

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

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Arkansas Memories Project

Richard Mason
Interviewed by Scott Lunsford
November 14, 2007
El Dorado, Arkansas

Objective

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

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

Transcript Methodology

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

The Pryor Center transcripts are prepared utilizing the *University of Arkansas Style Manual* for proper names, titles, and terms specific to the university. For all other style elements, we refer to the *Pryor Center Style Manual*, which is based primarily on *The Chicago Manual of Style 15th Edition*. We employ the following guidelines for consistency and readability:

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

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

Citation Information

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Scott Lunsford interviewed Richard Mason on November 14, 2007, in El Dorado, Arkansas.

[00:00:00]

Scott Lunsford: Richard—um . . .

Richard Mason: Right.

SL: . . . today is November 14. The year is 2007. We're at the John Newton—restored, pre—uh—Civil War house here in downtown El Dorado. Um—we are—um—gonna be talking a little bit about you and your book and El Dorado. Um—this—uh—videotape is going to be archived at the—uh—University of Arkansas Mullins Library—it's part—uh—the Pryor Center is a part of the library, and it will be physically housed in the Special Collections Department. And—uh—now I need to ask you if it's okay with you that we're videotaping this interview and for it to belong to the University of Arkansas.

RM: Yes, that's very good.

SL: Yeah.

RM: I'm fine with it.

SL: All right. Well, thank you very much. Richard—um—what is your full name?

RM: Richard Harper Mason. I was born here in El Dorado, August 12, 1937.

SL: Right.

RM: Uh—we lived in El Dorado till I was five years old, and this was back during the Second World War. Gasoline was rationed, and my dad was working about eight miles north of here in a little town called Norphlet. Uh—there's an oil refinery. He was working there. So we moved to Norphlet when I was five years old. So I remember virtually nothin' about El Dorado in those early years. But—I—my memory picks up in Norphlet when we moved—uh—into town—uh—where my dad could walk to work, and that was the real reason we moved to Norphlet. Turns out I went to school in the first grade in Norphlet and—and spent all twelve years of my early education there in the Norphlet school systems.

[00:01:53] SL: What was your—uh—father's name?

RM: His—he was go—he went by Jack . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

RM: . . . but his birth certificate says Lavelle Mason. And according to my mom, whose name was Annie Sue Mason—her maiden name was Noggle—uh—according to my mom, my dad just didn't like Lavelle at all, and he just said, "Call me Jack." [*SL laughs*] And everyone that I ever knew called him Jack.

SL: Mh-hmm.

RM: I never heard him called Lavelle. Uh—the Mason family, I—I know a little bit about it. His—my—uh—his father was John Mason—and—uh—the Mason family—uh—came from the area right around the—ke—state line, just about twenty miles south of here. And that was after they moved from North Carolina and Virginia. According to—uh—great-uncle George Washington Mason, who did the genealogy, they go back to the George Mason of Virginia.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:02:54] RM: Uh—I haven't checked that out, so that's just a—I've seen the genealogy, but it's—uh—evidently he did a lotta work on that. And so—uh—the Mason family is—uh—even not going back to Virginia—they've been in—in south Arkansas since the—uh—1840s at the—at the—at the latest. In fact probably earlier than that. A funny story about my—would be great-great grandfather—he had a house that supposedly the living room was in Arkansas and the bedrooms were in Louisiana . . .

SL: Wow.

RM: . . . so they were right on the line. And they were—uh—were raised in a town ca—or they lived in a town called Blanchard Springs. And that's just about—uh—fifteen miles—uh—southeast of here. It's within a mile or two of the Louisiana line.

It was a—it was a little spa town back at the turn of the century. Uh—there was a hassle on getting the railroad to come through. The railroad came through about ten miles to the east—uh—because of the land—uh—some—some farmer held out, wouldn't sell his land, and so Blanchard Springs now is gone.

SL: Mh-hmm.

RM: The little town that had several hotels, a lot of homes, they—it just disappeared after the railroad. So—uh—that's a—that's a little of the oral history that I've heard from my family.

[00:04:22] SL: Did you know your—uh—grandfather or grandmother on your dad's side at all? Did you . . .

RM: Yes, I did. We knew them, and they—they lived—uh—when I was a boy, they lived in Malvern, Arkansas.

SL: Mh-hmm.

RM: And so—uh—I'd gone up to meet them many times. I remember—I was in college when—uh—when my—uh—grandfather died . . .

SL: Okay.

RM: . . . and his wife—at the—at the University of Arkansas.

SL: So you probably got to spend some good time with 'em, then, if they—if they . . .



RM: Yes, I spent some. You know, back—back at that time—which

was—uh—which was the late 1940s—basically travel was—uh—unusual. Vacations—I—I never remember goin' on vacation. The trips were to go to be with family for a few days or a week or so. And so—uh—we would go up to Malvern and visit the family there and then maybe one of dad's uncles—which lived down in Corpus Christi, Texas. So—uh—those were big trips for us . . .

SL: You bet.

RM: . . . uh—and from the time I—uh—started school at Norphlet—uh—I could count the number of times I left the state on one hand and have three fingers left over. [*SL laughs*] I went to Oklahoma once and Texas once. [*Laughs*]

SL: Yeah.

RM: And then a few trips to li—Little Rock and to—to Malvern. That was about it.

[00:05:42] SL: Now your grandparents in Malvern, they were—were they farmers? Is that?

RM: They were retired at the time . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

RM: . . . that I knew them. They were retired—in their seventies when I knew them.

SL: Mh-hmm.

RM: And so—uh—uh—they grew up—as far—or his—uh—my great-great grand—my great-grandfather—were—they farmed down in the—uh—area around—uh—Blanchard Springs and really that land wasn't suited for farmin'. And most of the farmers that started and tried to make a living outta that land—uh—just struggled for years and finally gave up the ghost, you know.

SL: Mh-hmm.

RM: It's just—just not good farmland.

