

William Jefferson Clinton History Project

Interview with

Richard McDowell
Hot Springs, Arkansas
16 September 2004

Interviewer: Andrew Dowdle

Andrew Dowdle: It is Thursday, September 16, 2004. I am Andrew Dowdle and I am in Hope, Arkansas, with Richard McDowell. Could you do me a favor and please spell your last name?

Richard McDowell: M-C-D-O-W-E-L-L.

AD: Very similar name to mine, and I know it's always the fun thing to try to spell that. Can you first tell me when and where you were born?

RM: I was born here in Hope, Arkansas, in 1946. In fact, there was a hospital down on Main Street called the Julia Chester Hospital, and that's where Bill Clinton was born.

AD: Yes.

RM: I guess everybody was back in those days. So I was born in 1946.

AD: Who were your parents?

RM: Ray McDowell and Mildred McDowell. My daddy was a hardware man, I guess you'd call him. He was a traveling salesman for a while, then he ended up with Hope Hardware Company. I used to work there every summer. I hated it.

AD: [Laughs] And your mother?

RM: My mother was—both of them were actually from Spring Hill, Arkansas, which is about twelve miles down the road, and they're both from there. I have an older

sister, six years older than I am. She's a psychologist at the University of North Texas. That's all.

AD: So your family moved here only a few years before you were born. They lived in this area for a long time.

RM: Oh, yes. My dad had a house built just inside the city limits. We had about four acres of lawn, which I got to mow. And I probably enjoyed it. It was [a] Norman Rockwell-type childhood.

AD: That's what a lot of people say. Can you describe Hope in the 1940s, 1950s, and the early 1960s as well, when you were growing up here?

RM: Well, of course, I don't remember anything about the 1940s, but I do remember the 1950s. It was, as I said, just pretty easygoing. You know, everybody thought they had problems, but there weren't very many big ones. It was virtually crime-free. That's about it, really. I played Little League baseball and all that kind of stuff—just had pretty much an average life.

AD: Where did you go to school—kindergarten up through high school?

RM: Well, I was in Miss Mary's Kindergarten. I was going to call my wife. I might still be able to call her. We may have to have to turn the tape off here in a minute. I have a brochure from Miss Mary's Kindergarten. It's hilarious. It's something like \$5 a month [tuition] , and it says a whole bunch of stuff. I don't know where that thing is. I had it in a frame somewhere, and my wife's always sticking it somewhere. [Laughter] Don't say that. But I went to Miss Mary's Kindergarten when I was four and five—kind of a two-year deal. Then I went to Brookland Elementary School here. Actually, if I remember correctly, I think Bill Clinton

moved in the second grade.

AD: That's what I was thinking, too.

RM: Well, I recall—certain things you remember just out of the blue. I recall a teacher coming in there one time and saying, “You all need to say goodbye to Bill because they're moving.” Back in those days, unless you were affecting our candy or something else, we weren't going to worry about it, but I do kind of remember that.

AD: Yes.

RM: Then I went to Hope High School, and I graduated from Arkansas Tech University, [Russellville].

AD: When did you come back to Hope?

RM: I came back in about 1975 when we built this house. At that time, I was working for the Internal Revenue Service. I was an agent. [It was] probably the best job I ever had. One of the banks down here lured me back to be a controller.

AD: Yes.

RM: I was a home-town boy, and they kind of played on that, you know. I came back here and [inaudible].

[Sound of barking dogs]

[Tape Stopped]

AD: So, again, looking back, what was kindergarten like?

RM: Kindergarten was cool. You know, back in those days I probably didn't think it was. We went there every day. They would give us limited instructions. I remember they had the alphabet around the top of the room. They'd give us some

kind of little limited educational experience. And you'd take a nap every afternoon at 2:00. Everyone had to bring a pad or a blanket or something, and you would lie down on the floor and take a nap. In-between times we would have recess. We'd go out—they had a chain-link fence around the backyard—and we'd go out there and play and get into no telling what. It was a pretty good experience outside. I've got two daughters. I wish they could have gone through something like that, but it's not available anymore.

