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Arkansas State Police Project

Interview with

Jerry Davis
9 October 2003

Interviewer: Michael Lindsey

Michael Lindsey: What was your motivation to join the State Police in 1969?

Jerry Davis: I was going to college at Arkansas Tech [Russellville] and I was planning on going to medical school. They had an opening working the radio at the police department there, so I went to work two days a week. It got in my blood, I guess. When I turned twenty-one I went to work for the police department. After Uncle Sam got done with me [reference to military service], I went to work for the State Police. No one in my family had ever been a policeman.

ML: What did you do in the army?

JD: I was a cook—Food Service Technician-94B20 [military occupational specialty]. When I went to work, I was sent to Clarksville. Boon Bartlett was the captain. He went to work in 1937. In 1973 I got a divorce and transferred to Governor's Security in Little Rock. Dale Bumpers was governor. I replaced John Bailey. In late 1975 I went strictly with the lieutenant governors—first with Bob Riley and then with Joe Purcell. I was the only one assigned to them. I got a doctor's de-

gree in political science [while] assigned to those two.

ML: What would the lieutenant governor do?

JD: He is president of the Senate, and no one is allowed in the Senate chambers except for the senators, pages, and three or four media [representatives]. Since I was assigned to him, I got to stay in there. I loved it. I learned so much during and after the sessions. They were all around, and I got to know a lot of them. They were fun. In 1976, there was the Bicentennial [200th birthday of the United States]. If you go to a county seat or city with a Bicentennial Certificate, I am the one that brought them there. We lost one for Bentonville. After it was all over with and I had transferred, I found it and I still have got Bentonville's original somewhere. I was promoted to sergeant and moved to Fort Smith, which was closer to my parents. They were getting old and I wanted to be closer to them. In 1979 I resigned. I stayed out for five years. I came back and they sent me to [Governor Bill] Clinton, and I have been here ever since. I retired on September 21, 1997. I have still got the uniform and am ready to go.

ML: When you started did they immediately send you to the academy?

JD: I went to work on February 20, but my first official day was March 1, and in about a week I went to the academy. I got out of there March 29. I guess they were in a rush to fill some slots that were opened by retirements. On [April 4, 1968] Martin Luther King [Jr.] was killed [in Memphis] and I got to go over there. That was different.

ML: What did they tell you your role would be [during the riots]?

JD: To report to West Memphis and they would assign you from there. When you

crossed the bridge you were sworn in as a Shelby County deputy. It didn't last very long. They pulled us back across the bridge in case anything spilled over. When I was heading over there, Melvin DeLong passed me and said, "Come on, boy." People like that were God; they had been there forever. I didn't have to go to any of the penitentiary stuff [reference to riots at Cummins Prison riots in 1970]. I think I made every tornado that hit.

ML: When you went to the tornado-hit areas, you were there to maintain order?

JD: Right. We worked twelve hours and then were off twelve. It was mostly security.

ML: Talk about Memphis for a second. Did they put you out on the streets in riot gear, or were you riding in the car with deputies?

JD: You were in your car with four national guardsmen. It was mostly just patrol with them for backup. Thankfully nothing spilled over into West Memphis. There was a steady flow of traffic from Memphis over the I-40 Bridge heading north to St. Louis [Missouri]. There was hardly anything heading south on I-55. We would patrol around West Memphis then up I-55. It was mostly maintaining a presence.

ML: You never had to break out the batons and stop looters?

JD: No, I didn't. A couple of weeks after that, when Sweet Willie Wine was going to make his walk, they picked fifty-two troopers. Evidently they went through the files and picked everyone that was over six feet and two hundred pounds. They sent us to Camden for a day or two of training. Sweet Willie was going to walk from West Memphis to Little Rock. There were fifty-two of us that went there and Sweet Willie and a couple of others started the walk. The rest of his suppor-

ters disappeared.

ML: Were there any problems during the walk?

JD: In Carlisle, the mayor got all of the farmers to get the combines and block the roads. We just stayed out in the periphery and let nature take its course. There were very [few] problems.

ML: There were a number of racial disturbances in Marianna, Forrest City, and other [communities]. Did you get called in for those?

JD: No. When I was in Fort Smith, David Duke [former Grand Wizard of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan who is also a former Louisiana state representative] came in to recruit or incite or whatever. I went to the one at UALR [University of Arkansas at Little Rock]. They had another rally at Creekmore Park in Fort Smith. Have you ever heard David Duke speak? He was the speaker at Fort Smith. He got up and made his speech. He was in a business suit. I was standing off to the side of the stage and he was so eloquent with his speech that I thought some of the blacks were going to join him. I talked with him after it was over, and he was as nice a guy as you could expect. It surprised me because of the reputation of violence with the Klan.

ML: Did they send you up to the Covenant, Arm and Sword of the Lord siege?

JD: No. Gene Irby was the guy that handled that. He's a good guy. He was in Governor's Security with me for a while when we went to Washington for a Secret Service school. The biggest thing with the State Police is being able to help people. You could see relief on people's faces when you got there and that was my biggest thing. It was a good thirty years. It was a rough road, but a beautiful

ride.

ML: Is there a particular car that sticks out as being memorable?

JD: The 1968 Chevy I had when I first went to work was a hot car. The last one I had was the same way. It was a 1995 Caprice. It was a Corvette motor and chassis with a Caprice body. It would get you where you wanted to go quickly. My least favorite was a Plymouth Fury. I got it when the 1968 got 50,000 miles on it. You couldn't keep a transmission in it.

ML: Did your 1968 Chevy have air-conditioning?

JD: No.

ML: When did you get air-conditioning?