[00:06:19] SL: What about your—uh—mother's side?

RM: My mother's side. My mother was a Noggle, and—uh—I've—uh—always heard the story from my mom that they were run outta Georgia by the Yankee carpetbaggers. [*Laughter*] That on her—let's see, it was her mat—maternal mother was—uh—General Harlan, who helped Johnson defend the city of Atlanta. And supposedly they had a large plantation with a number of slaves. And after the Civil War, the—uh—the taxes were so high that they lost all they had, and they moved first to Alabama for a while and then moved to Rose Bud, Arkansas, which is just—uh—north of Little Rock—north of Conway, actually.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:07:11] RM: Little town—just a crossroads now. And my mom

grew up in—uh—Rose Bud, went to college for one year at State Teacher's College in—I believe that's Conway—anyway met my dad there—uh—right in the middle the Depression.

SL: Mmm.

RM: They—they were strugglin' as a young couple. My dad heard there was work in south Arkansas. So he and my mother came down, and he would go to this refinery that he ended up gettin' a job at. And every morning' when the superintendent of the refinery left his home, my dad was—be standing on his doorstep asking him if there's any work, and he finally got on at the refinery. Worked for twenty-seven years at that refinery, and he was killed in an automobile accident when I was a sophomore in college.

SL: Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.

RM: Yeah.

[00:08:04] SL: Um—and was—did your mother—um—have a teaching career, or was she a . . .

RM: No, she went to s—college one year . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

RM: . . . but she had a flair for fashion, and when—when we were in—uh—Norphlet—uh—back during the early [19]50s—uh—times were pretty tough. My dad—my dad had a drinking problem. He

was a true alcoholic. He was one of those guys that had a good job, but when he got paid, he'd go to a beer joint—what we called a beer joint—or pool hall—and not only waste his money drinkin', but once he started drinkin', he became the most generous man in the world.

SL: Mmm.

[00:08:47] RM: He had some worthless friends [*laughs*] that he would loan money to, so times were really tough growing up. And I had a paper route to try to make a little spendin' money at that time. And my mother—uh—got on as a switchboard operator at a department store in El Dorado called Samples Department Store.

SL: Yeah.

RM: Old time department store run by the Samples family and the McKinney family owned a share of that. They ended up mergin' with—with another store called The El Dorado House, which my mother—which my mother worked for and became—uh—vice president and the fashion merchandising person. So she worked her way up from switchboard operator to a—a very good position—uh—which—which probably took place—and ended up back in the late s—no—early [19]70s—early 1970s.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:09:41] RM: I'd—by that time I'd graduated from the University of Arkansas with an M.S. and a B.S. degree in geology. I'd gone to work for—the company at that time was Humble Oil and Refining Company. It had—it was at the time merging with what was now Exxon—or Esso . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

RM: . . . at that time. And I was sent down to the King Ranch as a geologist and worked on the famous King Ranch for two years. And that's about the time my mother reached a kinda peak of her career. Uh—I took an overseas transfer at that time, and I was married to my wife, who was Vertis Nan Burton of Smackover. We met when I was a senior in college, and she was a junior in high school. A little age discrepancy there. Uh—we laugh about it, but when she graduated from high school, I started graduate school, and she started in at the University of Arkansas at the same time that—that semester. So we—we were married when she was seventeen, I was twenty-one—or nearly twenty-two. And—uh—we'll have our fiftieth wedding anniversary in a couple of years . . .

SL: Congratulations.

 RM: . . . we've had a long, a long career. I went to the University of Arkansas, and—and I graduated from Norphlet High School in

1955.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:11:04] RM: Uh—at 1961, I'd gotten my—my master's degree in geology, and that's when I went to work down in—in south Texas. I worked there for two years, in south Texas for Exxon. And then I took a transfer overseas to Libya, of all places, and I helped—uh—Colonel Gaddafi find some of that oil that he's—he took over. Actually this was before Colonel Gaddafi—King Idris was the king, and the United States had excellent relations with Libya at that time. There was an air force base in Tripoli . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

RM: . . . and the British had a base in Benghazi where we were—where we were living. And I worked out in the desert for a couple of weeks at a time as a wellsite geologist on the rigs. Learning the—the details of—uh—how oil and gas geology really work. I probably got more of my training as an oil and gas geologist from the Esso schools that they—they've got a whole school system and research center that they take their young geologists and send 'em through.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:12:09] RM: So—af—for about six years I was essentially training—uh—getting an understanding. I only spent two years

in Libya, and I came back to Corpus Christi, Texas. In Corpus Christi I was assigned as what we call a subsurface geologist. In other words, you're assigned—uh—maybe a county and your—that county is your county to look for oil and gas. You've got all the resources you need, and you come up with recommendations and have to support those recommendations with written reports and convince your supervisor that this is a good place for the company to spend, you know, maybe hundreds of thousands of dollars to drill for oil and gas . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

RM: . . . and so I did that for two years. But—uh—that's just not my cup of tea . . .

SL: Mmm.

RM: . . . working for a big company . . .

SL: Right.

[00:12:59] RM: . . . and so I kept getting the i—the itch—I guess you might say—to go to work for myself or for an independent. Uh—but to make the step to an independent geologist from a major oil company is such a big step. I went to work for a small company, and it was an individual by the name of John Hada. He was a geologist but a rather well-to-do geologist, and he had his own more or less independent company, and I was his

geologist for a few years. Actually only one year—it was because John was one wild man. The first—the first day—the very first day I went to work for John, he came in about ten o'clock still about half drunk from a hangover from the night before. He was a renown womanizer, drank like a fish, never exercised, smoked. Looked like a million dollars. [*SL laughs*] He really [*laughs*—it was just a shock. Well, that was a great learning year. I had learned a lotta the technical stuff from Exxon, but I really learned how to be—what we call an independent oil man from John.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:14:09] RM: He showed me how to map things and—and show them in the most favorable light possible. In other words, you're trying to sell somebody an oil and gas idea, and that's what independent geologists do. Well, after a year I quit John and just opened my own little office. And it was just one little room. It probably wasn't even ten by ten. And I pored over my maps, and I tried to come up with ideas on my own, that I would own the idea, and then I would find another company that would be willin' to buy that idea.

