grandparents'. But, you know, it was a moment. It was clearly a moment.

[02:11:15] SL: Were there folks in Monticello that felt like they needed, you know, a pilgrimage to Little Rock at that time? I mean, I—we've . . .

CJ: I was young.

SL: . . . I've heard . . .

CJ: I was a little young.

SL: . . . heard some stories of, you know, guys—you know, and gettin' in their pickups with their guns . . .

CJ: Oh . . .

SL: . . . to go . . .

CJ: . . . you mean on the other side.

SL: Yeah.

CJ: No, I—we never had that. Monticello was always a sort of—a more subtle community. And, I mean, it wasn't quite—I always felt that there wasn't—and Monticello wasn't like a Dermott or a McGehee. I'm not—in general—I'm just telling you sort of the personality of—and so it didn't mean that it wasn't as strong, it was just always a little more subtle and unspoken. But I never heard of anyone getting in there—you know, [*unclear word*] going up and being part of the resistance movement in Little Rock Central.

[02:12:15] SL: So what about the—did you ever take up the newspaper—reading the newspaper? Or did you ever have any kind of jobs, growing up in Monticello?

CJ: Yeah, I had some jobs.

SL: What did you . . .

CJ: I had a paper route for a while. And then I worked at a dry-goods store for a while—you know, sellin' shoes and doin' sorta [sort of]—that sort of thing. But they were—it was always part-time. It was either I did it on a—I'm talkin' about this—paper route you don't do it part time, but oh, it would either be—it would be Saturdays or Christmas—holidays and that sort of . . .

SL: Right.

CJ: . . . that sort of thing.

SL: Now paper the route, though—was that an everyday thing?

Why . . .

[02:13:18] CJ: It was every day when I did it. I didn't do it probably more than a number of months. It was a—whenever anything interfered—started to interfere with school, it was just something that my mother wouldn't—she was really focused on that. Even though she didn't have educational accomplishments on her own, she felt that there was a real need to support that. And part of that had come from the Johnson culture that I referred to. I mean, they—my father—he didn't graduate from college, but he went—he attended the University. He attended Hendrix [*unidentified sounds*]. My uncle, who—there were three children in the family—my father, my grand—my uncle and my aunt. And my aunt graduated from college. My uncle graduated from college and graduated from law school here—did very well in law school here. And then my father, who as I said, didn't graduate from college, but attended both Hendrix—well, he attended UAM—well, it was Arkansas A&M then—Hendrix—I mean, Arkansas A&M and the University. So—you know, in those days that's a—that was a . . .

SL: That's a lot of education for those days.

[02:14:46] CJ: Yeah, that was a lot. And so that got communicated to my mother that that was—if you're part of the Johnson family, you better get settled on—and education was much more important than money—to that—I mean, that—in that environment. And—but I know I'm getting off the subject, but that . . .

SL: No, no.

CJ: . . . that was the sort of thing—there were things that started interfering with my getting to school for a certain program or doing this or whatever 'cause I think I've sort of communi— school was sort of the center of not only our life, but [*clears throat*] what my mother felt was critical. And in all of its forms. I mean, extracurricular activities, and when we started playin' sports, my mother would not miss an event.

[02:15:40] SL: So that probably happened in junior high school—the athletics and sport—sporting side of things?

CJ: Mh-hmm. [*Drinks water*]

SL: They had a little program here in grade school called Kiwanis Club football.

CJ: Right. Mh-hmm.

SL: And I actually was wearing a football uniform as early as first grade. [*Laughs*]

CJ: Right, right.

SL: But you've mentioned baseball.

CJ: We didn't have that.

SL: That you were growing up playing baseball in the backfield.

CJ: Right.

[02:16:07] SL: When did organized sports enter your life?

CJ: Hmm, when I was in junior high. And I was larger. I got my growth early, and so when I was in junior high, I was rather large for—on a relative basis. And so I—you know, I played football and basketball and ran track, you know—swam—whatever I did. I sort of did all of it. And then as I got through, over time, I started focusing on football, and that's what I—and by the time I was a junior or senior, that's really a—basically all I really focused on.

[02:17:02] SL: Now swimming is a bit unusual. Was there a pool—a school pool?

CJ: Yeah, there was a pool. There was a pool.

SL: That's pretty neat.

CJ: There was a pool in Monticello and—but, actually, Warren had a swim team and when—and I was a member of the Warren swim—and my mother—this gives you an idea of how much my mother was really—on giving us as many opportunities as she

could. And she used to drive me over to Warren to—not only for practices—and it was eighteen miles away. I know it doesn't sound like a lot, but you know, and I . . .

