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Arkansas State Police Project

Interview with

John Kidwell
Warren, Arkansas
April 4, 2004

Interviewer: Michael Lindsey

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

John Kidwell: It was something that I always wanted to do. I idolized “Slick” Wilson and “Snake” Griffin and L.V. Jones when I was a kid. I would see them every time I was in town. Tommie Goodwin was a great motivator of mine. I always sought him out and talked to him.

ML: Where did you grow up?

JK: In a little place called Alpena. I graduated from high school at Harrison in 1958.

ML: Was there anything about them that sticks out?

JK: They always had time to talk to a kid and that makes a big difference. I can remember “Slick” from as far back as 1948. He was the epitome of what the State Police represented. He was very articulate and an imposing figure.

ML: Tell me a little bit about the application process and how you joined the State Police.

JK: I had asked State Police Commissioner J.E. Dunlap for an application. He told

me I was too young to become a Trooper, so I applied to be a radio operator. In 1962 I started as a radio operator at the station just outside of Bellefonte. I worked there until the spring of 1964 when I went to work as a Trooper. The application process was the same as it is today except we didn't have to compete with minorities because they weren't hiring minorities back then. I went to work and was sent to Texarkana.

ML: That is at the opposite end of the state. How did you feel about getting sent down to Texarkana?

JK: It didn't bother me. I wanted to be a State Policeman and it didn't matter where they sent me. I enjoyed my career and each place I went.

ML: You have been almost everywhere in the state.

JK: I have been assigned to each corner.

ML: I haven't lived in the other parts of the state, but it seems like the other parts of the state are different, whether it is the climate, the people, or the land. What is your perspective on that?

JK: There is a big difference in the people. You can start at the Mississippi state line and to west and see the changes. There is a difference between people in Lake Village and Monticello and there is another difference between the people in Monticello and Camden. I have found out one thing about people and that is if you shoot straight with everyone, no matter where you were, you won't have to worry about it.

ML: Was the activity different in the different areas?

JK: Not really. The cultures are different, though.

ML: How long were you stationed in Texarkana?

JK: I went there in April 1964 and I went to troop school in August. From there I had the opportunity to transfer to Yellville, so I came back to north Arkansas.

ML: While you were a radio operator in Bellefonte, what Troop was that a part of?

JK: There were four Districts or Troops at that time. That was District Three. Its headquarters was in Fort Smith. The other headquarters were in Hope, Newport, and Little Rock.

ML: What sort of radio contact did you have with the Troopers?

JK: Very limited. The entire system was antiquated.

ML: Do you remember any instances that it posed a particular problem?

JK: I don't recall a specific instance. Each Trooper in an outlying county had a county radio too. They could communicate with the sheriff's office if they couldn't communicate with me. It is still a very scary thing to know that people were out there and didn't have good communications.

ML: How long was your troop school?

JK: One month. But when we went, we stayed seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. It was at Camp Robinson. We had the largest troop school in the history of the State Police with seventy.

ML: Did they divide you up into separate classes?

JK: We had different squads, but we were all in class together, in firearms training together, we ate together. There was a lot of togetherness.

ML: Why were there so many troopers in this school?

JK: It had been a long time since they had a school. We had several new people and

some that had been there a while.

ML: Moving back to Northwest Arkansas must have been a little more comfortable for you.

JK: I was never uncomfortable in Texarkana. I have always been able to adapt. I spent four years in the Navy after high school. I was a radioman on a destroyer tender.

ML: How long were you in Yellville?

JK: I was there for five years.

ML: In 1968, Martin Luther King was killed and there was a lot of racial unrest in Memphis and east Arkansas. Did you get sent to any of those disturbances?

JK: Yes. It was a very traumatic time for all races. It was a very painful time in our history. I went over to Memphis when Martin Luther King was killed. It was an eye opener at the very least. Emotions were running extremely high and it wasn't a pleasant time.

ML: Were you one of the Troopers who were deputized by the Shelby County Sheriff and sent into Memphis? Did they give you any preparation about what you would see or experience?

JK: Yes I was deputized. I knew what I was going to be getting into because I saw it heading over to Memphis. It was chaos. It was a very unpleasant situation for everyone involved. The sheriff was named Morris and Henry Logue was the Mayor and he talked to us also. We partnered up with officers on the Tennessee side. We patrolled inside Memphis and went to all of the hot spots. It is something I don't even like to talk about.

