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Arkansas Memories Project

Interview with

William F. [Casey] Laman
North Little Rock, Arkansas
14 June 2001

Interviewer: Roy Reed

Roy Reed: This is William F. "Casey" Laman and Roy Reed on June 14, 2001 in North Little Rock. We are getting ready to talk about Mayor Laman's life and times. Do we have your permission to turn this interview over to the University of Arkansas archives?

William F. "Casey" Laman: Certainly you do.

RR: Okay, thank you. Start at the beginning, Casey. Tell me when you were born, to whom, and your upbringing.

WL: I was born October 20, 1913, halfway between Jacksonville and Cabot, Pulaski County, Arkansas.

RR: October what?

WL: October 20.

RR: Twenty.

WL: 1913.

RR: 1913.

WL: My dad had a small farm located just about halfway between these two cities, Jacksonville and Cabot, on that old --- it was a gravel road then. It was just a rock

and gravel country road. War broke out in 1918. Papa came down here to work in Camp Robinson. He drove a jitney. It cost a nickel to ride from Camp Robinson over to Little Rock to Markham and Main. They'd pick you up there at the base. It was Camp Pike then. It wasn't called Camp Robinson. You could ride from Camp Pike to Markham and Main for five cents. I guess the slang word for a nickel was a jitney.

RR: I never knew . . .

WL: That's why they called it the old jitney. He drove that, I guess, for a couple of years and then, finally, we moved down here.

RR: His name was Jim.

WL: Jim Laman.

RR: What was his . . . ?

WL: And Mama was Anna. James N. James Newton.

RR: And Anna?

WL: Anna Fewell. F-E-W-E- double L. That's my middle name. That's what the "F" stands for, my mother's maiden name.

RR: Yes. Okay. So that's when you all moved to North Little Rock.

WL: That's right. But when he quit driving the jitney --- I don't know why --- maybe he wasn't making enough, or maybe the war was over and the camp wasn't operating like they had. Anyway, the first time --- I remember much of it --- is I remember him driving the jitney because I would ride with him sometimes in the evenings. Not before dark, but in the evenings he would come by and tell Mother something or she'd want to tell him something and then I'd ride with him for a

while. The next I knew, he was working at night at Missouri --- Pacific [Railway] as a machinist's helper. He worked from 3:00 until 11:00 as a machinist's helper at Mo-Pac. He held that job until they had the strike, I believe, in 1922. That's when all the workmen went out on a strike. The unions were supposed to get together and the roadmen --- the brakemen, conductors and engineers were --- supposed to join the roundhouse crew --- the machinists, helpers and all that --- and all of them go out on a strike. Right at the last minute, the roadmen decided they wouldn't go out, but the others did go. Papa went out on strike with them and, of course, they fought that thing for over a year. They lost the strike because the railroad brought people in here to take the place of the machinists and helpers and everything. As a side remark, let me make a skip. I was campaigning, and --- I met the union group over in Little Rock off Cantrell Road. It was the painters, plasterers, plumbers --- the Consolidated Central Union, or something --- I forgot the name of the organization. It was a whole group of trade people. They understood that I was opposed to unions, and I said, "No, I'm not opposed to unions at all." And they said, "Well, we understood that you were against unions. We can't support you if you're against the unions." I said, "Let me tell you something. My dad went out on strike in 1922 to protect this union and he's still on strike. Some of you fellows are sitting here now, and your fathers are scabs they brought in from Georgia and Alabama on trains to take the place of Papa and his friends who went out on strike. Your daddies were the scabs who helped them break the strike. Don't talk to me about being union." That ended that discussion.

RR: [Laughs]. I'll bet.

WL: One of them said [center of it, and you might not comprehend it??]. They said, "Do you want the union vote?" I said, "I want it, but I didn't come over here to kiss your butts to get it." They said, "Well, we didn't know you'd let us organize." I said, "You can organize anytime you want to on your time, early in the morning or after working hours. Not on the city's time." They said, "Well, great. Then we'll be the voice of the workmen." I said, "No, not as long as I'm the mayor, you won't." I said, "The people hired me to be the spokesman for the city. I'm going to be that as long as I'm there." He asked, "What good would it do them to join the union?" I said, "That's your problem." And, with that, we returned to the meeting, and I didn't get the union vote.

RR: [Laughs]. Okay.

WL: Ross Lawhon got that vote.

RR: You ran against Ross?

WL: He ran against me. I was in there already. [Laughs].

RR: Oh, and he came back then.

WL: He came back from Texas.

RR: What year would that have been?

WL: Oh, it was in the early 1960s.

RR: Oh, that was after I had gone. Okay. All right. Let's save that for a little later on.

Let's catch up on . . .

WL: Yes. I've got a couple of good stories about that.

RR: [Laughs]. Well, in fact, Ross was one of the things I wanted to ask you about.

WL: Okay.

RR: Let me catch up on the early years. I assume you went to school here in North Little Rock.

WL: I went to old Baring Cross Grade School. I lived right across the street from it. 1207 West 10th. I lived there until I married in 1933, the very depth of the depression.

RR: And . . .

WL: The high school --- we didn't have but one high school and it was out on Fourth Street.

RR: North Little Rock High School?

WL: Yes.

RR: Yes. Did you go to college?

WL: I finished high school here in 1930. Ours was the first graduating class from the new high school out on what we call "Wildcat Hill" in 1930. The building wasn't completely finished. They didn't have sidewalks. We had wooden duck boards, they called them, for us to walk on to keep out of the mud. I went to junior college for my first two years, then to the university for my third year, then I had to quit because of the Depression.

WL: Nobody had any money --- you couldn't get a job at a dollar a day. That would have been [a position?] to get a job then for a dollar a day.

RR: And you had married, then?

WL: I married, then, in September 1933. I was making \$10 a week when I married.

RR: Doing what?

WL: Working in our furniture business. Our family had a furniture business.

RR: Right.

WL: After they lost the strike. My Dad went to work for the old Brooks Furniture Company in North Little Rock and worked for him for two years, then went into business for himself.

RR: On Main Street.

WL: We went to Little Rock, out in the east end of Little Rock, first --- with a very small store and then came over to the store we had in 1929 on Main Street.

RR: And you married Arlene?

WL: Arlene Ellis.

RR: Okay. Now go ahead and tell me about the rest of your schooling.

WL: I went to the university then. I'd go up for summer school. I would save enough that I could go to one summer school. From 1934 to 1937 I enrolled for summer school for 6 hours credit three each time, then one 12 months from June, 1938 through May, 1939. I graduated with a bachelor of science degree. I jerked sodas at Argenta Drug before I went to work for my dad and, of course, in my years at junior college I was a soda jerk in the evening. I'd work one evening until 6:00 and the next day I had to work from 1:00 until 10:00. We'd alternate --- the soda jerks would alternate. Then I quit and went to work at our furniture store. I was making seven dollars a week at the drug store for Mr. Joe Poch and received \$10.00 a week at Laman's.

RR: Joe . . .

WL: P-O-C-H. The Argenta Drug Store was advertised as the oldest drug store west of the Mississippi River, and they still claim that, I believe.

RR: I saw it --- down there at the corner of Main and . . .

WL: It's still there. It's still being operated. Joe Poch's son-in-law sold it to the fellow who's operating it now. It's stayed in his family all these years.

RR: I used to eat lunch there.

WL: Mr. Poch was really a character. He was a great guy. He was a big, big Lions Club member. He had all the honors that the Lions Club could give you, but he really watched his money. I don't know what adjective could describe that-- parsimonious, stingy, or what? Close, I say. He was sharp with it.

RR: [Laughs]. All right.

WL: I'll give you one example. When I was up at the soda fountain --- you'd work alone and they would give you break sometimes. Cleve Powell was studying pharmacy under Joe Poch. He'd come up and give me a relief. I left one night with Angelo Ritchie. He was the pharmacist, and I was at the soda fountain, and we would work until ten o'clock. One night we closed, and when I came to work the next morning at eight o'clock, Mr. Poch called up and said, "William, turn the fan off." There was a ceiling fan above the soda fountain. I said, "What is it?" He said, "Turn the fan off. You left it on last night. You've got to keep it off as many hours as it was on." So every time I was working by myself, he'd say, "William," and I'd reach up and cut off the ceiling fan until he got his time back and broke even with the electric department. And when the other soda jerk would come up to work [laughter], he'd reach up and turn the fan on. I couldn't have the fan while I was working there. But he was a great guy. I admired Mr. Poch. He was a nice to everybody.

RR: Well. So you got your degree from the university what year?

WL: 1939.

RR: 1939.

WL: [Laughs]. When I tell someone it took me nine years to get a degree, I hasten to say, "They weren't consecutive." [Laughs].

RR: Oh.

WL: On again, off again, go to summer school --- one time I had enough to go to two summer schools. I went up in June of 1938 and went to two summer schools and right into regular session then --- we started in September then—and went until graduation in 1939. I tutored for twenty --- five cents an hour. Arlene, my wife, typed for ten cents a page. I had her name on every bulletin board up there. "Perfect copy --- ten cents a page." And she, smiling, would say that she had the widest margins, top, bottom and sides, as anyone on the campus. The idea of being "poor" wasn't --- it didn't seem to matter. We were all in the same boat. Nobody had any money and everybody was just scratching to get by, just barely making it.

RR: What did you study?

WL: I had a double major. I had a major in botany and one in chemistry. I started out with pre-med --- two years at the junior college. The Depression lasted, and there was no idea of working to get a job to go to med school. They had all their positions over there, like cleaning the rats' cages and cleaning out everything --- their helpers --- but the students got the choice of those jobs. Nobody else had a job for you. People would stand in line at 4:00 in the morning to get the early

edition of the *Gazette*, which was a morning paper, to see if there were any jobs offered. If there was one job offer, there would be fifty people over there by 4:30 a.m. the next morning, waiting to be interviewed.

RR: Boy.

WL: But we all lived through it, and I think we're probably better off for it. My grandchildren couldn't understand how I could live and be married on \$10 a week. I said, "It's not how much you make. It's what you can do with what you bring home. You don't need to feel poor unless you let your wants get ahead of how much you can pay for." I told them that bread was a nickel a loaf. Gasoline was thirteen cents. I rented a four --- room house for \$10 a month. It took two of us to bring \$5 worth of groceries out of the grocery store. My Grandson said "Golly, grandfather, it cost us \$22 to have a date and take her out to the show and go have a hamburger after that. You might as well have \$25 if you count your gasoline." He couldn't see how you could live on \$10 a week. [Laughs]. He just couldn't believe it.

RR: Yes. You had a brother who . . .

WL: I had a brother who was two years older.

RR: . . . went to medical school. His name was John?

WL: John. John Edward.

RR: Is he still practicing medicine?

WL: No, he's retired. And I have a sister named Doris.

RR: D-O-R-I-S?

WL: Yes.

RR: I never knew her. I've met your brother.

WL: No, she lived up East. She married a Yankee and moved up East.

RR: Okay. So you got out of the university in 1939. Bring it forward.

WL: I worked for the furniture business until I was drafted. I worked first at the assessor's office. I was a deputy assessor for Bruce Huddleston, who was the assessor. I worked over there until just about the time that I knew the draft was going to be breathing down my neck. I left and went back to the furniture store, and then my draft number came up. I went into the service in 1943.

RR: Army?

WL: I was in the air force.

RR: Air force.

WL: Of course, you know, through basic training you're just "G.I."

RR: Just army.

WL: Yes. I was stationed down in Texas for my basic training.

RR: What base would that have been?

WL: Wichita Falls

RR: After your basic training, where did they send you?

WL: I went from there to radio school in South Dakota, Sioux Falls, South Dakota. I stayed there seven months. I was naïve enough when the fellow on the line said, "You're going up for interviews to be assigned." We went up, and I thought that you'd go in, you'd give your background, what you're interested in, maybe take a little test and be talked to, and be judged your personality and your aptitude, and you'd be assigned to something. Well, I was abruptly apprised of the fact that that

wasn't the way it was going to be. We lined up on the bench and every once in a while we heard "Next!" And everybody would move up one. "Next!" And you'd move up one about every three or four minutes. "Next!" And I was on the end of the bench, and I was next. I went up there and he first said, "Give your name and your social number." "W. F. Laman, thirty-eight, five, fifteen, nine, ninety --- one, Sir!" --- You could punch me awake at midnight and I would know that army serial number --- Anyway, the interview started, and he said, "You've been designated as an ROMG." I said, "What's that?" He said, "Radio operator mechanic gun." I didn't know what that was. He said, "You've been assigned as radio operator." I said, "I don't know anything about radio. I've got a radio. If it goes bad, I call the man and get it fixed. I can't repair radios." He said, "Hell, we got a sergeant who's going to teach you all about it, Laman! Next! You're a radio operator. Move it." And our interview was over. [Laughs].

RR: [Laughs]. That's how you became a radio operator.

WL: My interview and my aptitude, I read in the newspaper that they'd never put a square peg in a round hole. And if you ever saw a square peg trying to get fitted in a round hole, I was it. I even resigned at the air force once. [Laughter]. That didn't last long, either.

WL: We stayed down there, I guess, a couple or three months. We built roads, we cut grass, we did everything that came down the road. The most antagonizing thing, I guess that happened to us was we were building roads out of seashells, crushed shells. Each one of us had a tamper that was about twelve inches square with a handle on a metal base, and you go along tamping the shells into the ground. We

would pass two of the barracks that had German prisoners. They were lolled around out on the grass under the shade, drinking cold drinks and smoking, and we were out in the hot sun. We wondered who was going to win the war! [Laughter]. We had explicit instructions: "Don't open your head when you pass those barracks. No matter what is said, what is done, what gestures are made, you are not to open your head—not make one sound. If you want to count, 'Hup, two, three, four,' you can do that until you get past there, but you ignore it." And man, that was hard to do.

RR: I'll bet.

WL: That was hard to do. We stayed there until we got our assignment. Then we went to South Dakota as a radio operator. We went up there in the winter time, and we thought they were putting us on with stuff like, "Isn't this a pleasant day?" –It would be twelve or fourteen below zero. When we piled off that cattle car of a train that we rode up there in, it was cold! I mean, bitter cold. We just had our southern uniforms. They marched us up, forty to a barracks. Forty men fell out. Forty men fell out. We filled two company streets on both sides. One guy said, "What about the heat?" He said, "You got it. All you got to do is bring it in." It was coal, and not many of us had ever seen a coal stove, much less knew how to build a fire. The guy said, "Where's the coal?" He said, "See that hill right out that window?" There was a hill out there about six, eight feet high covered [with] about a foot of snow. He said, "The shovel's there inside that little shed. When you get that snow shoveled off, you can find that coal down there." So we set out trying to make a fire, and that's another whole story. And we learned to keep a

fire going at night. You draft it, you cover the coals with ashes, you do this and that. But it was a revelation to all of us trying to build a coal stove fire. It was a wooden barracks, not a brick. Just wood with tar paper on the outside. Bitter cold.

RR: Did you spend the rest of the war there?