SL: That is a lot.

[02:17:40] CJ: And it'd be for practices, and then, you know, I would go on these swim trips, you know, to Little Rock and Fort Smith and various places. So I was a member of the Warren Swim Club, and then eventually Monticello got its own swim club. And so I did that, but it was—football—later on—and I swam up until I—till right before I went to college. And I . . .

SL: What events . . .

CJ: [*Unclear words*].

SL: . . . did you do in swimming?

CJ: You name 'em. I—you know, it was freestyle—the individual medley, which was—I was never very good on the backstroke but the breaststroke, butterfly, and freestyle. And then I would—I was pretty fast in terms of freestyle, and so I would do the—at that time there were fifty meter, the hundred-meter freestyle. So—and occa—and often I would do the butterfly—like, the fifty-meter butterfly, but that was—and I had—I just couldn't get—my arms weren't—I didn't—my arms aren't—I'm sort of stubby arms, and so [*SL laughs*] I ended up—it just didn't

work very well for me. For me. So that didn't—but, you know, I—but I—football, therefore, became my sort of the key.

SL: What position?

CJ: Well, I played—when I was in high school, I played fullback and inside linebacker. And then when I went to college, I—my first two years I was in college, I went to Harvard College—and I played guard and inside linebacker.

[02:19:42] SL: Now correct me if I'm wrong, but was that a football scholarship?

CJ: No, they didn't give . . .

SL: No, it was not?

CJ: That was—they didn't give football scholarships.

SL: Okay.



CJ: But I was—let me put it this way—I know that I got into Harvard for more than just my academics. I mean . . .

SL: That's kind of what I was . . .

CJ: . . . I was an academic, but I mean, I was—you know, I did reasonably well in school. And in my later years. And—but my football—I had played in the Arkansas All-Star Game, and I started in the Arkansas All-Star Game. And when Jon Brittenum was the—I was the fullback when Jon Brittenum was the quarterback and Bobby Nix was the left halfback, and I played

fullback. And a person named Williams—Billy Williams—he played in the AIC—Arkansas Intercollegiate Conference—and he was the right halfback. And so I—that was really important to me. I mean, football was sort of my life for a period of time when I was like that. And I had to give it up when I got an injury when I was at Harvard. I had a bad concussion, and I was—I lost a little reaction time on my right side. And the doctor at the Boston University Hospital said . . .

SL: You're done.

[02:21:06] CJ: . . . "Don't even get in another fight." So [SL *laughs*]—"And you can't play football and don't get in another fight." So—it was—I know I'm getting off the [*laughs*] subject, but . . .

SL: No, no, this is good. The—first of all, I have to comment about—the fullback position is a—kind of a brutal—as far as the backfield goes . . .

CJ: I was a brutal guy.

SL: As many times or not . . .

CJ: I was a brutal guy.

SL: . . . you're clearing out the hole.

CJ: Well, in this case, I ran the ball a lot.

SL: You did?

CJ: I ran the ball, yeah. That was the position at that time. I've played inside linebacker. I loved bodily—I loved contact, and I was—and it was really devastating to me when I gave up football. It was just—it had—it just had a—I was—it was hard 'cause I—it was such—it—for—you know, when you're young and in co—high school and then in college, and that is sort of your focus, and then that's taken away, it was very—it was a wrenching time. But, no, it was the bodily contact. I loved it. I really—I loved tackling, and I loved running over people, and it was . . .

SL: A headhunter.

CJ: It was a—it was great.

SL: The . . .

[02:22:26] CJ: And in the Arkansas All-Star Game, they put me on the position of monster man.

SL: Ah.

CJ: I was monster man.

SL: That was my position.

CJ: Oh, monster man?

SL: Uh-huh. Well, that was a middle linebacker in my—in our defense.

CJ: Oh, okay.

SL: It was a 5-3, and . . .

CJ: Well, the one they did in the Arkansas . . .

SL: It was kind of a walkaway . . .

CJ: . . . All-Star Game is you go on the side . . .

SL: The strong . . .

CJ: . . . the wide side of the field. And so—anyway—and I loved—
but, anyway, I'm probably gettin' off the subject, but . . .

SL: [*Laughter*] No, I could talk football with you all day.

[02:22:57] CJ: It was a wonderful experience . . .

SL: No, I under . . .