ML: Shortly thereafter many of the Troopers were sent to Pine Bluff.

JK: I stayed in Forrest City and when we got cut loose there after a few days some went to Pine Bluff and some went to Hot Springs, but I went back to Yellville. I made all of the civil unrests: Marianna, Forrest City, Wynne, and Earle. It was up and down Interstate 55. It was not one of the bright spots in my life.

ML: Did you get a feel for why this particular time was so explosive?

JK: People wanted their rights. They were tired of being treated like a second-class citizen. I know I would have been tired of it. It was overdue that they got their equal rights.

ML: Do you think these situations placed stresses on the State Police to be put in the middle of those situations?

JK: Absolutely. It is stress on the Department, the officers, and their families. You are gone from home for two and three weeks at a time on special assignment. We went to Marianna and we were over there for quite a while and it was pretty rough. The same with Forrest City. When you are lined up and you have a group of black people on one side and a group of white people on the other and they are both very hostile it is stressful. The National Guardsmen assigned to us weren't much good because they were home folks. We didn't have that many people and it was very hairy.

ML: Did they give you any sort of special training to deal with riots?

JK: From the time I went to work until just a few years ago we had special riot training. It is very much based on military techniques. We aren't dealing with the same types of situations anymore. Now it is terrorist attacks that are the concern.

When I went to work people would get in fistfights, but now they are liable to step out with a machine gun.

ML: After Yellville, you moved to Batesville?

JK: I took Alan Bufford's place. He had been shot and killed. I was there for six or seven months when I was promoted and moved to DeQueen in south Arkansas.

ML: What were the duties of the Post Sergeant?

JK: It is much like the military. You have a squad of people you are accountable for. You create the schedule for work, days off, and vacations to make sure you have coverage in the five county area. Most of the people that we had were dedicated, hard working Troopers.

ML: At the time you were working six days a week, ten hours a day.

JK: I would have liked to have had just ten hours a day. [laughs] We were called out quite a bit.

ML: That had to put a lot of stress on your family. How did you deal with that and attempt to alleviate the stress for your Troopers?

JK: You try to give them time off when they need it. You have to be very flexible. It isn't exactly like the military because you had to be flexible. If something came up, like ball games or birthday parties, you did your best to get them off and their shift covered. Even though we are semi-military we aren't as inflexible.

ML: Were you married at this time?

JK: Yes, I was married before I went to work for the State Police.

ML: How did the moves and working six days a week affect your family life?

JK: It must have done something for us because we have six children. [laughs] We are

still married. I have known my wife for all of my life because she was raised in Alpena.

ML: That is amazing and speaks well of you, your wife, and your kids, because I have heard that the hours and the stress really take a toll on the family life and divorce is really common.

JK: Divorce is very common in law enforcement. My wife and I graduated from high school on a Friday and we got married on Saturday. I am very proud of wife.

ML: How long were you at DeQueen?

JK: About a year and then I went back up to Walnut Ridge. I stayed there until 1976 and then moved to Springdale. I was promoted to Lieutenant. At that time Springdale was still part of Troop H in Fort Smith. I stayed there for a year and then transferred to Warren and worked under Jimmy Loman until he retired and I was promoted to Captain. I was Captain at Warren from 1983 to 1995, which is a long run.

ML: One thing that actually happened before Martin Luther King was assassinated was the problem at the penitentiaries. Did you get sent down for that stuff?

JK: I certainly did.

ML: I actually knew that you were sent down there because I have people talk about how big you are and that anytime something like this happened they sent down the biggest guys they could find.

JK: They really did. [laughs] We went down and took over Tucker Farm. They were running away from the penitentiary in droves. We stopped the runaways. Deloin Causey and I were roommates at Tucker Farm. The penitentiary is an all-together

different climate. They are called cons for a very good reason. It was a learning experience that everyone should have a taste of. Every youngster should have a tour of the penal system. That would scare someone straight. If it is run right it can be a very productive thing. If it is not it can be a training ground for criminals. I was down there too long and was ready to come home. When I was down there I was in my twenties and I had a little redheaded wife at home with two kids and my oldest son on the way in 1969. I didn't like to be away from home.