WL: No, we went from Sioux Falls to Yuma, AZ. We hadn't flown a plane yet. We went down to Yuma, Arizona, on B-17s. I finished up on B-17s, finished my training on B-17s. From Yuma, we went to Dyersburg, Tennessee. Yuma was hot. It was cold at night and hot, hot, hot in the summer. For some unaccountable reason, every week or so they would change the way we would wear our uniforms. Sometimes it would be long sleeves, and you'd have to have your jacket on the inside. Of course, it's cooler if your jacket hangs loose and you wear short sleeves. But you know the old quote, "Not to ask why. . . ." And we did it and almost died. [Laughter]. They were trying to let us understand that we were no longer civilians. Not first encountering experiences that made a lasting impression on me. We had a D. I., drill sergeant—a "D. I.," they called them. We were raw recruits. That's why we came from Florida up to this base and learned short-order drill, etc. He had us distance, and you'd get your distance --- put your arm on the other guy's shoulders, you know

RR: Yes.

WL: You start learning close-order drill. This guy was really heavy --- what he called, "A black." --- "Hup, a black!" and you'd turn at an angle and go --- it was an oblique angle.

RR: Yes.

WL: I was getting prepared. I was clumsy, and I thought sure he was going to holler, "a black." He ordered, "About face," and I went "A black" and knocked the gun down out of the other guy's hand and knocked him in the head! [Laughs] He said, "Sergeant, front and center!" They opened up, and I went up through the ranks. I had to march by myself for about five minutes up there. "Hay foot, straw foot," he called it. [Laughs] And the same guy, about a week after that—he cursed constantly. It was all abusive curse words. Then one day I said, "Sergeant, we don't have to take that kind of abusive language from you. There's no occasion for it." He said, "Troops, halt!" He called me front and center. He turned [?] and said, "Take over the troops." Then we went to the [?]. The first one said, "What's your problem?" He said, "We got us a smart ass here, sir." He told him what it was. He said, "Well, put him on KP [kitchen police] for a week, and he'll learn. So I pulled KP for a week. [Laughter]

RR: Now, here you were, thirty years old at this time . . .

WL: I was twenty-nine at that time. They started calling me "Pop," and I stopped that right off the reel.

RR: Most of these were probably just kids.

WL: Eighteen, nineteen, twenty. I had to really strain and keep up on physical training. Running. Ten-mile hikes with full pack. Of course, we tried to get by --- empty our packs and stuff clothes in them so they wouldn't be heavy but you had to have a flask of water and your little ax and spade that you dug a foxhole with the whole bit. It was heavy and jangling. Of course, if you got caught without a "full pack,"

you'd have KP and you didn't get a pass or anything. But we still tried to get by with it.

RR: So where did you end up the war? In Tennessee?

WL: Yes. No, we were sent down to Mississippi, to Gulfport.

RR: Yes.

WL: The reason I went there, after the whole group had gone was that Arlene's mother was sick, and she had died. I asked for a furlough. Red Cross had to send a wire or make a phone call or something as proof that one of my relatives had actually died. I guess that was the usual thing, trying to get a deal to get out. But, anyway, they gave me a pass to come home. I had a ten-day pass to come home. I was home for the funeral, then I applied to the Red Cross to ask for an extension. We had to settle up some debts and get some things settled, like where her [mother?] was going to live and what she was going to do, and that sort of thing. Arlene begged me to see if I could have the time to help her do it. They gave me another two weeks, so I had three weeks. In the meantime, my whole company group had gone down to Gulfport, Mississippi. We did nothing down there. There was nothing to do. We were all waiting to be shipped somewhere to get out. Then, one day, it was announced that we were all going to Kansas—up to the Junction City Air Base.

RR: You were getting out on “points.” When you accumulated so many points, you were eligible to get out. The people coming through there were mostly officers and all had been in for a long while. They didn't stay very long. They'd come in a week or two, with their points, they were out and they were gone. I remember

when we landed, there were seven of us who had been together through about four or five other Air Bases, really good buddies. The base commanding officer came in there one day and said, "Who's had experience with working in orderly rooms?" We eyed each other. All seven of us suddenly have been "orderlies in orderly rooms." He asked, "Are you experienced with tech orders?" "Oh, yes," we all answered. "What do you know about tech orders?" I didn't know a tech order from a two-humped camel, but I figured if we were assigned to the orderly room with mostly officers coming along, waiting on their discharge papers, we had a better chance of getting our own discharge papers. Five of us seven were assigned to that orderly, that headquarters guy. That lieutenant said, "Listen, I came in here last week, and I don't know my backside from straight up. If you guys take care of me, I'll take care of you." Every Friday he took leave and had what he called "TDY," temporary duty. . . .And he'd check out a P-51 and fly down to Waco, Texas, where his parents lived. [Laughs] He'd fly back Monday morning, but he got credit for his three-hour flight. He got a three-day paid vacation every weekend. [Laughs]

RR: Yes.

WL: And we were put in charge of the orderly room. The first thing we did was to ask permission to go up and talk with the Adjutant general of the air base. Now, the A.G. could tell a general what to do . . .

RR: Yes.

WL: . . . or what not to do. The A.G. on the base was supreme. He was almighty on the base. Permission, of course, was denied, but we called this adjutant general's

office and gave a fictitious name, "I'm getting some complaints about the mail being delivered late in the afternoon. What's the matter with getting some early mail up here to these men?" "Well, see if you can't beat ten o'clock and I'll be checking with you." Shoot! The next morning, the mail call was announced for 10 o'clock, and from then on everything was fine. [Laughter]. We had a ball. Finally, five on our team and one other guy cooked up a deal. We sat there with very little work to do. Every day a box full of technical orders for the B-17 planes would come in. You'd go to the files and pull out the old orders—anything that applied to a B-17 --- take that out of the file, put it in a box, put the new tech orders in place. In the evening an armed guard would come and pick up those out --- dated tech orders and take them out to the burning area and stand there while those tech orders were burned. And the war was practically over. Anyway, that was a job. Well, you were through with them by eleven o'clock. Well, we hit on this: "We'll work every other day." Three would work Monday, Wednesday and Friday; three worked Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday. A new C.O. on duty one day said to me, "Where's so-and-so?" I said, "This is his day off." He said, "What do you mean, his day off?" I said, "We work every other day. . . . I said, "A lot of VIPs [very important people] come through this office. If they're coming in by air and land here, they come through here." I said, "It was embarrassing for those visitors to see a G.I. just sitting around, six of us, doing nothing. So they arranged for us to take every other day. So we are working every other day." He said, "That makes sense." Didn't embarrass the air force. [Laughter] One day they called us up to the C.O.'s office and told us of our assignment to the next post. A

lot of trouble was being caused by the men who were being discharged. These men were still bitter against the service. They were going to do this and do that, and they'd go around and beat up the first sergeant when he came in to get a drink or something.

RR: Yes.

WL: Then the base officer explained to us that we were still under the jurisdiction of the air force for thirty days after you were discharged. You weren't really discharged. You were dismissed from camp, but you were still controlled by the air base.

RR: Yes.

WL: You still belonged to them.

RR: So you got home when? Summer of 1945?

WL: 1946.

RR: Oh, you were in another month?

WL: Oh, yes.

RR: Okay.

WL: No, not that long. I mean, I was in it 2 ½ years training. Almost all mine was training except the dead time we had in Florida waiting to be assigned somewhere.

RR: Well, I mean, after the war was over in 1945, did you stay on . . .

WL: I stayed until March of 1946.

RR: Okay. And then came home . . .

WL: I came home in March. I was out.

RR: Back to the furniture store?

WL: Yes.

RR: When did you take over the running of the furniture store?

WL: Christie, my child, is called a "baby boomer." I came home in March, and Christie was born in November. I told someone that I get Christie's birthday and our anniversary mixed up. Arlene and I were married on November 4, 1933, and Christie was born on the eighth of November. Someone said, "Boy, you cut that pretty close, didn't you?" I didn't tell them there was twelve years' difference in there. It took us twelve years for Arlene to have one baby.

RR: Yes.

WL: She had four miscarriages in eleven years.

RR: So you came back to the store?

WL: I came back to the furniture store and went to work there.

RR: Your father was still running it?

WL: He worked there, and he stayed there for a year after I came back.

RR: Okay.

WL: He left the furniture store in the fall of 1947.

RR: Okay.

RR: Now, when I first met you—we're skipping forward a while here—when I first met you one day in your furniture store, you had been active in North Little Rock politics for some time before that.

WL: Yes.

RR: Can you remember what it was that got you interested? Was it . . .

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

WL: I get to thinking about politics, thinking about how some elected officials ruled us from the three, four, seven, eight years some of them had been in too long—that sort of thing. We organized the first chapter of the Young Democrats Club of Arkansas.

RR: You mean here in North Little Rock?

WL: Here in North Little Rock.

RR: Who were some of the others?

WL: Somewhere I've got picture of them with their names. I won't remember a single name.

RR: Well, that's all right, then.

WL: I was elected national committeeman. Arlene and I went to Chicago to the National Convention.

WL: Well, that was my first experience on the national political scene, and it was a revelation to see how it operated. We came back, and we held that group together for a long while. Then we had a falling out within the ranks, jealousy here and there, and the opposition was going to organize. One of the girls got a group together and put out the word with the dissenting group to come on down to her house. They were going to organize another Young Democrats Club. They were going to abolish this one. They were going to organize and elect their own officers. So a group of us got together, and the night they had the meeting, we went down to her house, and just went in and said we had come to the meeting to

see about the organization. They voted this, that, and the other. Then they voted on the name, and we recommended the name, "The Cosmopolitan Club." We had the most votes, interestingly enough. We named the group that night, "The Cosmopolitan Club." That was the end of the--[laughs] split-up bipartisan group.

RR: Yes.

WL: Then I got interested in the actual political angle of our school board problem. Christie was to go to school in September. She'd go to school there at Baring Cross, three blocks from our house, where my whole family went to school, an old three-story brick building. The first floor was storage rooms and the janitors lived there --- the janitors' residence --- and the boiler was there. Then you went up one set of wooden steps to the first floor. They called it the first, but it was actually the second floor. Then up to the third floor. It had one set of wooden steps. The school was built in 1913, and the stair steps were hollowed out by the years and years of foot steps on the Pine stairs. They used O-Cedar oil for dust. I don't know if you've ever heard of O-Cedar oil. You put it on dust mops and mop with it.

RR: O . . .

WL: O-Cedar. And they used so much of that stuff that the thing had just turned the darkest brown it could. Our church had just installed a new type of fire escape --- the Baring Cross Baptist Church. It was at 13th and Parker. This was the type of fire escape that you'd hit the door, it flies open, and there's a corkscrew metal tube that makes about two loops around. It's hard to tell that without showing you with my hands how that looped around. [Laughs]. And you shoot out the end of it. It

was just an enclosed sliding board. The kids wanted a fire drill every week so they could hit that sliding board. I went out to the school board meeting one time to ask that a fire escape be built at the Baring Cross School similar to the one at our church. At that time, I was told --- first, you couldn't get into a board meeting without permission. It was a closed board meeting. You sat out front in the auditorium, which is adjacent to the superintendent's office, and you'd have to call ahead of time and get on the agenda so you could be called in. Billy Shelton was the business manager. He attended the meetings. He'd come out and call out your name so you could go in, then, to say your piece. I went in to make my plea for a fire escape. I was told by the chairman that it was a costly thing, that they weren't contemplating any fire escapes in the schools, and they hadn't had a fire in a long while and it wasn't very much of one, and he talks on in that tenor for a while. Finally, one of the vice presidents of the board, Mr. Scott, said, "Laman, the percentage of fires that you have in school where the children are hurt, it's almost negligible. I couldn't even tell you the smallest percentage." I said, "Mr. Scott, I've got one child. I'll never have another one. And if anything happens to her, that's a hundred percent. Now, don't talk about percentages. That's a hundred percent." I said, "What price do you place on the life of a child?" And the president said, "If you don't like the way we run this thing, maybe you ought to be on the board and see what you can do." I had never dreamed of holding political position. About three seconds went by, and I said, "I don't know who runs for a school board position, but you're looking at your opponent. This is my announcement, my public announcement, that I will be a candidate the next time

the school board has a vacancy." The school board election used to be held on Saturday from eight o'clock a.m. until twelve o'clock noon. The PTA [Parent-Teacher Association] members usually were the clerks and judges as volunteers. They didn't get paid for it. That was part of their PTA work to be clerks and judges at school board elections. Anytime any other election came at the time of the school board election, the board would meet and either move the school election up a month or move it back a month or two months. They would never let a school board meeting be held within sixty to ninety days of a general election because it would not be possible to control. A big vote in North Little Rock school board election would be anywhere from seventy-five to a hundred to a hundred and twenty-five. That was a big vote. Of course, that was the teachers and their husbands and their friends and relatives. That was all who ever voted at the school board elections.

RR: Yes.

WL: I announced and ran in the next School Board Election. I stayed there nine years and went through three elections and had opposition two times I ran.

RR: Did you beat an incumbent the first time?

WL: No. He retired.

RR: Okay. But you ran . . .

WL: It was an open position.

RR: Okay. So you were on there nine years?

WL: Nine years. The first board meeting I attended—of course, there was no reporter present— as usual the first order of business was approving the current monthly

bills. A board member would say "I move the bills be allowed and order paid." "Second the motion" Everybody voted, "Yes." A month after that, the same thing. Everybody voted, "Yes." I said, "Wait just a minute. Before you vote—how much bill are we paying here?" Not a word. Had a stack maybe ten inches high out in front of him of these invoices. I said, "How much does this cost? What is it?" The superintendent, Mr. Brawner, said, "Laman, it's just what it costs to run the school for a month. These are our monthly bills." I said, "But how much are they, Mr. Brawner?" He said, "Mr. Shelton," (he was the business manager) "how much are the bills?" Shelton said, "I haven't figured the total of that. It's just the monthly bills. We never figure the totals." Mrs. Messenger, who was the secretary at that time, said, "We don't figure the total. We just bring the bills that are due." I said, "I can't sit here as a director of a business, even a school district that is spending our tax money, and not know how much we're spending each month. I'd like to have a monthly statement, at least, in front of me here." And they said, "We'd have to hire another secretary if we did that." I said, "Well, let's just hire one. We need to know that. I don't know anything about the operation of a school. I want to find out." Next meeting—the second meeting we had—they had two typewritten pages, legal-size, onion-thin typing paper, single spaced, with names and figures. They said, "You are receiving a copy of the financial information for the school district for this month." Everybody looked at it. I looked at mine. They went right on into the meeting, called the roll, did this, that and the other. I'm looking down at this row of figures, just figure after figure —you can imagine two typewritten single spaced typed names and numbers. They

were about ready for adjournment and one of the board members stood up. He went around and I saw him collecting the financial reports. Byron handed him his report. He came around to me, and I said, "What do you want, Mr. Scott?" He said, "I'm picking up this financial information." I had mine rolled into a little scroll. I was kind of tapping on the table as he walked up. I said, "Well, I haven't studied this enough, Mr. Scott, to turn it in yet." And one of the members said, "You can't leave this school board meeting with that. That's school board information." I said, "No, this is public information." I stood up. I said, "Now, I'm going to start out the door with this. I don't know who's going to try to take it away from me. That's going to be your problem." And I just walked right on out the door. That was the end of that meeting. Then Mr. Brawner called me, and I went out there to talk with him, and told him that I'd like to have an agenda --- there wasn't any agenda. They told me, "We don't have agendas," that if Mr. Brawner, the superintendent, wants it brought up at the Board meeting. "If he doesn't bring it up, we don't get to vote on it." Second meeting, I said, "Where is the press?" They said, "We don't allow the press to attend the meetings." I said, "I'm going to bring one next time. He will be my guest." The chairman said, "We'll declare an executive session, and under our rules, we can force him to leave." I said, "You can do that. He'll be waiting right outside the door, and I'll try to tell him everything that happened. And I might not be as objective as you'd like to read about the next morning in the *Gazette*." From then on, we had a *Gazette* reporter there. The *Democrat* came when they wanted to, but most of the time, they copied the *Gazette*.

