

William Jefferson Clinton History Project

Interview with

Lonnie Luebben
Hot Springs, Arkansas
2 February 2005

Interviewer: Andrew Dowdle

Andrew Dowdle: It is February 2, 2005. I'm in Hot Springs, Arkansas, with Lonnie Luebben. Could you spell your first and last name?

Lonnie Luebben: L-O-N-N-I-E. L-U-E-B-B-E-N.

AD: We usually ask a few biographical questions at the beginning. Where were you born?

LL: I was born in Hot Springs.

AD: Oh, so you're a native.

LL: Yes. I lived here most of the time, but my dad played [major league baseball] for the [St. Louis] Cardinals [and] for the [Chicago] Cubs; so we lived in St. Louis [Missouri] and Chicago [Illinois], too, part of the time.

AD: That was going to be the next question. What are your parents' names and what did they do?

LL: My father's name is Lon W-A-R-N-E-K-E. My mother is Charlyne Warneke.

AD: So, obviously, you spent most of your time in Hot Springs, but certainly a number of other areas as well. Do you know when your family moved to Hot Springs, approximately?

LL: My dad grew up in Mount Ida. He went to Houston [Texas] out of high school and was hired by the owner of the Cubs baseball team to play in one of their

minor league teams. He played a year or two and came back and had enough money, finally, in his pocket to get married; so he married my mother and they moved to Hot Springs. That was in the early 1930s, maybe 1929.

AD: Why did they decide to move to Hot Springs? What drew them here?

LL: Well, Dad always wanted to live in Arkansas, and they didn't want to live in Mount Ida; so they moved to Hot Springs.

AD: I guess Mount Ida is a little small, yes, [laughter] a little smaller. When were you born?

LL: 1938.

AD: Where did you go to school in Hot Springs? I guess all the way up through high school?

LL: I went in the first, second and third grade to Lakeside, which is a school on the outskirts of Hot Springs, because my dad had some property there. From there, we moved to Phoenix [Arizona] where I attended fourth, fifth and sixth grades. Then we came back to Hot Springs for the seventh and eighth grades, and then my dad bought a rice farm in Carlisle, Arkansas, so I moved there in the ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth. After college I came back here and married a local person and have been here ever since.

AD: Where did you go to college?

LL: Henderson [State University, Arkadelphia, Arkansas].

AD: Henderson.

LL: Yes.

AD: Why did you come back here, just because this was . . . ?

LL: This was home. It's where my parents were, and this is home.

AD: Where and when did you start teaching?

LL: I graduated in three years and I started teaching high school English when I was twenty [years old] at Hot Springs High, [in] 1960.

AD: In 1960 you came back and you taught here. What was your impression of Hot Springs? You'd obviously lived a lot of places during the early 1950s. What was Hot Springs like?

LL: I was single and there were not very many other single people, so it was a little bit lonely for a while. I was teaching. I really loved teaching. I loved the school, and the students were so nice. I really enjoyed my vocation, and then I met my husband. We started dating and [got] married.

AD: What was Hot Springs High like in the 1960s?

LL: It was a four-story building that was wonderful to be in because every room had big windows, and we could look out all over the city. There was a big staircase in the middle. Everybody had to go up and down that middle staircase, and you could look down and see the ones going down or watch the ones coming up. It was very friendly, as far as the population and the teachers. It was very warm and family-like. I will say the students were extremely polite, well-mannered [and] usually did their homework. They were affectionate and respectful. It was the most unusual place.

AD: It seems like, again, really [it was] very much in the heart kind of downtown, too, which is obviously different than the current high school.

LL: Yes, yes. Most of the students walked down the street for lunch. There were little restaurants nearby, so during lunch break, they made [it] to these little restaurants and back.

AD: When did you first meet Bill Clinton, or hear about him? Probably start with, I guess, maybe—when did you first hear about him as a student?

LL: I don't remember whether I heard about him before he was in my class or not, but he was my student in the eleventh grade.

AD: You mentioned it was the eleventh grade honors English class?

LL: Yes.

AD: About how many students were in that class?

LL: There were about ten or twelve. I don't remember exactly. I've tried to reconstruct it, but I can't.

AD: But it was a fairly small class?

LL: Yes.

AD: What was the class like?