AD: Looking back, what were the schools in Hope like?

RM: I think they were pretty good. We had probably six elementary schools and just one high school and one junior high. In those days, I think most of the teachers were pretty dedicated. We had some really—in high school we had a couple of them who really shaped our lives. In fact, I know Mack McLarty gave a speech one night somewhere—I don't know where—in New Jersey or somewhere—about our high school English teacher, and, I mean, she was a *fire-eater*. She didn't let you get away with any kind of bad grammar. She had a sign by the door when you went out. It said, "You finish your homework. You leave when the bell rings." In other words, don't say, "I'm through."

AD: Yes.

RM: Another one said, "Time is passing, are you?" [Laughter] But Mrs. Williams—taught Spanish, too. I was president of the Spanish Club, and I couldn't—I wasn't good enough to read the minutes, so I had to get my secretary. [Laughter] Teachers—actually, I'll back up a little bit—were probably a little better than average. I had some high school teachers that—I took all the advanced subjects:

physics, chemistry, advanced math, and all that stuff. We had some really good instructors. So I—at that time, I would say things were pretty good. Education was pretty good in Hope at that time.

AD: One of the things we've been asking everybody in Hope and Hot Springs is what was the racial climate like at the time they were growing up in the 1950s?

RM: Well, there was no conflict. You never heard anything like that. There was a separate black high school—separate black elementary schools. I didn't know anything about the elementary schools. The high school was named Yerger.

AD: Could you spell that?

RM: Y-E-R-G-E-R.

AD: Okay.

RM: It was a good school, from what I heard. They had a football team—they were in kind of a crazy conference. They played El Dorado and Texarkana and [a] bunch of larger schools, but they would play on Saturday afternoons at the stadium here. We played on Friday night, and they played on Saturday afternoon. We'd always go out there and watch them because it was pretty good football. Yes, at that time I probably didn't know two black people, but it was just because we weren't around each other. Discrimination was accepted, I guess, but there wasn't any really bad stuff going on. Nobody was being hanged.

AD: You think about the stereotype of—even in the terms of Arkansas—Central High School [integration crisis in Little Rock] in 1957 . . .

RM: Yes. Had that happened in Hope, Arkansas, there might have been some demonstrators or something, but I wouldn't have gone. It didn't make any

difference to me. I'd say it was fairly smooth, really.

AD: Again, thinking about Bill Clinton—when you knew him as a five- or six-year-old [laughs], was there anything that really stood out at the time? What was he like at that time?

RM: Well, he was a—I heard an interview one time—I think it was Joe Purvis. Did you interview him?

AD: Yes.

RM: He was a good friend. He's crazy. I think he said at one time—he said that at that time in kindergarten there were only two kinds of people: good guys and bad guys. Bill Clinton was bigger. He was six inches taller than everybody else, but he was an easygoing guy. In fact, I don't know if you have been by his original birthplace or not.

AD: Yes.

RM: Okay. Well, Joe used to live a couple blocks past that. Bill would come over there sometimes and play, and I would go over to Joe's to play. We were pretty good friends. Bill was always just amicable and easygoing and easy to get along with.

AD: Did you know his family that well, either his mother or the Cassidys?

RM: No. Well, I did know the Cassidys. They had a grocery store coming into town. I don't remember why, exactly, but sometimes I would go by there. I think maybe they'd cut the meat into steaks for you, or something. That was, of course, after I came back here. I knew the Cassidys and some of their relatives. I went to school with a couple of them. I can't remember exactly which ones they were.

AD: What type of people were they, looking back?

RM: Oh, salt-of-the-earth-type people. They had that grocery store. They ran it, and they were happy to have you come in, and happy when you bought something. Good people.

AD: And I gather that was also one of the few places in Hope where there was some mixing between whites and blacks.