RR: How do you spell Brawner?

WL: B-R-A-W-N-E-R. R. B. Brawner.

RR: R. B. Brawner?

WL: Yes.

RR: Sounds like the revolution going on.

WL: They asked me at that meeting, "What are you going to do with that financial report?" I said, "I'm going to take it down to my office at the furniture store and study it." I said, "I can't sit here as a new member of the board, trying to learn how it's run, and look at two typewritten pages and come up with any idea of what I'm reading." And Mr. Brawner said, "If you've got any particular business that you want to know that we're trading with, well, I'd be glad to show that to you." That was before I got my list. And I said, "Well, I'm going to get the information if I have to bring my own secretary out here. That's public information. You can't deny access to public information." So the next meeting was the one we had where we didn't have an agenda. They told me that if Brawner didn't bring it up, it wasn't discussed. It took me several meetings before I could get an agenda made, and finally we adopted a rule that an agenda would be mailed out on Thursday before we met on Tuesday. We had night meetings on the first Tuesday of the month. We had to receive that agenda for it. I took that same idea into City Hall. Do you remember they had to do the same thing? When I went down there as mayor, they didn't have an agenda, and they'd pull their ordinance out of their coat pockets and turn it in. Nobody would see it until you laid it on the desk and the clerk started reading it. But that ended my communication with the

school board. They didn't even call my name anymore so I could answer, "Present." They just vision-checked the roll. They paid no more attention to me than if I wasn't there. Mr. Brawner would say something and talk a bit. I'd say, "Mr. Brawner, that's a good idea. I move we adopt that." Complete silence. Not a sound. In a minute, "Let's move this meeting along. What's your next item, Brawner?" He'd bring up something, and they'd move it along, and just before the meeting was about to adjourn, one of them would say, "We never did vote on that other idea of Brawner's. I move we adopt that. Second the motion?" Boy, you could say "scat," and he had a motion and a second.

RR: How many years had it been like that, when the board meetings were closed?

WL: Forever, I guess. They said they'd never had an open meeting. Never had an auction of a school bond issue[?]. That's what really tore it. I said, "We're going to have a public auction of the school bonds, or I'm going to put something on your back that Grandma's soap won't wash off," and we had one. One of the bond brokers told me, "That's the first time in thirty years I've been able to bid on your school bonds.

RR: Always going to the same company?

WL: Who was a good man and always gave them a fair deal, they said. The man told me, "We'd give them the best deal they can get," and I said, "Then you don't mind bidding because you're still going to give them the best deal." But we had a hog-calling auction. I mean, they'd recess the meeting, go use the phone, and come back and bid again. And from then on they had open bidding. The city didn't

have open biddings. Do you remember I had my biddings down in the council meetings, and the clerk wouldn't read the bids?

RR: Yes. Where were the newspapers on this closed meeting?

WL: I don't know.

RR: You can't imagine, nowadays, a public body getting away with that kind of thing.

WL: I don't know. But they told me they didn't allow it, and they didn't. They told me I couldn't bring a reporter in there as personal friend.

RR: Do you remember who you brought to report?

WL: I was trying to think of his name. It's got about five or six letters in it. I'll come up with it before you leave.

RR: And you called the *Gazette* and invited him . . . ?

WL: I called him because he was a city reporter. He sat at our city council meetings all the time. I knew him.

RR: Okay.

WL: And I told him I was going to invite him. I told him, "They're going to be hostile to you." He said, "That won't be news to a newspaper reporter." And you know, before he left—he stayed there three or four years—before he left, he was almost part of the board because something would come up, and he'd say, "Well, now, in Paducah, when that thing came up over in . . .," you know? He'd just horn in. He just made all the difference in the world!

RR: [Laughs]. I ought to know who that was, but I can't—that was a long time before I went to work . . .

WL: He was elderly, and he was single. He was a bachelor.

RR: Well, those were some times. So this was all . . .

WL: They didn't speak to me for over six months. And they even cut Arlene. We'd go to meetings where they had dinners, and even the wives weren't too kind to Arlene, but Arlene was the type—she said, "I'm not going to let them ignore me." And she'd go up and say, "That's a nice outfit," or "I'm glad to see you." She made it a point to be especially nice to anyone who tried to ignore her. She knew what was going on between me and the School Board members.

RR: Yes.

WL: She just said, "I don't believe in that. And there's no need of it."

RR: These other board members—I assume they were substantial members of the community?

WL: Dr. Burns was one. Byron Bogard was one. Mr. Scott—I'll think of his other name—Cameron Feed Mill was one. One worked for the Missouri Pacific—starts with a "B."

RR: Well-known people.

WL: Oh, yes!

RR: Not used to having folks . . .

WL: They didn't have open meetings. When I was the mayor—you might want to get to this later on—when I was the mayor, I went to the NLR Public Housing Authority meeting down in Silver City Courts, and the door was locked. I rattled the door. The chairman, who had been a friend of mine for years—my dad helped create the Housing Board and put him on it --- When he came to the door --- "Ed, unlock the door." He said, "Casey, what do you want?" I said, "I've come to the board

meeting." He said, "This is our monthly board meeting." I said, "Yes, I know." He said, "There's nobody comes to our board meetings." I said, "Are you telling me, as the mayor, I'm not allowed to attend a meeting of the housing authority?" He said, "This is not the city housing authority. This is the federal housing authority." I said, "But I'm the mayor. I'm supposed to know what's going on with our people." He said, "But you can't come to one of these meetings." I said, "I think you've made a mistake." I turned around and walked out. Two council meetings after that, we abolished the housing board and created a new one.

RR: [Laughs]. Casey . . .

WL: I couldn't imagine --- he was telling me that I couldn't come into a public housing meeting!

RR: Back up a little bit and talk about your father's interests in politics.

WL: I don't know what even got him interested in it. We were there in the furniture store a block up from city hall. We were on the same block city hall was in. Our store became --- well, it had been kind of a hangout for railroad people who came to town. People would come in --- the stores always stayed open until ten o'clock at night then on Saturdays. They'd come in and buy their groceries, maybe at six or six-thirty --- bring their groceries in the store and go to the picture show and come out at nine o'clock, pick up their groceries and go home. We were kind of the --- we didn't have the coal stoves and spittoons, but that was the atmosphere that our store seemed to have. The gathering place was in the back end of the store. Anybody looking for anybody would come back there and say, "Is old so-and-so here? Is he coming?" And a lot of the aldermen came in here. They

would discuss problems of the city. I guess they finally talked Dad into running, and maybe he wanted to. I don't know what got him into it at first.

RR: What was the office that he ran for?

WL: Alderman.

RR: And he held that --- was he an alderman for some years?

WL: I believe he was there for three terms. It was only two-year terms then. In 1933--1933, when I went to the University of Arkansas. What got him interested in that, I don't know, unless it was that group in the back of the store. That much is true. I would hear the talk back there, hanging out as a kid. And I told him, "If you'll run --- Papa, it pays \$25 a month. That's \$12.50 a meeting. If you'll run, I'll campaign for you." The fifth ward went from the Arkansas River to 15th Street, west of [Pack?] Avenue. Come up [Pack?] to the railroad at 15th. That was the fifth ward.

RR: Old Baring Cross.

WL: Old Baring Cross. That was it. That was a lot of people. We knew half of them. Papa had been working with them in the shops. He announced--It was an open deal. Mr. Smith, the incumbent, had died. I got out and campaigned, knocked on doors and told them--it wasn't like, "We're selling magazines and I'm working my way through college." But in a way I was working my way--I was getting the \$25 a month that Papa was paid for the Alderman's job. Where the old post office is now, at Fifth and Main, was the city park. The whole block was city park. It had swings and slides, and it had a little gazebo out there. And on Sundays the town band would come down there and play. On Sunday afternoon we'd have a

community sing-in. It was a big thing. Everybody walked down there on Sunday afternoon to hear the band and join in with the old-fashioned singing. Religious songs and all kinds of songs. And I'll tell you how we lost the city park area after a while. Anyway, back to this --- Papa ran and was elected. He sent me his alderman's check. He'd sign it and send it to me. I'd sign it, take it to the bank, and get it cashed. \$25. That went through 1933. 1933 was the depths of the Depression. It came about time for me to start back, and Papa said, "Son, I've got to have this money. I've got to have it. You're going to have to go to work and do something else. I've got to have this alderman's check for \$25." Well, that's when I went to work jerking sodas at the Argenta Drug and got \$7 a week.

RR: Is it raining, or is that your . . . ?

WL: It's the sprinklers, I guess.

RR: Oh, yes. So you were your dad's campaign manager, in effect?

WL: Yes.

RR: And that must have been your first . . .

WL: That was my very first time to indulge in politics.

RR: Yes. When you were twenty years old.

WL: Yes.

RR: Well, you must have met a lot of people.

WL: That kind of started everything with organizing the Young Democrats with.

RR: So then you got elected to the school board. Was that city wide, or was that also by district?

WL: City wide.

RR: So that expanded your constituency, you might say.

WL: That's right. Mr. Prunisky, Mr. John Prunisky, was the owner of the North Little Rock Times. He made and printed my cards for me. He came up to me, "I'm going to print your cards, and I'm not going to charge you anything for them. You're new, you're young, you're eager, and I think you'd make a good board member. I'm going to give you these cards. But let me tell you something about these candidate cards. You watch this while you're campaigning. You'll hand that card to a fellow. He's going to do one of two things. Either he's going to fold it in half and clean his teeth, or he's going to clean his fingernails." And you'd be surprised how much that happens.

RR: [Laughs] The things you learn in politics!

WL: But he gave me the cards for Papa, and I politicked for him.

RR: Yes. So after the school board --- nine years on the school board --- that would take you up to the . . .

WL: 1958. It took me through 1958.

RR: So you were on the school board when I went over to cover North Little Rock. That's where I first met you. You weren't still on the board when you were elected mayor, were you?

WL: Yes. A year. I offered my resignation, and they said, "No, we're not going to accept your resignation. We have checked into it, and it's legal. There is no conflict between the mayor's office and the school board's office. You can hold both offices." They said, "The reason we want you on here is because of this Little Rock incident," that's the way they referred to it. "You've got the

background. We've been talking with these people, trying to work out a program, and we don't want to have to break in a new board [member]. Please stay on one more year. Finish your term through 1958 and help us keep our school district straight." And we didn't have any problems in 1957 or 1958. Now, the third year, four or five blacks did come up the steps to the high school. Coach Burnett and about half of the football team were lined up at the top of the steps. That must have been in 1960 or 1961.

RR: Yes.

WL: They lined up there, and the coach was out there, and it was like the French telling the Germans, "Non de pan pah." "You're not going to pass. Nobody passes."

RR: Yes.

WL: They just turned around quietly and went back.

RR: Now, there was one incident in the fall of 1957 that I covered, because I was covering North Little Rock at that time, and Bruce Wright was the superintendent.

WL: Brawner had resigned and gone down to Texas and headed up the education department of the biggest Methodist church in Dallas. He took our coach with him to head up the youth program because that's a big three- , four- , or five-thousand member Methodist church --- Highland Park Methodist Church in Dallas. And then Bruce Wright assumed that position. We hired a new football coach.

RR: So Bruce Wright was called out to the --- we all heard that something was happening out at the high school. We got there, and there was a small number of black kids, but all boys, as I remember, who had decided, I guess, spontaneously,

I don't know --- that they would go integrate the high school. They had left the black school across the way and come over there. When we got there, the police were on hand and there were some white boys there joined with them, and there was a little dust-up --- nothing serious. But the reason I remember that is because that was the day that I met John Popham of *The New York Times* --- I've told this story a hundred times to my students in journalism about the different styles that reporters have --- John Popham was the Southern correspondent for *The New York Times*, and he had come over to cover Central High, but I hadn't yet met him. Bruce Wright was standing at the top of the steps after the little dust-up. It had been very tense for a few minutes, and it was all over with and all the kids had left. The police had kind of cleared the thing out, and Bruce was standing up there surrounded by this small mob of reporters, me among them. Maybe L. D. Kerr and I were the only ones there who knew Bruce Wright. We started trying to ask him questions. Old Bruce had been so tense that he had temporarily lost his voice, and he couldn't answer the questions.

WL: He was an emotional man.

RR: He was. Yes.

WL: He felt things deeply.

RR: I liked old Bruce.

WL: I did, too.

RR: But we realized there was something wrong. Suddenly, here came this little man, a funny-looking little guy wearing a seersucker suit and a hat pushed way back on the back of his head and his hands jammed in his pockets --- no sign of a

notebook or pen or anything. He came up and stopped right in front of Bruce and just started talking in an accent that I had never heard before in my life. One of those Tidewater Virginia accents . . .

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[Beginning of Tape 2, Side 1]

RR: So he [laughs] turned out to be John Popham, and that was the first time I had ever met the man. As far as I know, he never did take a note that day. Never got out a notebook. I learned later that was his style. He'd just talk and somehow get information. But Bruce --- I used to tell my students --- I saw this guy save a man's life one day.

WL: [Laughs]. I don't doubt it! Bruce took things seriously.

RR: That was the fall of 1957 after Central --- after the [Central High School desegregation crisis].

WL: Yes.

RR: But you say the mayor's election was that same year, 1957?

WL: Yes.

RR: And I had forgotten that.

WL: I was elected in the primary in the summer, you know, as a Democrat. I had to be elected in the general election in November.

RR: Yes. I want to back up and lead into that by getting some background. When I first met you, Alton Perry --- is that his name? He was the mayor?

WL: Yes. Almon. A-L-M-O-N.

RR: Almon. A-L-M-O-N was the way he spelled it. He was the mayor. But before that, there was this famous mayor . . .

WL: Ross Lawhon?

RR: Yes. Now, talk a little about Ross because I gather you had known him from the beginning.

WL: I guess Ross was elected in 1929, probably, the first time. He was elected mayor four times. He'd be elected and run for re-election and get elected. Then they'd throw him out. He'd be gone three or four years and go back to Texas. He'd come back up here and stay long enough to be established as a resident and a citizen and run again. He got elected. He was a very persuasive man. Easily met, he was an outgoing person. If he was anything, he was a typical politician, a back-slapping, hand-greeting, "Hi, how are ya, ol' podnuh?" --- that was his --- everybody was "ol' podnuh." "Ol' podnuh." "How are ya, ol' podnuh? How's your mama? How's your mama?"