LL: We could have our own criteria, so we did the standard work, the literature, the grammar—we worked hard and wrote papers and essays, and so on. The one thing that was a little bit different was that I contacted Vance Randolph at the University of Arkansas, [Fayetteville] who was the foremost folklorist of the Ozark Mountains, and arranged a trip through him—through his advice—to go to Jasper, Arkansas. I took all the students in the class. It was so easy to do; I never had a thought that anybody would misbehave or be out of line. We all piled in my car and one other car and went to Jasper and spent two nights. I had made

arrangements with a game warden who took us back in the hills—and that’s before it was covered over with people from other countries and other states. There were still hillbillies up there. One night we went to a movie theater in Jasper. When we came in, the young people from Jasper saw us and wanted to know, “Who are all these people?”

AD: [Laughs]

LL: Afterwards, they invited us to the ice-cream parlor. So we all went to the ice-cream parlor. Then they invited us to go to one of their houses. They had a big impromptu party for us. A hoe-down.

AD: [Laughs]

LL: They got out their musical instruments and played; we danced. One thing that happened, which I later relayed at Bill Clinton’s fortieth birthday roast, was the father of the house had a treadmill on which he would train his dogs to hunt rabbits or hunt coons. So as this treadmill would go, he’d take the handle and move it forward so the dogs would have to run faster. When he moved it back, and [they’d] slow down. We all got so tickled watching those dogs; so at Bill’s fortieth birthday roast I ventured that was when Bill Clinton decided he wanted to be governor of the state because he saw those dogs running on the treadmill, and he wanted to be the one that pushed the lever forward or pulled it backward. [Laughter] Bill remembers that trip because he’s mentioned it to me several times.

AD: That sounds like just a wonderful couple of days.

LL: It was.

AD: Great opportunity.

LL: Yes. We went to see things back in the mountains that were very mysterious and exciting—Indian and Civil War relics, and were invited into homes by people who had never seen us—people living in log cabins way off a main road. They were amazingly hospitable, serving us lemonade and engaging in conversation. We came away with an appreciation for their genteel dignity. Bill was one a fine student. Believe it or not, he said very little. He was very quiet. He was an attentive listener who would follow the speaker with his eyes. One could imagine that he was taking it all in and remembering it. He was prompt with his work [and] did it well—just a marvelous student and such a gentleman, always such a nice gentleman.

AD: Do you remember any of the stories or activities that he was involved in terms of student government? I know he was very involved at the time.

LL: I researched the 1953 Old Gold Book and listed the following activities: All-State Band, Student Council, Key Club, Mu Alpha Theta, Beta Club, Junior Classical League, Band Key Club, Trojan Pep Band, Starlight Dance Band, Trojan Marching Band, Junior Class President, Boys State, and Boys Nation. He was a very visible student.

AD: So he was somebody that was very easy to know. Even though you said he was quiet in class, he was somebody that people then noticed.

LL: Yes, some teachers sensed that something special was going to happen with Bill. We sensed it was political.

AD: You knew that, again, he obviously had an interest in politics from going to Boys State and Boys Nation, or was this even—it was separate from that?

LL: The assistant principal, Johnnie Mae Mackey, was a figure in the state Democratic Party. She was very interested in Bill, and perhaps that's how we sensed that something was going to happen with him, because of her interest.

AD: So she was a very important. She was important in terms of, again, kind of steering him in that direction, of course, with other people.

LL: Yes, yes, I think so. I don't know specifics about it, but, yes, I think so.

AD: Do you remember any more stories about President Clinton, or about that graduating class? That was supposed to be a fairly special class—again, kind of the first post-World War II class that was going through Hot Springs, if I remember correctly. [He was] born in 1946. That would have been the first class going through.

LL: I know many of them have done very well. I was so young, myself, and I didn't socialize with them, so I really don't know personal stories.

AD: I was thinking about what you said, that one thing is true that it's just amazing in terms of how many of them ended up going on and doing other things. Obviously, President Clinton was very successful, but a lot of the other people in class ended up doing very well for themselves. What do you attribute that to? How much of that was the school [and] how much of it [was] maybe there were just a lot of opportunities at that time?

LL: They got a good education, for one thing. The school was a very good school. And there was so much parental concern and parental involvement in guiding

them correctly. They had well-developed social skills, and I think social skills feed off of—if one person has it, then it transfers to others in the same group, and it was a class of outstanding social skills. They were courteous. They knew when to laugh [and] when to be quiet. They could converse with adults easily, and seemed very comfortable doing so. [There were] a lot of bright students in the group, too. I don't know what makes it all happen.

AD: I guess it's one of those mysteries, trying to figure out exactly what causes what in the end.

LL: Why one class excels and another one is ordinary. I think Bill had an influence on his class. They were fun, too.

