

William Jefferson Clinton History Project

Interview with

Donna Taylor Wingfield
Hope, Arkansas
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Interviewer: Andrew Dowdle

Andrew Dowdle: Good afternoon, and thanks for meeting with me on a nice Sunday afternoon.

Donna Taylor Wingfield: You're welcome.

AD: First of all, we usually start off by asking a few background questions. Could you tell me when you were born and your parents' names?

DW: I was born in 1946, and my parents were Jamie and Orval Taylor.

AD: What did you parents do for a living?

DW: My mother was a receptionist. My father was a car salesman and he actually worked for Roger, Bill Clinton's stepfather, for several years.

AD: Where did you go to school up until the end of high-school?

DW: I went to kindergarten with Bill [Clinton]. He and I went to [Miss Mary Perkins's] Kindergarten. Then we went to [Brookwood] School that was later named Edith Brown Elementary School. It was first through sixth grade. Clinton went to school there until about the middle of his second grade year and then they moved to Hot Springs.

AD: After Brookwood, where did you go?

DW: Hope High School.

AD: You went to Hope High School. You mentioned moving away from Hope for a little bit.

DW: I was in Hope until 1982.

AD: And then you moved to Prescott?

DW: Yes, I lived in Prescott for twenty-one years

AD: And you moved back here in 2004? Can you tell me a little bit about what Hope, [Arkansas], was like growing up in the 1940s, 1950s and the early 1960s?

DW: It was definitely different back then. We were real secure in the streets and playing in the yard. It's totally different [now]. I have two grandchildren and they are raised totally different. When you are in town—shopping or anything—it's totally different, as far as the innocence. Back then we were innocent. Safety, security on the streets—you don't see that on the streets with kids nowadays like you did in the 1950s and 1960s.

AD: Looking at Hope today, it is much less compact than it was forty years ago.

DW: I don't think it's less compact, but it has grown. It has spread out a lot. You have a lot of people who lived more in the city [that] now have moved out and new generations have moved in. Hope's got a lot of Hispanics that have moved in. We have sections you'll notice in the grocery stores with food for the Hispanics. It's made the town grow, and we've gotten a lot of industry in the area. It's just grown.

AD: Could you talk to me a little bit about what the schools were like when you were growing up?

DW: I've gone by there several times—it's a co-op now. I can't really think of a distinctive thing, other than [it was] just an elementary school and [I remember] drinking glass bottles of milk and [having] ice cream at recess. I remember I fell one time and cut my leg on a glass Coke bottle. I know [they] don't have glass Coke bottles any more out on the playground [laughs]. That's something that you don't have. Basically the schools around here are—I can't say anything is significantly different. We played games at recess—marbles, jacks, hopscotch, jump rope, [and] had spring maypole dances.

AD: You talked a little bit about the [post-World War II] Baby Boom Generation, while we were having lunch, in terms of the size of the classrooms. . .

DW: Oh, yes. [They were big because after the war we were all babies.] Most of our daddies were in the service in some way or another. All these home that were built along Thirteenth, Fourteenth, [and] Fifteenth Streets were pretty much all around the same size and the same price range. And they filled up with a lot of the baby boomers.

AD: So Hope was like what you hear about the rest of the country at that time in terms of—people felt prosperous, that it was growing. People were pretty much optimistic. . .

DW: It was a nice safe environment to raise children. I had a lot of children on my street. That was the way we were raised. I knew everybody on the street. I could go from one end of the block—Mother would whistle—she blew through her hands. She'd put her hands together and blow through her thumbs [and] whistle you home. [Bill] Clinton had a nanny and I had a black nanny, and he wasn't

allowed to cross the street. But I could cross over to his house. We could play up and down the street. In kindergarten—when he broke his leg in kindergarten—I could go over there. Because he had a cast on his leg, we would put his leg with the cast in a little red wagon and we would run up and down the sidewalk. [Bill] would push with one leg and had his leg with the cast in the wagon. Just playing on the street like that—there were the Mosleys, the Osteens, the Honeycutts. We had a lot of kids on the street—on Thirteenth street—you don't see a lot of kids outside playing like that nowadays. They are inside watching TV. We had hamburger suppers on Friday nights. The parents would play "pitch" [a card game]. Different houses would share in that.

AD: You talked about how your father had worked for Roger Clinton. Could you talk a little bit about that?

