

**The David and Barbara Pryor Center
for
Arkansas Oral and Visual History**

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Arkansas Memories

Morse Gist Sr.

Interviewed by Scott Lunsford

October 26, 2012

Helena, Arkansas

Objective

Oral history is a collection of an individual's memories and opinions. As such, it is subject to the innate fallibility of memory and is susceptible to inaccuracy. All researchers using these interviews should be aware of this reality and are encouraged to seek corroborating documentation when using any oral history interview.

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Transcript Methodology

The Pryor Center recognizes that we cannot reproduce the spoken word in a written document; however, we strive to produce a transcript that represents the characteristics and unique qualities of the interviewee's speech pattern, style of speech, regional dialect, and personality. For the first twenty minutes of the interview, we attempt to transcribe verbatim all words and utterances that are spoken, such as uhs and ahs, false starts, and repetitions. Some of these elements are omitted after the first twenty minutes to improve readability.

The Pryor Center transcripts are prepared utilizing the *University of Arkansas Style Manual* for proper names, titles, and terms specific to the university. For all other style elements, we refer to the *Pryor Center Style Manual*, which is based primarily on *The Chicago Manual of Style 18th Edition*. We employ the following guidelines for consistency and readability:

- Em dashes separate repeated/false starts and incomplete/redirected sentences.
- Ellipses indicate the interruption of one speaker by another.
- Italics identify foreign words or terms.
- Brackets enclose
 - italicized annotations of nonverbal sounds, such as laughter, and audible sounds, such as a doorbell ringing; and
 - annotations for clarification and identification.
- Commas are used in a conventional manner where possible to aid in readability.

Citation Information

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**Scott Lunsford and Joy Endicott interviewed Morse Gist Sr. on
October 26, 2012, in Boxley, Arkansas.**

[00:00]

Scott Lunsford: Morse.

Morse Gist: Mh-hmm.

SL: We're here on our second day. This is the twenty-sixth of October
now.

MG: It is.

SL: And we got in—uh—some good stuff yesterday, and I'm not sure
what tape number this is. Is this four or three?

Trey Marley: This is four.

SL: Tape four.

MG: Okay.

SL: So we're—we're—we've—we've probably got up to about three
hours of material from you, maybe two and a half, yesterday.

MG: Mh-hmm.

SL: Um—and—uh—uh—I know it was a long day for you. We've got
your day started a little earlier both days, now, but hopefully we
can get this thing—uh—wrapped up here in two or three hours.

MG: Okay.

[00:00:37] SL: Now, I'm going to apologize to you right up front. I—
I'm gonna need to leave in the middle of this tape . . .

MG: I see.

SL: . . . to go down and visit with Sonny Payne and . . .

MG: Yeah, give him my regards.

SL: I will. I will. He's a—he's a fine man, and—uh—he's a great believer . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . in what we're doing and—and it's . . .

MG: Yeah, he's one of my favorite people.

SL: There you go. [00:00:57] Well . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . you know—uh—maybe we should talk about Sonny Payne just a little bit while—while we're—got his name out there. You know—uh—he grew up here in Helena, too. Did you . . .

MG: He did. Yeah.

SL: . . . did you ever cross paths with him, growin' up?

MG: Oh yeah. Yeah, we kinda grew up together. I—uh—I grew up about two or three years ahead of Sonny. Um—we were in the same army together, though I didn't—didn't meet him in the army until we got out of the army. Then I knew . . .

SL: That's funny.

MG: . . . about it. Uh—we had—uh—we were able to exchange war stories and things like that. [00:01:36] But Sonny went into broadcasting real early in his life. I think maybe while he was in high school—at KFFA. Uh—and that was an interesting place because in those days the radio stations did not have black folks broadcasting over the radio station. KFFA was an exceptional—and

through Sonny, that's where the Sonny Boy Williamson band used to go up there and play live over KFFA—uh—but—uh—about fifteen minutes every noon hour ?type area?. He's continuing that—that is a spin-off of his early program with them. They—they neglected to make any type of a recording . . .

SL: Oh!

MG: . . . of that live music [*laughs*] in those days with Sonny Boy, which was a shame. Uh—but—uh—it wasn't easy to make recordings in those days. Do you remember the wire recorder?

SL: I do remember the wire recorder . . .

MG: Okay.

SL: . . . and I've tried to . . .

MG: So it . . .

SL: . . . work with some of those.

MG: Uh-huh.

SL: Um—but that's—yes, I—I—I do remember that wire recorder.