RR: Yes.

WL: "Well, what about those young 'uns? What are they doing now?" You know, he was just old homey folks. Everybody liked old Ross. He was wiley and conniving and slicker than bear-greased wheels, but he'd get elected each time.

RR: Yes.

WL: And he came up to run against me. I don't know which term, I guess it was probably my third term. My group kind of got worried about it. "Ol' Ross is coming back." Well, I had a cartoon made that showed a big bull straddling the state line at Texarkana, front feet and horns in Arkansas and the hindquarters in

Texas. And I said, "Watch out! Get prepared! The bull is comin'!" I enjoyed that campaign more than any I had. Ross was a great, old-style political, tub-thumping, shouting politician.

RR: Yes.

WL: "Lawhon Airport? This man out here telling you there's going to be an airport? Airport out here in Argenta? How many of you people got an airplane? Let me see your hands. Hold 'em high. I don't see 'em. Hold 'em really high! Uh-huh. Uh-huh. I don't see any airplane owners out there. He's going to take your tax money and build a little playground out here for these rich guys over here in Little Rock, who are afraid these jets are going to start comin' in, and they want a place where they can fly. He's going to use your money to build them a playground out here! Who's going to vote for that?" "No! No! No!" the crowd would yell. I had another [cartoon] of an old-fashioned itinerant coming along in his covered wagon with pots and pans hanging all over it. You know, the medicine man?

RR: Yes.

WL: Old hound dog trotting between the wheels under the wagon, trotting along. And there he is up there --- had a yellow rose of Texas drooping down on his coat, and the sign reads, "The medicine man has arrived!" [Laughter] Jon Kennedy drew most of those for me. Did you see that last cartoon that Kennedy put in the *Democrat* paper my last week in office in December of 1980?

RR: No.

WL: I've got it hanging on a wall. It's a take-off of my singing Frank Sinatra's song, "I did it my way." It shows me standing on a stage, a sign to one side reads "Final Performance Casey Laman Follies '6 year run.'" "

[Tape Stopped]

RR: "Now, the end is here, so I face . . ." Oh! "I did it my way." Yes. Yes. Oh, that's wonderful!

WL: You know, they'd call me a dictator two or three times.

RR: Yes, I know.

WL: The first time on air they asked me about that. They said, "How do you feel about being called a dictator?" I said, "Lady, anyone fifteen years or older that knows enough knows I am." I said, "They'd asked me, as mayor, to run the city, and I'm going to run it as long as I'm there, and when they get tired of me, they'll get a new one. But while I'm there, I'm going to be a dictator. I'm a benevolent dictator."

RR: That's a wonderful cartoon that Jon drew.

WL: Yes. I like that one.

RR: I believe he got the whole song in there, the old Sinatra song.

WL: Yes, he got it.

RR: Yes. Yes. What year would that have been when you finally left?

WL: 1980.

RR: 1980. Okay.

WL: Sinatra's song: "To think of all I've done, and may I say, not in a shy way --- oh, no. No, not me. I did it my way!" [Laughter] Hot damn! I don't want you to forget that. That was his attitude. [Laughter] But I liked that.

RR: So that was Ross Lawhon. Well, you know, I never knew Ross. He was before my time, but I heard you talk about him down through the years.

WL: He was nicknamed "Rootie Tootie" at one time. He was the old "Rootie Tootie." The Indian chief up in Oklahoma came to stay for awhile one time. He said he was coming on a barge, or something. Ross called out the fire department, and they had the high school band and all down there in front of the old Main Street bridge --- the old bridge --- to greet Chief Rootie Tootie, the Indian chief, who was coming down for a visit

RR: Yes. I assume you beat him when he came back to run against you.

WL: Like you'd beat a rug.

RR: Yes.

WL: Yes.

RR: But he was one of your predecessors. I guess the next mayor after that was Almon Perry.

WL: Yes. He was the first one that I ran against, Almon. He and I were good friends. I went over to talk to him, and I said, "Almon, you're ending up your second term." We'd never had anyone who had a third [consecutive] term. Usually if you get two two-year terms, then you're out.

RR: Yes.

WL: Everybody knew that. You didn't even run again for a third term. You didn't even think about it. I said, "I'm thinking about running." He said, "Well, you'd probably make a good mayor." I said, "I'm not running against you. I don't know if you're going to run or not." He said, "Well, I haven't made up my mind. My wife, of course, doesn't want me to run. So I just don't know if I'm going to make a run for it or not." I said, "Well, I want to be fair with you and tell you now that I'm going to be a candidate. If we run, we'll still be friends, I hope, when it's over." He said, "I can assure you of that." Well, the powers that were running the show got him to run again, and he was eliminated. Reed Thompson announced about fifteen minutes before the ticket closed, then he went over and filed.

RR: The city attorney?

WL: Yes.

RR: Now, that would have been in 1957?

WL: Right.

RR: I remember going to your furniture store --- the *Gazette* sent me over here to cover North Little Rock in 1956 as my first assignment when I went to work for the paper. It didn't take very long at all to learn that if you want to know what's going on in North Little Rock, you needed to spend some time at Laman's Furniture Store.

WL: That was just an old hangout.

RR: And your --- Lois . . .

WL: Bryan. B-R-Y-A-N.

RR: Yes. Was she the store manager?

WL: Yes.

RR: Nice lady. When I went there, I'd visit her.

WL: She's still living. Her husband, Charlie, is dead, but Lois is still living.

RR: You began to fill me in on North Little Rock politics. You were already laying the groundwork then to make a race for mayor in 1956. Does that sound right?

WL: Yes.

RR: What was it that got you thinking about running for mayor?

WL: The street program. We didn't have any paved streets. The only paved streets we had were in subdivisions paved by the developers, not the city. We had streets that had been oiled, and they looked like it was blacktop, but it was just dirt that had been oiled over and over and over and over. They would rake it up with a spreader and smooth it down, oil it and put down chat [crushed limestone] and rolled it in.

RR: Yes.

WL: Shelby Smith was the street commissioner. He was head of the street department. He's dead now. He was a great guy. One day I asked him "Why can't you do a better job than this pot-hole patching?" Because that stuff --- that oil under there would get hot and ooze up through the gravel. Then it would break open. Then it rained, then break open. Then the pieces would be over in the --- Those pieces would break out --- there'd be chunks lying over in the ditch about a week after that.

RR: Yes.

WL: I said, "Y'all have just paved my street." I was living at 302 Parker, by the Baring Cross Church. They had, what they called, patched Parker Street from 13th Street up to 15th in front of my house. I said, "I looked down there, and it looks like a herd of cattle came along. You've got a cowpile here, and a cowpile there, and a cowpile over there, and in a week or two, those cowpiles will all be over in the ditch, broken. And then we'll have the potholes again." I said, "Why can't you just pave the thing and be through with it?" He said, "Well, I talked to city hall. I work with what they give me to work with. With this money, tools and equipment, that's all I can do." So I went down to talk to the mayor. It was the first time I had ever talked to a mayor. I knew who Perry was. He worked for the Argenta Bottling Company.

RR: Yes.

WL: I went down there to talk to him about the thing. He said, "Well, we don't have enough money for it. I'm just using it as wisely as I can." And he was. He was a good, clean Christian man. Just as honest and kind and nice as any human being you'd ever meet. But our ideas and philosophy were just as --- they were diametrically opposed. He said, "Look. I'm the mayor. All I'm supposed to do is carry out the directions of the aldermen. They're supposed to come up with the programs, obtain the money, pass the ordinances, give them to me, and I see that they were carried out." I said, "Mine is different. If I am elected, I ought to come up with some programs, take it to the aldermen and sell them on this new deal that I wanted, these new plans that I want, tell them that I have provided the money for them. Then I take up where you did. Then, as a mayor, I'll see that it's carried

out." I said, "They elected me to be the mayor, and I think that means they elected me to think for the city and come up with these projects, get rid of some of the problems, see if we can't do better than this." He said, "Well, I don't feel that way. I leave it all up to the aldermen." I said, "Well, we've got nine mayors, then—eight aldermen and one mayor, all acting as mayor, each one bringing up their own ideas." That's the reason they never accomplish anything. They'd meet, reach in their coat pocket, and lay the ordinances out. The other aldermen hadn't heard a word. It was just a back-scratching deal. I vote for your ordinance, you vote for mine.

RR: Yes.

WL: Everybody voted for everybody's ordinance. If I didn't [vote for yours], you might vote against mine.

RR: So the street program got you interested in running.

RR: It was the street --- I said, "I think I can do a better job, Perry, than that. I'm going to try. That's going to be my main program." My first big group gathering that I had --- I guess you'd call it that --- it was in Burns Park. We had one pavilion out in Burns Park, that was all. One pavilion and one ball field. That was the total of Burns Park. We had a political rally out there. When it came my time to get on the podium to speak and introduce myself, I made my pitch of what I wanted to do and the things that I thought the city should have. I said, "I think that if we want to be a first-class city, we ought to be first class." I said, "The things that we have now don't show me that we are first class. We have been ruled by old people for so long and it's been the deal of 'We've never had it so good, we don't

want it any better, we're all waiting to die and don't rock the boat.' We've got a motto that says, 'North Little Rock --- a city without bonded indebtedness.'" I said, "You've got two words too many in your motto. We're going to knock off those last two words. 'North Little Rock--a city without.' We don't have a hospital. We don't have a library worth calling a library --- it's in a rented house down on Maple Street. We don't have paved streets, nor street lighting, nor street signs --- you couldn't find anything. The air base men had moved in. These people can't find anything in North Little Rock. There's nowhere to tell them anything. We don't have any street lights to light it. No traffic lights." And I just went down the list of what we didn't have. I said, "If you have faith enough in me and trust me enough, I'll build you a city. We'll have a bond issue that your grandchildren will be paying off because I believe the people are tired of doing without. They don't have the money for it, but they're tired of doing without. Now they're going into the lending business." A woman came into our furniture store and said, "I supported you as mayor, voted for you, but I'm against your bond issue for buying the water company." That was the first bond deal I proposed, to buy the water company. I think it was \$4.5 million. A New York outfit owned it. I said, "Why?" She said, "I'm just against bond issues. I just don't approve of them at all." I said, "Now, look." I knew her well. I said, "You came in here to look at TV sets. You didn't have enough money to buy a television set outright. You were tired of doing without it. You came in here and floated an eighteen-month bond issue, except in business we call it installment buying. If I were to tell you we're going to have a \$4.5 million sale, nothing

down and thirty years to pay for it, you'd buy some of it and not even know what it was." She stood there and looked. I said, "In politics and government, we call it a bond issue. In your case, we call it installment buying. It's the same thing. If you don't have the money, you're tired of doing without, and you can't buy it, you borrow the money and pay it off to get what you think you need. We need libraries. We need streets. We need street lighting. Parade routes. Where do our kids go? There's no place for them to go to at all." I told the crowd one night --- I said, "If my daughter, Christie, went to some of the honky-tonks that Arlene and I went to in the 1930s, I'd beat her half to death if I found out about it." Of course, everybody laughed, but it was damned true. There was no decent place for our young people to go for entertainment.

RR: Yes.

RR: Anyway, you were successful that first race for mayor.

WL: Almon was eliminated before the runoff, then Reed and I ran.

RR: Right. Yes.

WL: Reed ran on the program that he had worked for the city as city attorney. His platform was that he knew about city laws, and he had helped the police department, I don't know how. That was just --- he had helped all of these departments. But he had a lot of experience. He had traveled a lot. He had been to Washington. He had been from Washington and then from New York to California traveling. He had to been places where the sewer department alone had sewers big enough to drive automobiles through. I could never figure out how that entered into it, but it was a good part of his campaign. One time we were at a

Negro church, holding a political rally. There were hardly any places, then, where you could have a public meeting. I sat down and listened to Thompson's speech. I told the chairman, who was sitting next to me, "He has attacked me personally, and under the rules of debate, I am allowed to defend myself against those attacks because I spoke first." And when Reed was through the chairman said, "Well, Mayor Laman, I think you've been a little bit attacked by the opponent, and I believe that our group should give you the right of rebuttal." I got up and told him that everything that Reed said was probably the truth. I said, "He has traveled a lot. He has been to New York. He has been to California. He has been to Denver, Colorado. [?]." I said, "I haven't traveled much, but there is a difference in our travel. When I traveled, I was wearing the uniform of my country. He was wearing a business suit that he bought. He never wore a uniform, but he traveled a lot. I don't know what he was traveling for, but he never could own a uniform, and I wore a uniform to fight for my country for three years. And he talked about sewers, that he knew all about them. Well, I don't know if we need someone who's fairly experienced at being a sewer man. Maybe he's lived his life in the sewer, I don't know. But you people know Reed. I know you know him. He was the city attorney. He prosecuted some of you in our Courts, didn't he. You too? I see you grinning back there. You know what I'm talking about. Do you want some more of this head whipping? He left us and went to work for the FBI! Can you believe it?" [Laughs] They didn't --- they stomped the floor. "Boo-boo-boo-boo-boo-boo." Yes, he went to the FBI! [Laughter] "He wasn't satisfied with the head whipping down here in Argentina.

He went up to the big head-whipping place. Now, if you want some more head whipping, vote for him! The man's running here." "No! No! Boo-boo-boo-boo-boo-boo." [Laughter] Oh, I had good times back then!

RR: [Laughs] Oh, poor old Reed! I don't know about Reed!

WL: He was stupid! He was just dumb and stupid!

RR: [Laughs] So you beat him?

WL: Yes. I beat him [by] over six hundred votes. That was a big vote then.

RR: Yes.

WL: Well, you couldn't get people out to vote then. You couldn't get people out to vote.

RR: Yes.

WL: That was the thing that I tried to impress on [people], that you don't lose control over government. No city, no county, no state ever lost control You give up control when you give in to your indifference and you stay at home. Then someone else takes control. You didn't lose it. You just abandoned it to the other group. You're fussing about them now, but it's your fault for not going to vote.

RR: Yes.

WL: I've said every election we've ever had, there's been enough people who stayed home, eligible to vote, to have changed the election if they had gone to vote.

RR: Yes.

WL: That is still true today.

RR: Absolutely.

WL: School board election, 2000 votes out of 35,000 voters we got over here in North Little Rock in 2004 --- that's shameful.

[Tape Stopped]

RR: We are resuming after a short break to stretch our legs. You were elected mayor in 1957 . When you came into office, I guess the word is inherited. You inherited a city council with some pretty colorful people on it. Who do you remember from that first city council, and what?

WL: You know, it's hard for me to pick out any particular member, even to think of the names of the eight of them. Ed McCulloch was a young alderman. M-c-C-U-L-L-O-C-H. He was elected the same time I was. Ed was sincere. He still is --- he lives out in Maumelle. He was a hard worker, straight shooter, couldn't be worried about anything. You couldn't intimidate him. He resigned as alderman after maybe his second term and went to Washington, D.C., as a representative of one of the locomotive --- Missouri-Pacific Unions.