DW: [My] mother was real good friends with Virginia and my daddy worked for Roger. They were right across the street. Virginia, I just loved. She always had these red painted [finger] nails that curled down. She always had on lots of make up. I just loved Virginia. In fact, I had an appendicitis attack and she was my anesthesiologist. She didn't charge Daddy for it. We had to go in there at night. I remember [them] painting me with mercurochrome and thinking, "Uh oh, I know I am getting surgery." But Virginia was there, so I was okay. I knew her and I liked her. That kind of got me through that. She didn't charge Daddy—that's what my daddy told me—for putting me to sleep. Daddy got Clinton—Billy is what we called him—a cowboy outfit. Pants, hat, shirt—the whole nine yards. They were all into that. I remember I had to have a cowboy outfit just like

Billy's. I just loved Virginia. I think she thought I was pretty rowdy, though. I would stay over at her house for one weekend or another and he'd [Bill] stay, too. I remember Billy was the one that was rowdy. We were down just tussling in the living room floor one time, and he had on these cowboy boots and [my] mother had one of those three-sided round china cabinets. He hit that with his cowboy boot. Well, that was a mess. Clinton was real sweet kid, but he was almost obsessed, though, with being included in everything that went on in the block. The Mosleys lived down the street. They had three children, and if you were down at their house, here Billy would come, but he couldn't cross the street. Something happened one day when we were playing out in his yard and we got aggravated at him for something, so the next day we weren't playing with him. He came down the street where we were playing and he told us he got a new swing-set. We decided he was okay then. We weren't mad at him any more. We all went back down to his house. He always wanted to be involved in everything that was going on on the street. He was a sweet kid.

AD: So, Roger Clinton. . .

DW: Back to Roger. He had black hair. Wavy hair—back then they wore the Brill Cream and all that kind of stuff. I just remember him being a pretty loud, boisterous kind of guy, but he was Daddy's buddy. Daddy was always happy when Roger came around. He was a big talker. I know—it has been known there was an incident where the police had to come over, and I remember that night. I was five or six years old, [but] I still remember that night, though. Virginia and Billy came over and stayed at our house. It was [disruption] in the middle of the

night. Roger had been drinking, and he had a gun. I don't remember the gun going off or anything, but I remember the police coming down. Of course, that's all been out in the open for years. But I do remember that night. There was a big chip in our bath tub. For some reason in my child's mind, I always thought they must have lived there [in my house] before they lived over there [in their house] because someone had shot a gun and chipped this bath tub in my house. Somewhere in my child's mind I always thought they must have lived in my house first.

[Laughter]

AD: Do you remember what their emotional state was like that night?

DW: It was just a—they were afraid. It was a thing where Roger was drinking. The neighbors got disrupted, so the police came down. After a day or two it all died down. Roger was back to his old self. [He was] that kind of guy [unintelligible]. I do remember when they moved to Hot Springs and daddy stayed involved with the car sales. They did have some car auctions in St. Louis [Missouri] and visited off and on and stuff like that. And [he would] transfer cars from one city [to another]. I remember going to visit them—I can't remember if it was more than one time or not—I can remember one time, though, when there was a [playing]card hand in a frame on the wall. The house that they lived in at Hot Springs “Roger” he won in a card game. Billy would come to Hope in the summer for a visit. I would see him at the Hope Municipal Swimming Pool. He was just a prickly-faced teenager at the time. I didn't see him again, actually, until he was governor and he came to Old Washington for the dedication of Old Washington, Arkansas,

into a state park. I thought, “I’m going to go up there and see him.” I hadn’t even seen him since we were kids and now he was governor. Back when we were kids, he was Billy Blythe, not Bill Clinton. I didn’t even notice this in the news or anything until he was already governor. So a friend of mine and I decided we were going to get dressed up and go up there and see him. On the way up there she said, “Will he remember you?” And I said, “ Yeah, he’ll remember me! Surely he will remember me.” So we drove up there and we got out of the car just as they were coming down the street and he had all of his little entourage with him—all of his bodyguards, or whatever—and we stepped out of the car and I hollered, “Hey, Billy!” He came toward us and then he knew exactly who I was and he gave us hugs. He was speaking in a church house there so we went in. He had a couple of guys get up that were already sitting inside, and my friend Kitty and I sat down. In his speech that day he was talking about [how] he was glad to be back in his hometown, and reminiscing about his kindergarten days when he broke his leg, and he had run in to the first girl he had ever kissed, and that was me. I knew this because we were hiding behind the tree. [My] mother was calling me home one day, and that was [our] first kiss. Anyway, he mentioned that in his speech that day. That was the first time I’d seen him since he was governor of Arkansas.

AD: You also went to Miss Mary’s with him, is that correct? What was Miss Mary’s like?