AD: Okay.

LL: My dad was county judge, which meant the County Hospital was under his umbrella. Virginia, Bill's mother, was a [nurse] anesthetist who worked at that hospital. One thing I remember so well about Virginia was that there was a person who was running against my dad, and Virginia worked very hard for my father. My family appreciated her help so much. She took some scuff, I think, for having stood up for my dad for reelection, but she was a gutsy lady.

AD: So she was somebody that was a friend of your family, somebody that you respected at that point in time.

LL: Yes. She was one of those people you can't help but be attracted to because she had a lot of courage, and people sensed that, and she was a smart, savvy woman.

AD: One of the questions we've been asking people is about race relations at that time. What were race relations like in Hot Springs, from your perspective?

- LL: I wasn't aware of problems with it until a little bit later—until the Selma, Alabama business started [Reference to "Bloody Sunday," March 7, 1965, when about 600 civil rights marchers who were heading out of Selma were attacked with billy clubs and tear gas by state and local authorities, who pushed the marchers back into town]. Of course, everybody got a little nervous then, but I wasn't aware of problems in Hot Springs. I didn't encounter any. I knew some black people and respected them. The black population had a very fine school, Langston, and I think many were not happy when they had to leave Langston.
- AD: One of the other questions we've been asking people, especially people who've lived in Hot Springs for a while—how is the town different now from 1960? Really, it seems like a significant difference from what it's like now and what I've read about it in terms of the 1950s and 1960s. Is it really that different?
- LL: Oh, yes, very different. I used to be able to go all over town and know most of the people in the stores and shops—the grocery stores, the service station, department and hardware stores. Everywhere people were on a first-name basis. Now I can go all day and not see anybody I know.
- AD: That's kind of remarkable, considering how many people had moved in over the course of the 1940s and 1950s—that people became fairly well integrated into the community. Obviously, Roger Clinton, Sr. was from here, but the Clintons moving here from Hope—I guess [they] ended up fitting in fairly easily.
- LL: There was a well-known Clinton family here. Are you talking about Bill's father?
- AD: Bill's stepfather, yes.
- LL: Yes.

AD: In terms of that, but it does seem interesting that that's one of the things that you always hear. Oh, there were a lot of people that were moving here over the course of the 1940s and 1950s, but still was that community where, again, people knew each other's first names.

LL: We were interested in each other and were in and out of each other's homes. There weren't too many places to go, so we socialized in our homes. We knew each other's children, and [it was] a very family-like situation—very familiar.

AD: After President Clinton ended up graduating from high school, did you have any contact or hear anything about him after he had gone off to Georgetown [University, Washington, DC] and then . . . ?

LL: Only when he came back to town. My husband and I would bump into him. He was friendly and remembered us and was very polite. The first time he came back with a beard we were surprised. [Laughter] He looked nice. We were just surprised. Then when he went to Fayetteville we'd see him there occasionally. Once he was walking to a ball game, and there were four or five of us in a car and we said, "Come on ride with us," so he jammed in with us and he rode with us to the game.

AD: What was your reaction when he started running for political office—for Congress, and then for the Attorney General's office after that?

LL: My reaction? Did I vote for him, you mean? [Laughs]

AD: Your reaction, well, no, no, no, no, just—was it something where people—were you and people in the faculty surprised, [or] not surprised?

LL: I was no longer teaching by then. I quit teaching in 1963, so I was no longer in contact with the faculty. No, I was just interested, and followed him, and was happy that he became attorney general, happy for him.

AD: Were you surprised when he was defeated the first time he ran as governor for reelection?

LL: No, because he was so young, it didn't surprise me. That was just another step along the way. I figured he'd come back like he did. [Laughs]

AD: So you weren't surprised that he ended up running again after that defeat?

LL: No.

AD: It sounds like you thought at a relatively early age that politics was going to be his kind of main interest as an adult. That would more than wouldn't indicate a surprise at that.

LL: No, I wasn't surprised. I wasn't a political animal at that time. I am now, but I wasn't then.

AD: What was your reaction and what were your thoughts when he declared for the presidency? It's not every teacher that has one of their students who actually is running for the presidency. Again, were you surprised? Was this something that you kind of felt was a natural thing to happen? Did you think he was going to win?

LL: I certainly did want him to win. I don't think I was too surprised. It was just one of those hopeful kinds of deals. Well, Hillary, for one thing—so articulate and smart—I knew there was a lot of ambition there for both of them—both ambitious to do this. So I wasn't really surprised.