JD: The Plymouth didn't have air-conditioning either. Neither one had a commercial radio. It was probably the 1972 Plymouth that first had air-conditioning. I don't remember when we changed. In 1968 you worked six ten-hour days and were on call the rest of the time. The air-conditioning was wonderful. You were still in long sleeves, tie, and felt hat. I guess Ralph Scott was director when we went to five days a week and then later to eight hours a day. It was like a vacation every week when that happened.

ML: When that happened, did they add more troopers or did they just take them off the road?

JD: I think they just cut the hours and you were on call more. By the same token, back then if you needed off they would let you off. It was a pretty good system and it is too bad they still don't use it.

ML: Were there any technology changes that were particularly important?

JD: I got my first radar in 1973 or 1974. A lot of the technology doesn't really help the bottom line of what you do out there. A lot of the accidents that you work and the precise measurements they are having you do now are unnecessary. You can tell if a car turned over. When I retired they [had] got the new accident report. I did one before I retired and I didn't like them. They can do them on computers now, which is probably helpful.

ML: What is the VASCAR unit?

JD: Visual and Scientific Computer and Recorder. It is hooked into your transmission and it measures average speed over time. There is a computer built in under your seat. It had two switches on a gearshift. When a car passed a point, you turned it on and when it passed another point, you turned it off. You had already pre-measured the distance between the two points. The computer would then give you an average speed of the car. It was a good system, but it didn't last long. I had it in 1969 or 1970. I don't think they bought more than ten of them. It measured an average speed instead of a spot determination. If you were after a car, you would turn the timer on when he went under an overpass and off when he passed a fixed spot and you turned on the distance meter when you went under the overpass and turned it off when you passed the same fixed spot. It didn't last long.

ML: What about weapons?

JD: When I went to work I got a .38 caliber on a .44 caliber frame. Then they went to a .357 Smith & Wesson, blue steel. Then they changed it to a stainless steel .357. Then they changed to a Sig Sauer .40 Caliber. Lots of the old troops didn't like

the automatics. They liked the wheel gun. I thought they were both good, but I still like the wheel gun because it seems more reliable.

ML: Are there any particular commanders that stick out in your mind as being memorable?

JD: Captain Boone Bartlett. He was the old captain. Back then you took care of everything at the troop level. If you got in trouble, they handled it at the troop. You didn't take anything to Little Rock. Later they handled everything at Little Rock. As far as director, I don't know. I liked Ralph Scott. A lot of people didn't. I guess just because he got us on the five-days-a-week and eight-hours-a-day shifts. Tommy Goodwin was a good director. He had come up through the ranks and knew everybody on a first-name basis. He started out on the ground level and he got shot. I always thought Tommy understood.

ML: Do you think the State Police's mission has changed since 1968?

JD: The mission is probably the same; we just go about it differently. There is too much emphasis on numbers. [The leadership wants] more contacts and less miles. Originally, I thought it was created to help people. You were kind of the saving grace when someone needed help. Then it got down to the point of being about numbers.

ML: It seems like that system would prevent you from answering calls.

JD: No, you still did it all. In a little county like this one [Van Buren], you get to know everyone. You know their history and their problems. You just kind of double up and work harder to keep your contacts up. Even after you got off and went home, people still called you. They would ask your advice, or for favors or

ask me to help them do the little things that never get on paper. I still do it. They still call me. You are supposed to be the lawyer, doctor, and psychologist.

ML: What was your relationship with the sheriff and local police departments?

JD: It was good for everyone except the first one. He thought I was going to retire and run for sheriff against him. He tried to get me moved or fired. He accused me of bringing one of the inmates down here. I had been mowing my yard all day and went inside to listen to [a University of Arkansas] Razorback game. All of the sudden, there was a knock at the door and it was one of the 309s [state inmates located in county jails] and his girlfriend. We talked for a few minutes and then the radio operator called and asked if I had seen this guy, because they wanted him back down at the jail. I told them that he was here. I told him to get back to the jail because they were looking for him, and he said he was heading back. Before the media got through with it, I had gone down to get him, we drank beer all afternoon and watched the Razorbacks on television. We had a full investigation, and they found nothing inappropriate. How I could have prevented the guy from coming down here, I don't know. [Laughs] Otherwise, every sheriff I worked around was wonderful. Some places don't have that, I guess.

ML: Is there anything else in your career that sticks out that we haven't discussed?

JD: Not really. We just worked hard and played hard, which they don't do anymore. The young ones are too business-like. After you work a twelve-hour shift, you need to sit around and visit or have a drink. It was always quite a fraternity. When you see someone out there with that flat hat on, you can believe he has been through something, especially recruit school.

ML: When you went through recruit school, was it a kind of hard-nosed, military-type training?

JD: Somewhat. Ours was pretty short, though. I guess they needed us. When I was sergeant in Fort Smith I went down as a housemother in 1978. That was when they had to meet the requirements for blacks and females. That class was different. There probably weren't six or eight white males in the bunch. It was pretty tough on all of them. We picked them up and dusted them off and tried to instill in them what they needed to be. We only lost three or four. They all did pretty good. I am proud of all of them. In the first week or two, you tore them down to nothing. That was our job to help them up. We showed them how to shine their shoes, study, and made sure they were doing okay. The ones that didn't make it probably shouldn't have been there to begin with. It was very military. We ran five miles every morning. I ran with them. They didn't realize that we all got up an hour before they did and stayed up several hours after they went to bed.

ML: How long were the schools in 1978?

JD: Fourteen weeks. They were all at Camden, and the training was done almost entirely in-house. Sometimes you would have FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] agents and prosecutors come in. Most of it was accident investigation and how to deal with people and be an officer and a gentleman at all times. That is what I tried to tell all of them. Appearance, what you say, how you say it, how you treat people were all important.

[End of Interview]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]

[JD]