RM: Well, it's over—as I said, it's coming into town. You've always got the classic railroad tracks—across the tracks. But just, you know, no more than a hundred yards. I guess that's why nothing—I mean, it never bothered me. It didn't bother me to go in there and shop beside a black person. My daddy in the hardware store—in the hardware business—told me early on. He said, “Son, black people are just like white people. When they come in here to buy something, treat them nice and help them.” I had learned that, and I never had any trouble at all.

AD: Is there anything else you remember about him?

RM: Well, do you want to hear about the broken leg?

AD: Yes, Jim Fergus told me that one, but it's also good to hear . . .

RM: What did Fergus tell you?

AD: I don't remember. It's been about six months. He said he had been one of the people that had kind of raised the rope.

RM: He's lying already! [Laughter] Because I was the one who told him about that. What happened was we were out there playing in the backyard and there were cowboys and there were Indians.

AD: Yes.

RM: They were kind of acting like they were riding horses, and we would run around outside the thing. For some reason, I wasn't in it. I hate to blow the whistle on him, but Phil McLarty, Mack's cousin . . .

AD: Yes.

RM: Phil was kind of a tough guy back in those days, but now he's about five feet two [inches]. I'll have to erase that. But there was a jump rope with handles on it. They were strung between a couple little trees out there, and it was sloping. It was two or three inches off the ground. Phil said [whispered], "Come here, come here." I said, "What?" He said, "We're going to tighten this rope up." So we tightened it up to where it was about two feet off the ground. That's when Bill Clinton came through there and hung his heel on it. And that's where—and I've never forgotten it because I felt guilty after that. I actually was the one who did it, but I felt guilty after that because I thought, "What's wrong with him?" They said, "Well, his leg is broken." I thought, "Oh, man, I broke somebody's leg!"
[Laughs]

AD: Nightmares for a little kid.

RM: Yes. But that's what happened. He couldn't be held at fault for that because it wasn't like he'd been—it wasn't there previously when he came around the yard. I remember him having his leg broken. Again, he was at the Julia Chester Hospital. I have seen some pictures of people that had his picture with him in there. I don't have one of those.

AD: Did you go by?

RM: Yes, I think my mother took me by there. I think that was a decent thing to do,

especially for me because I never told anybody. [Laughter]

AD: This is a true confession. [Laughs]

RM: Well, like I said, I'm not the one who stretched it and tied it up, but I was complicit.

AD: After he ended up leaving, when did you hear about him again?

RM: I suppose when he got into politics. I was working in Little Rock when he was governor. I think he was a good governor. A lot of people didn't agree with this or that, but I think he always had the best interest at heart. The funny thing about it is these days when a person is elected to a powerful office like governor or president, all their old friends will ask them to do something for them. "Give me a job," or, "Put me on." I never asked him for anything. He has always—the few times that I've seen him face-to-face since he was president, he was always very nice to me. In fact, when Vince Foster died—they had a service in Little Rock, but he was buried here. They had a chartered bus [that] came with all the people from Washington, [DC], to the cemetery. They wouldn't let just anybody in there. You had to be deserving. The guy at the front gate was a friend of mine, too. He would tell the guards who was allowed in. I got in there, and the bus came about thirty minutes later. It was August, and it was terribly hot. Mack, Bill Clinton and Hillary and all of them got off the bus. They had a little service there. After it was over, the people from Washington just wanted to hang around. They were enjoying this down-home visiting. I remember Joe Purvis, who probably kept closer contact with him than maybe anyone—Mack was standing there with me, and Bill Clinton walked around that way. Joe said, "Bill, do you

remember Richard McDowell? He's from old Miss Mary's." He said, "Yes! Mack and I were talking about him at the White House the other day." About that time someone else said something. I said, "Talking about *what*?" [Laughter] I never found out what they were talking about. He had always been very nice to me. I was in Washington one time—I went up there for a seminar, and Mack was in the White House at the time. I called him and told him I was coming. He said, "I want you to come by and have lunch at the White House." I thought, "Well, I guess that's all right." So I did. We met Bill coming down the hall. Again, he was as friendly as he could be. I always liked him.