ML: You said you helped stopped the runaways and breakouts. Can you talk a little bit about what you did to curb this?

JK: We provided stronger supervision. We provided more patrol and we made them accountable for everything that was done. If they left with something in a "doby wagon" to deliver some materials then everything in that wagon had better be delivered exactly where it was supposed to go. A "doby wagon" is just a horse drawn wagon that they used to gather eggs or vegetables. We were very strict on collecting and overseeing all of that.

ML: Where were the State Police housed?

JK: We were on "free row." It was right across a big drainage ditch from the penitentiary. We had convicts that cooked for us and made up our beds. They were the trusties, but they were closely monitored. You could hear everything but meat frying and money rattling from those people. They will tell you anything that makes them look good. I have only talked to a very few that have ever admitted to being guilty. Just like most of the drunks I have picked up in my career have told me they hadn't had over two beers. [laughs]

ML: I have heard that a lot of the people that were running away were trusty guards because they did not want to be put back in the general population.

JK: When we first got there and went back in the back to put them up. I removed all sharp objects in my belt and took off my tie. Guess who I saw issuing guns out of the armory? A trustee that had been sent to the penitentiary for killing a sheriff's deputy in Oakland. He killed Lester Elliott's son who was a reserve deputy there. That was not a good feeling.

ML: A lot of people I have talked to say that Captains in the State Police tend to be relatively independent and they run the troops the way they feel they should be run. Do you agree with that sentiment or do you think the State Police is more of a top-down organization?

JK: Some people have to have more supervision than others. By the time you achieve the rank of Captain you should have the experience to know how the department wants something done. You have a policy book and we have a Major that you answer to. If something is not right then he would certainly call it to our attention. I ran the troop exactly like Jimmy Loman ran the troop prior to me. He was very efficient and one of the best administrators I had ever known. He had been in the National Guard for thirty-eight years and served in World War II. He was a stickler for having things right, which is the only way to go. When we got a new Trooper in we had rules that we talked to them about. First and foremost was to always tell us the truth. Don't lie to us. If I ask them if they hit a man, then they don't need to tell me they used appropriate force. I have to know if they hit them ten times in the head with a "slapper" so we don't get surprised. Rules aren't

flexible, but policies are.

ML: How would you gauge the activity of the Troopers?

JK: I monitored their weekly activity. Every county is not the same. Some are small and have small thoroughfares in them. The level of activity depends on the type of highways in their county. You have to take this in consideration when you look at activity. Accident experience is another good indicator. If accidents are high then someone isn't working. If a Trooper is out there working then he will run into stolen cars or run into thieves. Most of our Troopers were very good and we had very few duds.

ML: If a Trooper wasn't performing up to certain standards, how would you try and correct that?

JK: Number one, the Sergeant would counsel him. If that didn't work he would be brought in to the Captain or Lieutenant. There are any numbers of factors that can come into play in situations like this. They could be having family problems or monetary problems. They might be sick, mentally or physically. You have to take each one on a case by case basis.

ML: What was your relationship with the sheriffs?

JK: I had very good working relationships with most sheriffs. Once in a while you would have difficulties.

ML: Did you find that sheriffs in different parts of the state were different or viewed the State Police in a different light?

JK: Absolutely. One or two of the worst problems I have had with sheriffs were from former State Police officers. A lot of them had never had a position of authority

like that. Also, I never wanted anyone fooling with our tickets. When I was sheriff here I didn't fool with tickets. If someone is pulling tickets it can kill morale. But overall I have found that law enforcement agencies work very closely together. When I was at Yellville one of the sheriff's deputies rode with me nearly every day. That doesn't happen as much anymore because they have more people and communications are better. They don't interact like they used to.

ML: Since you served in the more rural areas of the state, I have heard that in these locations the State Police takes on a different role within the community. What did you see was the role of the State Police in the community?

JK: Everywhere I went the State Police were looked up to and we were expected to set a better example. Public relations were an important part of the job. I worked every type of crime in the world because CID was stretched so thin. We worked murders, rapes, and bank robberies - you name it. All-around police officers are what we need in all areas of the state.

ML: Did you find that people would call you on your days off asking for help or to complain about speeding or some other problem?

