

William Jefferson Clinton History Project

Interview with

Carter Russell
Hope, Arkansas
16 September 2004

Interviewer: Andrew Dowdle

Andrew Dowdle: It is Thursday, September 16, 2004. I'm Andrew Dowdle and I'm in Hope, Arkansas, with Carter Russell. I guess the first thing I want to ask you is when and where were you born?

Carter Russell: I was born in Hope, Arkansas on West Fourth Street, October 3, 1928.

AD: And you parents are—their names and what they did?

CR: My father was Chester Russell and mother's name was Wanda Russell. We started many years ago in the restaurant and country store business in Bodcaw, Arkansas. We operated stores in Shover Springs and Crossroads. Later we operated a store on Highway 67. In 1969 I moved out to our existing business. It's like playing checkers.

AD: [Laughs] We were talking a little bit before the interview about your relationship and in terms of how you're related to Bill Clinton. Could you tell that again please?

CR: Well, we're about second or third cousins. I think his great-grandmother and my grandfather were brother and sister. Of course, back in those days you didn't think much about your kinfolks. You all lived in a small community, and I didn't think much about it until he got into politics and he sent me a picture one day and

it said, "From your kin who strayed into politics." Of course, I figured he was wanting a little donation, maybe. [Laughter]

AD: Can you tell me a little about Hope in the 1940s and 1950s?

CR: In 1941 I was in grade school and [World] War [II] broke out. They opened up the Southwest Proving Grounds where they tested munitions. They made most of these munitions in Texarkana at the Red River Arsenal. They would bring these shells over here and test them and drop bombs. Now every year the government brings a crew here, and they still find live ammunition. Over the years there have been some kids killed by finding these shells and trying to sell them for scrap metal and beating on them. I know of two that were killed. During that time we had a restaurant downtown, and, of course, a lot of the servicemen had gone off to war, and we were running, believe it or not, five small businesses. We had this restaurant, we had a meat market, and a country store and a rolling store, if you know what a rolling store is. That's a peddling truck that goes through the country and sells groceries. Oh, back in the 1940s, a lot of people didn't have transportation except wagons and buggies and, you know—they were glad [to] see anyone come around once a week. My daddy would trade for eggs and chickens if they didn't have money. He also gave them credit. We had a store downtown, and I helped on weekends. I was the delivery boy. Our restaurant—now, this is going to be hard for you to believe, but back in those days these guys would come in and we would sell them what we called a meal ticket. It was just like your business card here. There would be numbers, like five, ten, twenty—and it would go up to \$5. These guys would come in early in the week and buy

\$5 meal tickets. All week they could come in and eat lunch on this meal ticket. We sold plate lunches—listen to this—for thirty-five cents. [Laughter] It seemed like tea and Coke were a nickel. A lot of these guys were from out of state and were working at the proving ground because jobs—those were good jobs for that time. In retrospect, their wages were practically nothing compared to wages today. A lot of those guys were single—some of them were married, of course—and a lot of them would throw their money away on the weekend, but they would buy a meal ticket and they knew they'd have money to eat on all week. A lot of them were sending money back home to their wives to meet expenses at home.

AD: It seemed like in the 1940s it was a town that was growing.

CR: It was. It was really booming at that time. I don't know how many people came here to work. Another little thing that comes to mind—my daddy had built a four-room framed house back in the early 1940s, just before the war broke out in 1941. He was going to build eight or ten of them. We had fourteen acres out there, and he had plans to build five or six of them. The war broke out. He rented the house for, I think, \$40 a month, and people would look at it—anything to live in. There were so many people working [in Hope that they were] living in garages. Anywhere they could, more or less, lay their heads. This couple that we rented to rented half the little house to another couple for \$40 a month, so they were getting their rent free. Things back in those days were really cheap, but imagine paying \$400 to build a house. [Laughter] Of course, there wasn't any indoor plumbing. It had electricity, but none of the conveniences we have today. However, the rent paid for it in one year.

AD: I guess if you look at Hope, what role did the interstate have in terms of changing the town? I know that when I-30 came through, there were—obviously, the town kind of shifted as—your stores are kind of a perfect example of that.

