

William Jefferson Clinton History Project

Interview with

Larry Thrash  
Caney, Kansas  
21 March 2002

Interviewer: Michael Pierce

Michael Pierce: This is Michael Pierce in Caney, Kansas, March 21, 2002. I'm here to interview Larry Thrash for the [William Jefferson] Clinton History Project. Let me get started by asking you about yourself, Mr. Thrash. When were you born and how did you get from Hope, Arkansas to Caney, Kansas?

Larry Thrash: Okay. I was born in Hope on October 4, 1946, in the same place that Bill Clinton was born, in the same hospital.

MP: The Julia Chester Hospital?

LT: Yes, the Julia Chester Hospital. I lived there [in Hope] until I went to college, to Ouachita University [Arkadelphia, Arkansas] for four years, then went to Memphis State [Tennessee] for two years to get a graduate degree. Then I entered the military. I'd been in ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] at Ouachita, then I went into the military for two years. When I got out, I moved to Shreveport, Louisiana, then Houston, Texas, then Bartlesville, Oklahoma, where I've been since 1981. For the last seven years, I've been in the banking business here in Caney, Kansas.

MP: Okay. I guess the place to start is your first memory of Bill Clinton.

LT: Bill lived about three blocks from where I lived in Hope. My dad used to take us to kindergarten. I can remember going to his house, to his grandparent's house to play, but probably my strongest memory is of kindergarten. Bill broke his leg at kindergarten. That kind of stood out. Being five years old, I'd never seen a broken bone before. They took our Sunday school class over to see him in the hospital. I remember him being in the cast and being in some sort of a traction set up. That really stood out, as far as the early years.

MP: You said you were a neighbor. Was that Thirteenth Street or the Hervey Street house?

LT: That was Thirteenth Street. I lived at 1520 South Walker, [and] he was on Thirteenth Street. We were about two and one half blocks apart.

MP: You knew him before you went to Miss Perkin's kindergarten class together?

LT: Yes. And one thing I recall is that his name was always Billy Blythe—not just Bill or Billy.

MP: You don't remember not knowing him, then?

LT: Right. There are just certain things I remember. Neighborhood children playing, you know.

MP: Who else played with you?

LT: A guy named Johnny Honeycutt, and a few others whose names I don't remember.

MP: You went to the same church together? With Bill Clinton?

LT: Yes, we went to First Baptist Church there in Hope.

MP: Do you remember his mother and stepfather?

LT: I remember his mother, but not the stepfather. I remember his mother, but just vaguely. She wasn't around a whole lot during that time.

MP: What about his grandparents?

LT: I remember very little.

MP: Just the house?

LT: Yes. I can remember where the back door was. We'd always go in the back door. Those types of things.

MP: You went to Miss Perkin's kindergarten class. Was it common for most kids in Hope who were five to go to the kindergarten, or was it sort of a special thing? It was a private kindergarten, I know.

LT: I would assume that it wasn't special. I don't know. I never thought about it that way. When you were five, you went to kindergarten. That's the way we did it.

MP: You wouldn't remember how much it cost?

LT: No, no.

MP: Of course. You were five! Do you have any other memories of Bill Clinton in class or playing?

LT: Not a lot. I can remember playing in the yard and on the slide, those kinds of things. I had someone tell me about him wearing cowboy boots, but I don't remember that specifically.

MP: I've heard that the cowboy boots were the reason that he broke his leg. Do you [unintelligible] about a nap time?

LT: I've read that and I don't remember that.

MP: *The Hope Star* actually attributes it to you.

LT: I think it was Joe Purvis who actually said that. It was not me.

MP: So you went to kindergarten with Bill Clinton. How about first grade?

LT: No. He went to another school.

MP: Why? How would that work?

LT: I don't know, unless [it was] because, at that time, he was at the other house. I'm not sure why they put him in a different school. I went to Brookwood first grade, and he was in a different class.

MP: People talk about Clinton as being very personable and very bright at an early age. Did you have that impression of him?

LT: In looking back, I did. But a lot of it came later in life. My first wife was his next door neighbor in Hot Springs, Arkansas, so I got reacquainted with him when I dated my first wife and then married her.

MP: Who would that be?

LT: Her name was Linda Yeldell. Her sister is Carolyn Yeldell Staley, now. I got reacquainted with him then. You could almost tell he had something in mind.

MP: When would that be?

LT: Probably about—let's see. I went to college from 1964 to 1968, so probably 1967, 1968—in there.

MP: How was he different?

LT: I don't know. It was almost like he knew he was destined for something, and people around him knew he was destined for something. An interesting side of it was when he was president of his class in Hot Springs and Mack McLarty was president of our senior class. They went to [American Legion] Boys State [a

government education program for high school students]. Mack was governor, and Bill was delegate at large, or whatever, when he met President Kennedy. We always felt that—and we talked about it from time to time—Mack would be president and Bill would be vice-president. That was the order, but we figured they were both destined for something.

MP: Do you have any memories of the Clinton house in Hot Springs?

LT: Some. We'd go over there and watch football games, or something. It's not like we were real close friends or I was there a lot, but Carolyn and Bill were best friends. We'd sit around the house and watch TV.

MP: What was the relationship between Bill and Carolyn like?