SL: Yeah.

RM: Well, I was really successful there for about two years doin' that.

Selling anywhere from ten to twelve, maybe fifteen—what we call deals a year. And I would get six, maybe eight thousand dollars per deal for those. Plus I'd get an overriding royalty under the well that was drilled. So we moved up from a—from a company livin' to a pretty—pretty good quality of life there with our income jump—pretty good. And I met a—a friend, another geologist that was in my position who was much more—much better off. He had been in business a long time.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:15:22] RM: We became partners, and his name was Joseph Baria from Corpus Christi. He's retired now but—who—we were partners for—gosh—from [19]68 to [19]78 to—uh—we were—we were probably partners almost twenty years.

SL: Wow.

RM: One of those partnerships where we never had a disagreement. Never. He could speak for me, and I—I could speak for him in making deals and trades. Uh—we started working with companies to be their operator. In other words, we would come up with the ideas—the companies—some of them—one of them was from outta Philadelphia and New York. They would come up with the money, and then we would earn an interest in the wells. Well, we did pretty good. In fact we were—we were making

probably a hundred and fifty, two hundred thousand dollars a year—each one of us—at that time. And . . .

[00:16:17] SL: Now is that workin' here in El Dorado?

RM: No . . .

SL: Where were you at?

RM: . . . I was in—I was in Corpus Christi . . .

SL: Okay.

RM: . . . Texas at that time. So that was my—that was my Texas



time. And in 19—about 1973—we drilled a well over in north Mississippi—from a—we'd taken the—the idea from another geologist that was a—uh—fraternity brother of my partner at Mississippi State. So you know, you have all of these connections as you grow up . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

RM: . . . and as you—as you're in business. It turns out that we made a major gas discovery in the Black Warrior Basin of Mississippi. We found the largest gas field that's ever been found in that basin. It was worth [*vocalized noise*] millions of dollars, and we earned a percentage of those millions. And so that put us in totally a different level. Uh—we were—uh—it—it was one of those things that it's almost like winnin' the lottery—that's the only thing I can say. When we drilled—now this is

science—this is not just throwing [*laughs*] darts.

SL: Right.

[00:17:21] RM: So we—when we drilled the key well—the well that would prove it up, either yes or no—uh—I flew over there. I met the geologist that was our partner in the field—uh—in a cotton field—we ran out to our—and on top of that car we laid out this electric log, and the geologists can interpret the log. And as soon as I looked at it, I say, "We hit it. We got it." I ran to the phone, called my wife, and I said, "We're rich." [*Laughter*] I didn't know how rich, but I knew we had made several million dollars in that one well. And you know, that's the kind of—you know—there's an old Texas song that says, "All I need is one good well". I think it musta been written by a geologist. [*SL laughs*] Because that really made my career . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

RM: . . . that one well—uh—turned out to—to—uh—to spark the drillin' of other wells, and our interest in that field and other fields. And we sold oil and gas interests over the years and made—you know—a—a number of—of very, very profitable sales. So that . . .

[00:18:27] SL: I'm sure it really boosted your credibility . . .

RM: Yeah, yeah.

SL: . . . quite a bit too.

RM: Yeah, that . . .

SL: Everyone wants to be on a winning team.

RM: . . . that's right and—and that's right—and we were able to raise money—and that was back when oil and gas was relatively cheap. I mean, you know, we sold our—our first gas for sixty cents an MCF That was the highest price that had been paid for gas on the Gulf Coast. I looked today fore I left, and gas was eight dollars. And—uh—it's been up to fourteen dollars. So—uh—we sold oil, back at that time, for two dollars and seventy five cents a barrel. Three fifteen was a good pri—you know oil's at ninety-two now, so . . .

SL: What year was that?

RM: That was probably in the nine—in the [19]60s.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:19:09] RM: And in the [19]70s we started getting that first bump—that first really move—uh—and then we had kind of a boom—what we called a boom—in the early 1980s. And we sold a lotta property. We kinda thought things were overpriced, honestly. And we sacked away some—some pretty good dollars, but the oil business had a bust about 1986. Prices dropped. A lotta companies that had thought oil was gonna go out the

ceiling went bankrupt . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

RM: . . . and we were—happened to be hedged rather nicely, and so we survived that. I moved—we moved—back here in 1975, and my partner a few years later retired.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[End of verbatim transcript]

[00:19:53] RM: But we had a house designed, and we had a lot on Corpus Christi Bay. We were going to build a big, redwood house on piers that stuck out over the bay, thirty feet high. And had a geo—had a architect that had a great plan outta redwood and glass. I told my wife one night, I said, "You know"—I said, "We've got a lot of friends here in Corpus Christi. We've got a great life, but if we ever build this house, we'll never move home." And you know, we'd talked about moving back to Arkansas. South Texas, it's kinda one of those areas where you really didn't have a winter, spring, summer, or fall. You just had kind of a blend of wind and humidity and no trees. And you know, all the ladies had to have headscarves to keep their hair from blowin' away. And it was just not where we wanted to live, and so we started a little search of towns. We started, and we had five towns in the final running: Columbus, Mississippi,

where I was actually doing a lot of work; Tyler, Texas; Jackson, Mississippi; El Dorado; and there was one other one but I can't recall it. Anyway, we eliminated the large towns, and we narrowed it down, finally to Columbus, Mississippi, which is a little bigger than El Dorado. A—really a pretty town. And my business was right there on the ground. I'd be right in the middle of my business. We actually got to the point of looking for houses in Columbus, Mississippi. That's how close. Our folks were still here in south Arkansas, my wife's folks and my mother. My dad was—had been killed in an automobile . . .