CR: It really hurt downtown Hope because a lot of people came through and stopped at restaurants and motels. Of course, they still stop at motels, but if you haven't got a restaurant out close to the highway, they aren't going to go downtown—most people. So it really dried up—mostly dried downtown. Many businesses have developed around the interchanges—all the restaurants, and, naturally, the motels. But it really—you know, when an interstate goes around a town—it hurts any town it goes around. There can be 40,000 cars out there today and there might not be a hundred get off at the Hope exit. Of course, Hope is fortunate enough to be a good drawing card. Back when I had my curb market on [Highway] 67, I would have melons stacked out there waist high. People would come through Texas where there were thousands of melons, and then come through Missouri where there were thousands of melons, but they would stop in Hope. Hope has always been known for good watermelons and the world's biggest watermelons. In fact, a few years ago—while I'm on the subject of watermelons—they had created a new tourist commission here in Hope. I was on it. Our record was a 195-pound melon sent to Dick Powell in 1935. So this was in 1979, and the record hadn't been tied or broken [since 1935]. At meeting one day one of the boys said, "Let's offer a big prize to anyone who can beat that record by growing a 200 pounder." Somebody made a mistake by saying, "Let's give them \$10,000," which we didn't have. [Laughter] So we got it started. The

chamber took it over. They had all the farmers interested. All they had to do was come in and sign their name, indicating that they were interested in growing a melon, and where they lived. Lo and behold, there was a family here that I knew well that pretty well and they held the record all these years. They grew one just a little over 201 pounds. And we had to cough up \$10,000. [Laughter] We finally got it together, but it wasn't easy.

AD: You had shown me a couple pictures before about ones that had been sent to—or ones that you had given people who were big celebrities.

CR: Well, over the years we've sent them to nearly everyone. We've sent them to movie stars. We've sent them to presidents. I know one year they sent, I believe, every governor one of those hundred pounders. When I first started in the watermelon business on Highway 67 in the late 1940s we had an open air market.

It was big thing back in those days—of course, you're too young to relate to a lot of this stuff, but we had a roadside stand that had three big shade trees out front, and I would stack maybe 400 or 500 melons under the tree. People would be coming through from Arizona, Texas—ol' throats dry and parched. They had water coolers on the side of their car windows. That was their only cooling system back in those days.

AD: Yes.

CR: They would put ice in that thing and the ol' fan would turn. [Laughter] A lot of them would come across and come through to the store, and they'd have an old water bag on the front of it where they had water in case the vehicle got to running hot on the desert. They'd come through and see a good shade tree and

the picnic tables with people sitting eating cold watermelon. It was just like ducks to water. Here they'd come. [Laughter] Back in those days it was, like I say, cheap. Prices were awfully cheap. We sold a good, big slice of cold watermelon, cut it and served you, and cleaned up the table for a quarter. Twenty-five cents. Times have changed. Now a slice of watermelon is \$1.50. [Laughter]

AD: Can you tell me a little bit about the Watermelon Festival? When did that start? We talked a little about it in terms of how many people come in during the course of it.

CR: Well, the festival started—I can't quote the exact year, but I know it was along about 1927 or 1928. It started in a small way. The reason I remember that so well [is because] my mother was one of the first watermelon maids back in those days. It finally, from all I've read—of course, I was too young to remember all this—it got so big at that time that Hope couldn't handle it because they didn't have the facilities and motels. It sort of died down. I think it started to come back and then it sort of died off again. This friend of mine, Pod Rogers, was big into watermelons. He worked for a local newspaper and promoted Hope watermelons anywhere he went. If you'd listen to him, he talked about Hope watermelons. I was at my curb market one day—do you remember the Hemisphere at San Antonio? It was a big event.

AD: I've heard about it.

CR: Pod was the local circulation manager for the *Hope Star*. On a lot of weekends he'd take the boys to Dallas to Six Flags [Six Flags Over Texas, an amusement

park in Arlington]—a reward for doing a good job on delivering the papers. This particular week he came in [and] said, “Cart, I just came from San Antonio. We ought to get some 100-pound melons and go down and put them on display at the Arkansas pavilion.” I said, “Okay, Pod, I’ve got my truck loaded with fifteen or twenty that weigh over 100 pounds.” We got together and went to San Antonio. We stopped in Austin, Texas. We had a friend that ran a fabulous restaurant, called “The Barn.” [Laughter] The legislature and Darrell Royal, the coach of [The University of] Texas [Longhorns football team], would dine there. It was made like a big barn out in the country with a silo. You’d come in and he’d set a big chunk of cheese on the table. He had a story—now, whether he did or not, he said, “This cheese is aged in a cave in Arkansas.” Might be ten or fifteen pounds of cheese. He worked mostly college students. We rolled in that night and he had rented the bridal suite to me and Pod. [Laughter] We spent the night and visited with him. He said, “Now you all come back through. We’re having a sportswriters’ convention on Friday night or Saturday night, so you all come back and join us.” And we did. They had a bunch of writers from Arkansas. Orville Henry—you probably remember Orville Henry. He died not long ago. We got to meet Darrell Royal. By the way, while we were at San Antonio we attended a Murphy’s ski show. They had college kids skiing on barefoot, on chairs. They could ski on a dime, I guess. We watched the show one day and we got to thinking, “Wonder if they could ski on half a watermelon.” [Laughter] We got with Stu McDonald, the head of the show. We said, “Stu, we’re from Hope, Arkansas, and we have these 100-125 pound melons, and we have an idea. Is it