MG: Yeah. So it was a groundbreaking—it was a precedent-breaking program, and it's still been on the air. And that's what he does now, still.

[00:03:16] SL: Well, you know that—uh—it's the longest-running radio program in the world.

MG: Is it really? I didn't . . .

SL: It is.

MG: . . . know it was that—uh . . .

SL: It is.

MG: But—yeah . . .

SL: And of course, it was—uh—uh—it became very popular.

MG: Yeah. Mh-hmm.

SL: And—uh—it's broadcast all over the world.

MG: Right now.

SL: Right now.

MG: Live?

SL: Mh-hmm.

MG: I didn't realize that.

SL: Yep.

MG: I had no idea.

[00:03:39] SL: So it—it is quite an honor to—to . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . to have gotten to know Sonny, and—and—uh—uh—do you member any time that you may've spent with him growin' up? Did you—uh—did y'all—I guess four years is—three or four years is a pretty big age gap . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . growin' up.

MG: Yeah. So we didn't spend much time together then. I just knew him. His—if I'm correct, you might ask him to confirm this. His father—uh—owned a gasoline station.

SL: That's correct.

MG: Did he tell you that?

SL: Mh-hmm.

MG: And it was right across the street from where we had, as I remember, from where we had our music store early on, in those days. Uh—so I got—I—he—he would come down and work with his dad, and I'd see him down there. But it was really after—after World War II when we both returned—uh—that—uh—I got to spend more time with Sonny then.

SL: Well, thanks. That's a—uh—I admire—I admire him very much and . . .

MG: Yeah.

[00:04:44] SL: You know, I think we were—um—um—you know, it's windy today. We can hear the wind outside the . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . the door here. Uh—but—uh—I think we were talking about your college days. I think we'd gotten to your college days yesterday.

MG: Okay.

SL: And so—uh—and you went to . . .

MG: Arkansas Tech.

SL: Arkansas Tech in Russellville.

MG: At Russellville. It was a two-year college then.

SL: A two-year college back then.

MG: Yeah.

[00:05:12] SL: And—uh—did you finish there? Did you get all the way through?

MG: I finished the first year there.

SL: Uh-huh.

MG: And then in [19]41 Pearl Harbor happened, and I was still—that was in part of my first year, the first semester of the first year. Um—I finished that year. The second year I went with a friend—um—uh—"Monk" Atkins—George Atkins by name. He and I went to California to a school called the Aeronautical Institute of America, I think. It was a—it was a college for aeronautics sponsored by Lockheed, I believe, company out there. Well, the—uh—the pressure to join the military [*laughs*] beca—became too much, and I came back home—uh—during the first semester to join the military. And—uh—George followed me about three or four weeks later. He went into the Seabees. I went into—uh—uh—and a friend of mine and I went to Memphis, and I tried to join the—uh—the marines and the air f—the—uh—the army and even the navy, and I couldn't pass the eye examination. [00:07:06] So in [19]43 I was drafted. That's when I went into the military, in [19]43. So this was [19]42 when I came back outta college. Uh—so that's—that's about my college experience, except in the military, they—uh—sent me to a special cadet program course at Yale University, and I got a—a certificate of graduation—uh—from Yale. It was a compressed course similar—it was based on West Point with all of their—uh—disciplines

and control, except each course up there, if we're still talkin' about college, each course was one week long. One week long on military law. One week long—number one week was on—uh—cook and baker school. Another week on bombsights, armament, things like that. So that went for two semesters up there. And that's where I—uh—got my commission and immediately went from that to—uh—Las Vegas. And—uh—well, Colorado Springs, I guess it was, next.

[00:08:47] SL: So is this air force?

MG: This was the air corps. It was army air corps.

SL: Ar—army air corps.

MG: Yeah.

SL: Okay.

MG: And I was told at the time—I was one of the last—there may've been one class that followed me at Yale, but—uh—at that time I was understanding that it was moving the whole outfit to Colorado Springs. And that was my first assignment after graduating was Colorado Springs. And I was under the impression that from that developed the—uh—Air Force Academy, but I don't know. I don't know if that . . .

SL: Well, I was thinking that's where the Academy is now.

MG: Yeah.

SL: Yeah. And—uh—so when you got your commission, are you saying you became a lieutenant?

MG: Yeah, second lieutenant.

SL: Second lieutenant.

MG: Yeah.

[00:09:38] SL: And I—I wonder what the criteria was for them to send you off to—to Yale and—and to go through the—uh—couple of semesters there. I mean . . .