SL: Right.

[00:21:33] RM: . . . accident back when I was in college. So we came in for a Thanksgivin' visit, and there was a piece of property out on Calion Road, just past where the Aldersons live right now—Diane Alderson. And there was an old place we called The Palace, and I can remember just as a little boy going there with my dad and that they served a tremendous barbecue. And it had turned in—after the fellow that did the barbecue died, it turned into what we call a beer joint. They just serve beer, you know. [*Laughter*]

SL: Right.

RM: And you know, the little ol' lady and the little ol' man that ran it

were the Quinneys, and they just retired and put it up for sale. Well, everybody in El Dorado thought it was an exorbitant price, and when I priced it I thought, "That's a steal," [*laughter*] compared to what I'd been lookin' at on Corpus Christi Bay. So we bought it and built our house there in 1975. So we've been in El Dorado—back in El Dorado since—born here 1937, returned to live here in 1975.

[00:22:36] SL: Well, did you continue working when you got here?

RM: Yeah. I did—I never changed what we were doing. Not at all. I—my partner and I worked at a distance apart. We'd talk for maybe an hour a day on the phone for several years, and then he was fifteen years older than I was. So he reached a point where he really just wanted to take it easier. And so we—he just retired—and we have—we still think the world of them. And they're still alive and down in Corpus Christi, Texas. But I, at that point, had hired a couple of extra people, and so I have a small office of three or four people here, and we have contract people on the ground over in Mississippi that do our on-the-ground work.

SL: Right.

RM: So I've continued to work, and I work every day in the oil business. And I'm still looking for new places to find oil and gas,

so . . .

SL: Yeah.

RM: . . . and we drill maybe six to eight wells a year that we operate. And then, as a lot of oil people do, we take an interest from other oil operators on maybe ten to fifteen, twenty wells a year. Sometimes our interest is not but 1 or 2 percent. But it's a way to spread your risk. The more interest you take—if you put all of—it's kinda like putting your eggs in one basket . . .

SL: Yeah.

RM: . . . you drill a dry hole—and of course, the dry holes are what really, really keep our business interesting. [*SL laughs*] If every well was a good well, gasoline would probably be fifteen cents a gallon. [*Laughs*]

SL: Right.

RM: But anyway, we do that [*SL clears throat*], and I've continued to do it.

[00:24:20] SL: Let's drop back to your early years again.

RM: Okay.

SL: When you're—you all are livin' in the small town there by the border. What was the—tell me about the house that you lived in back then and tell me about that town.

RM: Back when I first went to work for Exxon?

SL: No, no, no, no, no. Back at Norphlet.

[00:24:46] RM: Oh, okay. When [*clears throat*]*—*we had a couple of moves in Norphlet. When we first moved to Norphlet—I just barely remember this—I was about six or seven, and we lived on what I think is called Padgett Road right now. But I—we called it Main Street—or it was the main—it was the only street that really ran through Norphlet. And we lived in a little—John Grisham's unpainted house kinda comes to mind. It was a—it was kinda one of those clapboard houses that had the strips of paint on the side. Little, square house with about four or five rooms. [00:25:20] And my little—my younger brother, who's five years younger than I am—his name is William Lee Mason, and he is a doctor in Little Rock—worked for the state—had a pulmonary clinic for a while but he works for the state right now. And when he was born, I remember at the time just having to spend the night with our next-door neighbors when he was born in El Dorado. About three years later when I was eight years old, we moved out on the farm—what I call the farm. It was a mile outside of town. And it was a forty-acre farm, and one of the reasons we moved out there—we could earn our rent by taking care of the owner of the farm's blind father who lived in a small house behind that. And so durin' that time, we had a

pretty good garden. I spent my—from eight years old to twelve in the little creek and swamp bottom there, fishing and doing all of those things young boys do. [00:26:35] As I looked back, when I started writing my novels, I kinda tried to capture some of that when boys, during the summer, would bring a—well, in the spring—would bring a note to school—I can remember it just as clear as a bell—and it would say, "Dear Principal So-and-so, please allow Richard to come to school barefooted." [SL laughs] Most of the boys in Norphlet went to school up until they got up into the high school—went to school barefooted—the young boys. And after school was out, a pair of shorts were it. And we were brown as, we say, little Indians. We were sunburned—our feet were so tough we could walk across hot pavement or somethin'—never bothered us. And carried a slingshot in our back pocket. I can remember goin' into El Dorado and riding the train in for twenty-five cents. We'd come in—and at that time my mother was workin' at Samples, and so I would go in and get off the train and walk up town, and I'd go to the Ritz Theatre in El Dorado. It—right on Main Street. It was one of those—and I guess looking back on it, I didn't really think of it this way—but it was a B—what we'd call a B movie house now. They started their movies at ten thirty in the morning. And they had a double

feature always, and it was almost—on the weekend—it was almost always western double feature with Hoot Gibson, Roy Rogers, and all that bunch. Lash LaRue. And they'd have—and they had serials back then, you know. Lash LaRue would be fallin' through a burning roof the—when it quit the last time, and it'd pick back up . . .

SL: Right.

RM: . . . where he would miraculously escape. [*SL laughs*]
[00:28:20] It also had the new—*Movietone News*—the newsreels about the war. We were still in the Second World War at that time. And then when that movie was over, I would walk down the Main Street to Woolsworth Department Store, or five-and-dime store, I guess you'd call it. Have a hot dog at the counter, then I would walk down Washington Street to the Majestic Theatre, and I would go to the one o'clock movie there. [*SL laughs*] When I got out at three o'clock [*laughs*], I would walk across to the Rialto Theater, which, by the way, is the only one of those theaters still there. The old Ritz has been covered up, and it's a—they've converted it into an office now. But the Rialto is still there and pretty much like it was. Built in 1929.

SL: Wow.