DW: She was an old maid—never been married—with solid white hair. Just a sweet woman, in a little brick home—it’s still over on Second Street—she had a little

fenced in backyard and there was a little garage-apartment-like thing that was the kindergarten in the back. The only instance, really, that was disrupting for children that age, was the fact that—we played jump rope, and had the playground equipment out in the yard and everything—Billy broke his leg. I was holding the end of the rope. . .

AD: I have heard different versions. From [Joe Purvis] and from [George Wright]. . .

DW: Right. They gave him what they call “hot peppers,” which is a real fast jump rope. Billy was kind of chubby. I mean, he was chubby at that age. Some of the pictures that I have of Brookwood School and kindergarten—back then your jeans didn’t come in lengths. You couldn’t get a short leg or long leg. You just bought them to fit around the waist and if they were too long you rolled them up. His cuffs were real tall, and he wore cowboy boots. So, being the size he was and everything we didn’t think he was going to be able to do this “hot peppers,” you know. He tripped and fell and broke his leg. The ambulance came, and you remember that. That was just big doings. It was very exciting for five- and six-year-olds in kindergarten. [He would remember that] because they put him in traction with his foot up and put a rod through his heel, and, of course, he was in traction at home, too. I visited with him when he was at home and that just seemed awful to have that thing through his heel and his foot all jacked up in the air. It was pitiful. But he remembers that, too.

AD: Did your dad ever talk about Roger in terms of the car dealership—in terms of his skills as a businessman?

DW: Oh, they had a great business going. I still run into people, there is a ton of them. [There is a man] just down the street from me now, and he remembers that business very well. It was a good dealership, a good business—made us all a good living. We weren't rich, but we weren't poor. [We were] what you call middle-class.

AD: Looking back at Hope at that time, what were race relations like?

DW: We lived on 13th street, which is right in between Yerger, which was the black community, and the all white Hope High School. It was only three or four blocks to the high school, then another couple of blocks behind it the other way was Yerger. This was before they had integration and [as far as] race relationships, they were down there [in their neighborhoods] and they had their football games and their band and you could hear them all over town. You could hear the others from Hope High, but they were that [direction] and Hope High was the other way. Of course, both Billy and I had black nannies. Not that I didn't slip down to my nanny's house and play with her kids every now and then [laughter] which was only a couple of blocks away.

AD: And Virginia's parents . . . ?

DW: I didn't know her parents. I learned about her parents through Virginia's book, but I didn't know her parents.

AD: You mentioned that when President Clinton came back here—he was Governor Clinton at that time—what was the people in Hope's attitude about having somebody who had lived here part of his early life coming back and running for

governor—and actually before that, I guess, attorney general? Was he somebody that was popular? Were people excited that somebody from Hope was governor?

DW: Oh, they were all [for] it. [He was a homeboy]. They were very supportive. It made an impression—well Virginia did. She worked here a long time. It definitely made an impression because Virginia was a good woman. She really was a good woman. She made an impression, and her family did, I suppose. Clinton was only a child when he lived here—it couldn't have been him, it was just a matter of where he came from—he came from Hope. Hope is a very proud people, proud of this town, and [the town] supported him any way they could. They have always been that way toward him and still are.

AD: When did you first begin to realize that Bill Clinton was running for president? Was it when you heard a public announcement, or when did this kind of dawn on you? After that, when did it dawn on you that there was a good chance that somebody you knew was going to end up becoming President of the United States?

DW: Man, I don't know. I don't remember the year. It was around 1989, 1990—something like that, when he started in on that. Like I said, there was a lot more going on in Hope than there was in Prescott. I was in Prescott at that time. The night of the election they had some gathering with George Frazier out at the Western Sizzlin' [Steakhouse] and I attended that. We watched it on TV. There was a lot of that—different gatherings and stuff. Of course, we were all very supportive. I can remember George and me watching it on a big-screen TV along with the mothers, but the comment that we made. . .it was kind of an

overwhelming feeling that somebody that you actually knew, and went to school and kindergarten with, would actually grow up and be president. You think, “Everybody knows some president.” They didn’t just come out of an egg somewhere. It’s kind of an overwhelming thing. I guess I felt. . .the only thing that came out of my mouth as I think back on that was, “I sure hope he doesn’t embarrass us.” I was thinking of that in terms of knowledge, and found out since then actually how smart and knowledgeable Clinton is. At the time, you think, “How is somebody like that—my gosh, he’s going to be Commander In Chief of this country if he’s smart enough to do this! Oh, I hope he doesn’t embarrass us.”