RR: Resigned as alderman?

WL: Yes. He stayed up there until he retired. He retired out here at Maumelle. He's one. Dr. Phipps, I guess, stands out in my mind --- I had a lot of good ones. Dr. Phipps was the type that he was his own man. He couldn't be bought nor sold nor intimidated. He couldn't be jockeyed into something. You couldn't blow smoke, --- he was just Dr. Phipps. But if he told you he was for your ordinance, don't go back the second time, you didn't have to. If he said, "No, I'm against it," you might as well go hunt you another vote. I would go to his office with an ordinance. I never one time in my sixteen years asked an alderman to vote for or

against an ordinance. Not once. I'd say, "Here's something I'm trying to get done. I think it's good. I want you to read this and tell me how you feel about it." Dr. Phipps would be at his desk there in his doctor's office there at 4th and Main, you know, right? I'd hand it to him, and he'd say, "No, I'm not going to vote for that." He was through with it. [Laughter] And you don't have to, you know, go into all that. He said, "I'm not going to vote for it." "Well, I wanted you to know about it. I'm going to bring it up, I think. I might. I may not." That meant I was going to see how many votes I got. The mayor of Osceola . . .

RR: Ben Butler.

WL: Ben Butler. He and I were good friends. He was my mentor. He guided me. We were in a hotel, the Marion. I had been elected in November, and I went to the Municipal League meeting in December. We met in the Marion Hotel. The mayor of Texarkana, Mayor Hays --- I don't know his initials. They were there on a couch. We were on a sofa there in Ben's room, I guess. He talked like a Southerner, an old plantation guy. He put his arm up, and he said, "Now, boy, let me tell you something." He said, "Hays and I have been at this thing for a long time." He'd been --- I don't know how long he had been mayor until --- he said, "Let me give you some advice. First, don't you ever, ever, EVER, turn your back on a friend. He is the guy who put you in where you are. Not your enemies, now. Keep that in mind. It's your friends who put you there." He said, "If we were sitting here and a fellow ran through this door and Hays jumped up and shot him, I'd swear that the fellow ran at Hays with a knife." I said, "That's friendship." [Laughter]. Friendship. He said, "Now, let me give you a piece of good advice.

Don't ever let them taste blood if you can help it. If you see your ordinances are not going pass, you pull that sucker down. Pull back, regroup, count your votes again. Maybe you miscounted, maybe you got double-crossed. Figure out what happened, but pull that sucker down. Once they defeat your ordinance, it's almost impossible to get that ordinance passed again because they've made a decision."

RR: Yes.

WL: And Ben went on and on with his background. "And they got on me up there because I was using the county prisons for the farmers. The big farms up there had to have some labor. I said, 'Of course, I let them have the prisoners. I let the farmer feed them instead of the county feed them. What's wrong with that? I don't know if it's against the law or not.'" [Laughter]. Oh, he was feisty.

RR: I remember old Ben. Yes. He was a case.

WL: We went to the highway commissioner. I was co-chairman of the Arkansas Municipal League legislative committee and served in that position for eight years. You talk about an education! I learned that if you were elected to the League Legislative Committee you had to get acquainted with as many of the Legislators as you possibly could. By February or March, I visited the legislators wherever [their district] were. Down to El Dorado, up to Blytheville. I had coffee in his coffee shop on his corner on his turf. I was representing the Municipal League, telling him what the league is and what it could do for him, and how much we'd appreciate his attending the meetings, that sort of thing --- take him a manual --- all the laws in one manual and that sort of thing. I told him that Glenn Zimmerman would be his friend, call him anytime --- you know.

Glenn was the --- I guess he was the only president the Arkansas Municipal League had. It was organized here in North Little Rock. Glenn was the secretary.

RR: Is he still going?

WL: No, Glenn is dead. The son is running it now.

RR: And his name is--it's not Glenn, is it?

WL: No, it's Don.

RR: Anyway, go ahead.

WL: U. E. Moore was the mayor of NLR who was the first president of the Arkansas Municipal League.

RR: So you were on the legislative . . .

WL: I was on the legislative committee of the Municipal League [?]. And it got [to be] so much, I couldn't handle it. I had to have help and I asked for an assistant. They asked Ben would he serve. He said, "Sure, I'll serve." We worked together.

RR: Yes.

WL: It was the group who had the most pressure on the governor who got the money for whatever the group was after. The schools and the highway and the cities, those three fought each other teeth and toenail. Usually the highway would come out ahead. They would win. The schools would get some, and we would get what was left. Ben decided, "Let's change this thing," he said. I believe it was Red Oliver, who was chairman for the --- check that because I'm not sure who the highway commissioner was. I believe that was his name. He was nicknamed "Red" Oliver.

RR: Sounds right.

WL: But, sure enough, check on that one because of what I'm going to tell you. We had a meeting of the Municipal League over in someone's office, one of the legislators' office, and then we decided, "Ben, let's you and I and so-and-so go over and talk to Mr. Oliver and see what we can work out. Let's negotiate instead of going on the floor and fighting the Highway Department."

RR: Yes.

WL: We didn't have a thing to lose because we were already losing. And that's right. Ben said, "I know Red. We're good friends. Let's go and talk to him and see what we can negotiate." I've forgotten the third guy who went with them. We went over there and Mr. Oliver was in his office. They all greeted each other. "How are you getting along? I haven't seen you in a good while." Finally, the mayor said, "We're over here to do a little negotiating. There's no need of our going in there and you fighting us and us fighting you, and the schools getting all the money." He said, "Let's get together and see what we can work out." Oliver hasn't said a word. He's just sitting there. As I recall him, he was almost bald headed and had a fringe of red hair. He was just sitting there. His eyes looked at us, and we looked at him. He said, "Well, what do you mean, negotiate?" "Well, let me just ask you, point blank now --- let's get an understanding. You know the desperate situation the cities are in. Just how much money out of the turn-back fund do you think the cities and towns deserve to get?" Oliver replied: "Not a goddamn cent." [Laughter] "Well, you know, that doesn't leave much room to negotiate, does it, Red?" "Well, come on, guys. We'll see you on the floor, Ben." [Laughter] That was a type of meetings we used to have, but everybody

understood where everybody was coming from. There wasn't any tricking or chicanery or double-crossing or buying or anything. It was just out-and-out who can out-muscle the next [guy?]. And I would tell a new mayor who was going to help me or any lobbyist, "Don't wait. Don't try to see the guy when he's in the restroom at the urinals, standing there. Don't try to sell him a bill of goods. Go to his hometown. Eat with him. Eat lunch with him in the greasy spoon around the corner. Find out who his wife is. Does she teach school, or what does she do? Know him. Call him by name. Know him when you see him. You can't do much with a guy you meet for the first time walking up and down these halls." That's the way I try to do whatever effective lobbying I can do, and I enjoyed that. It gave me a good statewide acquaintanceship with these people.

RR: Yes.

WL: I knew the mayors. I knew their friends. And it was nice to have a statewide acquaintance like that.

RR: Yes.

WL: They tried to get me to run for governor one time. They really put the pressure on me. I had a delegation from northeast Arkansas --- they're from Ben's people --- and down in the delta country and up in the Russellville area, and I said, "I've never had any political ambitions except to be the best mayor for North Little Rock that I can be. I love this job of Mayor. This is my home city, and this is the only political office I expect to hold. I have never aspired to anything except this." And I said, "When I think that it's time for me, I'll voluntarily quit." And I did.

RR: What year was it that they tried to get you to run for governor?

WL: It was when Rockefeller was the governor. They wanted me to run for lieutenant governor.

RR: Lieutenant governor. Now, wasn't there some talk at one time about you running for governor?

WL: Oh, yes. That group down there, I believe, that I just told you. They wanted me to run for governor. I told them I wasn't interested. Then some of Rockefeller's friends came to me and wanted me to have dinner with them "up on the Mountain." It was the thing to do to go to Petit Jean mountain. "Y'all going to the mountain this week?" This was the common question among the young Republicans concerning what's going on this weekend.

RR: So they wanted you to be a Republican?

WL: Yes.

RR: I'm trying to imagine Casey Laman as a Republican.

WL: [Laughs] Well, I voted for Rockefeller!

RR: Oh, well, everybody voted for Rockefeller.

WL: Yes, I'd vote for him tomorrow. I'd vote for Faubus if he ran. I don't put a lot of faith in the party label.

RR: What year was it that there was some serious talk about your running for governor? Not lieutenant governor, but governor?

WL: That was before this lieutenant governor thing. I don't remember that.

RR: Do you remember who was governor at the time?

WL: Well, that's what I'm trying to think . . .

RR: Surely it wasn't during [Orval] Faubus's tenure?

WL: Oh, no. Faubus and I were friends. I liked him. We got along.

RR: So it would have been—his last race was in 1964, so it would have been after that.

WL: Anyway, I told them that I was not interested in it. I didn't care anything about it. All I wanted to do was make a good mayor [?]. And even Rockefeller told me that they would underwrite my expenses. I said, "Man, I would hate to run countywide in Pulaski County. I just don't know if I could deal with Little Rock people. I don't know any of them." I said, "I even need a visa to cross the bridge if I get over there." [Laughter] When Little Rock voted to go city manager, Dean Dauly and I took office at the same time. I was sworn in as mayor [and that] was the day he started work as Little Rock's city manager.

RR: Dean who?

WL: Dean Dauly. The first city manager for Little Rock.

RR: Yes, and I can't spell it, somehow. I've forgotten how to spell his name.

WL: It may be D-A-U-L-E-Y, I don't know.

RR: Anyway, yes. That sounds like it.

WL: He came up here from Texas.

RR: Yes.

WL: He was the first city manager in the state of Arkansas. He left here to go back to Texas down there and start what people had never heard of, these big shopping centers --- go to the store where everything is in one place. Shopping centers. He left and made a fortune down there organizing shopping centers.

RR: You all took office . . .

WL: We met on the top of the Broadway bridge about the third month we were in office. The two chambers of commerce rigged up a program that had the two cities to meet up there.

RR: In the middle of the bridge?

WL: Right in the middle, they stopped the traffic on both ends, and we met up there. They had a little ceremony to discuss how the friendship of the two cities could work. I told Dean, "I have just been elected. You have the advantage. You had a college education in political science and administration. All I've had is I've had the experience of trying to run a business. I want to meet with you as often as I can. I'm going to pick your brain. I think you can give me some experience that would be valuable to me. But I'll tell you one thing, before we shake hands here in the middle of this bridge, let's have both hands out in the front because my experience has always been that when you shake hands with Little Rock, their left hand has got the damn club behind their back, and they'll beat the hell out of you before the ceremony is over." I said, "You put both hands out here, and I'll shake with you." [Laughter]. "Seal of friendship." They really ragged me about that.

RR: There has been that relationship between the two cities.

WL: We got the dirty end of the stick every time it came up. They called me one time and said, "We've got a business that we thought maybe you all would be interested in. We'd like to help you get that business." When somebody would come in their chamber of commerce, they'd never talk about North Little Rock, and you can't blame them. They're just doing their job. I didn't hold it against them. They just did their job. There's no need to bring them over here because

that was the Little Rock Chamber of Commerce. We talked. I said, "Yes. Yes. We'd be glad to. What is it?" He said, "Well, they are looking at a location up around the big rock crusher somewhere up on your side of the river." I said, "What kind of business is it, then?" It was a slaughterhouse. I sat there. I said, "You must be crazy." We were on the telephone. I said, "Do you think that I would even allow a thing like that to come in, with the breeze coming down the river and we get all the stink? Have you ever been around an abbatoir, they called it, or a rendering place where they're rendering the fat? It gets in your head, it gets in your skin, it gets in your clothes." I said, "The very idea!" I said, "If you all try to bring it in, we'll fight you to the very end." That was the relationship we had with the LR Chamber of Commerce?

RR: Well, they called North Little Rock "Dog Town."

WL: Yes. The high school started that with the football games, you know? That was a real --- Thanksgiving Day rival. That was the big football game of the season. We'd beat them [Little Rock] about once every four or five years, and we reveled in that for the next four or five years. Then they'd beat us for the next four or five.

RR: Yes.

WL: But it was a big football game, and they always called it "Dog Town." I don't hold any credence with this rumor that the people came over here and dumped their dogs. Maybe they did, but I never heard about it growing up over there, and I never heard of "Dog Town" until I got into high school. "Oh, he's from Dog Town." --- Like Texas and Fort Worth, Cow Town. They had the biggest, I

guess, herd of cattle anywhere over in those pens, and so they were nicknamed "Cow Town."

RR: When you became mayor, was Joe Donnell still on the city council?

WL: Joe Donnell --- yes.

RR: And Dallas Bobbit?

WL: No, Joe Donnell was defeated the year I went in, by Ed McCulloch. Yes, Dallas Bobbit was there. He was there two to three years, maybe. He had just been elected the two years before that.

RR: How about John May?

WL: John was there. John May.

RR: What about Paul Duke?

WL: Paul Duke was one of my aldermen.

RR: Tell me about Joe Donnell.

WL: Joe Donnell worked for the Missouri-Pacific [Railway]. We were friends. His sister was Ruth Anderson, who was head of our health department. We'd never had a better one and never will have a better one. She was as conscientious and as good a manager of a health department as you could have found anywhere. She was there for years and years and years. In fact, she was still head of the health department when she died. Joe was pretty much of a loner. He had a few friends in the Missouri-Pacific, but he didn't --- he wouldn't crony around with a bunch of politicians. I saw Joe in this group that would come in the furniture store once in a while. He'd bought some furniture from us. He had a really nice wife. She was just as sweet and kind as she could be. When Ed McCulloch and I became friends,

that cooled the friendship between me and Joe. He wasn't very --- I didn't see much more of him. He moved up in Park Hill on the street that overlooks the stadium down there. Joe committed suicide one evening out there. He took a shotgun and a coat hanger, took his shoe and sock off, hooked his toe in the coat hanger, and the coat hanger in the trigger, and put the gun to his mouth and dropped his foot. There it was. I didn't even know him enough to know what --- I couldn't give any idea what depressed him to that extent.

RR: Do you remember when Joe Donnell attacked me in his house?

WL: You know, that vaguely strikes a memory. I don't remember what it's about.

RR: I had written a story that he didn't like about something going on. This is when Almon Perry was mayor. Something was going on with the city council. It had to do with some bills, some city contracts, or some work around the city hall.

WL: Probably the electric department.

RR: I don't remember that, but Harold Gwatney got to looking at it and told me some things. I wrote a story that made Joe mad. He called me out to his house late one afternoon. I drove out there, parked and walked in. There sat Joe and Dallas Bobbit.

WL: They were good friends.

RR: I sat down in an easy chair like that one there. He was across the room, and Dallas was standing up. We had just a few words of conversation, and he said something about that story. I'm not sure I ever got a word out. The first thing I knew, he was out of his chair and across the room and all over me with his fists.

Then he called the police, at which point, I realized why Dallas was there. He was there to corroborate Joe's story.