RM: And it was a—it's a—it was an old, grand—it was the grand

movie house, and I can remember the tickets costs eleven cents. The tickets to the Ritz Theatre costs eight cents, and I thought, "Boy, that's a bargain." But you know, that was when popcorn was a nickel a sack.

SL: Right.

RM: And the Cokes were a nickel. Everything was . . .

SL: Was a nickel.

RM: . . . you know, scaled down to that lev—funny books, as we called 'em, were a nickel and . . .

SL: Yeah.

RM: You know, a nickel bought a lot back then.

[00:29:34] SL: Sure did. Well. What kind of—wa—did music play a role in your childhood at all?

RM: It really didn't early on, except as we got up into the rock-and-roll era. As we got into high school, most of the kids were listening to that early rock and roll which—I graduated 1955, and by the time I got in college, Elvis was on the scene. And so my—really when I think about music, I think about The Everly Brothers and Elvis and all those early rock and roll—Bill Haley and the Comets—I can remember hearin' "Rock Around the Clock." And when those songs came out, the DJs at the various radio stations played 'em over and over. I mean, if you

turned the radio on, you could hear that song fifteen times in an hour easily. And so we'd all memorize all the words.

SL: Right.

[00:30:33] RM: And I can remember that clearly. And then—a—you—on that same, related kinda subject, we knew every model of every car. Well, now—today with the models like they are, it's an impossibility, but it was not—it was not difficult. We could spot a [19]56 Chevy in a minute . . .

SL: Sure.

RM: . . . and you could—you never had any doubt what was comin' down the road or what was [*unclear word*]. So things were a—I would say—a lot simpler, but they—you got into 'em a lot deeper. That's what I can remember some of the music. Well, I don't know whether kids memorize all of the verses of all those songs now. Most of 'em sound like they're just repeat verses or repeat choruses. But back then they had a—I can remember, "Hang down your head, Tom Dooley" . . .

SL: Dooley.

RM: . . . and some of those songs that . . .

SL: Yeah.

RM: . . . you knew every line of every verse...

SL: Yeah. That's Kingston Trio, I think, wasn't it?

RM: . . . so anyway, that was kinda the music part of my . . .

SL: I think that was Kingston Trio that did that. "Hang down your head, Tom Dooley."

RM: Yeah, yeah. Kingston Trio.

SL: Yep.

RM: I still have all The Kingston Trio albums. [*Laughter*]

SL: Me too. [*Laughter*]

RM: I'm putting those albums on CD right now. I've got a deal that conver—that switches and converts 'em so . . .

SL: That's good.

RM: . . . they work pretty good on there.

SL: Yeah.

RM: You can put five or six albums on there.

SL: Yep.

RM: It works.

[00:31:53] SL: Well, so—I mean—but did y'all have a radio in your house? Or . . .

RM: Yeah, the radio.

SL: . . . did you ever listen to anything?

RM: The radio was the big deal.

SL: Yeah.

RM: You know, it was kinda like—I've got the radio at—when I got

home from school and if I got my chores done, I could listen to *The Green Hornet* or *The Shadow* . . .

SL: *Shadow*.

RM: . . . or some of those. Or the—and then I always listened to *The Lone Ranger*. Never missed *The Lone Ranger*. And then the news would usually come on some time, and dad took that over. And I can still remember—in fact I recorded that in the book that I've written. Walter Winchell would come on, and he would say, "Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. North and South America and all the ships at sea. Let's go to press." And it would always be somethin' on the war.

SL: Right.

[00:32:38] RM: And of course, that was my—I had two uncles, one which was in the infantry, landed on Omaha Beach, and managed to get off the beach, but the Germans shot his kneecap off.

SL: Oh.

RM: It ended up okay. They repaired his knee, and so we found out about that. My uncle J. R. flew bombing missions over Germany in a B-25, or 7, or whichever, or 29 maybe . . .

SL: Twenty-nine, yeah.

[00:33:04] RM: But anyway, and so we were kept up with the war.

And I can remember durin' the war, especially, things that we did to try to help the war effort. It just seemed like everybody wanted to do somethin'. I can remember joinin' with a team on a scrap iron drive. And we just—anything that wasn't nailed down—signs—everything was just hauled in. We were havin' a contest. My mother put her vacuum cleaner out on the back door to have her—my dad change the bag, and it disappeared into the scrap drive [*laughter*], which—I have to admit it was me that hauled it off. So durin' those war years—you were—one of the big things here in south Arkansas were maneuvers, and the maneuvers would come through as they trained, and they would divide up into the—with blue arm patches or green—into the green and the blue armies, and they would camp out. And the whole town in Norphlet would go down to the army camp. And I can remember the commanding colonel would stand up, and he would welcome everybody. And he would give the men leave to go into town with the townspeople and have dinner that night. I can remember one where my mother brought a chocolate cake, and there was this young man—you could tell he was very bashful. And he just kinda was very hesitant, and Mother came up and offered him a piece of chocolate—I think it was chocolate pie come to think of it—chocolate pie, and sure enough, there



was a group went around, and then the colonel said, "Well, you can invite any of our young men to join you for dinner, and we'd be happy to give 'em a leave." And so I thought, "Well, I bet Mom invites this skinny, young private." Well, I got back to the house, and I heard a little argument going on. I walked in, and Mother said, "Yes, I invited that private to dinner." And Daddy said, "I've invited the commanding colonel. How do you think he's going to like sitting there with a private?" And Mother said—I can still remember—she said, "If that private's good enough to go over and fight for us, he's good enough to sit at my dinner table, and I don't care who with." Well, my dad thought was a pretty good put-down. And so we had dinner that night with the commanding colonel and a private.

SL: That's great.

[00:35:36] RM: The private was a little nervous, as I recall. I was about eight, I guess, when that happened. [*Laughter*]

SL: That's a great story.

RM: Yeah, it was an interestin' story.

[00:35:45] SL: What about church?

RM: Church?