LT: Best friends. Absolutely best friends, just soul friends.

MP: Was it like brother and sister?

LT: I suppose it was. They connected. It was always that way.

MP: Getting back to Mack McLarty. Since you must have known him better there in Hope, what was he like?

LT: He lived about two or three blocks away. The thing I remember about him was that his house on Main Street had a big "M" on the front. That kind of stood out. They were one of the wealthy families in town. They were one of the better-known families, and well-respected. Mack was always straight arrow. He just never did anything wrong. The things he did were right. He made sure things were right. I remember he was one of the first [kids] with a trampoline, and we'd go over and play on the trampoline.

MP: One of the things I'm interested in is what was it like to be a five-year-old in Hope? What would your day be like?

LT: For Mack and I—a lot of us—it would be sports. Baseball, basketball, football. We always had something like that going in someone's front yard or backyard.

MP: Was Bill Clinton playing?

LT: No. I don't remember that. When we got old enough to ride our bikes, those would be the things we'd do, playing in the front yard or the backyard.

MP: As a five-year-old in Hope, did you ever go downtown or go to the movies, or anything like that?

LT: I don't know. At that age, I don't remember. As we got older, we obviously did. Bill was gone by the time he was about seven. I don't know if, at that age, we did a whole lot of those kinds of things or not. It was a pretty laid back town.

MP: I spent a weekend there, and it was very laid back. To this day! So, in 1967, you became reacquainted with Bill Clinton. Was that an acquaintance that lasted a long time, or was that another short period of acquaintance?

LT: It was short. We moved to Memphis, and lived in Memphis for a few years, then moved to Shreveport [Louisiana] after the military. So we kind of got away from Hot Springs. It was fairly short. I did run into him when I worked for a company in Houston called Texas Eastern Gas Pipeline, and I used to spend a lot of time in Washington DC. One day I was walking along the sidewalk . . .

MP: When would this have been?

LT: This probably would have been in 1976 or 1977. I'm not sure of the date. I was walking along the street, and someone hollered my name, and it was Bill Clinton.

It just startled me because I didn't know ten people in Washington. We talked for maybe ten minutes. You know, "How are you doing? What have you been doing?" That kind of thing. In 1994, Bill was back at the University of Arkansas [Fayetteville] between Christmas and New Year's, watching a couple of Arkansas Razorback basketball games. My nephew saw him at a restaurant and went up and started talking to him and told him who he was, and that his grandmother still lives in Hope and that I was his uncle, and he said, "How's Larry doing? Is he still in Washington DC?" He remembered that first meeting fifteen years ago. It gives you an indication of his intelligence or his recall, or whatever you want to call it. It's uncanny.

MP: I hear these amazing stories about his memory. Anything else we should know about Hope in the 1950s? Any memories of Hope that really stand out in your mind as the way to think about or characterize Hope?

LT: A few things come to mind. We never locked our cars. We never locked our houses, and we never worried about having them unlocked. I guess, at the time, it showed there were no fears, no worries. Nothing was going to be bad in Hope. If there was going to be something, it was going to come from outside of Hope.

MP: A lot of political writers looking at Clinton's life talk about a racial divide in Hope. To what degree do you think there was one?

LT: There was a strong one.

MP: How did that affect daily life?

LT: The strongest thing I remember was probably later. In fact, it *was* later. There was a black school system and a white school system, and we had what was

considered a black part of town and a white part of town. One of the things that I remember about that was that when the white football team was out of town, the black football team would play in the high school stadium. I lived a block and a half from the stadium, so I'd go watch the black game [unintelligible]. There was a definite line and a definite division.

MP: As a child growing up in Hope, would you have had much contact with black children your age?

LT: Very little.

MP: Or personal contact with black adults?

LT: Some. Some worked for my father, and I worked during the summers for him.

MP: What did your father do?

LT: They ran some service stations. They were a propane distributor, and they also ran the International Harvester dealership.

MP: Dabbled in a lot of things?

LT: Yes. A lot of small businesses in Hope.

MP: Was Southwestern Proving Grounds the biggest employer at that time?

LT: Probably not at that time. I don't know who it would have been, but I'm not sure how many they employed.

MP: Is there anything else—your memories of Bill Clinton or of Hope? Anything you think might be important to get a documentary record of?

LT: Off the period in Hope—of course, I don't remember a whole lot of what was going on at that age. It is surprising, and maybe it's just because it's been brought back with his being governor, that it's more about him than a lot of other ones.

We were friends like you could be at five. But there are a lot of other people that I can remember from later. Joe Purvis. I was surprised to look at a class picture, to see all the people who were in it, that I would not have known were in my kindergarten class.

MP: You had Joe Purvis, Mack McLarty, Bill Clinton . . .

LT: A really good group, a good group.

MP: Was David Watkins with that group?

LT: He was two years older than we were. And Vince Foster was one year older. In the event we'd play basketball . . .

MP: He looks like he has a basketball player's body.

LT: Yes. He was as thin as a pencil. He was pretty thin. I remember a little about him. We lived on the other side of town, so we didn't play together. But it was great.

MP: That's amazing that they all came from the same town. Well, thank you very much. This has been wonderful. I enjoy these types of interviews.

LT: Thank you.

[End of Interview]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]