

William Jefferson Clinton History Project

Interview with

Myra Irvin  
Hope, Arkansas  
22 February 2002

Interviewer: Michael Pierce

Michael Pierce: This is Michael Pierce. I'm here in Hope, Arkansas, with Myra Irvin. This is for the Clinton History Project. I want to start by asking you where are you from? Where were you born?

Myra Irvin: Originally, Hope, Arkansas.

MP: Who were your parents?

MI: Oren and Holly Grisham.

MP: He was also known as Buddy?

MI: Correct. The media did this.

MP: In fact, I was just interviewing someone else and they said that they had never heard him called Buddy until 1990—1992.

MI: Do you want me to tell you the story behind that?

MP: Sure. My father had a little sister, who was Edith Cassidy. Her daughter—and all their life, they referred to each other as Brother and Sister, instead of Edith and Oren. In fact, he had two sisters. Her daughter came along, Virginia, and she could not say Brother, so she said Buddy. Her son came along—Bill. It was just automatically—he called Daddy “Buddy.” But, he called him Uncle [Leslie?]. He did not call him Uncle Buddy. The media got Uncle Buddy because my father was Bill's uncle, but Bill never called him anything but Buddy.

MP: Now, 1992 comes along and everyone calls him Buddy?

MI: You mean locals?

MP: Yes.

MI: Well, daddy died in 1997 and, until his death, no locals used to call him that. No one ever referred to him, as far as being close friends—he was just Oren.

MP: Edith and Oren were brother and sister. And they had other siblings?

MI: One. The same thing with her children. She had two daughters. Her name is Opal and those two daughters called my father Buddy.

MP: And that's Carol? Is that her name?

MI: You mean her children?

MP: Yes.

MI: She has a daughter—the oldest one is Donna and her sister is Lynne.

MP: I don't know why I—I have a lot of names.

MI: It might be if you've talked with someone about these girls. Lynne's middle name is Carol and all the elderly people refer to her as Lynne Carol.

MP: Ok, that's it. Can you tell us some things about your father? What he was like? Let's put it this way, what was his relationship with Bill Clinton?

MI: More like a grandfather. I truly do not remember the year that Eldridge died, but it must have been in the early 1950s. You probably have that somewhere. So, Bill didn't have a father and didn't have a grandfather in Hope. My father just took him under his wing. Aunt Edith was a nurse and she did very little activity outside the home as far as what little boys would be interested in. Virginia was in school for much of the time and was away for much of the time. So, Bill stayed

with Mother and Daddy quite a bit. My father was a hunter, a fisherman. We always had horses until I was a young teenager. My father had a cow to milk. All of this was fascinating to Bill. He really did admire my father. Everyone in the world that knew my father did. I cry when I talk about him.

MP: Can you think of any incidents or any anecdotes with Bill and the animals and Bill and your grandfather?

MI: Ok, my grandfather . . .

MP: I'm sorry, your father.

MI: Yes. My father's father, my grandfather, was still living when Bill was little. I remember there are pictures that probably will wind up in the library. Bill when he broke his leg, set up in the air in a cast. My grandfather had a picture made of him. Bill was acquainted with all the Grishams.

MP: Your grandfather's name was again?

MI: My grandfather?

MP: Yes.

MI: Oh my.

MP: Edith's and Oren's father.

MI: Memuel. But, for short, Lem. L-E-M. His true name was Memuel, but everyone knew him as Lem Grisham.

MP: You were born in Hope?

MI: Yes.

MP: Not Bodcaw?

MI: No. I guess I'm the only one of the four of us that was born in Hope. Actually,

then it was just the countryside of Hope. Now, it's the community of Perrytown.

That's actually where I was born.

MP: When were you born?

MI: 1939.

MP: 1939.

MI: Bill was born in 1946. I married at a very young age. As a teenager, Bill was just beginning to—that's the reason I say I don't remember too much about his teenage years.

MP: Yes.

MI: When he was small . . .

[Tape Stopped]

MI: When he was small, I would take him to the movies and I would play Saturday baby sitter. I remember when he got out of the hospital with his broken leg and had a cast and taped ankle I think it was—and he was pretty heavy. Bill was a pudgy little boy. It was really a treat to get out of the car, into the theater, run around here and there for him and then back into the car. I do remember that. I've heard him relate to other people that he remembers going to the movies with me when he was little.