possible to ski on half a watermelon?” He said, “I’ll tell you what you all do. Be here between shows, and we’ll try it out.” So we did. We got a picture of those kids eating watermelon. We cut a watermelon and scooped out the heart. A little boy from Mexico City was the one who was chosen to ski. Now, imagine putting your feet in a number three wash tub. [Laughter] No straps or anything to hold it. [Laughter] Finally, they jerked him just right, and he went around the park three or four times. About the third time around he hit a skiff laying in water, and one of these melon rinds just disintegrated, you know, just went into a thousand pieces. We didn’t get it on our camera, but the newspaper picked up on it. It came out in the San Antonio paper. We had two big pictures about the melons in the San Antonio paper. Pod, being a newspaperman, said, “Well, if you can’t get on the front page, the back page is the next best page.” After we came back home we got all this publicity. They wanted us to come to Shreveport, [Louisiana], to [be on] a talk show. One of the champion growers, Pod, and I went to Shreveport. During the—I guess you’d call it an interview—the announcer said, “What are you boys going to do to top that next year?” Pod said, “We’re going to Hollywood.” There wasn’t any talk about going to Hollywood. [Laughter] We got so much publicity that we thought about Hollywood. Glen Campbell’s daddy stopped at my store. I said, “Next time you’re talking to Glen tell him we want to be on his show with a big melon.” Well, I don’t think that carried a bit of weight. Pod was at Six Flags with the paper boys and decided to write a letter to NBC or CBS—I think it was NBC—and tell them what we had and all that stuff. We worked up a deal to go out there the next year. We also tied it in with Little Rock

and got with the secretary of state and the governor. They were having the year of the centennial in San Diego. Well, each week a state would host. This wouldn't happen but once in a thousand years, but it happened that a week before we had to be in Hollywood, Arkansas, was going to be the host state that week. So I got my old ton truck with no air conditioning in the middle of July [laughter] and put 100 king-size watermelons and three giant watermelons in it. Here we take off to Hollywood. The lieutenant governor, Miss Dogpatch, Miss Arkansas, and a bunch of dignitaries are in an airplane flying out there. [Laughter] It takes us about three days to get there. Had a blowout around the hottest part of Texas. We finally get there, and they put us up at the Westgate Executive, at that time rated the third or fourth best hotel in the world. Before you walked in the door they had a doorman who jerked the door open. [Laughter] Of course, they were paying for it, thank goodness. We took those three watermelons and put them in our room with us. One day these Mexican ladies came in and they hollered, "*Sandia, sandia, sandia.*" That's Spanish for watermelon. [Laughter] We spent a week with the lieutenant governor, [Maurice] "Footsie" Britt, at the time, one of the most decorated soldiers during World War II. We went to professional football games, professional baseball games. One day I went out with him to a [United States] Marine base in San Diego. I was right with him and we walked into this office with these three- and four-star generals. Then later on he awarded some soldiers with medals who had come back from Korea. I was right with him. Boy, I just felt out of place, as you can imagine—a civilian with all these generals and all. We finally left them and went on to Hollywood, and they went

back to Arkansas. Later we met up with Glen Campbell. We met with the director when we got there. The director, old Jack Shea—I never will forget him because he produced a lot of “Sanford and Son” TV episodes. He asked Pod, “Would you like to present this melon to Glen?” Because Pod didn’t have a bashful bone in him, he said, “Yes.” [Laughter] So we were sitting there in the audience like two dummies holding this melon in our laps. They start the theme song of the Glen Campbell Show, and old Tommy Smothers walks up on stage and said, “Hey, Glen, I just saw the biggest watermelon I’ve ever seen in my life. Two guys are holding it out there in the audience.” Glen said, “Yeah, it’s old so-and-so, Carter Russell and Pod Rogers from back home. Go out there and help them bring it up here.” We had it in a tow sack—what you would probably know as a burlap bag.

AD: Oh.

CR: Like a stretcher.

AD: Yes.