SL: Yeah. Did that play a role in your . . .

RM: Well, as long as I can remember, we were—we went to church.

My mother was a Methodist. And my dad wasn't really anything. He went to church occasionally. But we had a preacher come to Norphlet. His name was David Loyal Prior. He became good friends with my dad, and they fished a lot together. And Dad finally said to Mom, "You know, I'd go to church if we went to the Baptist church." Well, my mother was a Methodist forever, but she went to church. And my dad joined the church. I joined the Baptist church. We became Baptists, and I've been Baptist now for as long I can remember. And that was when we were about nine or ten years old. And so it was a friendship there that developed into a church relationship, which stayed with us for a long time.

SL: So were you just engaged with that on Sundays, or did you join choir . . .

RM: No, those . . .

SL: . . . or were there Wednesday evening thing . . .

[00:36:47] RM: Those days, church was a big part of everybody's entertainment essentially, and we'd have a two-week revival at church. And you'd go every night, and they'd have the—I can remember the young group would be in something they called the booster band. And all us guys and girls would set up on the front. And we'd have little choruses like, "Joy, joy, joy down in

my heart," dah, dah, dah, and we'd sing it just—well, sing our little hearts out. And then—they would have vacation Bible school that went another two weeks in the summer. And so all of these things were church activities. And probably some of the things that I remember more vividly are—socially—when I was growing up there—are the after-church fellowships at peoples' houses. Because church members would get together, and a couple of families would have homemade ice cream at their house one night after church services, and somebody else would have it. So church was probably—is—in the [19]40s and [19]50s a big part of a person's social life—and the kids would go play, and the adults would socialize. We'd all eat ice cream or watermelon or somethin' like that.

[00:38:05] SL: Before we get to your latest book . . .

RM: All right.

SL: . . . that you're touring with, is there anything that you can remember with your father that kind of pointed you down your career path or pointed you toward the path that . . .

RM: Yeah,

SL: . . . you took in your life?

[00:38:26] RM: Well, you know, I think probably growing up in an oil field. You know, we played on the old pullin' machines, and we

played on the drillin' rigs, or actually most of those were oil pumping units—probably really dangerous, but we would stand on 'em while they pumped and ride 'em up and down. And you know that today parents would just have a heart attack if they saw their kids on one of those.

SL: Right.

RM: And so just bein' in the oil business . . .

SL: Arena. Yeah.

RM: . . . and my dad worked at the refinery, and he was what they called an asphalt stillsman. In other words, he was in charge—that little refinery at that time—their big product was asphalt that they use on highways.

SL: Okay.

RM: And so he was in charge of blending the asphalt and loading tank cars when they came in to pick it up. When I graduated from high school, I went to work in the summers at the same oil refinery, MacMillan Petroleum Corporation in Norphlet. And I worked four summers for them, and if I hadn't've—my dad was killed about in that second summer or actually while I was in school. But earning that money in the refinery really was the only thing that le—allowed me to go to college. I wouldn't have made—I couldn't have made college expenses if I hadn't earned

about—I earned about a thousand dollars during the summer. And I could save virtually every cent of it. Well, college back then, I could remember my first year as a freshman at the University of Arkansas. College costs were twelve hundred dollars, period. That was tuition, room and board, books, everything. You could go to college. Now you can't join a fraternity. You couldn't live it up, but you could basically get a room and board and books for twelve hundred dollars. That first . . .

[00:40:20] SL: That's for a year?

RM: That's for a year—full year.

SL: Yeah.

RM: So anyway, that got my interest. And when I got up to school, I guess the first that kinda hits your mind as you think about—to me as a young boy—is—engineers were popular back then—be an engineer. You know—an en—you know, I thought engineers just kind of were a vague thing, and so I started registering as an engineer. And I got actually registered in college as a electrical engineer in my first year, and then I went over for orientation, and I heard the professor talk about it. And I said, "You know, I'm not that good at math. [*SL laughs*] Physics I can't stand." After I was there for one day—and I went back to

reregister—and I—my roommate told him he—told me—he said, "You know, you don't have to pick a major. Just get a bunch of courses and—that can be applied to anything that freshman year." And so I did the very—that very thing. And as I got involved, I started getting interested in geology, which I knew nothin' about. But I had an interest in history, archeology, and geology. I probably—if I thought I coulda made a living, I woulda been a history teacher 'cause I dearly loved history. But—and archeology kinda links with geology in a little bit. But I [*clears throat*]*—*at the time I decided to become a geology major. We were spendin' some time in a group called the Ozark Hikers in Fayetteville. And it was the—I don't know whether that group still exists or how long they existed, but it was a formal group of students. And we didn't do much hikin'. We went out and went in caves.

SL: Ooh.

RM: We went in all of those caves—I've been in every cave—I've been in caves where I would crawl to the point where the top of that cave was on my back and the bottom on my stomach. And that gives you—if you've got claustrophobia, you're gonna feel a little funny [*laughs*] when you do that.

SL: Yep.

RM: But after that—really exposure to that—I really decided that I really liked working with rocks kinda in the outdoors. And of course, geology at the University of Arkansas is what we would call hard-rock geology. When I graduated I was really trained to be a mining geologist. But there are very few jobs as a mining geologist.

SL: Right.

RM: So what happens, the oil companies take the mining geologists who have a good, strong background, and they take them and train them as petroleum geologists.

[00:42:56] SL: Well, let's talk a little bit about what you're doin' now with your life.

RM: Okay.

SL: So you've got a book that you're promoting right now. What's the name of the book?

RM: The book is *The Red Scarf*. And it's the fourth book in the series. I've written a series, and I pick back up when I was about eleven or twelve years old. I've written it as historical fiction. I heard Andy Rooney interview Studs Terkel about maybe six years ago probably—right about six years. And he asked Studs, "What would you advise a person that wanted to write to write about?" In other words, what subject matter?