CJ: . . . and I'm glad I did it, but I'm also actually glad I got hurt
because it changed my view. I needed—you know, as I said, I
was—it was sophomore of my—when I was at Harvard, and I got
hurt, and I was told, "You never play the game again." And it
caused me to really alter my worldview, and it took a while for
me to do that. And the University of Arkansas was very, very
helpful to me 'cause I was on that. I left Harvard for a variety of
reasons. I just—but that had something to do with it. I was—
and so—and I came here, and I explored. I mean, I breathed,
and I explored, and by the time I left here, I was really a
different person, and I had gone through that experience of
having given up something that was very precious to me. And

I'm—'cause I was given the opportunity to come to Arkansas. I know I look—I'm a hundred and fifty-three pounds now, but when I played college ball, I was two-ten.

SL: Wow!

[02:24:18] CJ: And so, anyway, that—and I had the opportunity to come here, but—and I went to Harvard instead. And, actually, I'm glad I did that instead as well. But, anyway, I—Arkansas—the university was really very important in terms of my making a transition of who I was, and I don't know how much I would've done without that kind of transition. And I—and it helped me enormously.

SL: So . . .

CJ: I got off the subject.

SL: Well, that's all right.

CJ: Yeah. [*Laughs*]

SL: I mean, you know, it's the athletics side of growing up—especially is what I would still say considered a youngster . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: It shifts your attention quite a bit and dominates your life. And in football in particular, there's two-a-days. There's spring workout, and there usually some kind of off-season routine that you're responsible for.

CJ: Mh-hmm.

[02:25:22] SL: And, you know, of course, there's the—all the goal-setting and having success and dealing with failure. I mean, it's a whole nother [another] [*smacks lips*] . . .

CJ: Kingdom. [*Laughs*]

SL: Kingdom. It is.

CJ: Yeah, it is.

SL: It is.

CJ: It is a kingdom.

SL: And a way of education. There's something about it that . . .

CJ: Right. And the one thing . . .

SL: And it's also a social thing, too.

CJ: Right.

SL: It's a . . .

CJ: It is.

SL: Yeah.

[02:25:49] CJ: But it also—just—let me just make one point. With me, I fell in love—I mean, not [*laughs*—but I fell in love with my coach. I had a coach who had actually been—he was—he had played here under a guy named Jack Mitchell, I think . . .

SL: Yeah.

CJ: . . . was the coach.

SL: Sure.

CJ: And . . .

[02:26:09] SL: What was your coach's name?

CJ: Charlie Whitworth.

SL: Okay.

CJ: He played—and he did very well here. He started, I think, for three years as a end here. And I thought the world of him. I—he was my—he had come directly from there to Monticello, and he and I just got along just magnificently. And, you know, as I said, I didn't have a father, and I didn't really have any male figure. And he was—he filled that for me in a—in such a significant way. And, I mean, on mornings when he knew that I was gonna be riding a bicycle to school, and it would be raining or whatever, he would actually come and, you know, we'd put—he'd put the bicycle in the back end of the—of his car and drive me, and then he would—he always was able because people remembered him, he wouldn't—he would come to Fayetteville and be able to go to the games and get tickets and whatever, and he would bring me. And then the day after a ball game—even when I was a sophomore—this was—you know, and I played quarterback when I sophomore, and I'd go to his house and, I mean, it's that—you know, it became more than that. It

was like . . .

SL: Part of the family.

[02:27:33] CJ: He was a part of the family. Definitely. I was part of his family, and he was definitely part of [*laughs*] my family. So he was—he had a—he had an extraordinary influence on me, and it was a—and—no, but he made no—he could've really forced me to come to the university if he had wanted to—I mean, emotionally . . .

SL: Yeah.

[02:27:55] CJ: . . . he could have. And the idea—I mean, he's—he wasn't the kind of person that you would think, you know, was—but it was a—but he didn't force it, you know. So, anyway, I'm—but that was a—it was a—that was a very—and I—I'm sure I'm speaking for—and actually, you know, I'm doing a poetry reading here today, and the first poem that I'm reading is called "Friday Nights On Hyatt Field," and it's a poem about, you know, playing a football game on Friday night in the South. And so, anyway—I'm just saying that it was an important—very, very important time. I mean—so—and the way you're articulating it, it's correct as well. I mean, it's more than just a game.

SL: Yeah. Did your best friends play football, too?