CR: So Tommy came and he took my end of the bag. [Laughter] Pod had the other end of the bag. Pod was ad-libbing. “Oh, boy, the people back home are proud of Glen Campbell,” and said just a bunch of stuff bragging on Glen. Tommy made like he turned loose of the bag to clap. When he did, the melon hit the floor and went *whoosh*.

AD: Oh!

CR: And when it did the audience came out of their seats. They cut the film right then. [Laughter] We had a lot of experiences there. But before this happened—

I'll tell you the funniest part, I think, of the whole trip is that we had those three melons and we leased us a car. We were tired of running around in that truck because it wasn't air-conditioned, and it wasn't easy running around Hollywood in that ton truck. So we leased us a car. We had a melon that afternoon at the farmer's market right across from our motel and across from NBC [television studio]. They just nearly joined one another. We made a deal to put two of these melons in cold storage. While we were over there we set the melon on a stand and had a young girl paint a Mexican face on it. It had a sombrero! Somehow or another, we got that in the Los Angeles paper that afternoon. That night we go to the "Lawrence Welk Show"—do you know that show?

AD: Oh, yes.

CR: Are you familiar with that?

AD: Yes.

CR: Lawrence came out and asked, "Is anybody from Kansas? Anybody from so-and-so?" Pod jumped up when he said Arkansas. He said, "I'm Pod Rogers from Arkansas. I'm out here to have a big melon on Glen Campbell's show tomorrow." And he talked to him a little bit. We got up [and] danced in those scenes and clowned around. So after the show was over—I guess some of those people, the best I can remember, came out and looked at our melon. It was getting along about dusk and Pod said, "Let's go get a sandwich." I said, "That suits me." We go to Hollywood—Sunset and Vine. I'd heard of it all my life. We pull in there, park, lock the car, and go in to get a sandwich. We're in there a few minutes. We came out to get into the car and Pod said, "I thought you locked the

car door.” I said, “Yes, I did.” We get in and someone had gotten into the car and had stolen our watermelon. The first thing he said—just this quick—he said, “They’ve done us a favor.” Under my breath I’m thinking, “He’s lost his mind.” [Laughter] I said, “Pod, what do you mean?” He said, “Follow me.” We go twenty or thirty steps from the car, and he gets on the telephone, pay phone, to call the police in Hollywood, California, to report a stolen watermelon.

[Laughter] Can you believe that? I could only hear one side of the conversation, but I could sort of figure it out. I think it was a woman operator. She said, “Sir, are you drunk? What’s wrong with you?” [Laughter] She was about to get irritated. Pod says, “No, no, you don’t understand. We brought this melon all the way from Arkansas. We’ve got to have it tomorrow for the ‘Glen Campbell Show.’” He told her it weighed 100 and some pounds. He told a little lie here. He said, “And when we leave here, we’re going to the World’s Fair,” which we weren’t. He finally got through talking to her and hung the phone up. I said, “Come on, Pod, let’s go.” He said, “Oh, man!” We were fixing to leave. He said, “The police will be out here in a minute.” I said, “Do you think they’re coming out here to investigate a stolen watermelon in Hollywood, California, where there’s a murder every five minutes or a rape, or something going on all the time?” He said, “Yes. they’re coming. So let’s just hang around here for ten or fifteen minutes.” Sure enough, two old boys came driving up in a police car and introduced themselves. They were both from Oklahoma. They knew what a big watermelon was. They got a kick out of it. They filled out a report. So we left and went to the motel room and got up the next morning, and picked up a *Los*

Angeles Times. A big write-up in the *Los Angeles Times*. I heard later on a friend of mine—you won't believe this—I've still got the clipping somewhere—he was a radio man. He was in Paris, France. We made a write-up in a magazine there that said, "Giant watermelon stolen off the streets of Hollywood." [Laughter] So we went across the street to the studio the next morning. And we had been there a week with these guys. They called us the "watermelon men." Tommy saw us walk in and said, "Hey, you two country boys come here a minute." Pod said, "Yes, Tommy, what do you want?" He said, "I want to ask you something. You boys have been out here about a week and got more publicity *free* than we can buy. Who did you hire to steal that watermelon?" [Laughter] We'd had write-ups in two days. Anyway, getting back to how the Watermelon Festival got started—when we got back home, we got, according to our local editor—I forgot how many thousands and thousands of dollars worth publicity for this town. We had a man—I can't remember his name—he was head of the chamber [of commerce]. We were sitting there one day just talking, and he said, "Let's revive the Watermelon Festival." That was probably in 1970-something. They got after it that year, and it's been going ever since. This guy, I want you to meet him if there's any way possible. You'll love him—Mark Keith. He has really touted the festival. He pushes our little town. He's great for the town, I think. I've another I'd like for you to meet down here. Gary—he runs the Clinton Museum.