AD: When he started running for office—for Congress in 1974, for attorney general in 1976, and governor in 1978—what were people's attitudes in Hope? Were you in Hope at the time?

RM: Shortly afterwards. It seemed like there have always been two factions—those who like him and those who don't. The ones who don't like him make more noise than the ones who do. Those of us who like him just kind of roll along and say, "Oh, that's all right." I don't think it was anything totally negative, but there were some negative opinions out there. I don't know why that was. One thing is that he is so intelligent that he sometimes out-thinks people. They don't understand.

AD: When did you realize that he was going to run for president?

RM: I was there, actually. I was in Little Rock. I don't remember the circumstances. I'm not sure I want my wife to hear this. [Laughter] Just kidding. There was an attorney from Kansas. I was working with the Public Service Commission at the

time as a utility regulator. I had gone to Michigan State [University] for two or three weeks with a girl who happened to be an attorney in Kansas. She was actually the head attorney. She called me [the] day that he announced. Of course, I had no idea. Maybe it had been in the paper that he was going to hold a news conference. I wasn't paying attention. We went down to eat at a little Greek restaurant and walked out the door, and that's where a crowd had gathered. He was standing there, and we were standing at the corner. He said he was going to run for president. I said, "I'll be damned."

AD: What was your first reaction?

RM: My first reaction was, "I like him, but he's from Arkansas. He'll never be elected president." Of course, I watched him pretty carefully after that.

AD: When did it dawn on you that there was a very good likelihood that he was going to become the next president?

RM: Actually, it wasn't until the very end of the election. I was lying on the floor watching the election returns, and at some point in time I said, "He's going to win!" I was thrilled about that. I really was.

AD: What is it like to have gone to kindergarten with somebody who . . . ?

RM: Well, it's strange. And to know them. How many people know a living president? I'm sure, a lot of people, but it's really strange because you remember just who they were. Like Mack McLarty. He was chief of staff at the White House. He's still the just same old boy he always was. He's very astute. He doesn't treat me any differently. Of course, I like to think I'm not an idiot. So they don't have to soften up anything for me. I just talked to Mack the other

night. It's like a lot of people said, when Bill Clinton was first elected, he made Mack the chief of staff. The reporters would say, "Were you surprised?" And the classic line was, "Well, I'm not surprised that Mack is in the White House. I'm surprised he's not the *president*." He was the one.

AD: Looking at Hope—it's really interesting in terms of the number of prominent people who have come from Hope. Obviously, in that group at that time period there is Bill Clinton, Vince Foster, Mack McLarty, Joe Purvis. Have you looked [laughter] . . .?

RM: I'm sorry. Actually, what you don't know is that they were outstanding kids. We had a lot of outstanding kids. We had some very, very intelligent people in my senior class in high school that went all over the [country?]. I took those advanced courses, so I had them with some of the brainy children. Hematologist in Dallas and PhD at Purdue, and all over the place. I can't explain that, but we had an outstanding class.

AD: This is really interesting. George Wright, Jr. and I were talking about this yesterday, and he said, "Well, is it really random chance?" Because he was talking about a number of other communities that have had groups of people who have gone on to be nationally prominent.

RM: That might be as good a way to put it as any. I was right in the middle of it. I just have a lot of respect for the people that went through with me. Even after—I'm talking about those people that have gone on and done some higher academic things—there were a lot of others who were good, too. Good folks. That's just kind of the way it was. Like George said, "Random chance." It's kind of like a

football team. Once in a while it all loads up and you have a bunch of seniors. Like our football team that year. Mack was the quarterback and I was the fullback. We finished number one in the state.

AD: I was going to ask you how good you were.

RM: We were good. We had some skilled players. Mack was a good quarterback. He called all his own plays. The coach never sent a play in. That's the difference.

AD: That's remarkable.