JK: I never had a day off unless I left the county. Then sometimes they caught me when I was away. People did call me on everything from marital to criminal problems. Everywhere I went it was the same. A lot of the times people just wanted to get it off of their chests and complain. If you are a public servant you need to listen and help if you could.

ML: Another big event that occurred was the Cuban Refugee Crisis and the CSA Siege.

JK: I sent people over to both of those but I did not go.

ML: You have already talked about some memorable people in the State Police, are there any stories or incidents that highlight some of the people you looked up to or respected in the State Police?

JK: The finest man I ever worked for was named Bob Ward and he was the Troop Commander at Newport. All of the men I have talked about had one trait, integrity. They wouldn't just sit back in an office and tell you what to do. They would lead you.

ML: Are there any other incidents or car accidents that come to mind when you think about your career?

JK: I worked an accident one time at Midway, between Cotter and Mountain Home. A young girl was killed. As a matter of fact, she died in my arms. The car was just like one I owned. The girl driving was redheaded like my wife and the little girl that died had blonde hair like my daughter. That affected me terribly. I pulled up and the first thing I saw was the red hair and the blonde hanging out of the car. I could just visualize my wife and daughter.

ML: Were there any investigations or traffic stops that are memorable?

JK: There are bunches of them. One time Lieutenant Ken Hendrick was shot at Marshal. These guys had robbed a bank in Mountain View and he stopped them in Searcy County. They shot him in the elbow. We put on a huge manhunt for those guys. It took forever for us to finally catch all of them. Earl Rife had to go to Honolulu to bring one back.

ML: Technology changed a lot over your career.

JK: One of the most important things that ever happened to us was getting air conditioning in the cars. [laughs] Before this we had wonderful air conditioners called "4-60s." This meant you had all four windows rolled down and were going sixty miles per hour. [laughs] In 1966 we got air conditioning in the cars and automatic transmissions. Cars now have power steering, air conditioning, commercial radios, and the communications system has made a hundred and eighty degree turn. Computers, cell phones, and all of that have changed it for the better. The pay is much better too. I went to work the radio at \$200 a month. When I became a Trooper I thought I was rich because I was making \$300 a month. They start the Troopers now over \$30,000 a year.

ML: Did you have to work a second job?

JK: No, my wife cooked, cleaned, sewed, and canned. She would wait up on me at night with a first aid kit in one hand and a sewing kit in the other. She would sew up the poplin shirts and clean up my scrapes. [laughs] I didn't get into too many fights though. Size does have its advantage.

ML: What did you think about moving to the short sleeve shirts?

JK: I thought it took away from the looks of the uniform. It was certainly cooler and with the advent of the bulletproof vest it certainly increased comfort. Still, it took away from the looks of the uniform.

ML: Can you tell me a little bit about the Directors that you worked under?

JK: Herman Lindsey was the Director when I went to work and you didn't have to worry about who was in charge when Herman Lindsey was there. He was the Director. Ralph Scott brought about more change than any Director we had. He

was instrumental in giving us two days off. My favorite was Tommie Goodwin. He was a policeman's policeman. I am very high on Tommie Goodwin. I always liked Bill Miller and he came through the ranks as well. Ralph Scott came from the FBI and created a lot of controversy. Right off the bat, he made some major changes and quite frankly they were needed changes. He said that politics was out and he would stay with you until Hell popped as long as you told him the truth and you were right. You didn't ever want to lie to him. He never got on me, but I have seen him get on some folks and he didn't mix words. He was what we needed at the time.

ML: In 1968 and 1969, the State Police shut down the gambling in Hot Springs. Did you take part in that?

JK: Yes.

ML: You must have been gone in the late-1960s nearly every week on special assignment. [laughs]

JK: I asked the Major how I could get off this "flying squad." He told me to shrink six inches and lose a hundred and fifty pounds. [laughs]

ML: Do you have any specific memories about Hot Springs?

JK: There was a lot of corruption. I couldn't do any of the undercover stuff. My friend from Harrison, Bill Carver, did some of that. The Major told me that anyone could look at me and know what I was, so I didn't work undercover. Also, he told me I looked at everything with a jaundiced eye, in that it is either right or wrong with no gray area. I do see things this way and I don't like to be in a place where they are serving drinks. There is truly a gray area, but it takes a while to

get over being a policeman. I don't care if people drink, as long as they don't get behind the wheel of a car.

[End of Interview]

[JD]