CJ: Yeah, not all of them. I had a number of friends who played in

the band, and—but one thing—it—when we were in school, and I know [*unclear words*]*—*but we could go—when we were seniors in high school, we could go to the UAM. We could go to—and take classes at the University of Arkansas at Monticello. And so there were a number of us who did that as well, so I had a lot of friends who were focused on that side. But most of my friends played sports and, particularly, football. And we were district champions there our senior year in high school and that caused a coalescence of a lotta [*lot of*]*—*you know, that sort of thing.

[02:29:48] SL: Misters Trotter and Walk . . .

CJ: Trotter did not play football. Warren Stephenson played end. So—and was very good. He was a very good end.

[02:30:07] SL: Who was your biggest rival in high school? What team? What school?



CJ: I would have to say the Warren Lumberjacks. They were eighteen miles away, and they always had a good—they had a very good team and—but they were—it boiled—it—when we had—we were undefeated—they were undefeated the senior year, [*SL laughs*] and they were rated, like, number one in the state, A division. It was A division then. And we were rated, like, two or three—somethin' like that. And so the two—and, you know, eighteen miles away, you can imagine there's lots—

but we—and we were sort of two or three of the top best A-division teams that year in the state, and two things I found that happened—really, very significant. One was that we had over three thousand people come to that game. There's a town of, you know, like, four thousand five hundred in ours, and they had—they have something similar—a little less—but that's how—I mean, that's how much Friday night football means, and you know, I mean, it was just an incredible—and the other thing is we—it boiled over—and I'm gonna tell this story [*unclear words*]*—*but we went to Key Club meeting on Monday night before the game on Friday, and some of us had the great—the idea of going to Warren and painting up their high school—you know, painting—put "Monticello's gonna win" and all this sort of stuff.

SL: Blue and white.

[02:31:55] CJ: And we went [*SL laughs*]*—*and we were—and my—by that time, my mother had gotten a car, and we were in my car. And I had dated a girl in Warren, so most people knew my car over there. So we drive—we go over, and we launch in—and what—also, all of us were really smart—we wore our jerseys that we would be wearing on Friday night, and [*laughter*] so we started—and we started painting up the building. We painted up

buses. And as I was getting out of the bus lot—and someone was driving my car. I was doing a lot of the painting, and they were driving around to pick us up—I saw the big figure come running at me, and I didn't realize who it was at the time. And it—we were close to a ditch, and he swung at me, and I ducked, and his own momentum threw him into the ditch. I jumped in the car, and we made it all the way back to Monticello—and [*SL laughs*] without, you know, being—anyone catching up with us. [02:33:10] And by that time the principal of our town [CJ edit: school]knew who it was who had done it. They called my mother and asked me to come—and what it—it was actually the big [*unclear words*] in there, and his name was Mr. Small, although he wasn't, and he was the superintendent of schools in Warren, and his own momentum had thrown him in the ditch, but he wrenched his knee, and he ended up bein' in a—in the hospital. And it really caused a lot—I mean, this was a big deal. And the next day [*SL laughs*] the principal calls me, you know, 'cause—he calls me in, and we have this discussion. Then the football coach—and this is what I mean by that Charlie Whitworth—he calls me in, and I was captain of the team, and all that. And he said, "I—you know, it was not smart of you to do this." I mean, I—"you know this, Chester. It wasn't smart,

and you shouldn't have done it. But I'll tell you this, if that's the worst you ever do, you won't be much of a man." That was a pretty [SL laughs] unusual thing to say, I thought. It really, you know, just sort of captured it. But then the other thing that was interesting is that both towns got upset about—"Well, how was this thing goin' to mushroom?" [SL laughs] And so the mayor came to town—came to the school to address—Monticello's mayor—to address the schools. I was president of the student body, so I had to introduce the mayor. [Laughter]

SL: The criminal! Introduce the warden, ?so to speak?.

[02:34:42] CJ: [Laughs] I had to introduce—yeah, exactly. I had to introduce him. But they won, but they only beat us by about thirty—they—we led up until the last thirty seconds, and they beat us by 13-7. But [SL laughs and claps hands] it was a great story.

SL: That's a good story. [CJ laughs] Great confession. [Claps hands] Okay, look, you've got to go.

CJ: Yeah.

SL: So we have to stop.

CJ: I'm sorry, but I'm about [unclear words]. I needed to tell the story, though.

SL: I know, and I [CJ laughs] thought I effectively set that up for

you.

CJ: Yeah.

SL: I knew . . .

CJ: Yeah, you did.

SL: . . . this story.

CJ: Oh, you did?

SL: Yes, I did.

CJ: Hey! Wow! [*Laughs*]

TM: Stoppin' tape.

[02:35:18 End of interview]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]