WL: Back him up.

RR: The policemen came. Joe said, "I want you to search that man." So I turned my pockets inside out, and I had a pocket knife just about the size of this one here, about two inches long, a little pen knife. So Joe said, "Be sure and make a note of that in your report." And, sure enough, it was in the police records the next day.

WL: That you were carrying a knife.

RR: They searched Reed, and he was carrying a knife. But he drew blood. He didn't hurt me bad, but he mussed me up pretty good around the head and face, as they say. I told somebody that story recently about the only serious violence I ever encountered as a newspaper reporter was the time I was assaulted by an alderman.

WL: I have never gotten mad enough at a newspaper reporter. I said mad enough to even think about physical harm. I've been displeased, as a mild statement, and I've hated to see some of the stuff in there. But some of the stuff that I hated to see in there was what I said last night. And I've often said that sometimes the politician's biggest problem is that he's talking about something, making a speech to the audience of the council, and he gets to listening to what he's saying and he likes what he's hearing, and he gets diarrhea of the mouth. He never knows when to quit. [Laughter] And he says things that the next morning he wishes he hadn't said.

RR: What's the worst trouble you ever got into over something that you said?

WL: Saying that I was the "head nigger."

RR: Yes.

WL: And back then, that wasn't a big thing like it is now. I called several of my black friends and apologized. I still have a lot of people who are black. We are good friends.

RR: But I guess you have to do some work to . . .

WL: I just went to them and told them what the occasion was. I said, "I used that in a combination I have used all my life. I'm making an honest effort to delete it from my vocabulary. I don't mean it in a derogatory [way]." I could've said any other thing, like, "Well, I'm the head knocker." But without thinking I said, "I'm the head nigger."

RR: And the occasion was this reporter for the *Democrat* had asked you a question about . . .

WL: She asked, "What gave you the authority to declare an extra holiday?"

RR: Yes.

WL: "Thanksgiving Day is Thursday, and you gave them Friday off. Do you know how much employees' salaries were that were authorized not to produce for the city?" I said, "Well, I didn't think about that." That's when she said, "Well, who gave you the authority to do that?" I said, "I took it again." She said, "How did you do that?" I said, "Well, as the mayor, I guess I'm the head nigger of the city government."

RR: Hmm. And she printed it.

WL: Oh, I regretted that for the next ten or fifteen years. Some of my black friends tease me about it, but I think most of them understood what I was—I went to them

and apologized. I said, "I'm here to apologize to you for using that word. I admit I'm wrong." Strange enough, in 1957 I was the one on the school board who seconded the motion for the schools to be merged.

RR: Desegregated?

WL: Yes. Bogard made the motion. Who was the woman who led the big fight?

RR: Daisy Bates?

WL: Yes. She and her husband and two other people came to our meeting of the school board. At that time, we were having to meet in the basement of the high school because the school was so crowded that they had to use the superintendent's office for classrooms. He had to move out and give those two offices to make two classrooms out of them. His office and his secretary's office made one classroom, and the records and all that made another one. We all moved all the school board stuff down into the basement, and then they started building another high school.

RR: Yes.

WL: That's the only thing that ever plagued me. Of course, I got jumped about a lot of things that I've said because, as Arlene would tell me sometimes, "You put your mouth in motion before you shift gears in your brain." She said, "You [should] shift gears first before you put your mouth in motion," but I didn't do it. If it came up, it came out. I just said it.

RR: Talk to me some about the politics of North Little Rock in the black community.

My recollection is that you always had a good working relationship . . .

WL: I still have. I've still got friends over there. If I called now and said, "I need you," they'd say, "Where are you?" They wouldn't even ask why. And it works the same way. I could name four or five that if they called me at midnight, they'd still say, "Mayor, I'm in trouble. I need you." I'd say, "Where are you?"

RR: Who are your main political friends in the black community?

WL: Oh, I'm going to get in trouble on that one. I'll leave out some . . .

RR: Well, I'll tell you --- let me mention two for a particular reason. Annie . . .

WL: Effie Mae Holman.

RR: Effie Mae Holman.

WL: She was a ring leader.

RR: Effie Mae Holman, right?

WL: Yes.

RR: M-A-E or Y?

WL: M-A-E, I believe. Yes.

RR: Holman. H-O . . .

WL: H-O-L-M-A-N.

RR: Yes. Now, what was her position?

WL: None. She was into everything that moved that was black in North Little Rock. She was a big worker in the Morning Star Baptist Church. That was her base of operation. She had a van, and she hauled people to the cotton fields. She'd pick them up at two or three designated spots every morning and haul them down to Scott, Keo, Toltec, to pick cotton. They'd weigh their cotton at the end of the day to get their credits, their ticket. She carried water, sandwiches, cold drinks, and

sold it down there. She charged them to ride in her van like a cab service—I don't know how much --- but she'd load that van. She had a big van. I guess she'd take eight or nine people in that thing.

RR: Down into the plantation cotton.

WL: Yes. That's where she went. She'd go down there during cotton picking time. Anything they were harvesting, they'd go there. We sold those workers furniture on what they called the "fall terms." They would come in and buy, let's say, a wood cookstove. They'd buy a cookstove, \$49.95 --- middle-sized price. They'd pay half of it in cash and pay the other half next fall. We wouldn't see hair nor hide of them, didn't send them a statement, didn't know a thing about them. Next October or November when the crops were "laid by" --- that was the expression—when they "laid by" the crops, we'd be back there [to get] the balance. Those are the most honest people we had ever dealt with. And Effie Mae hauled those people to work and brought them home. She did that until she got so crippled she just couldn't do it. She had to have two knee replacements. In fact, she's still living. She's over here in one of the nursing homes now, but she's in the very last stages of Alzheimer's [disease]. She doesn't know anybody. I visited her in the nursing home out here in North Little Rock. When I went into the office there, I introduced myself to the office girl. I said, "I'm Casey Laman. I'd like to know the room of Effie Mae Holman." She looked at me for about a half a minute. She said, "Are you Mayor Laman?" I said, "I was." She said, "Well, thank God that I got to meet you." She said, "That woman, every time a problem comes up, she says, 'I'm gonna call Mayor Laman. He'll get you people straightened out. I'm

gonna get Mayor Laman out here and get this place cleaned up. That's what I'm gonna do.'" She said, "We've been hearing 'Mayor Laman' for two years."

[Laughter] Effie got to collecting rent. She had about three little red houses out behind her house. And in this nursing home, she'd go into your room and say, "Now, you owe me rent, and you didn't pay me last month. Now, I'm here to tell ya, I'm gonna be here Friday, and you better have my money for me."

RR: [Laughs] Poor soul!

WL: Finally, she told one woman, she said, "This is my second time. My third time, you're not gonna want to see me." So the third time she went in there and just beat the living daylights out of that patient in the bed because she didn't have her rent money. [Laughter] Well, they shipped her out that day to a psycho ward in Little Rock.

RR: No kidding.

WL: So that was the end of Effie Mae.

RR: Yes. Oh!

WL: But she was a hard-working politician. I mean, she worked at it! They had an organization that I wished several times when I was a candidate that I had one like it. I tell you the other head of the black organization was the Bishop, Sherman --- Bishop O. Sherman.

RR: O. Sherman.

WL: Just the letter "O." That's all I know of.

RR: That's all I ever heard. Bishop O. Sherman.

WL: Bishop O. Sherman. Now, he was a strong leader, and he and Effie Mae would lock horns at almost every --- if they got on opposite sides. They really got together because it was --- who got the money. I was a brand-new neophyte, as we mentioned a while ago. I didn't know from anything. I ran because I thought I could do a better job of paving the streets, but I didn't know about elections. And everybody told me, "You better see Effie Mae. If you want the black vote, you better go see Effie Mae." Well, I had some good friends in the black neighborhoods because of my nine years on the school board. The School Board wanted to make prospective teachers live in North Little Rock. A prospective teacher from Little Rock said, "Where are we going to live in North Little Rock? Show us a decent area in North Little Rock where blacks can live. In Little Rock we have nice neighborhoods and live in nice homes.

RR: Yes.

WL: We couldn't go anywhere [with that]. We didn't have any good neighborhoods. But I made friends with a lot of our teachers. Mabel Mitchell, whom I saw yesterday, is one of them. She retired from teaching several years ago. The last job she had was running the East End Community Center in Little Rock. She was head of that organization.

RR: That's Mabel Mitchell you're talking about?

WL: Mabel Mitchell. I got Mabel her first job as a school teacher. She was just a young girl, just got her degree. She is now serving her fourth term as a member of the North Little Rock School Board --- the city government for eight or ten, fifteen years over there. Well, my story was that you had to have people in the

neighborhood. You couldn't go in a neighborhood by yourself and talk to anybody. They just wouldn't talk to you.

RR: Yes. So you had to see Effie Mae Holman back then?

WL: She --- Effie Mae or the bishop. Of course, I saw them both, and . . .

RR: Yes.

[End of Tape 2, Side 2]

[Beginning of Tape 3, Side 1]

RR: This is tape number two, and we're still talking about Effie Mae Holman. I wish you would. Yes.

WL: My advisors told me I had to go to see Mrs. Holman to talk about getting votes from her people down in the Negro area. I went down to her house. She lived in the two hundred block of Hickory Street, she and Emmett, her husband. Emmett worked for the city, worked out in the parks department for the city. We talked about it, and she said, "Well, you know, we've got an organization." I'm not making fun. I'm just talking like Effie Mae talked to me. It might sound like I'm trying to make fun of this thing, but certainly, I'm not. She said, "Now, you know, you've got to get with the organization or you're not gonna get anywhere." I said, "Well, tell me about the organization." She said, "Well, you have to have a supervisor who will supervise the whole group, and then you've got to have people who will answer the telephone. You'll have to have people who—you've got to have some 'knockers.' You've got to have some 'rousters,' some 'creepers' —a 'knocker' or 'driver' first." You had to have this head administrator, and then you had to have two supervisors, one for the Dark Hollow crowd and

one for that subdivision down there that's really nice. Supervisors—then you'll need "drivers," "knockers," "rousters," "creepers." C-R-E-E-P-E-R-S, I guess. Creepers. I said, "Now, wait just a minute, Effie Mae, I can understand that a supervisor pulls them together. Now, what are the drivers?" She said, "Well, someone got to be on the telephone when them people gets off of work. They got to call someplace and say, 'Send the car. We got four votes waitin' out here, or six, or two, etc. We just got off at Missouri-Pacific.'" They "got off" at the bakery, they "got off" here or there, and they'd send the car out to wherever they were and bring them in to vote. I said, "All right." "That's the drivers. The supervisors get \$25 a day. For every day they work they get \$25." I said, "How about the drivers? How many drivers will you need?" "Well, that just depends on how bad you wanna get elected. You gotta work our people. You know, they don't go vote very often." She said, "You'll need at least four or five drivers." "Effie Mae, how much does a driver get?" "A driver gets \$10. And, of course, he gets his gasoline. Now, there'd be a 'knocker' at every corner for the drivers." I said, "Now, wait a minute. What do you mean, a 'knocker'?" She said, "Well, now, you know, Mr. Laman, a white boy goin' into these houses out here in my area, they not even gonna talk to ya. They will shut the do' in yo' face. They don' know you. They don' know what you there fo'. They don' believe much o' anything you gonna tell them. So you wastin' yo' time. But when this 'knocker' goes in there, he's one o' them. He'd say, 'We got a driver out here. We goin' to da polls.' "I've missed one." Effie Mae: "There's one that goes out and distributes yo' literature, an' he works Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday, an'

he gets \$10 a day to hand out yo' flyers." F-L-Y-E-R-S. The flyers. I said, "All right. I got him. The 'flyers man.' He gets \$10 to hand out your cards and your platform, whatever you want them to know about. "Now, what does a 'knocker' do?" She said, "Well, he go up to the do' an' knock on the do' and tell 'em a man's gonna be there to get 'em to the polls, an' tell 'em what it's all about, and then the 'rousters' come. Somebody's gotta roust 'em out. They won't go vote unless someone gets 'em. They have to go down there an' "roust 'em out" and get 'em in the car. The 'rousters' get \$10." [Laughter] "Okay. Every car's got to have 'drivers.' You've got to have a 'knocker.' You've got to have 'rousters.' Now, what's this 'creeper'?" "Well, now, you know the opposition's gonna be havin' some meetin's, an' someone's gotta creep in there an' see what's goin' on!" [Laughter] Oh, Lord! Now, the "creeper" got \$10 for every meeting he crept into [laughter] and brought back the information . . .

RR: Yes.

WL: . . . of what was said, what they were going to do, and what the plans are. And the "creeper" was a most valuable man for you.

RR: Yes. I can see where it would be money well spent.

WL: I spent it! Everybody spent it. Everybody spent it. Of course, there are two or three of those people who set themselves up as leaders who would double-cross. They'd take everybody's money that they could. I was in a car with one worker was campaigning for a guy running for some political job. I said, "There are some rumors out that you're also working for his opponent." He said, "That is a damn lie," and he kicked his dashboard, and his glove compartment fell open, and

all over my feet fell this other guy's cards." He said, "Who in the hell stuffed those cards in there, I wonder?" [Laughter] Oh, it was usually a rat race, but I enjoyed it. I really enjoyed it. I looked forward to an election. It's good to have opposition. It keeps you on your toes. It makes you think twice sometimes before you do something at city council one night I said –"The first time any of us vote thinking, 'Will this help me in elections, or will it hurt me?', that's the night you should resign because you've ceased to be a good representative and turned into a ward heeling politician, and you ought to "turn in your card." I believe that. I believe you had to vote your convictions and take your lumps.

RR: How did you get along with the city council, in general?

WL: About seventy-five percent of it most of the time, perhaps 80 to 85%. You mentioned Dallas Bobbit. Bobbit took a solemn vow—I don't know if it was on a Bible or not—that he wouldn't vote "yes" as long as I was in office. It didn't matter what it was. One time during a long harangue, Bobbit was about half asleep. "Bobbit?" Bobbit did not vote when his name was called. I called his name and asked him to register his vote. "Yes," he voted, then yelled out, "Wait a minute! What am I doing? I didn't mean that yes vote. Expunge that from the record. I vote 'no.'" And at that meeting, when the vote was counted, I made a mistake. I said, "Dallas, not that it matters, it's over with, but I'm just curious. What reason do you have for voting against such an important ordinance like that? I'd just like to know." Alderman Paul Duke spoke up, (who'd been my lifelong friend --- we grew up within two blocks of each other). Paul said, "Mayor, we don't owe you an explanation. We represent the people. We vote our convictions. We don't

vote your convictions. We vote our own as best we understand them. Bobbit doesn't owe you an explanation for anything." I said, "Alderman, you are correct. Dallas, I apologize. Read the next ordinance."

RR: Yes.

WL: And that was a lesson you don't forget. That was a lesson that I remembered for the entire balance of my tenure.

RR: Paul Duke was an interesting guy, as I remember.