AD: Yes.

CR: You've probably met him.

AD: Actually, I haven't. I'm going to try to get in touch with him next time when I

come back.

CR: You'd be interested in talking to him.

AD: So you had talked about how many people had come this year—40,000 or so?

CR: I think it says—I believe, if I remember right—it was closer to 50,000. That's over a period of four days. Usually Thursday is not a very big day. Your big day, naturally, is Saturday.

AD: Yes.

CR: Fridays and Saturdays they packed them in. They have free entertainment. It's just country fun—arm wrestling, horseshoe pitching, tug-o-war, and country music. They've three or four outdoor places they can perform with lots of shade. Some of the buildings have air-conditioning and have a lot of arts and crafts. It's just a fun thing. One night they have a fish fry. One night the Lion's Club puts on a big chicken deal. Some of the clubs sell homemade ice cream—I mean, “old timey” homemade ice cream. It's just a fun thing. Years ago I was active in it. I had to buy the watermelons, get them cold, and get a crew together to cut them for four or five days and get all of our ingredients ready. Usually a couple of TV stations would come to town. We used to hire some big celebrities, but we found out they'd gobble up what little money we had. We had Charlie Daniels one year. They have a guy every year who is an old entertainer—Ace Cannon.

AD: Okay, yes.

CR: He was an old performer. He could blow the horn. It's just a fun thing. If you've never been, you need to come.

AD: You said you were friends with Bill Clinton's uncle Buddy?

CR: Yes, Buddy lived—of course, I called him Orin. His name was Orin Grissam. His close kinfolk, like Bill, called him Uncle Buddy. I don't know where the name Buddy came from, but I do know Bill thought enough of him to name his dog after him. [Laughter] Anyway, he lived about—well, when we lived in the country we didn't live but four or five miles apart, and then we moved to town later on. He moved to town within four blocks from my old curb market. I bought a lot of produce from him over the years, and he was quite a character. Everybody just loved him. He had such a pleasant personality and a lot of witty sayings. I wish you could have met him. Of course, I know his daughters and sons. We all sort of came from the same backwoods, I guess you'd say.

[Laughter]

AD: You had mentioned something that Mr. Grissom had said when he found out that President Clinton was going to run for president.

CR: Bill asked him one day, "Uncle Buddy, what do you think about me running for president?" He talked slowly. He said, "Well, Bill, it would be about like getting a hold of a greased hog tail." [Laughter] "A greased hog's tail," I believe, is the way he said it, or a hog with a greased tail. It would be hard to hold onto.

AD: You also knew President Clinton's mother.

CR: Yes, I knew Virginia quite well. Bill's daddy was killed before [he was born]—did you know that?

AD: Yes.

CR: Virginia worked for my doctor, Dr. Wright. I think he encouraged her to go back to medical school. She went to New Orleans and made a nurse anesthetist. Is that

the way your say it?

AD: Yes. Anesthetist.

CR: After she finished her training it wasn't but a short time before she remarried.

They moved to Hot Springs. She did most of her practicing in Hot Springs.

AD: What type of person was she, if you were going to describe her personality?

CR: She was straightforward. She either liked you or didn't like you. She wasn't one that tried to—seems like Bill's personality and hers might be a little different.

Bill wanted to please everybody, you know what I mean?

AD: Yes.

CR: Being in politics, you've got to try to smooth off the rough edges. [Laughter]

But Virginia was just plainspoken, and like I say, if she liked you, she liked you.

And if she didn't, she didn't. I remember this about her, and I think it was natural—as she began to age she had a gray streak in the front of her hair.

AD: Yes, I've seen that.

CR.: She was a likeable person. I've been around her quite a bit. I used to see her nearly every time I'd go to Hot Springs.

AD: Are there any good stories or anything that you can remember? Things that really capture her personality?

CR: Really, at the time I can't. I know my daddy's double first cousin was Dale Drake. She and Dale were just like sisters. They did a lot of things together. But as far as something funny they did, I can't [remember], but maybe later on I will think of something.

AD: Did you know her parents well, the Cassidys?

CR: Oh, yes. I think we're back on down the line—I think Lu Cassidy, I believe, was a Russell—we're nearly kin. Mr. Cassidy had a country store right down the street. He catered, mostly. Of course, this was a black area, mostly.

AD: Yes.

CR: Most of his trade was with black folks. That's where Bill, you know, got acquainted with a lot of them, and made contacts with black people. I think he's done more for the black folks than any president we've ever had.