MP: What type of movies were they?

MI: Oh, my. In Hope, Arkansas, on Saturday, we had a double feature and they were both westerns. *The Lieutenant* was a serial that goes on week after week after week.

MP: Would he wear cowboy boots?

MI: Yes.

MP: There's pictures of him all the time with cowboy boots.

MI: I think that comes from being interested in riding horses with daddy. We had one huge horse and my father used to tell people that I learned to ride before I learned to walk. My father had one horse that I couldn't ride, that daddy would put me in the saddle in front of him and ride on the big horse. The big horse's name was Trigger, just like Roy Rogers. [Laughter]

MP: Did Bill learn to ride?

MI: I truly don't remember him riding alone. I don't. There's a very nice picture of him that was taken professionally, I'm sure, on a Shetland pony. I don't think that was Bill's Shetland pony. I think that was a professional photograph, but I could be wrong. I just, I don't remember it. He was really small and, I think, at that age, he was still living with Aunt Edith and with Eldridge.

MP: Can we talk about Edith and Eldridge for a little bit?

MI: Ok.

MP: What were they like?

MI: They were characters.

MP: How so?

MI: Uncle Eldridge had a grocery store, but I earliest remember [that] was he was an ice man. Has anyone told you that?

MP: I've read it, but I haven't heard the stories.

MI: When I was born, we lived in the country. We had no electricity, so our refrigerator was an icebox. An ice man delivers blocks of ice to keep whatever

you can't sink down in the well to keep cool—you put it in this ice box. Uncle Eldridge did that. He was a delivery person as many other people. Then, he went into the grocery store. You didn't have television back then. His grocery store was located in a part of town that was predominantly black. He was loved by everyone. They all had charge accounts. They all paid him. He enjoyed his nips. He would also keep a few half pints in the grocery store to sell. I've heard this rumor about where he kept them. I never knew that. In fact, when I was small, sometimes if Mother and Daddy had come into town to shop, they would deposit me with Uncle Eldridge. I would stay at the store with him. If he did anything illegal, I never knew about it, but Virginia would tell how he kept his bottles under the [dalthalt?] meter or something like that. [Laughter]

MP: What was the store like? Was it fun for a small girl?

MI: Yes, it was for me because I lived in the country and I didn't see a lot of people. Our nearest neighbor was probably a mile, mile and a half, down the road. When I was there, people were always coming in and out. That was fun. Of course, he always gave me candy. I don't remember Uncle Eldridge ever moving. I know Amy just read to Bill and sat with him while he read daily. This was school time. I don't remember him doing more.

MP: Okay. Edith—a lot has been said about her. What was she like?

MI: She was very rotund and she had this big car. I want to say it was a Buick, but I'm not sure about that. When we would see her coming, we would make comments, "Here comes Aunt Edith," because the driver's side of the car was lower than the other. [Laughter]

MP: I think in Virginia's book she talked about just seeing the tips of her eyes. Do you know . . . ?

MI: Yes, she wasn't very tall. See, my father was 6'1"—6'2." The other sister, Opal—she was probably 5'8"—something like that. But Aunt Edith was not that tall. I guess the springs in the car weren't all that good either. [Laughter] She did a lot of private business, nursing. That's why they used to make the comment, if one of her patients died, we'd say, "Well, they didn't stand a chance because Edith loved them to death!" [Laughs] She was a believer in massages. Her father, my Grandfather Grisham, lived with Mother and Daddy when he died. I remember the morning that he died—Aunt Edith was there and that upset her so. She went into the kitchen and sat down and, well, pretty near had a stroke.

MP: What year was this?

MI: Probably 1954, probably. Around there, 1953—1954. She was put into the hospital. She knew every doctor. She knew every nurse and, if she felt at least twangs of pain or discomfort, she would tell them what she wanted. Way back then, they didn't have the rules that they do now, so consequently she became addicted to prescription drugs. She was placed in a help center in Benton for rehab[ilitation]. I learned to drive my father's car driving to and from Hope to Benton to visit her and those were sad visits. She didn't stay there too long and when she came home, she did fine.

MP: Let's get back to Virginia. She was older than you were?

MI: Much older.

MP: About ten or fifteen years?

MI: At least fifteen.

MP: What are your memories of her?

MI: Just her beauty. I thought she was the most beautiful woman. When I was little and when my relatives lived in the two story house over on Hervey Street—have you been in it?