WL: He was an upright fellow. Some of them --- we'd meet in the office before we went to the council meeting, and one or two of them would tell me right there how they were going to vote and would go right across the hall to the council meeting and vote just directly the opposite. They said they'd changed their minds. I never asked, but I didn't need an explanation.

RR: Paul, I gather, was not that kind.

WL: No, nor was Woodrow Phipps. If Woodrow said, "I'm against it," you better find you another vote to counteract it.

RR: Wasn't Paul an old boxer?

WL: Yes, he sure was.

RR: Was he a Mo-Pac [Missouri-Pacific] man, a railroad man?

WL: Yes, an engineer. He had diabetes. He had to lose one leg before he died. They started off at his ankle, then his knee, then above his knee, and his hip, and then he died. Paul was a good Christian man. I respected him.

RR: I remember [you?] once described somebody on the city council, or maybe it was nobody in particular, as being "just like a goose, he wakes up in a new world every day." [Laughs]

WL: That was probably one of my aldermen. Probably talking about Reed Thompson, the city attorney.

WL: I had a real problem my first year because Reed was the city attorney, and I would need legal opinions, and I got to the point I couldn't trust the opinions that he gave me. I wondered if he was still considering me as a political enemy because I beat [him?] in our race for mayor. But he still was the elected city attorney.

RR: Oh.

WL: I don't know if it was still maliciousness because he had been defeated or if he was doing the best he could do as an attorney. But, after the second year of that, I asked . . . the city council, the aldermen—I went to them individually because I didn't want it put in the newspapers. I asked them to hire an attorney to represent the city administration, to represent the mayor and the aldermen aside from the city attorney where they could go to for reaffirmation or go to get their ordinance reviewed. They complained that Reed would never get their ordinances out on time. He'd never get them ready. There'd be a mix-up some way: they couldn't put it in, they had to make some changes in it, they were making too many changes, amendments, trying to get it passed, so they hired Glenn Zimmerman.

RR: Wow. Is Reed dead?

WL: Yes, he died two years ago, maybe.

RR: Tell me about your secretaries while you were in the mayor's office.

WL: I had good ones. I didn't have a single secretary that I didn't like or that we didn't get along. I don't remember having a cross word with any one of them. I had three.

RR: Who were they?

WL: Mrs. Maude Murphy was the first one.

RR: I don't think I knew her.

WL: She had worked for the state for years, and she was really good at taking dictation and good at composing letters. She was in her sixties when I hired her. She was sixty-one or sixty-two. She came from the same area that I came from, within three blocks of where I was brought up with her three children. She had a son and two daughters. We all played together. We all called her Aunt Maude as kids. Seven-, eight-, nine-, ten-year-old kids—we played in her yard. They had homemade see-saws and things that the kids' daddy had made for them. She had lemonade. Her idea was to keep her kids at home and bring the neighborhood kids in, and she knew what her three were doing. And she was known through the neighborhood as Aunt Maude Radnedge. R-A-D-N-E-D-G-E. Radnedge was her first married name. She later married again. When she came to work as my secretary her name was Maude Murphy.

WL: She was the type who could really compose letters. You get so many requests to be a speaker here, or come to this meeting or go to that meeting, and I tried to do as much as I could. Then, finally, my wife Arlene just said, "Look, you've got a family here at night. I want you home. I know two nights you're going to be gone because of the two council meetings, but this being gone every night to a

dinner meeting here and some kind of meeting there—you don't even come home. You stay there and work until six-thirty or seven and go to the meeting and get home at ten." And, honestly, a year of Christie's life, my daughter, just went by me. She was asleep when I left home in the a.m., and asleep when I came home late at night. I'd leave home every morning at around seven o'clock—and six o'clock a.m. when they were developing Burns Park because I'd go through the park to see what they did yesterday and what we could do tomorrow. I had to cut out a lot of those meetings, but I didn't want to disappoint [?] people, and I'd say, "Aunt Maude, give them the number one letter." And that was, "Thank you for this invitation to . . . I really appreciate your thinking about me. I know I would enjoy hearing the speaker that you all are going to have. I enjoyed it the last time I was there." She went on. She'd bring in that letter, and I'd read that thing and I'd say, "Hell, I think I'll go to this one. You made it sound so good [laughter] I think I better go to hear him." [Laughter] After Mrs. Murphy retired I asked Pat Descoteau to work with me. She resigned her job at the NLR Chamber of Commerce and came to the City Hall as my private secretary.

RR: Pat Descoteau, I remember her.

WL: Pat?

RR: Yes.

WL: I guess so. I don't know how long she had been married. She had a boy who was about five or six years old. I remember because she was concerned about his schooling and taking him here and there, and she was a good mother --- a PTA [Parent-Teacher Association] worker and that sort of thing. Sometimes she'd get

off to go to PTA meetings when she thought it was important. I don't know what her husband did. He worked for one of the banks, I believe, a really nice young man. Pat stayed there a long time. She resigned to go to work for a NLR physician.

WL: After Pat left, I ask Betty Glover to come work with me. Mrs. Murphy was my first secretary. The night that I was elected, the night when we counted the final tally, we were in our headquarters down there on East Broadway in that two-storey building just past that viaduct. We received the final tally on the mayor's election and I knew that I was elected. When the victory shouting and yelling was going on, I'd run—I went up to her and said, "Aunt Maude, what would you think about—would you consider being my secretary?" And she was just absolutely astounded. It had never entered her mind. She said, "Well, I don't know. What would I do?" I said, "Well, just do your secretarial work. Do the typing, answer the telephone, be the receptionist, and that sort of thing." She said, "Well, I'll think about it." I went home and told Arlene. I said, "I've asked Aunt Maude to be my secretary. I'll tell you one thing. I'll be accused of everything under the world that I can think of, I guess, while I'm the mayor, but I don't believe having an affair with my secretary is going to be one of them. Aunt Maude is sixty-two now." I said, "She's got a son who can beat the hell out of me. [Laughter] I don't think we're going to have any gossip about the mayor and his secretary."

RR: Yes.

WL: And I kind of meant that. There had been a lot of rumors. You know, that kind of goes with—you get too cozy and all that.

RR: Yes.

WL: And then Betty Glover came, and Betty stayed until I left there.

RR: Okay.

WL: Betty was a --- they all were nice people. After Betty left, they had two or three different secretaries down there --- three different mayors. And then Betty went to work for the city again.

RR: Yes.

WL: Major Powell resigned in June of 1979 and the city council appointed me to be temporary mayor because they had to call an election within sixty days because he had more than a year left. If you had more than a year, you had to have an election. Otherwise the appointee could serve out the unexpired term. I was the temporary mayor for two months, and during that two months I announced that I was going to be a candidate. The aldermen came and asked me to take the job over again. That was one hard, hard decision, for me to go back. I reminded them that I said this situation wasn't very good, coming back after being gone. I've known of ministers who have left the church, resigned--left in good standing, maybe--maybe not. But eight or ten years [later] they were wanting to come back. And there were still some more hangers-on in the congregation. "We've had enough of him. We don't want him back."

RR: Yes.

WL: I said, "I will get the same thing." I said, "I've still got probably a thousand people out there who read the obituaries every morning. If my name's not there, their coffee will curdle. They're still waiting for me to go on. Still bitter."

They've never seen me, never talked to me, never spoken a word to me, but they're my bitter political enemies, and I don't know why. You just don't know about those things."

RR: So you were elected again in 1979?

WL: Yes, for a year and a half, eighteen months. I served eighteen months. That's why I say I was mayor for sixteen and a half years.

RR: Yes.

RR: Was that when Betty Glover was your secretary?

WL: Yes.

RR: Okay, so that will come to you later. We won't worry about that.

WL: Ritchie. Gladys Ritchie. She was the receptionist. There was no private secretary position when I was first elected.

RR: Ritchie. Okay.

WL: R-I-T-C-H-I-E. However you spell Ritchie. She was just one of the local Ritchies, lived out there near 18th Street. She resigned to take a better job.

RR: Yes.

WL: And I don't think I ever had a cross word. I may have been sarcastic with them, and I might have been [hyper?] with them at times, but when I wasn't feeling good, sometimes I let it be known too easily—irritable and cross.

WL: When I was elected, they had one pavilion out there and one ball field. During the campaign I promised the people a park, that I'd build a park. And I worked as hard as I had ever worked at anything to build Burns Park.

RR: Tell about that, how that came about.

WL: Before I took office?

RR: The federal land and all that.

WL: Yes. Before I took office, the city had been granted by the United States government seven hundred and some-odd acres of land that had been owned by the federal government. That was the first seven hundred acres. That was the front part of the park.

RR: When the federal government had it?

WL: I guess, where they had Fort Roots. It was part of the land that was used during and after WWI. It was declared surplus land later, and the city was to acquire it.

RR: So it would have been part of the original Fort Roots . . . ?

WL: Fort Roots was tied into that.

RR: Okay.

WL: Fort Roots was on the border of this land.

RR: Right.

WL: You could walk off across Fort Roots' border into Burns Park's border.

RR: Right. Okay, so the federal government gave it to the city?

WL: They sold it to us for \$20,000, and we could pay that \$20,000 in kind, which meant if we sent a tractor out there, keep account of it. If we sent four men out there to cut grass, keep an account of it, and those expenses were used as part of our annual cash payment to the Federal Government. The annual payment was \$1000, in cash or "in kind." And we had to send a letter—we had to make a report every year of progress we had made to earn our \$1,000.

[Tape Stopped]

RR: We are talking about Burns Park . . .

WL: Yes.

RR: . . . and how that came about, the arrangement to pay for it in work in kind.

WL: We would send in that report every year. The city engineer would make up the report of what had been done. He'd have to give the type of equipment, serial number, and all that. You know, the typical stuff the government demands of you. And then we'd get credit for that one year. And we still owed—I don't know, five, six, seven thousand dollars when the highway department was dealing with us to come through there for the expressway, for Highway 40. That's another whole story in itself. But we really started developing the park, E. C. Shelby and I, and Shelby Smith. E. C. was one of my aldermen and a lifelong friend. He died in a nursing home about four years ago. He and Shelby Smith, who was the city street department head, and the engineer and I walked the trail. The engineer had walked through there and seen about where we could build roads, and he took us out there. E. C. on one side and I was on the other, carrying a red [can of] spray paint, tagging the trees, which didn't mean "exactly here," but this is what the engineer had said would be a good route for us. I said, "Don't make it a straight one. We're not building an Indianapolis runway out there. I wanted the roads to be curvy [so people will] slow down and enjoy the park. Don't make it a speedway." And some have asked me why it's so crooked, and I've had to explain to them that's exactly why. Sometimes we had to go around big trees. I'd just rather pull a tooth than cut a tree. We walked that main route around that makes the horseshoe—starts in at the gate, goes in a horseshoe shape and comes

back around up at the flag pole. That was recently named—the north half of that horseshoe was named “Joe Poch Drive.” That goes down to the covered bridge. It used to be just called the loop road. Then, starting at the covered bridge and coming back up to the animal shelter. They named the street “Arlene Laman Drive” in honor of my wife. That really just gets to me when I drive by and look up and see that name, “Arlene Laman Drive.” It just . . .

RR: Yes.

WL: It brings back a lot of memories. And that relates in what I started to say a while ago when I said the girls had a code for me. They’d hear me on the telephone or hear me talking to someone in there, probably making a fool of myself and being irritated about something and not being very nice. And then one of them would say, “Mayor, why don’t you drive down and see what they’re doing out in the park. You haven’t been out there in a while.” And that meant, “Knock it off, old man. You’re just making a nuisance of yourself and making a fool of yourself. Get out there, slow down, take a deep breath, stay a while.” And I knew exactly what they meant. I said, “I’ll believe I’ll do that.” [Laughter] I’d take off. I’d sit on a park bench out there and drink a Coke, and it’s just like going home and taking a cool shower.

RR: Yes.

WL: Pond, trees, wind blowing through them, the birds singing, peace and quiet. All the problems just melted down, and things weren’t nearly as important as I thought they were when I was sitting there in the office. You can go back and act like a human being then. And when Arlene and I would go out just driving

around checking on city work, we always made it to Burns Park. That was one of her favorite drives, starting up there at the animal shelter and coming down to that covered bridge and making that loop road coming back up to the tennis center. The covered bridge is a story by itself. Up East --- Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine --- they have covered bridges, but it's not from an aesthetic standpoint. Back then in the 1800s when they were building bridges, it was costly in terms of labor and materials and time. It cost so much. Their winters were so harsh they built a roof over the bridge. They covered the bridge to protect it from the elements. Of course, now the expressway will have a sign, "Covered bridge, two miles." You can take a little detour and go down to the covered bridge and come back. It's a curiosity. It's a tourist attraction. One week we were visiting with our niece up in New Jersey, and we saw one of those signs, and Arlene said, "Why don't you build a covered bridge in Burns Park?" And I said, "Well, because I hadn't thought of it, I guess." I hadn't thought of it. She said, "Well, you could take East Fork Bayou out there. Don't you own property across there?" I said, "Yes, there's seven hundred and eighty acres across that bayou that we haven't touched. Seven hundred and eighty virgin acres that haven't been touched." She said, "Build a bridge across White Oak Bayou." We came back, and I took the city engineer out there. We selected a site, hired an architect, selected a contractor, and built a covered bridge.

RR: No, I haven't.

WL: It's right in the bend. It's where "Arlene Lamar Drive" connects with "Joe Pock Drive." The stream comes down, makes a big bend, and goes on.

WL: I'll jump way ahead now. Saturday a week ago just north of "Joe Pock Drive" was where they gathered with all their horses because it's the beginning of the equestrian trail. They built a bridle path that twists all around through that four hundred acres that we hadn't used. Gravel --- I guess the bridle path must be ten feet wide, eight feet, at least, and it winds around through all those woods out there. And you can cross the covered bridge to get to it.

RR: Yes.

WL: Someone said, "Why is that big hole cut in the wall of the covered bridge?" I said, "People were knocking out the planks off the sides of the bridge to look down at the water. Park employees had to go down there in the creek to get the planks out. I said, "Get a saw, saw a big hole, make a six-foot square hole up here and then build a little platform for them to stand on and look out over the water." See, that's the story that nobody ever hears about. You don't think about how those things came about.

RR: I know Burns Park was a big passion of yours.

WL: It was!

RR: For a long time.

WL: We didn't have anything. We didn't have any playgrounds. We didn't have any buildings for the young people. The only park we had was there at 5th and Main. Mr. Lawhon was the mayor. D. D. Terry, I believe, was the congressman.

RR: Terry was in the 1930s.

WL: It must have been D. D. Terry. Anyway, Ross was the mayor. He talked with the congressman. The post office was in the two hundred block on Main Street, on

the east side of it--the Princess Theater and then the post office, and then W. W. Woolworth's, the old five-and-ten-cent store was there, and then the corner lot of 2nd and Main was vacant. They finally built a Bank of Commerce there that didn't last very long --- a yellow brick building. But Mayor Lawhon propositioned the legislators, "If you'll build us a new post office --- we're in these cramped quarters down here --- old, old building --- the roof leaks --- two-story building --- nothing up above it --- windows all broken out, we'll give you that piece of ground up there." And he gave them a deed to our city park. The council voted to give them that piece of ground if they'd build a post office.