AD: So you think that early exposure had a big impact?

CR: I think it did. In fact, Eldridge Cassidy—that was his name. I was trying to spit it out. His wife, Edith, used to trade with me when I was down on [Highway] 67. She was a nurse herself for years and years here at our local hospital. I remember them really well. I know most all of Bill's kinfolk here in Hope. I never did know any of the Blythes on his daddy's side. I never did meet any of them.

AD: What did people think about when they thought of the Cassidys? What was the reflective reaction in terms of . . . ?

CR: Well, as far as I know, everybody liked them. Eldridge had a really good personality. Seemed like his wife, Edith, was more—I don't know the term I should use, but he was a really likeable person. I remember him—for years he ran an ice truck delivering ice. Back in those days a lot of people didn't have electric iceboxes [refrigerators]. In fact, I can remember when I was in junior high, most people in town—if you had a freezer you went downtown to the locker plant and rented lockers. There weren't home freezers. Home freezers came onto the scene, I'm going to guess, in the early 1940s. I don't remember. But I can

remember when hardly anyone had a home freezer. Of course, I can remember when TV came on the scene, too. It goes back too far for you.

AD: Yes. Were your families in competition in terms of business or was it, since you were in different parts of town, kind of separate customer bases?

CR: He was in a different type of business. Mr. Cassidy was down the street. Like I said, he dealt with the local people in that area. And at the time, I was down on [Highway] 67 with an open-air market. In fact—you know, you lose a sense of time—seems like pretty soon after I came to Hope he closed his store. I can't really remember. I know Edith was still doing nursing work because she would come by the store and trade with me, and she'd still have her uniform on. Sometimes you could tell she'd been working that day.

AD: So what were race relations like in Hope after World War II in relation to whites and blacks?—the stereotype that people have of Arkansas is [the integration crisis at Little Rock's] Central High School, 1957, in terms of how they think about how the racial relationships between whites and blacks at the time. How would you describe it?

CR: I graduated in 1948, and they hadn't [integrated] the schools then. We would let the black football team come out and use our field on several occasions. Back in those days we didn't look at it as a race deal. "You're black and you stay over there, and I'm white and I'll stay over here." There weren't any problems. This town has been really fortunate because there hasn't been a lot of trouble. It just seemed like everybody got along, and these people lived in this part of town, and these people lived over here. It's like the rich people now live out in this part of

town and the middle class over here.

AD: So it's more kind of custom than any sort of hatred or animosity?

CR: I think the news media stirred up more of that stuff than anything. You let one little incident come out and they'd blow it out of proportion. That's one of the worst things, I think, to ever happen to this country—of course, it's good in one way, but the news media overreacts on a lot of this stuff. They might have ten people rioting about something, and they'll show it on the screen and you'd think the whole city is in flames and fighting. The race relationship has always been good in Hope. I've been thankful for that. We've always had a good relationship. Even back in those days I had a lot of good black friends I thought as much of as I did white people. Even when I was running the curb market, I didn't serve black people. I used to haul watermelons out to Florida, and I'd carry one of the nicest little back boys with me. We would go into a restaurant, and he'd have to go in the back and eat, and I'd go in the front. But that was the way it was back then.

AD: When did you first meet Bill Clinton? When do you first recall meeting Bill Clinton?

CR: Well, that would be when he was two or three years old.

AD: Okay.

CR: They didn't live—have you ever been to their . . . ?

AD: Yes, I've been to their house.

CR: My old curb market was located on [Highway] 67 and I wasn't a half mile from him. Later on he lived on Thirteenth Street. When Virginia went off to get her

degree in nursing, he lived with his grandparents in the two-story house where they give the tours.

AD: What were your recollections of him as a child? Is there anything that stands out?

CR: The only thing that really stands out—I know he had a small Shetland pony and he was crazy about it. He seemed like an all-around boy, and some of his classmates—I think he went to kindergarten one year with Mack McLarty, who is a distant cousin and was Chief of Staff. He and Mack and, I think, the Watkins boy and the Foster boy, who committed suicide, all went to the same kindergarten. I believe Bill went to school one year in Hope. He left, I believe, when he was seven years old.

AD: That sounds right.

CR: That's about all I can remember about him.

AD: So it wasn't something that, again—that there's a lot that stands out. He was a typical five- or six-year-old.

CR: Yes, I think he was just an all-around boy.

AD: Looking at Hope, you mentioned a number of people who served in that administration—obviously, Mike Huckabee, the current governor of Arkansas, is from Hope. That seems to be a lot of very prominent people from a relatively small town. What do you attribute that to?