RM: That's the difference. He knew what to do. We all came together. We had a *huge* line. We averaged 250 pounds.

AD: That was big for that time.

RM: For those days. We would go out there. It was kind of like a business day on Friday night. "We [are] going to win this game or we're going to do something else." It was a lot of fun.

AD: Is there anything else you would like to add—something we haven't touched on?

RH: I will say—I had never met Hillary before we went to the graveside service at the cemetery at [Foster's funeral]. I walked up to her, and she just turned around and hugged me. I thought, "This is the first lady." I told her who I was. She was just as nice as she could be. I ran into a guy at a grocery store parking lot—it's been a good long time ago when he [Clinton] was still in office—he had a bumper sticker that was very derogatory toward Hillary. I tried to get the guy to fight. It made me mad. Boy, it made me mad. I thought, "She doesn't deserve this. All she's trying to do is make a mark and do something, try to help people." It [was] just one of those Clinton haters.

AD: Again, looking at this as one thing being talked about by a lot of people, it just seems interesting the high levels of animosity that certain people have.

RM: I don't understand the psychology of it, actually. I have always suspected that some people didn't like him because he was so intelligent. He would out-think them. I don't know. And it's true today—all he has got to do is show up on television or something, and he's got ten people on there talking about [how] they don't like him, and you can't shut those people up. Like I said, the people like him, obviously. He got elected. They just don't make as much noise.

AD: It's also been interesting—the strong levels of positive feelings of the people who have known him. It can be someone who hasn't talked with him for ten years, but it certainly seems there is still a bond there.

RM: Well, that's kind of the way we were.

AD: It's really interesting because you look at the people who are critics, and they tend to say that he's a phony, that he's faking. It just seems that everybody I've talked with says the reason they say that is they don't know him.

RM: Well, I think that's probably true. In fact, a lot of critics have no idea what he is really like. I suppose they could be swayed by enough journalism or something that may put him in a bad light. I think, by and large—in fact, I'll say this—I don't know anyone who was in school with me in those times—or even since then—who doesn't like him. It's just the people who don't know him. They call him Slick Willie. Well, he's smart. He's not going to say anything. He's an attorney, too. He's not going to say anything incriminating.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

RM: . . . would not understand what a nice guy he is. He's really a nice guy. I know he's been in the most powerful position and leader of the world, but he's still a nice guy. He'll talk to you. He acts like he—he makes you think he cares. Not that he doesn't. Every time he's had a chance, he has come back to Hope. Of course, he's always welcome. It's hard to get in there and see him. I remember when his mother died, I went to the graveside—I think it was kind of similar—maybe they had a service somewhere else. Anyway, she was buried in the same cemetery my parents are in, the big one outside of town here. [A] different one than Vince [Foster] is in. It was wintertime. I don't remember what month it was, but it was cold. Of course, I had a suit on and had a trench coat and a pair of sunglasses. So I walked out there, and my friend, George Wright, who was already there, said, "Richard, we've got to help them." And I said, "What are you talking about.?" He said, "Well, they're going to come in the caravan from Little Rock and they are going to pull up here and stop, and they won't all be able to all get in. We're going to have to get down there and direct traffic." George Wright isn't what you would call—he was never the captain of the football team. Mack and I were captains. I said, "Okay." He said, "Why don't you go down there and look for them." So I walked down the road. It was a pretty big cemetery—lots of roads going everywhere. We were trying to get them all in there. So I was standing out there directing traffic with my sunglasses and trench coat on, and everyone thought I was Secret Service. [Laughter] And a [Chevrolet] Suburban comes sliding up there and slams on the brakes, and [Ronnie?] comes down. It

was Mack McLarty, and I can't think of that guy's name—he was one of their aides. Mack said, “What the hell are you doing here?” [Laughter] I said, “I'm Secret Service. Keep moving!” [Laughter] Then we walked to [the] graveside once we finally got them parked, and George Rodgers was standing there. I went up next to him and said, “What's happening, George?” And he said, “That's Barbra Streisand right over there.” And she was. She was standing right over there. She had a guy with her who was about six feet five inches [tall] and weighed about 250 [pounds], a bodyguard. George said, “I'd go over there and hug her neck, but I'm afraid that guy won't let me.” [Laughter] I remember that. Anyway, I don't think all that negative criticism—I don't think he deserved that. He's a better person than that.