AD: That’s interesting because you look at that group of people. . .

DW: They were very qualified—over-qualified to do this—but at the time, that’s what you feel like.

AD: You look at that age group—again, I am including people a little older and a bit younger, but you’ve got him, Mack McLarty, Vince Foster, Joe Purvis—a number of people who have come out of that class. It sounds like everybody who has come out of that class has really done pretty well for themselves.

DW: Well, they have all kind of helped each other in this.

AD: What do you attribute that part of it—people being in a position to help each other?

DW: It just goes to show you, Clinton surrounded himself with the people he could trust and that he respected the most. Why wouldn’t he? You go back to your roots, naturally. In a pinch, that’s what you are going to do. You’re going to rely

on the people that you trust and they are going to be your closest companions.
For your welfare.

AD: I guess that also goes, maybe, with my next question. As you pointed out, the president has to come from someplace—he doesn't end up descending from the sky—but why Hope? Again, not only President Clinton, but all of these other people. That seems to say a lot about the town. I am thinking in particular about President Carter. I don't think there were that many people from [Plains, Georgia] who followed him to the White House. There were a lot of Georgia people, but mostly those were people, I think, who were from Atlanta who had met him while he was governor. So it's really interesting looking at—again, in terms of how Hope ended up producing not only him, but all of those other people, as well.

DW: [Little America?] I was thinking the reason that Mack was [successful] was that Mack came from a successful automobile dealership and stuff. He also continued his education in order to be qualified for any position. Being that Clinton and he were close, that's how he got to where he was. If you are talking about Vince—they were close—he continued his education. It just goes to show you that if you continue your education on the way through there, there is no telling who you're going to run into. You may run into somebody who decides to [be] president one of these days, and they'll ask for your help.

AD: Also, it does make some sense in terms of the fact that Arkansas is a smaller state because these people—it was fairly easy for them to run into other people in later stages. I know that Joe Purvis had said there were a number of years where he had lost contact, and he was working for Jim [?] at the attorney general's office. Also

in terms of Vince Foster, they had lost contact for a number of years and Vince Foster happened to be at the university when President Clinton was on the law school faculty.

DW: [It is a] small state. People know each other and they go into college and they keep up with each other just through the college. It's a small world, a small state, and if you have got good qualifications as far your education and stuff like that, why not have those people around you that you grew up with? Just like lots of times [like] when Clinton was in the White House—your background has a lot to do with your decisions. There is a time when things—or even choices of music and stuff like that—because we are the same generation. We grew up the same. The same things were going on in our lives. The same TV programs—we had black and white TVs at the same time—we had the same programs. I can almost tell you, in a lot of the decisions Clinton makes, what he is going to do because I would do the same thing. It's just [that] a generation forms your personality. The environment—just like what we are interviewing about—what was it like? We all had the same upbringing. So a lot of the things he likes or enjoys are the same things his generation does, too.

AD: You had talked a lot about the importance of his mother in terms of support in this area, she was a very popular person. . .

DW: Because she was such a loving person. There are some people that meet you with a, “Hi, how are you,” but they are off somewhere else. Virginia was genuinely concerned. Clinton was, too. Clinton had charisma. His real dad had a lot of charisma, too. He is really sincerely looking at you and caring about what you are

saying to him. There are certain people that don't. They are there, you see them everyday, but you're not making a connection. Clinton was always gifted with that genuine concern.

AD: So a lot of that came from his mother?

DW: Yes. Of course, I didn't know his dad, but I have heard my dad speak of him. My dad spoke of his real dad. He was a good friend. My dad was pallbearer at his father's funeral. His real dad's funeral. He talked about him as if he was a good guy. He really liked him other than just the businesses—the cars in general, the auto business—he really liked him. Of course, I didn't know him, so I can't say for myself. But I do know that Virginia was well liked. I loved her. I loved her to death. I was always attracted to her, too, because she always wore lots of make up and fingernail polish—red fingernail polish.

AD: After they moved to Hot Springs, you mentioned that they would come back every so often. . .

DW: Clinton would come back in the summer months a lot of times and he would go swimming. I think he was visiting his grandparents. We would go swimming—we had a public swimming pool then. He would come and go swimming with [Joe] Purvis and different ones like that. Just a prickly-faced teenager.

AD: Once he became president, were people proud [of] him, generally, or is it hard to make generalizations for . . .?

DW: Once he became president? Yes, Hope was proud. To [have produced] a president that had actually come from a small town, we must be doing something right.

[End of Interview]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]