MP: No, but I know exactly where it is.

MI: Ok, but you must go. Up there was Virginia's room and it was the entire front of that second floor. Well, my, my. We lived in the country in a farm house and I shared a bed room with my sister. I thought I had died and gone to heaven when I would go there because Virginia was gone most of the time, in school. Aunt Edith would let me go upstairs. She had this old fashioned dresser that was really a dressing table with the high sides and the drawers and the big mirror. I would sit there and use all the make-up. I guess—I don't know why, but Virginia gave me a collection of evening gowns that she would no longer wear or anything. As a young, young teenager, my friends and I would go up into the attic of my mother's house and play "dress-up" with Virginia's evening gowns. But I don't remember Virginia.

MP: Why would Virginia have the evening gowns?

MI: Well, I know that when she was married to William Blythe—in his traveling, they dined out. Back in those years, it was just the thing to do. If you went to a—not a play, but maybe if they went out to a club, she wore long dresses. I'm sure that probably some of these were left over from her high school years. She was very, very popular and probably [had] a prom dress, but I'll never forget the one. It

was gray satin. I thought that was the most beautiful dress I had ever seen—gray satin, silvery black. She wasn't in Hope during my growing up.

MP: She wasn't in Hope, but did you ever meet William Blythe?

MI: No.

MP: You never did?

MI: No. In fact, my father only met him one time.

MP: Did your father have strong feelings about him or . . . ?

MI: If he did, he didn't [affect a meeting?]. Let's see, after that, she married Roger—Roger. I do remember her coming to our house and telling Daddy, could she [and Mr. Clinton] marry?. He always called her Ginger. He said, "Ginger, you think about this. You're not marrying Roger Clinton. You're marrying their car dealership." [Laughs].

MP: What was Virginia's response to that?

MI: Oh, buddy, "No, that isn't it at all." Well, she had some pretty horrifying years, I understand, with Roger. Then, after that, she married Dwyer. He was a cosmetologist?

MP: A hairdresser.

MI: Right. I don't remember him, but my father-in-law did go to his funeral. I truly don't remember what he looked like.

MP: What about Kelley?

MI: Oh, adorable. He is adorable.

MP: Tell me about him.

MI: I heard him talk some about his life with Virginia and when little Roger got into

trouble and he was in Texas. When Virginia and Dick would go to visit him, they would always stop here. Most of the time, it was on the way home. My parents didn't drink and Dick and Virginia did. It was just that every afternoon you'd have a toddy in the afternoon. The first time they stopped on their way back, Dick just brought in his little carry all bar and Virginia said, "Dick, they normally don't approve of that." He said, "I'm not going to offer them any." [Laughter] Oh, my father loved him.

MP: Is he still alive?

MI: Yes. I saw him at Oaklawn last week. I didn't visit with him. I just saw him at a distance. When we went to the library's ground breaking in January—was that January or December?

MP: December.

MI: Ok, December. He was there and we did get to visit. He's just a priceless person. He told stories about—I don't remember where we were—but he spoke about Virginia—about the time that they went on the airplane—what's the name . . .?

MP: Air Force One.

MI: Air Force One, and it was in the morning and Virginia asked for a drink instead of a glass of orange juice. [Laughter] He said, "That was just Virginia."

MP: There are some pictures of them with Barbara Streisand and they just look so happy. They just look comfortable and happy at the same time. There's pictures that you can just tell.

MI: When Virginia died—I have a brother that lives in Florida and he is near Virginia's age and they probably were closer than any of the rest of us with

Virginia. So, he and his wife flew into Little Rock and I went to Little Rock to pick them up. Then we left there and went to Hot Springs. It was the afternoon of the wake that night. We went to Virginia and Dick's house and Dick went to pick Barbara up, Barbara Streisand. I just happened to be standing near the door when they came in. So, he introduced us. About that time, someone said, "Telephone." He asked me, "Would you introduce her around?" I had an experience there. She's a lovely person, Barbara Streisand is. After the funeral, we had a card with some [unintelligible] couple of us, [couple of things to pay for because we knew they couldn't], but . . .

MP: I know exactly what you're talking about.

MI: . . . at the Western Sizzlin' banquet room and Barbara was present at that also.

MP: Getting back to Bill, do you remember when he was born?

MI: No, I don't.

MP: You don't?

MI: No.