AD: Is there anything else you would like to add?

RM: Well, I don't think so. My experience has been limited, but I do vividly remember some of those things. When I first heard about him getting into politics, I knew and remembered who he was. All I could remember was [that] he's a nice guy. I had no idea he was as intelligent as he is or what he had been doing, really. I didn't know about Georgetown or any of that [reference to Clinton's academic career]. I was happy to have him in there. Happy to know someone who's in there. I never used it. I always thought, “Well, maybe I can. Maybe I could get my death sentence commuted or something.” [Laughter] That's about it.

AD: Is there anything—and don't feel that you've got to compromise any bonds of friendship—but between Mack McLarty and Bill Clinton—again, the relationship

between them—do you have any insights in terms of that? It's obviously a very close relationship.

RM: Yes, and Mack and I are very close. I would say that the primary thing in their relationship is respect. I know that Mack has never said a negative word about Bill Clinton. Mack was a state legislator at twenty-two. Actually, that's the only time he's ever been in politics. He could be governor tomorrow if he wanted to. Mack was closer to him because he had been in politics. I think, at that time, he was president of ARKLA [Arkansas-Louisiana] Gas, which was at that time and is still large. It was a gas provider in Arkansas, and a huge job. I was with the Public Service Commission [PSC], so we regulated them. That was kind of funny. [Laughter] Mack would not do anything that was not straight up. I have seen this. I've tried to tell him more sometimes than he needed to know, or more than I needed to tell him. He is an honest, straight-up guy.

AD: And considering the reputation of Arkansas utility operators before that . . .

RM: Yes, he had his job cut out for him. I remember I called him after I had taken the job at the Public Service Commission and told him. He said, "Oh, man! [Laughter] When I hear PSC, people just start seeing red." I said, "Well, maybe I can bridge that gap a little." I never had the opportunity. Mack is who he is. Mack has always been like Clinton was. Mack grew up with money in the family. His grandfather had started a Ford agency here and made a lot of money. His dad [came] along behind him and took up where he left off. They even expanded. They had about five or six dealerships around the state. Mack's daddy was a pretty flamboyant-type man. I always liked Frank. He would have liked Mack to

drive a Cadillac or a Corvette. Mack just had a clunker in the parking lot. That's all he had. He didn't want that kind of an image, I guess. He married a really nice girl from Texarkana. I was in the wedding—a lot of stories about that, but I can't put them on tape. [Laughter]

AD: Is there anything we haven't talked about? I know we have gone over a lot of territory.

RM: I don't think so, except maybe—I don't have an answer for this. I just have a question. What is Bill going to do now? He has already been president. I don't care. When he talks, people listen. It just makes you wonder. It seems like he has a lot more time. He's got a lot more useful stuff to do, but I don't know.

AD: That's a really good question. I wish I had the answer.

RM: Yes. I guess he's enjoying himself, doing what he wants to do, and all that. He's supporting Hillary. I know he's doing that. It's hard to believe that he's going to spend thirty years out of power.

AD: Yes. He is only in his mid- to late-fifties, right?

RM: Yes. I just turned fifty-eight the other day, and I was one of the younger ones in my class, so he's probably fifty-eight or fifty-nine. But he's got a few years left. He certainly has the expertise and ability to do things, and who knows?

AD: I'd like to thank you for your time. You've been very helpful.

RM: You are more than welcome. My experience is limited because I wasn't around him as long as some of those people in Hot Springs were. I definitely remember him well.

AD: Thanks.

RM: You are more than welcome.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Cheri Pearce]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]