

William Jefferson Clinton History Project

Interview with

Joe Dierks
Hot Springs, Arkansas
20 April 2004

Interviewer: Andrew Dowdle

Andrew Dowdle: Hello. This is Andrew Dowdle, and it is April 20, 2004, and I'm in Hot Springs, Arkansas, with Joe Dierks. D-I-E-R-K-S. My first question to you is where and when were you born?

Joe Dierks: I was born in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1946.

AD: And who were your parents?

JD: My parents were Don and Margaret Dierks.

AD: And your father was in the lumber business and owned a company?

JD: That is correct.

AD: When did you move to Hot Springs?

JD: We moved in 1956.

AD: Why did your parents move to Hot Springs?

JD: Well, the business moved. The business was Dierks Forest, Incorporated, and the headquarters moved from that location in Kansas City, Missouri, to Hot Springs.

AD: And this involved a considerable shift in terms of the number of jobs. It's a fairly large company. Obviously, not General Motors large, but a fairly large company.

JD: It was a good-size corporation. Yes, absolutely.

AD: How long did your father own the company?

JD: He did not own the company.

AD: He didn't own the company. Okay.

JD: Oh, no. Nowhere near that. It was a stock organization.

AD: A stock organization.

JD: And he owned some shares of stock, but was not the largest shareholder by any means.

AD: And they were sold or merged with Weyerhauser?

JD: They sold to Weyerhauser in 1968, I think it was, or 1969. I'm not positive.

AD: Okay. So when you moved to Hot Springs, you were . . . ?

JD: I was about ten or eleven years old.

AD: What was your first impression of Hot Springs?

JD: Well, you know, I think when you're a young kid like that—I think you adapt fairly quickly, but it certainly wasn't Kansas City. It was a smaller town. It was a lot different, but it didn't take long to get adapted to new friends and a new school and things like that.

AD: Where did you go to school in Hot Springs?

JD: St. John's Elementary School, and then I went to Hot Springs High School.

AD: Okay. And you graduated in the class of . . . ?

JD: 1964.

AD: 1964 from Hot Springs.

JD: Yes.

AD: Okay. So what were your impressions of the schools here at the time? What did you think at the time, and kind of looking back, I guess, also, has your opinion

changed any?

JD: Well, I'm not sure I know how to answer that. I think when you're growing up you don't think about the schools. The schools were fine. They were good schools. Of course, when I was at Hot Springs High School, it was—I guess when you look from this point in time and look backwards, the most notable thing was that it was all white. We had no blacks in our school. We had a separate black high school in Hot Springs, Langston High School. So I never—we didn't have any blacks when I was in high school.

AD: When you left Hot Springs High School, where did you go next?

JD: I went to Regis College in Denver, Colorado. It's a Jesuit institution out there.

AD: And when did you come back to Hot Springs?

JD: Well, I went four years to college and I came back for one year. Then I went into the military. I served two years in the navy. I served there from 1969 to 1971, and when I got done with the navy, then I came back here. And I've been here ever since.

AD: When you think of Hot Springs compared to the rest of Arkansas—or even the public image of Arkansas—what kind of stands out as being different, if anything?

JD: Well, you know, nationally the image of Arkansas is one of a relatively poor state—a low-income type of state. But, you know, Arkansas is a wonderful place. We've got some major corporations throughout the state in Little Rock and northwest Arkansas—some very nice corporations. I think this state is a great place. Now, I don't know if that's what the nation feels about it, but I think it is.

AD: Well, in terms of, I guess, the subject of Bill Clinton, when did you first remember meeting Bill Clinton?

JD: I think it was in high school.

AD: What was your opinion when you met him? What was your first impression?

JD: I think my first impression was that he was a nice guy. He was very studious and a very smart and intelligent guy. He wasn't anything that stood out so much. He wasn't loud or boisterous or a show-off or cocky. He was just a nice guy. He came to school and made good grades.

AD: So was he the person, then, that you ever thought would have been president of the United States?