MP: What's your first memory of him?

MI: I guess as a little baby in the crib. We would go to town to visit and I just remember him being a little fat baby. I remember when he started eating. Aunt Edith put him in a high chair and was just forcing him to eat. [Laughs] She had a silver napkin ring that was always on his tray and later on his table. She taught him a lot about manners and etiquette and all that, but he didn't stand a chance of not being fat! [Laughter]

MP: Do you remember when Virginia came back from New Orleans?

MI: Not really.

MP: Virginia talks about some tension then. You were probably too young though.

MI: Right. I lived a pretty sheltered life. My parents didn't talk about family problems. I remember that once they got Bill—we've talked about Billy—she didn't even when they lived over on [Waterford?] Street. I just remember that being casually discussed—or not casually—but quietly discussed; and not really of all of what happened. I've learned more about it as an adult than back then.

MP: So you were the . . .

MI: Ok, now Bill was what— twelve—when that happened?

MP: You know, the [unintelligible] on [Lockett?] Street there—I want to say that they moved to Hot Springs by the time he was twelve.

MI: All right, so he was about eleven.

MP: Really, maybe seven or eight. I think they moved to Hot Springs in 1952 [or] 1953. I could be wrong.

MI: Why I was back-tracking, I may not have been here. As I say, I was very young and I may have already left Hope.

MP: Where did you go?

MI: Colorado.

MP: When did you come back?

MI: 1973.

MP: So you were gone for a long stretch?

MI: Quite a few years, yes. In fact, I didn't live all those years in Colorado. It was like we left there and went other places and then back to Colorado. Fifteen years

there and I came back home.

MP: Did you have much contact with Virginia or Bill?

MI: No.

MP: Just from your father?

MI: Yes, that's all.

MP: When you back in the early 1970s, did you see Virginia?

MI: No, not often. I did not. I really didn't have a great deal of contact with Bill until he became governor. Then we visited more at the Governor's Mansion than at any other time.

MP: What was a visit to the Governor's Mansion like?

MI: Very informal. I mean, so "at home." He always had a—what he would call a family and friends Christmas party. I remember one year the weather was so bad my father decided he didn't want to make the trip. I bet there were not more than twenty-five people there because it was so bad, but I had gone. Seems to me that I spent the night and didn't have to drive in all the weather. I didn't spend the night at the Governor's Mansion in Little Rock. Anyway, Bill always thought that Daddy had to be taken care of when we were at the Governor's Mansion. Those were nice visits. Bill [unintelligible], one of them, when he was in the White House. It was for Daddy to visit, and family, and Daddy wouldn't do it.

MP: He wouldn't?

MI: No.

MP: Why not?

MI: Well, I know at his age he had become hesitant about flying. He had lived pretty

much, not in solitude, but he didn't get out and travel. When he was younger, he did and it wouldn't have bothered him at all. At that age, he didn't want the hassle of big cities. What he didn't realize is that Bill would have treated him like a dignitary, had him picked up and delivered and everything.

MP: There'd be no hassles involved.

MI: No hassles involved. But, no, Daddy didn't know that. Bill had talked to me because I had spent the night [at the] White House, oh I don't know—three or four times. Every time—before Daddy died—it was like, “Do you think you'll get Buddy to come up with you?” And he never would.

MP: Your father went to the Governor's Mansion?

MI: Yes.

MP: Did he play a part in the 1992 campaign, your father?

MI: In 1992, no, no. He played a part in the governor's campaign.

MP: What would he do?

MI: One of the commercials was Mother and Daddy sitting in their swing on the porch at their house talking about why he should be governor. [Laughter] He didn't get out and door-to-door campaign or anything like that, but he was [a] very big supporter of him. Then, when Bill became president that was more than Daddy could comprehend because, to him, Bill was just Bill. The president of the United States didn't really go too well with him. He just didn't get excited about it and magazine reporters, newspaper reporters and television reporters would come to Daddy. He just—he didn't care to talk to them. One thing I think that he thought—he didn't have a real education to be on the news. You and I are having

an interview and I don't have an education! [Laughter] The night of the election, we all went to Western Sizzlin' because they had big screen TVs set up. I was sitting by the side of Daddy and, oh, I got so excited. I'm screaming and yelling and he looked at me like, "You're making a spectacle of yourself. Don't do that." He was very calm, cool and collected. [Laughter]

MP: Is there anything else that I need to ask you about?