CR: The watermelons! [Laughter] What I ought to say is watermelon and my country hams. Bill does like country ham, and Mike does, too. Mike used to stop—he used to come perform at the Watermelon Festival every year.

AD: Yes.

CR: He would stop by to see me. Of course, he and my son are friends. After we get through with this interview I'll show you something. Well, I'll tell you about it now. He and my son used to play in a little band together. One day I found something out there. It looked like a part of an old windshield wiper. I said, "What in the world is this?" I opened it and it was a music stand, and Mike Huckabee hauled it all over to different places. I got to thinking he'd left it at my home one day when visiting my son, Tommy. In fact, my son lives in Fayetteville. I'd like for you to meet him sometime, Tommy Russell. I wrote him a letter and sent a copy of the story you started to read, and I told him about the stand. He laughed, and said, "Just keep it." He sent me a fishing plug that he'd endorsed. Mike is a good, down-to-earth boy. His daddy was a fireman at the fire department. They called him Tubby. He was a big guy. Everyone liked his personality. Of course, my son went to school with Mike. Mike [became] a preacher, a Baptist preacher.

AD: Yes.

CR: He preached in Texarkana for a long time. In fact, I know his wife, Janet, really well. I was at a funeral the other day in Hope, and she was there. She had just come in from California that day. Yes, I think a lot of Mike. A lot of people kid me that I've a picture of Mike and a picture of McLarty side by side.

AD: Probably one of the few people who have these people on the same wall!

[Laughter]

CR: People kid me about playing both sides of the fence. But I can't help it. If you are a Republican or a Democrat, if I like you, I like you. [Laughs]

AD: It's interesting in terms of the fact that there are just so many prominent people—you mentioned Mack McLarty, Vince Foster, Bill Clinton, Mike Huckabee. Also a number of other people. Vince Foster's sister worked in the Clinton Administration. I don't know if phenomenal is the right word, but . . .

CR: Her husband used to stop to buy country hams. He was a senator for a while. In fact, speaking of the Fosters, I used to duck hunt with Vincent's daddy some. I went to Vince's funeral and talked with Virginia, Bill, and Hillary. After the funeral was over, I came home to the store and one of the kinfolk of the Foster boy came in. I didn't ask him a thing, and he volunteered that "There's no doubt in his mind that Vince"—he said they made a big controversy over it, about suicide or murder. He said there wasn't a question in his mind that Vince committed suicide. I know his mother well. She is really nice.

AD: And I know the three times President Clinton came to Hope during his administration—these were all funerals, weren't they?

CR: Several of them were. I remember going to two or three who were his kinfolk.

AD: Yes.

CR: And he'd come in here occasionally. He didn't come back as much as the local people thought he ought to come back. But, you know, a man like that is pretty busy. [Laughter]

AD: It's kind of interesting. It seems like that town has really adopted him. Of course, he was born and spent a good part of his early life here. But it seems the town has adopted him as a prominent citizen. I don't know if that's the exact phrasing I'd use. When did he reemerge back in Hope as somebody people ended

up really keeping in touch with? When he moved to Hot Springs people kind of lost touch with him somewhat. You said that you went to Hot Springs every so often.

CR: Yes . . .

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

CR: We'd go over and visit with them.

AD: I know the Wrights well. Yes.

CR: Yes, they went over. It was an ideal situation because Hot Springs is a nice tourist town with the lakes and a lot of restaurants, and a lot to see. A lot of people go there in the summer and visit. It made a nice two-way trip.

AD: Yes. But probably when he started running for office again, people began to become aware of Bill Clinton as somebody who spent a lot of time in Hope.

CR: That's right.

AD: So when he ran for attorney general the first time—he had obviously run for Congress before, but it was in northwest Arkansas. What were people's reactions to him when he was running for attorney general and governor that first time?

CR: The biggest reaction I can remember was that he was too young to be running for that office. You know how that is. Bill had the brains to do it. I remember a story years ago—they were having a local political rally, and this particular guy came down with hoarseness and couldn't speak that night. Bill was just in high school, I think. Bill happened to be in town, and they asked him to speak. He did. They said it was the best speech that was made that night for this politician.

He had the—I don't know what word I'm trying to throw out, but he had—not the experience, but the know-how, I guess, and smarts to do the office.

AD: Were you surprised when he lost his first reelection attempt for governor versus Frank White—looking back at it?

CR: Well, you're talking about after he had become governor?

AD: Yes. Maybe eight years . . .

CR: In a way I was, but what had people more upset than anything else was that he raised the price of [car] licenses.

AD: Yes.