AD: What's it like to have one of your former students become president?

LL: It has been interesting for me because he's included me in some very nice things. He invited me to Washington to be the symbol of [America's family and career woman.] He presented me to a delegation of the Women's Labor Bureau, that was meeting at the White House. I appreciated the honor so much. There are so many things for which I'm grateful to Bill. For instance, when he was governor, he established the Governor's School. My children each qualified and were selected to attend this school. The experience was very important in their lives.

AD: Okay.

LL: On the last day of Governor's School Bill would be there. He would make a closing speech. Both times at night after we had gotten home, he phoned us and congratulated us for our children having been there, and told us he enjoyed seeing us. Little personal touches like that were so nice. One time at Governor's School we were waiting for the students to be dismissed, and Bill was there with Chelsea, who was a little girl at the time. Bill needed to use the restroom, so he asked my husband if we would watch Chelsea so he could go in and use the restroom. This probably shouldn't be on the tape. [Laughs] Two other occasions to which I was invited were the class reunion at the White House and the opening of the [William J. Clinton] Presidential Library [in Little Rock]. He's been very nice about sending Christmas cards to us. When I was ill, he sent me a couple of letters. You know, it's pretty impressive to go to the mailbox and find something from the White House. I have loved watching him grow into his job. He's done magnificently. He always was [a] very articulate person. He could always speak

well, but he gets better and better, and, of course, the first time I heard one of his speeches I listened for all the grammar in it, you know, to double check.

[Laughter] The old English teacher in me. He had it nailed.

AD: I was going to ask you if there's anything else that we haven't touched on or any other things that you'd like to add? The Governor's School story—he would go and he would end up calling you afterwards. How often did you keep in touch when he was governor?

LL: We really didn't. There would be a party occasionally—rarely—but every once in a while there would be a party and sometimes we would go—a political party. Once I saw him as he was riding a bicycle in Little Rock. I was driving by and we waved and smiled, but there wasn't really much contact then. I was busy rearing little children.

AD: And he was busy being governor at that time.

LL: That's right.

AD: Is there any other thing?

LL: Well, I told you I spoke at his fortieth birthday roast.

AD: Yes.

LL: The roast was at the time of the teacher testing.

AD: Yes.

LL: Many teachers were upset about having to take a test, and I thought it was a good idea. The ones who were afraid to take it, or opposed it, I think, were ones who were afraid they might fail it. [Laughs] The testing stirred up an interest in

education, and I thought that was really good. Education changed in Arkansas because of his having been governor, I think.

AD: I guess, from things all the way, again, more stringent standards for teachers to the Governor's School, the things all the way across the . . .

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

AD: . . . that the teacher reform at the time. Do you think that those feelings have kind of gone away at this point?

LL: Oh, sure.

AD: Some of the people were upset at the time, but having retrospect, [it] just became part of the normal process that you went through?

LL: I think they've just forgotten it. We took the test, then it was out of [our] minds. We went on with our jobs.

AD: Is there anything else that we've not touched on? We've gone over a lot. [I'm] trying to rack [my] brain [to] think if there's anything we missed. I can't really think of anything at this point. Is there anything that you can think of?

LL: In his younger days? I mean, we're trying to stay there, aren't we?

AD: Yes. Or even things in terms of your impressions of him as an adult, at this point?

LL: Oh. I was so pleased that he recently was appointed to be the person who orchestrated the charitable giving for the site of the Tsunami [reference to Indian Ocean tsunamis of December 26, 2004, which killed an estimated 275,000+ in South and Southeast Asia] victims. I think there's a world of things that he can do now to make the world a better place. I think his heart has always been in the

right place. I think he genuinely wanted to be a good president and to make America a better place, and I think he got stymied on some occasions, and it broke my heart when it happened, because I think he was an excellent president. I hear people all the time say, “If we could have another election right now, we’d elect Bill Clinton.” Even people who voted for [George W.] Bush said that to me recently. [Laughter] His help with AIDS [Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome] is significant. I watch him any time I can when he’s on TV—on panels when he is with others like Madelyn Albright discussing world conditions. I think he is wise. He comes up with sensible sounding solutions. I think he has an amazing mind. I knew [he was] smart when he was in high school, I just didn’t know that he had such a big grasp of world affairs—of course, he’s grown into it.

AD: But isn’t it kind of interesting in terms of—we talked [about] a lot of the humanitarian issues that he’s championed—a lot of in terms of civil rights, peace initiatives in the United States and across the world. How much of that in terms of, I guess, the concern for those types of issues—how much of that do you think existed at that time in terms of where the seeds of that [were] laid?