And I thought he was gonna really talk about research and all that. But he said, "Write remembrances." Memories. And I thought about that, and I had been doing some little short stories for my grandchildren, reading those stories. So I started writing with a real interest and started writing these stories about growin' up in the little town of Norphlet. And I guess as I started, I started out as nonfiction, but it turned into fiction real quick. [*Laughs*]

SL: Right.

[00:44:14] RM: And you know, embellished historical fiction is what it is. I had a little change in the way I wrote because when I first started writing, I took it to Bettie Anne Mahony who is a—who's an English professor here at the local college, a good friend, and she was my editor. Well, she edited it just where it was perfect King's English. And I was writing—which I didn't know any better—that writing in the first person is a hard way to write—but I was writing in the first person speaking as a twelve-year-old boy. Well, I had a friend in New York that I'd done some business in the oil industry, and he had a publisher friend. He said, "Let me just let him read it and see what he thinks about it." Well, he took it over to his publisher friend and got a rejection letter back, but the guy said, you know,

"Charming stories." Dah, dah, dah, dah. He went on with some positive things, but then he said, "You know, it sounds like a grandfather's telling the story instead of a young boy." Well, I thought, "Huh." Well, about that time [*SL laughs*], I had finished the overall of *The Red Scarf*, the book I have right now. So I went back, and I said, "By George, when I finish this it won't sound like any grandfather." So boy, I put in all of those "fixin's" and "gonnas" and "ain'ts" and "nos," and all of that. I was a little nervous about it when I got finished, because it was just opposite from the correct, punctuated, grammatically correct [*clears throat*] manuscripts that I'd had. After a couple of weeks I decided to send it to someone, and I noticed that August House just would accept manuscripts just like they are, they wouldn't—they didn't have to go through an agent—which can be a little bit of a tough deal just to get an agent. Anyway, I sent it to August House, and they have a deal where, "If you don't hear from us, it means we've turned it down." Thirteen weeks later I hadn't heard anything, and I had forgotten about it, and I got a call from August House. And they said they thought it was a charmin' story, et cetera. And so they wanted to publish it. And so I'm published now. But in that six-year period—in fact I've already written the sequel to *The Red Scarf*,

and I've gone back and put those five books—I have five books in what I call the Richard series—all in the voice of a twelve year old.

SL: Wow.

[00:46:35] RM: I'm pretty productive on the typewriter. I have an additional three novels that are adult novels. One which is—my son is Ashley—Richard Ashley Mason—he's thirty-nine. He has a special forces training center up by Jacksonville—outta Little Rock—seven hundred and fifty acres where he brings in—he's a former Green Beret. Spent time in Afghanistan, stayed with a warlord, and hunted with Afghan mercenaries—Bin Laden, actually. So anyway, I base one of the books called *The Warlord's Daughter* on his service. It's fiction, but it's a—and then I wrote another one in which we can expound on a little bit called *The Queen of Hamburger Row*. Hamburger Row is the oil field street in El Dorado. It's now South Washington Street, and it was the lawless part of town in the early [19]20s when the oil booms hit. And this is about a young girl from Locust Bayou, up by Camden, who came to El Dorado—thrown out of her house, came to El Dorado penniless, ends up on Hamburger Row. *The Queen of Hamburger Row*. I've written another one called *Choices*. It's set at the University of Arkansas, 1955 to 1961.

Not a [*laughs*—not my story but an interesting story. Anyway, I'm hopefully going to move ahead and try to get some of those others published if I can—if *The Red Scarf* does all right.

[00:48:09] SL: Well, so did this writing side of your career just kinda spring from just writing stories for your kids?

RM: It really did, and really, I've always had an interest—in fact . . .

Trey Marley: Excuse me. I got to do something for a second. I got to change tape real quick.

SL: Okay, we'll change tape.

[Tape stopped]

[00:48:26] SL: Okay.



RM: Well, my interest in writing has always been there. In fact when I was in Libya, I was about twenty-five or twenty-six years old, and I spent two weeks at a time out on the drillin' rigs, as being the wellsite geologist, and I was the guy in charge of discerning whether we'd found oil or not. Well, that job really takes about an hour a day. So playin' poker [*laughter*], and if you wanna do something else, or just roaming around was about all there was—I started writin' a novel. And—writin' it in longhand—and I really had an interest in doin' it. Well, when I got back to the states after the thing, I just put it aside. I was so busy in my career with the oil and gas industry, I didn't really pick it back

up.

SL: Right.

[00:49:16] RM: But I've since picked it back up six years ago because my interest—my oil business right now is going great. And I get up in the mornings, and a lot of times, I'll get to the office about seven o'clock. Now I found—and I read a book by Stephen King, *On Writing*—that was the name of it. He said that he found that if he would limit himself to twenty-five hundred words a day—no more—that those were good words. They would—they could stay with the novel. If you push yourself and get tired—start writin'—your imagination leaves you. I found it to be exactly right. And so I'm pretty quick typist, and so I'll come into the office seven or eight o'clock, sit there for about two hours, and I'll type. Fast as I can. [*SL laughs*] If I get a—if I get—after I get an area finished, I can go back and rewrite, but I'll try to get that fresh thought. And so I'll work on writing for a couple of hours every mornin', then I'll go into the oil and gas, and downtown real estate, or whatever we're dealin' with.

SL: Right.

[00:50:24] RM: And so that's how I do my writing.

SL: Well, I'd say Stephen King's a good one to take a clue from.

RM: Yeah, he had a—he—the book, *On Writing*, goes through his

career. And he was a schoolteacher for a while, and he did—had a tough time, and finally he—kinda like we did—hit the gusher.

SL: Yeah.

RM: He had one novel that just took off. I can't—I think it was *Carrie*.

SL: Is that right? He did *Carrie*. I guess that's right. Yeah.