JD: Well, quite frankly, I do remember when we graduated from high school, I asked him what he wanted to do in life, and he said he'd like to be the governor or a senator someday. And I remember him saying that upon graduation from high school. So, yes, I knew politics was in his future, but who would have ever thought of president?

AD: Okay. When was the first time that you heard of Bill Clinton again after he left Hot Springs? Did you hear much about him when he was in college or law school, or did you not really hear about him until he came back to Arkansas and ran for public office?

JD: Well, I didn't hear too much about him, no. But, you know, we were friends, and so you hear about what friends are doing here and there. And I knew that he had helped a few people on their political attempts—presidential races. I knew that he was involved with some guys back in the 1960s, probably, and the early 1970s.

So I knew he was doing things of that nature. Then, of course, we found out a lot more about him when he came back here and started running for public office.

AD: So what were your feelings when he ran for public office? Was this something—obviously, it didn't seem to shock you, since you had heard that this was something that he had planned to do earlier.

JD: Oh, yes. Well, I mean, it was kind of in his game plan. I would have been surprised had he not done something like that. Sure.

AD: So when he was governor, what was your reaction or your feelings, and what were the feelings of the people that you knew around town? Were they proud? Were they indifferent? What were their feelings in general?

JD: Oh, I think more proud than anything. He did good. He got elected to a lot of different offices. I think he was attorney general first and then governor numerous times. It's not easy to do that. And I think people were very proud of him. I don't care whether you liked his political agenda or not. I think people were very proud of him, and they were happy to know him.

AD: Did you keep much contact with him when he was in the attorney general's office or when he was governor?

JD: No, not really. I never tried to reach out and take advantage of any situation. No. He and I were friends, and that was good enough. I never tried to do anything like that.

AD: What was your reaction when he announced he was running for president?

JD: Well, I was surprised at his timing, but I was not surprised that he did it. I think that people felt all along that this was what he was going to make an attempt to

do. I think he had made mention that he wanted to do it. In fact, when he ran for governor the previous year, he stated that he would not run for president during that period of time. Of course, things changed. So people knew that that was in the cards.

AD: When he had announced that he was running the first time, what did you think about his chances of winning?

JD: Running the first time for . . .?

AD: Oh, sorry. For president.

JD: Well, quite frankly, he was running against George [H.W.] Bush, who was the incumbent, and who had very high approval ratings at the time. So you really didn't give Clinton much chance at that time.

AD: When did you change your mind? When did you think that he had a chance—or a good chance?

JD: Well, as soon as he got the Democratic nomination, you knew that he was in the game, and he's probably the greatest vote-getter of our lifetime, maybe—who knows how far back you go?

AD: Yes.

JD: So he had a chance. And then when things started going badly for Bush, everything that went bad for Bush was positive for Clinton. It was an amazing thing. I don't know when we changed our mind. These kind of . . .

AD: It was kind of a gradual process. Yes.

JD: Yes.

AD: So the first time he ran for governor, which I really didn't touch on that much—

what was your reaction then?

JD: You know, I can't say that I really recall exactly. He had been attorney general, and he beat he beat John Paul Hammerschmidt in an attempt at United States Congress, if I remember. And that was a little surprising because Hammerschmidt was well liked. So when somebody does something like that, you really don't feel like they're a big underdog when they go for a next undertaking. Who did he beat for governor that first time?

AD: Let's see. I'm trying to remember.

JD: Was it [Frank] White? Did he beat White the first time?

AD: I don't think so. I think White beat him the next time, and then he beat White. There's somebody else who was a republican.

JD: Yes. I don't remember who he beat. I don't remember my feelings back then, but I doubt if I would have been too surprised.

AD: Were you surprised when he lost to White?

JD: Yes—surprised when he lost, and then interested that he came back and beat White again. So that was kind of the beginning of—you know, you can't keep him down. The “Comeback Kid” type of thing.

AD: Looking back at Bill Clinton's life in terms of what you know of him personally, were there any things that you would see as keys or signs or hints that would really make him stand out from anybody?

JD: No.

AD: Just kind of a normal childhood.

JD: No. None. There wasn't anything. I mean, when I knew him when we were in

high school, when we were youths around here, he didn't do anything that was super, super great or anything that was very bad.