LL: You mean when he was in high school?

AD: Yes.

LL: I think a lot of people in his class have been concerned about civil issues. Their lives are not encapsulated by their own interests. Many have an interest beyond themselves. Part of it the concern came from class—the influence of class members. I think Virginia instilled concern in him. I hope some of his teachers

encouraged it in him. I hope I did. I think he hoped all the world would be pleasant like this place was.

AD: That's one of the things I was going to comment on. I've talked to a number of people, and it seems that the kind of idealistic stereotype of the early sixties [1960s] very much seems to be true for Hot Springs at that time. If you talk to people, [they say] it's a town that's very cosmopolitan, but it's also a town where everybody knows everyone. It's a town where people are very open, but there still were, at that time, traditional values. It just seems that in one sense it's kind of the best of both worlds.

LL: Hot Springs is unique. For instance, the circus used to winter here, so all of a sudden the classrooms would swell with some extra students who had been all over the country with the circus, and they would winter here. There was a whole Jewish community. There was and still is a Greek community, a Lithuanian community, *et cetera*. For instance, in a class, all of a sudden, a little Greek girl appeared. Her family, one of the Greek families here, had brought her over from Greece to live with them. She didn't speak any English at all, but there she was in class one day.

AD: [Laughs]

LL: It didn't seem to make much difference who had money and who didn't have money. People associated with each other anyway. I didn't see a lot of social snobbery based on monetary values. People just seemed to associate with each other, which was very nice, [and] which I don't think is true now.

AD: A lot of that—I don't know if it's idealism because it actually does sound like, in a sense, things were better. A lot of that has changed over the last forty years.

LL: Oh, I think so. Yes. Well, I think the different ethnic groups still associate with each other. The Greeks, the Jewish people—we still all associate with each other.

AD: I noticed that some degree of closeness has kind of changed as Hot Springs has spread out . . .

LL: There's a whole community of people who have lived here a long time who are still friends with each other; we still associate with each other. They're not all natives—didn't all grow up here—but until ten or twelve years ago, we all pretty much knew each other. Then there was such a big influx of people—a lot of people from Pine Bluff, a lot of people from Chicago, California. We just haven't met them yet.

AD: Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

LL: I can probably think of a lot of things in the middle of the night. [Laughter]

AD: Well, if there's anything that we forgot, we can always add it on the transcript, if something comes up later.

LL: There are just so many things that I'm very grateful to Bill Clinton for, personally. You know, he could have forgotten all about me as though I didn't exist—didn't need me anymore—but he didn't. He's still very attentive, and I appreciate it so much. He was very generous with his time, as far as writing me a note here and there or sending me a card. I just appreciate those things, and I so greatly appreciate his good governance.

AD: One of the things that kind of interested me—another thing that I’ve talked to people about [is] that people who I’ve talked to—for the most part, the people who like him seem to like him very much. The people who don’t like him—there’s a large level of animosity. There doesn’t seem to be that many people who are indifferent.

LL: And I don’t understand that, but you’re exactly right. I’m in a club in which there are two or three who have nothing nice to say about him. They dwell on an indiscretion. One day, I said, “Can’t you get over that? There’s more to a person than one incident. Think about some things he did as president, like a balanced budget, which is far more important.”

AD: Is there anything else that we haven’t talked about?

LL: My husband and I think a lot of him. We’re just amazed at what a statesman he has become. He’s one of the few statesmen left in this world.

AD: Have you had a chance to talk to him since he left the White House?

LL: I saw him at the library opening. The class went on Friday night. I was really concerned about him that night because it was so closely following his heart attack. I think he was exhausted, and I was terribly concerned about him that night, but he greeted everybody in the room. I’m sure [it] was very difficult for him to do. I really grieved for him that night, but it’s typical of Bill to hang in there and greet every single person.

AD: I’ve heard about the class reunions, in terms of just how much energy and effort he puts into talking and greeting everyone—that it’s not just that he goes in for five minutes and then leaves.

LL: No. The two that I've been to, he greeted everybody. It's just his way. He knows everyone's names [and] remembers something about them.

AD: Is there anything else? We've gone over a lot of material.

LL: I really don't have much contact with him, so I don't have a lot of anecdotes.

AD: Well, actually, you probably—when you go back and look through your transcripts, you'll be presently surprised by things. I'd like to thank you for your time. I really appreciate you agreeing to talk to me.

LL: It was my pleasure.

[End of Interview]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]