MI: Well, if there is, I don't remember it [laughs]. I told you when you came in that I was afraid that this would be non-profitable.

MP: Actually, this stuff is wonderful. This is the type of stuff that historians can't find in newspapers and documents. The Clinton [Presidential] Library is going to have—they have a warehouse full of government documents documenting everything Bill Clinton did for those eight years. But, it's these types of interviews that give us sort of the quality—give us a feel for what he was really like and what the Cassidys were like and what Virginia was like.

MI: I talk to older people that went to school with Virginia and she was the "belle of the ball"—the "life of the party." She was intelligent, so, by her being that, it wouldn't let her grades go. She was just a well known, loved person, I'm sure.

MP: I'm trying to think if there's something that we forgot to cover. I can't think of it, but thank you very much.

MI: We have done all right.

MP: We have done all right. It's been profitable.

MI: Very good.

[Tape Stopped]

MP: Could you tell me something about your visits to the White House?

MI: The first time I went, I was there on a business trip with the company that I worked for. I had let Bill know that I was coming to Washington, DC. I called when I got there and the lady that takes care of the family affairs, who was Carolyn Hubert, had a car pick me up at the hotel and it took me to the White House. I was given a pass to wear, a guest pass, and that gave me just access to the entire White House. Carolyn took me places that ordinary tourists did not go. I went to the green house, which has all the roses and the fresh cut flowers that are distributed through the building everyday. I visited [the] kitchen and met the chef. I saw how they do the toppings of all of the fancy cakes by blowing them—it's like blowing glass but it's actually blowing caramel. Then they're frozen. That was before the dog Buddy, so I got to visit with Socks. Then, another time—ok, it was the first time—I had not gone with any kind of attire except business attire to attend these meetings that I was going to. The night that I was there was St. Patrick's Day and they were having a huge party and attending it was the—what, not the King . . . ?

MP: President, Prime Minister?

MI: Whatever. Everyone was in long dress and tie, so I did not go through the reception line. During the evening, I did see Bill after he was through with every little table, waiting for the show and he asked me, "When did you get here? I looked for you in the receiving line." I said, "Dressed like this?" I was the only person out of five hundred that had on a business suit instead of a long dress. He said that was fine and I was treated just graciously. The night during the party I

had the privilege of staying all night in the Queen's Bedroom. That's the same floor that the Clinton residence is on and also Chelsea's little suite. During the party, I went upstairs and visited with Chelsea and the lady that stayed with her. Of course, Chelsea was very, very small then. Another occasion, the last time that I stayed, I was able to visit with him early the morning that I left. We talked one-on-one, family, politics, whatever, for about an hour and a half. That was really a delight. I have many, many souvenirs from the White House. In Bill's mother's bedroom, there's a huge picture of Bill—the most favorite of hers. He had written on the corner of it some notation to her. The first time I was there was shortly after Virginia died. I told Carolyn [Hubert], I said, "You know, I don't have a good picture of Bill. Just the ones that they put out for public offices and whatever." She said, "I have one for you." It was the same picture that Virginia had in her room. That was her favorite. She had them frame it for her to give to someone, but no one knew who she was going to give it to. So Carolyn said, "She'd be just as happy for you to have it." Bill autographed it for me before I left. They packaged it up and shipped it to me. I was treated royally while Bill was in the White House. I really do appreciate it.

MP: Was the Buddy the dog named after your father?

MI: Yes. There was an announcement that they were trying to decide on what name. About—I don't know—one evening late, I had talked to my brothers and my sisters about suggesting Buddy. So one evening late, I called the White House and told them who I was and that I would like to speak to Bill. I used to work at 7:30 in the morning. Before I left for work the next morning, I answered the

phone and Bill said, “Hey, I hear you called last night.” There was no in between or anything. It was just him on the phone. I said, “Yes, we’ve had a family meeting and we’d like for you to name the dog—” And before I could say it he said, “Buddy.” I said, “That’s right.” He said, “Hillary and I talked about that last night. That’s what his name is going to be.” That was the way that came about.

MP: That was quick.

MI: Yes. Bill Clinton is a marvelous human being. I mean, he has the heart of a giant. That was just the few little things that I remember about him in the White House.

MP: Well, thank you so much.

MI: Yes.

[Tape Stopped]

[End of Interview]

[Edited by James Defibaugh]