RR: Give it to whom?

WL: To the government.

RR: To the government. The federal government.

WL: "We'll give you a deed if you'll build a post office there." They built a post office there, and a few months later, Ross resigned as the mayor and became the postmaster. [Laughter] Lifetime job. He stayed there maybe two years and resigned. He said, "No, that's not for me." He said, "You got a door up there with peep holes up in there. Got a little walkway up there and a man peepin' down there, seein' what's goin' on. He come in the side door --- you never see him, never hear him, even, but then you get a letter that somethin' happened. You gotta think back. 'That dude was up in that loft all the time lookin' down at you while you were . . .'" He said, 'Man, I ain't for that, sir! I quit!' And he did. He quit. He walked off and left it. [Laughter] He didn't want them peeping down on

him. [Laughter] Then O. W. Neely took the job. O. W. Neely was the mayor then for the next six years.

RR: Neely, I remember him.

WL: He went up there as postmaster. When his last term as mayor expired, he was appointed to the postmaster position.

RR: Yes.

RR: Percy Machin.

WL: All right. Who was the city treasurer?

RR: I don't remember.

WL: He must have been the postmaster before Lawhon. Anyway, that's how we lost our city park. It was a regular city park. We would walk from Baring Cross all the way out and go down there. It had swings and slides and the usual park stuff. It had a gazebo.

[End of Tape 3, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 3, Side 2]

WL: . . . cleaned up Military Heights. There was a post office out there. The merchants downtown were really frightened over that. They said, "Man, we won't have any downtown left." And I said, "You won't even know there's a new post office. They can't back these big trucks into this post office down here. It's right by the railroad track and a feed mill behind it, congested." They were having a terrible time getting in and out of that place. I said, "They're going to move all that out there. All the docks, all the big trucks, all that junk will be out there. It'll be like a substation. Our downtown people will never know the post

office moved because the post office will still be here.” And it still is there. We got over . . .

RR: What became of the city park when the federal government took it over?

WL: Oh, they did like that. That whole bunk went.

RR: And did what with it? What’s there?

WL: They built the post office there.

RR: Oh, to put the post office on . . .

WL: It’s built on that square of ground. He deeded to them the entire square block.

RR: Yes. Okay.

WL: They got from Main to Magnolia, from 4th Street to 5th Street.

RR: Yes.

WL: So we lost that park.

RR: When did you finally finish Burns Park? Well, I guess it never is really finished.

WL: It’s not finished. Now they’re right in the biggest development they’ve had in a long time. They just finished and we dedicated a horse trail out there a week ago Saturday.

RR: How many acres is it all together?

WL: Fifteen hundred. It’s a thousand, five hundred and seventy-five.

RR: Isn’t it the largest . . .

WL: Second largest municipal-owned besides Central Park in New York [City].

They’re the largest, and we’re second, with fifteen hundred and seventy-odd acres out there.

RR: Yes. And before you were mayor, it was just kind of sitting out there?

WL: It was just nothing but --- well, like I said, on the way you come into it now, that number one pavilion they had built, Joe Poch got the money for them to build that pavilion. Joe Donnell helped on that thing. I remember his name being attached to that. Dr. Burns worked hard as he knew how to get that park developed. It was just --- it wasn't called anything yet.

RR: Yes.

WL: He got the electric department to agree to put the bottles out there with signs on it, "Contribute when you pay your light bill." The south side of the city hall was the electric department when I was the mayor.

RR: Put what out there?

WL: He put little jars . . .

RR: Oh, yes.

WL: . . . "When you pay your electric bill, drop a quarter. Help us develop a park system."

RR: Yes.

WL: And I thought, "With fifteen hundred acres, how many quarters would you have to collect from people to build a park?" I pledged to the people, when I campaigned that if they'd elect me, I'd build them a park, but we'd have bond issues to pay for it. We started out --- we had a plan. You might remember a fellow from Scotland. Jerry McLendon

RR: Well, that rings a bell --- the fellow from Scotland.

WL: He developed a five-year plan for us.

RR: Yes.

WL: . . . and the fourth year, they'd always renew it for another five.

RR: Right.

WL: That's the way the school boards do.

RR: Yes.

WL: The Superintendent would get a three-year contract, and on his second year he would get an additional three-year contract.

RR: Right.

WL: So you've always got three years ahead. You're never less than three years. And then they always have to buy out his contract should the School Board decide to replace him.

RR: Who handled the bond issue for Burns Park?

WL: I couldn't tell you if you hung me by the thumbs.

RR: Well, a pretty good guess when you mentioned bond issue is Stephens because they had most of the bond issues.

WL: Well, not when we got to bidding. They would lose some of them. We'd just have a bid right there at the city council [meeting]. The bond brokers would turn their bid in. We'd run the ad in the newspaper. That, the law required. We closed the date by a certain time, and the bids would be opened at the next council meeting.

RR: Yes.

WL: And then they'd sit there. You may have been through some of those when they'd open these bids and just call out, "Six and a half," "Four and a half," "Three and a half," "Three and a quarter." After a while, "Call recess." They've got to

go call someone. They take a break. They'd go down, use the telephone, come back, and open the bid. Finally it got to two of them --- one of them bid "Four and a half." The other would say "I'm out." The next guy dropped out.

RR: Yes.

WL: Then we'd say, "All right, within thirty days you guarantee this percentage, but not longer than thirty days." That was only fair because the stock market could mess him up. So within thirty days we'd have to meet and go over that with whatever the bond issue was for, to see if it needed changes.

RR: Yes.

WL: Then we'd call him and give him the contract. But that's the way we did it the whole time I was there. "Hog Calling Auction." That's what it was.

RR: What kind of relationship did you have with Stephens?

WL: We were friends, as far as business friends go. I knew Mr. Witt, and I remember when Jack went into business with him. See, Witt lived over here in North Little Rock. He and his first wife lived up on Ridge Road.

RR: I don't think I knew that.

WL: Yes. He was a North Little Rock resident.

RR: So you knew him as a business . . .

WL: Yes, just as a businessman.

RR: Yes.

WL: He would have a meeting, I guess, once a week. He'd call in about eight or ten people, and they'd have lunch over there in his office. They had a regular big, long dining table and his people brought in the food.

RR: Yes.

WL: And just a general discussion. It wasn't about anything in particular. Just bring up anything or just talk about weather, or fishing, or Aunt Purdy, or anybody you wanted to.

RR: Yes.

WL: He just wanted to know people.

RR: Yes.

WL: He wanted to know everybody. He was the friendliest guy you'd ever come across. As a young man he sold belt buckles door to door. He got out and sold these electric lamps door to door. I mean, he'd knock on a door and try to make a sale.

RR: Gas lamps?

WL: Yes. Gas lamps, I mean.

RR: Yes.

WL: Gas lamps. Since the gas got so high, they make them electric lamps now.

RR: Yes.

WL: But he'd knock on your door and wouldn't know you from Adam, and before he left, you'd signed up for a gas lamp. [Laughter] "Won't cost you a dime. No, we'll just put it on your bill!" And he sold them.

RR: He was something! He was really something!

WL: Boy, he was a nice guy.

RR: Let me ask you one more question, and then I think we ought to call it a day.

WL: Okay.

RR: I have the vaguest recollection of something having to do with St. Joseph's Orphanage and how you arranged to get their garbage picked up for them.

WL: That's a short story. I just told the city garbage collectors to get out there and pick it up. [Laughter] That's the truth!

RR: Now, explain where St. Joseph's is.

WL: If you've ever driven out toward Remount, that huge, red-tile topped building—you know, the big yellow brick one with the red tile roof on it?

RR: Yes.

WL: That is the orphanage.

RR: Outside the city limits, right?

WL: Just outside.

RR: Yes.

WL: Just outside, which was illegal as a three-dollar bill.

RR: [Laughs] How did it come about that you . . .

WL: John Mathews asked me to serve on the board. He called and asked me would I go to lunch with him one day. I said, "Yes." And we were at lunch, and he said, "I want to ask you something, and I want you to be serious about it." He said, "We need another member on the board at St. Joseph's. Are you interested?" I said, "Man, I have been acquainted with St. Joseph's since I was a teenager." At our furniture store we sold a lot of Christmas toys—tricycles, little pedal-pushing things, red wagons and all that kind of kiddie stuff. On Christmas Eve we had to stay open until about 12:00 making deliveries. We never got home before midnight. A lot of the stuff they'd buy, and they'd say, "Now, I don't want it to

be delivered until after the kids are in bed.” Cedar chests for their graduating daughter, we couldn’t deliver until after she had gone to bed or gone to Aunt Trudy’s house or something. Oh, it was a mess. We dreaded [Christmas Eve] night. But all that little junky–stick horses, where you got a stick with a horse head on it and they just get on it and gallop, I’ve taken them out there, maybe, forty or fifty of them at a time. Everything that was left --- tricycles, small chairs, little red wagons, our store was small. It was only about twenty-six or twenty-eight feet wide, but it was from the alley to the front, so it was one hundred-forty deep. But we were always crowded for space. We had a balcony that ran the full length of the thing. But all this junk that took up space, we’d load on the truck and take it to St. Joseph’s.

RR: Give it to them.

WL: The sisters would put it under their Christmas tree that night. They used to have a dinner out there every year that I always looked forward to. You would take a “boy gift” or a “girl gift,” and you’d write on there, “Boy, between six and ten” or “Under four,” just some description. The sisters would take it and put that under the Christmas tree, and we’d go out there for a sausage dinner. They had their Polish sausage that they made with their own hogs. They’d make this Polish sausage, and we’d all get a pound of sausage. Of course, we’d all give a cash contribution to the church when we were out at the orphanage.

RR: Yes.

WL: It was not an orphanage as you’d think of, as we say, a Catholic orphanage. It was not a “Catholic orphanage” in reality. It was a home for children who needed a

home. I would venture to say there was never at any one time as much as ten percent of the children Catholic. Catholic people usually take care of their own unless it is a tragedy and both parents are killed or something of that sort. But St. Joseph's they took in any family of children who needed a home, and we were the only organization that would take in all of them. One time we had six brothers and sisters of one family and kept them all until they got big enough to leave. They don't do that now. Well, the state made us give up keeping the children. They wouldn't let us keep them, so there's no such thing as St. Joseph's orphanage now. It was a school—of course, they had a school of their own—and they taught first through twelfth grade.

RR: Yes.

WL: And then St. Joseph's would take other children who wanted to come to their school. But it was set up for the kids who lived at this orphanage. The teachers were the nuns who lived there and taught.

RR: When did you go on the board? You said you had lunch with John . . .

WL: John Matthews.

RR: John Matthews. Okay.

WL: He had been on the board for a long while. John and I got to be good acquaintances, good friends. I put his wife, Helen, on our library board because I thought we needed someone like that, and I was criticized for that—putting a Catholic on—“the first thing you know, you're going to find the shelves just loaded with Catholic books.” Isn't that pitiful, people who think like that?

RR: Oh, yes. Oh, my.

WL: I don't know how their minds work. Anyway, Helen died last year, and John had died about three years before that. But he asked me to serve, and I served from the early 60s until the orphanage closed. I was president of it for three years, and the next year, I said, "I will not take it because this is too great an honor to let one person hold the position for so long. I'm a Baptist here serving as head of the board for a Catholic organization."

RR: So tell me how the garbage pickup came about.

WL: They asked me—Sister Charlene, who was one of the leading—C-H-A-R-L-E-N-E, Charlene. I didn't know they weren't picking up garbage. They told me, and I told the garbage trucks to go out there and pick up their garbage. I said, "That place does nothing but good for the community. It's not in competition with anything or anybody. They're just there to do good. They're like a church. A church and a school do nothing but do good." In our store, my papa always discounted merchandise to churches and schools. Teachers got a discount. Automatically, they got ten percent off if they taught school. That was just automatic.

RR: Yes.

WL: Anyway, I said, "They deserve it." So we went out there and picked up their garbage. They called and wanted to know about paving some of their driveways. I said, "We'll be out there Monday. I'll get it set up, and we'll be out there Monday. Now, you're sure on what you want paved? Because they're going to have to grade it and put gravel on it, then come back . . ." and I went through the whole thing. I explained that to Mr. Smith. Shelby Smith— our street department

superintendent. He went out there with Sister Charlene and Sister Concheta. She was in charge of the younger children. Just as sweet a person—both of them are still living in Fort Smith now. Concheta is in the first few stages of Alzheimer's [disease]. She doesn't know you when you go to visit. Sweetest person --- with the Benedictine Sisters there in Fort Smith. They're all living up there now, but about three of them who lived at St. Joseph's down here have died since they closed this place. I said, "They're going to be out there to pave, and you all keep out of the way because if you're not moving, we're going to pave over you. We're going to pave that place." We paved everything out there that they pointed to.

RR: Yes.

WL: And I did that for churches. I was caught paving behind a place down here—not a church—in the second ward. Charlie Bahil was another alderman, B-A-H-I-L. Charlie called. He was running for re-election, had an opponent and he wanted help. The guy who ran a place down there wanted the back end of his place of business blacktopped. You'd drive across the curb and go around his building. A sheriff's deputy walked into the mayor's office about two o'clock that afternoon and served a stop and desist [cease and desist]. That word's in there, I remember that --- "forthwith." The officer said, "By God, it meant now." [Laughter] I went down there, saw what they were doing. I told them, "Don't do anything until I come back." I came back and called the judge. I can't think of his name. He lived in North Little Rock until he retired. I'm not renegeing on these names, I just can't get there with them yet.

RR: All right.

WL: We had a trial. I went to trial in Little Rock. There wasn't much trial to it. He said, "The charge is you were using publicly owned equipment, manpower and materials on private property." I said, "I did that. Yes, sir. I'm guilty." The Judge was trying to help. He said, "Well, I know sometimes it's hard to tell where a street—you did that with the street department?" I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "Sometimes it's hard to tell exactly where the city property ends and the private property begins. I can understand how you can make mistakes." I said, "Judge, I was twenty feet off the street. I was back in behind that ice cream place, paving that parking lot." He said, "Why were you doing that?" I said, "Well, Charlie Bahil was running with opposition, and the ice cream man told him he needed to hustle in some votes, and I was trying to help out." [Laughter] He sat there, it seemed like, for ten minutes. He just sat there. He looked at me. He kind of looked all around. Then he said, "I've been on this bench a long time, and I have never heard anything like this!" I said, "Judge, before we go any further, let me ask a favor of you." He said, "What?" I said, "They've asked for a 'temporary injunction.'" He said, "That's right. They're about to get it." I said, "Make it permanent." He said, "You want it permanent?" I said, "Yes, sir. I'll tell you why. People come in here and put the political pressure on me to pave their driveway, pave their storefront, pave here, pave there. I weaken, and just like this, I run out there and do it. Make it permanent so I can show them, 'Look! I'll go to jail!'" He said, "You sure will, and it'll be permanent!" I said, "Thank you, judge!" [Laughter]

RR: Casey, I think we ought to quit with that.

WL: Okay.

[End of Interview]