AD: Yes.

JD: He was just one of the guys. I can't say that he and I—we weren't best friends. We didn't hang out with each other, but we were good high school friends. I think we respected each other equally. He was just a good guy, and people like good guys.

AD: So did he have a—it's obviously kind of an understatement—did he have a lot of friends?

JD: Sure. Yes.

AD: Looking back, there is a number of people who have had animosity towards him and his later political career. Was there any sort of that animosity that was present in high school? Was there anybody who disliked him?

JD: I do not think—I couldn't tell you if there was anybody who disliked him. No. Now, I'm not going to tell you that he was—that people would have looked at him and said, "He's my best friend," either. I don't know that. I'm sure there were a few, but he wasn't—he was just a good guy. And, no, there was not any animosity. There was not anybody who said, "You know, I don't care for the guy." No.

AD: What type of activities did you do? Were you in the band or . . . ?

JD: No. I liked to play sports. I liked to play basketball. I liked to play on the golf team. In my senior year I was president of the student body, which—our principal, Johnnie Mae Mackey—the year before, I think, said that if you held a

certain office in the school that you could not participate in sports. She limited some of our activities, so I wasn't able to do that as a senior. But I did those things.

AD: It's kind of interesting that somebody else besides Bill Clinton [was] the president of the senior class . . .

JD: No, not the senior class, the student body.

AD: The student body.

JD: That's different. Right.

AD: Right.

JD: I think he was the senior class—was he the secretary of the senior class or something like that?

AD: I'm trying to remember.

JD: I think he was.

AD: I think either he was, or he lost to Carol Yelldell.

JD: Oh, did he? Carolyn Yelldell?

AD: Yes. Yelldell. Yes.

JD: Okay. I didn't remember that aspect of it. Yes, I don't remember how Carolyn beat him. They were both good people. I guess those things happen.

AD: In looking at what he's done since he has left office, has there been anything that has been a surprise or have things happened pretty much the way you expected?

JD: You know, any time you're surprised when somebody does what he has done. I mean, he really is an amazing person—the self-confidence that he has. I talked to him one time, and I asked him how it was that a guy from Hot Springs High

School can stand up to the top guy from Russia or the top guy from any country, or to the Pope and look him straight in the eye and feel like he's on an even keel with them. That would be pretty intimidating for *me*. So I don't know how a person—but he seems to have more self-confidence than anybody I have ever seen or known. And, to me, it's an amazing—it's a great trait as long as you're capable, and he seems to be.

AD: Do you remember what his answer was?

JD: His answer was—he kind of looked at me like, "That's a dumb question." He just has so much confidence, it was like he . . .

AD: It just never would have occurred to him.

JD: Yes. It never would have occurred to him. It was just—I thought it was kind of a neat question. [Laughter]

AD: Are there any other stories or any interesting things that you can think of? Even things that may sound kind of trivial that might be indicative of who he was?

JD: You know, when he was president, one time we had our high school reunion in Washington, DC, and there was an awful lot of folks who were up there. I got asked once one day by some of his friends to come up there one morning. So I got on the White House grounds with a few people, and he went jogging. Then we played touch football on the White House lawn—I guess the back lawn. And it was interesting how competitive he was. I mean, we were just out there, a bunch of guys, you know—we were probably forty years old or more—forty-five years old. But he was very competitive, even in a touch football game in the backyard. He did not want to get beat. He didn't want anybody to show him up,

either. It was interesting.

AD: Isn't that one of those things that you had noticed looking back at high school, or does that seem to be at least a new aspect of his personality to you?

JD: That would have been something more—something that I would not have seen in high school because he was not athletic that I know of in high school. He was in the band, and he was studious. He didn't play football. He didn't play basketball. He didn't play the normal sports that you think of from back in the high school days. So I didn't know he was that competitive. I hadn't noticed it.

AD: Did you have any of the same classes together?

JD: I don't recall.

AD: Yes.

JD: I really don't recall that. Probably. Probably.

AD: About what size was your graduating class again, about 200?