RM: I think he did that one, and that one just took off. And all of a sudden he realized that he didn't have to worry about tryin' to keep bread on the table, that he was—then, you know, was pretty well self-sufficient then, and he really took off. He has an interesting part of that book—havin' nothin' to do with what we're talkin' about. He was hit by a car while jogging.

SL: I know that, yes.

RM: You remember that? And it n—he was—he just barely survived.

SL: That's correct.

[00:51:15] RM: It was a tough deal. Anyway that was—it's a interesting story. But he gave me ideas on writing, and I've really tried to—I'm one of those guys that, if somebody tells me—gives me constructive criticism—I'll do everything I can if I think that criticism is valid. And I try to change, and I think my writing has improved. And so, you know, it's kinda one of those things that—I told my wife, oh, a year or so back when I hadn't

got anything published, and I'd had a few agents turn me down, and a couple of publishers turned me down. I said, you know, I said, "I've had a real good time writing this stuff. I've enjoyed every minute of it. I'm tickled with the way it's—the way the stories have come out. If it's just a hobby, it's just a hobby. And I've enjoyed doin' it."

SL: Well, but now you've taken it beyond that, it sounds like.

RM: Well, I hope I have . . .

SL: Yeah.

RM: . . . and you know, it's tough to get out there and sell this stuff.

I mean, I was down in Monroe all day yesterday, and I sold three copies to a lady that was a hundred years old. [*Laughter*] Went to a retirement center, and she's gonna send 'em to her sons for Christmas . . .

SL: Well, that's . . .

RM: . . . and—I—you know—you sell—we sell a dozen novels, but I was on television down there, and you just gotta—what they call it—buzz the novel . . .

SL: Right.

RM: . . . get the novel—talkin' it. And if your novel supposedly has merit, people will start talkin' about it, and it will—and it'll help. So anyway . . .

SL: Yeah.

RM: . . . we'll see how it goes.

[00:52:42] SL: Well, Richard, I know you gotta go. Is there anything else you wanna say before we leave?



RM: I think El Dorado is a unique town. I did a lot of research, and I'm gonna expand on this just a little. I did a lot of research of the oil boom. On January the tenth, 1921, at 4:00 p.m., the well—they call it the Busey well out here—and it shoulda been called the No. 1 Armstrong—but the Busey was Dr. Busey. Anyway, it came in. You could see it from town. El Dorado was thirty-five hundred people, and the research in do—in diggin' up this *Queen of Hamburger Row* uncovered just an unbelievable oil boom. People have underestimated the—and I don't know what word to use—the velocity of that boom. It hit with such a huge impact that the next day, the very next day, there were special trains that were chartered coming in. Came in with big, white flags on the engine. Five or six chartered cars from Shreveport and Little Rock. El Dorado, at the time of the boom, was thirty-five hundred people. A little old, sleepy, farming, lumber town.

SL: Right.

[00:53:58] RM: And by the end of the year, the population had

doubled and doubled again. There were twenty-two trains a day comin' in and out of the station. There was a—the point from the square on South where the railroad's tracks were—was totally lawless. You would not believe, in your wildest dreams, how lawless that was. I think some of the old senior citizens of our town have tried to look the other way—because when I researched that out, I found little things in the newspaper, an actual article, the next January 1, the paper talked about New Year's Eve. It only—with a little clip, not only an inch high—and it said, "It seemed the sport of the night was shooting at church bells. Twelve people were killed."

SL: [*Vocalized noise*]

[00:54:53] RM: They had mortuary wagons that went through Hamburger Row, picked up guys in the alleys every night. People were killed by the hundreds down there. It was totally lawless. They had bordellos—they called 'em barrel houses . . .

SL: Right.

RM: . . . bordellos with gambling and prostitution and moon—you—and they would sell—young boys were sellin' moonshine in Coke bottles for a dollar a bottle on the street. Tuggin' at your sleeve. Guys had dope in these bags—they call it dope—I don't even know what—maybe cocaine—I don't what it was. They were

sellin' it on the streets. Prostitutes were openly soliciting. And the law—there were two law enforcement officials, and there were some estimates that the population reached forty thousand as it peaked out in the next year.

SL: Man.

RM: And you know—you just had total chaos. Total chaos. But it was a wild time. It changed El Dorado forever and ever and ever, that huge amount of money. The amount of money that came in—I researched this—in that first year was equal to all of the appraised property in the state of Arkansas. [*Laughter*] And it just boggles your mind.

SL: It does.

[00:56:08] RM: And of course, it established some of the families in our town that have been just wonderful to the community. The Murphy families and a number of other families were established durin' that boom. They weren't involved with the chaos particularly, but the good that came out of that was—almost every building you see downtown is a 1920s-era building. The courthouse, all of the big churches, and so that's the huge change that happened in this community, which is probably more or less unique for the state of Arkansas. We—there's not really any other really—boomtowns that—the—now the—what

was called Hamburger Row, South Washington, is a quiet, little street with maybe a couple of old buildings still hangin' around, but . . .

SL: Yeah.

[00:56:55] RM: H. L. Hunt got his start runnin' one of those barrel houses.

SL: Is that right?

RM: That's right. He ran . . .

SL: Unbelievable.

RM: He moved—came over here from Lake Village and was a—he was a card player. He was—he liked to play cards, and he opened this barrel house. Made enough money there where he started investin' in oil and gas deals. And—the—you know, he became the richest man in the world at one time. All of his kids were born in El Dorado. All of the—they were born right here in El Dorado. And he moved on down to east Texas when the big east Texas field hit and then on into Dallas. So quite a history there.

SL: Great history.

RM: Yeah.

SL: Great history.

SL: We good? Y'all think of anything else?

TM: I want to hear just more stories. That's great stuff.

SL: I know. [*Laughter*] I'm sorry you've got to run but . . .

RM: Well, I—some other time I'd like to kinda . . .

SL: We'll come back.

RM: I'd like to kinda continue on.

SL: Yeah, we'll be back. We'll be back.

[00:57:50 End of Interview]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]