CR: It seems like that one thing . . .

AD: It went from \$4 or \$5 to about \$20 or \$25.

CR: Yes. I heard a lot of people say, "He just surrounded himself with all his young buddies and friends." That was the most negative thing I heard about him.

AD: After he lost, what did you think was going to happen to him? Did you think he was going to continue in politics or that he was going to do something else?

CR: I figured he would keep plugging along. He doesn't give up easily, you know that.

AD: So you weren't surprised, then, when he ended up running again and winning?

CR: No, I wasn't.

AD: What was your first reaction when you heard he was running for president?

CR: [Laughs] Well, it was a shock, in a way, but I thought it was an honor to have a man from Arkansas running for president. Of course, when he first entered the race I thought his chances were pretty slim, but who knows in the political arena?

AD: When did it dawn on you it was likely that he was going to be the next president?

CR: It was late into the convention before he started to make an impression. Actually, I felt he had a chance all along.

AD: Yes.

CR: He really put Hope on the map. The slogan he used, “I still believe in a place called Hope.” People at least knew where Hope was. [Laughs]

AD: Now, generally speaking, what are people’s attitudes in Hope about Bill Clinton?

CR: Some of them love him, and others want to knock him in the head. [Laughter]

But I tell you what, we meet people here from Argentina and Australia and all over the world, and a lot of them are beginning to wish he was president again.

Several have stopped here and told me, “If he was running again, I’d vote for him.” What he did in his private life doesn’t seem to bother a lot of people.

AD: One thing that’s kind of interesting is if you’ll look at the reaction to him—it tends to be either very positive or very negative. Is there anything that you can point to that would really show why there is a large amount of animosity, at times, towards him?

CR: I don’t think I’d have to point it out. [Laughter] I think everybody knows.

[Laughter] It’s abusing the office, you know, and things that he—I think that’s the only thing that hurt him. I really think in my heart that he was a good

president. I think Bill wanted to help people. I think he’s good-hearted. But he had a weakness.

AD: And the scandals that caused that negative feeling?

CR: Well, like that first deal, Whitewater?

AD: Right.

CR: I don't think there was a thing to that. From all I've read they didn't prove a thing on him. They spent millions of dollars. I think they were after him before he ever went to Washington. They were after him from day one and they tried to get him. This is just my idea—you asked me—I think a lot of people thought, “Well, a little ol' guy from a little ol' town in Arkansas as president”—I just think they didn't want him up there, myself.

AD: Yes. What's it like to be distantly related to the president? When it hit you, what did you think?

CR: It was just sort of a surprise to be related to a president of the United States. I never thought I would even *see* a president, and now to be kin to one and have one from the same little town, and to know him personally is sort of a good feeling, I'd guess you'd say.

AD: Is there anything you'd like to add? I'm trying to think if there's anything that we've not really touched on or discussed?

CR: Well, I'll throw this in for what it's worth. You know, he was in town four or five weeks ago doing a documentary on “60 Minutes.”

AD: Yes.

CR: I got a thrill that day. I got to meet one of my favorite newscasters, Dan Rather. I see where's he's in a little hot water now. [Laughter] But Dan was here, and I got to meet him. I think Bill introduced him to me as the “Watermelon Man,” [laughter] or something. Dan said, “Well, I sold watermelons one year and lost money on it.” [Laughter] I said, “Well, don't feel stuck up.” And come to find

out, somebody told me he was reared in Henderson, Texas, and then later on someone told me he had a home in Austin—that he flew from Austin to New York to do the shows. [Laughter] I do know he was reared somewhere in east Texas. I'll say one thing, he looks a lot younger in person than he does on television.

AD: It's interesting—people talk a lot about Bill Clinton's personality in terms of his natural charisma and how he is able to remember people, that he just has a phenomenal memory.

CR: Over the years I've had two different people stop in my business, and I can't call their names, but they told me when they saw his pictures in the store—they said, "I met Bill Clinton in Houston about two years ago, and then I ran into him somewhere at some deal, and he called me by my name, and had only seen me *one time* in my life." Another guy told me the same story. I don't know how he can remember things. I guess he has trained himself all these years, being a politician, to do that. From what I understand, what really turned his fields on fire to get into politics was going to Boys State one year and he met . . .

AD: President [John F.] Kennedy. Yes.

CR: Yes. I think that really got him going.

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

CR: I can't think of anything right now. I've used my breath up. [Laughter]

AD: Yes, we talked about a lot of stuff. Well, it's been a pleasure talking to you, sir.

CR: I hoped I helped you a little.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Cheri Pearce]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]