JD: We were a pretty large high school back in those days, and it was probably a mere 200 or 225 or 230. Yes. It wasn't that big.

AD: When you went off to Regis, do you feel that the educational experience there had prepared you? Obviously, there are a lot of questions and debate, now, about how well Arkansas schools do of preparing people for higher education.

JD: Well, yes, I think we were properly prepared. I think the high schools properly prepare kids today, but it's an experience—high school—that can't be forced upon someone. If they're willing to accept the high school experience and get the learning out of it, then they can be prepared for any place. We have plenty of kids from around here who go to Georgetown [University]. Clinton is not the only

one. We have kids from around here who go to many of this type school in America. It's not whether the high school did a good enough job in preparing them. The high school laid it out there. These kids did a good job of preparing. That's the way I look at it.

AD: One of the things that people talk about is how cosmopolitan Hot Springs is for a small town in the South. And I guess maybe your background is a little bit different since you grew up in Kansas City, but do you think that had any impact in terms of the people at Hot Springs and Bill Clinton?

JD: I had no—I mean, that's the first I've ever heard of Hot Springs being cosmopolitan. [Laughter] I look it as being . . .

AD: People from Hot Springs say that. [Laughs]

JD: Right. I look it as being kind of small and “country,” you know. But *good* “country.”

AD: Yes.

JD: I don't look at it as cosmopolitan.

AD: Have you had much contact with President Clinton since he's left the White House?

JD: No, I have not.

AD: When is the last time you've talked to him or seen him?

JD: Oh, that's a good question. You know, I don't think I've seen him since he has left office. He doesn't come back to Hot Springs too much, so I don't think I've talked to him since he has left office.

AD: So you said you had been to Washington for a high school reunion. Did you go to

either of the inaugurations?

JD: I did not. I'm disappointed, but I did not.

AD: Did you have much of a chance to interact with him? I know you touched on this before when he was governor.

JD: Well, I probably had a chance, but I just never did. I was busy working. I should have taken the time out. I mean, when your friend is the governor over there, you ought to take some time out and go over there and take advantage of knowing the governor and hanging around a little bit. But I didn't. Again, I am disappointed, I guess, that I didn't do some of that. But I had my own things to do.

AD: Is there anything else that you'd like to add? Is there anything that we really haven't touched on, either in terms of Hot Springs or even in terms of the Clinton family? In terms of Liz Clinton Little and other people—were you ever friends with them?

JD: Liz Clinton and [her] brother, Dan?

AD: Right.

JD: Yes. I know them, and they're very good people. But how they interplay with the governor or the president, if you will . . .

[Telephone Rings]

JD: . . . I'm not privy to all that.

AD: Even in terms of their personalities, do you see similarities—differences? Or just the random things that you'd see between any sets of cousins?

JD: All I can tell you is that Dan Clinton—I haven't seen Liz Clinton in a long time, but Dan Clinton, I see him and talk to him, and he's a very nice guy. But, you

know, Bill Clinton has a unique personality. It's like we said a minute ago, he's not intimidated by anything. He has more self-confidence than probably anybody I've ever known. I don't feel like he's cocky or smart-aleck with it. He's just a very confident, self-assured person, more so than anyone else. So, you know, in that aspect, I imagine he'd be different than *any* of his relatives. I don't have any relatives that have ever done that. [Laughter] I can't . . .

AD: It *is* kind of hard—that's actually a very helpful answer in terms of that. Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

JD: Well, I don't know. What would be interesting to add? I am very proud to know the guy. It's fun to know the president. How many people get to know the president of the United States and can discuss what it was like? I wish I'd had opportunities to do more. I've got some friends who have slept in the White House and stayed there and done a lot more, but they were a lot tighter friends with him than I was, and they deserved it. But I'm proud to know him. You know, there are a lot of things that people are discouraged about with him, and I can't say that I'm one hundred percent happy. But, for the most part, you know, you're happy to know him. It's fun, and you're proud that you know the guy.

AD: Well, thank you for all your time and the opportunity to interview you, Mr. Dierks.

JD: Well, you're welcome. All right.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Cheri Pearce]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]