MG: Well [*laughs*], it—uh—let's see. In basic training you take a lotta tests, and you do a lot of interviews . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

MG: . . . and so forth. And I was called in—I was completely naive and probably had no idea what was goin' on. It was in Miami Beach at that time. And they—uh—I had passed certain criteria in the—uh—in the personal interviews and certain tests, academic tests, and so forth that they . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

MG: . . . that they—they gave. [00:10:32] And this guy called me in and said I was—um—available and—uh—academically—um—acceptable for two particular programs they had—they were starting out with. And he said, "One will be military, and one will be academic." And he said, "Do you have any preference of what you want?" So I said—uh—now, in the back of my mind, I wanted anything in the army that didn't have anything to do with foxholes at the time. So—uh—and it seemed like to me that—uh—if I became an officer, I probably wouldn't have to slee—in the air corps

I wouldn't have to spe—this was air corps that . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

MG: . . . the army down there—that—uh—I wouldn't have to sleep in a foxhole at least. So—um—he said, "Well, you can take the military course. The other course will be purely academic." Both of 'em, as I understand for—that's a long time ago. Both of 'em, I understand, were at Yale University, and one was a—was a—uh—four-year course, if it lasted that long, at Yale in military academics. Uh—the other would be military service, and the other one—uh—would be one year of compressed service, and I would get a commission if I passed it. Um—so—uh—I chose that one. They—uh—they then sent me to—uh—I guess I went to Denver, Colorado, to a preparatory program. [00:12:46] And one amusing things, in Denver they called me in for an interview with—uh—four high-ranking officers, and—uh—one was a general and then two or three colonels there, it seemed like. It—so I did feel kinda intimidated [*laughs*], and—uh—the—uh—the interviewer, whoever he was, put me at ease. I was standing there in front of the—this—this rank. And he said, "Tell me—uh—Gist, why you are not using your right name. Why did you change your name when you came into the air corps?" I said, "I don't know what"—I, you know, I had no idea what he was talkin' about. Um—he said, "Well, we got a copy of your birth certificate, and Morse Gist [*voices in background*] is not your name, according to the birth certificate." Well, I didn't know

that. But he said, "On your birth certificate, your name is *M-O-S-S* Gist. And what is it you're trying to hide?" Well, I didn't know what he was [*laughs*] talkin' about. And so—um—then he—uh—he said, "Well, I'll tell you what we've done. The FBI has investigated you in your hometown, and we conclude that it was"—and it was a doctor's error. The doctor, when he made out the birth certificate, wrote *M-O-S-S*. And so—uh—but—uh—I'd never seen my birth certificate, I think. I never had seen it [*laughs*], but—uh—he said, "We talked to—uh—businessmen around your town and—and the law enforcement people around your town, so you're still acceptable in this program." It was sort of a confidential program. [00:15:13] Um—and—uh—so then they went on with the interview, and the—uh—the interviewer, I don't know which one now, asked me if I knew—uh—Hattie Caraway. You member the senator?

SL: Yeah, sure. Yes.

MG: And I said, "Yes, sir, I did. I knew her real well. She lived not far from me, and when we were kids, we'd go to her house, and she'd make cookies." Well, I was thinkin' of a family named Haraway.

SL: Oh!

MG: [*Laughs*] And so, the interview went from there. And I—he kept tellin' me things that he had done with Hattie Caraway in their younger days. And he did all of the talking.

SL: [*Laughs*] He just . . .

MG: Reminiscing . . .

SL: . . . wanted to talk about . . .

MG: . . . to me.

SL: . . . Hattie Caraway.

MG: And that used up the whole program, so I didn't have to do much more interviewing. [*Laughter*] [00:16:21] But—so—uh—then I went from that program—they sent me to—uh—um—I guess, Boca Raton, Florida. And at that time that was—that was part of the cadet program. And—uh—at that time in Boca Raton, the whole outfit was moving to North Carolina, so everything was—uh—disorganized there.

SL: Mh-hmm.

MG: We stayed in what they told us was the Boca Raton, Florida, clubhouse or something. The army had taken that over, so it was pretty good livin' there. Um—and a friend of mine—well, we were there together—um—found out they really didn't know we were there. When they'd call roll, our name wasn't on it or anything, so [*laughter*] we went fishin'. There's a river down there called Indian River, I think. It . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

MG: . . . runs close by there. And so, we would miss formation and sit on the bank of that river with a pole and a string and a safety pin [*SL laughs*] and catch what we call puff-fish. Are you . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

MG: . . . familiar with puff-fish?

SL: I've heard that.

MG: You—you catch 'em, and they blow up like a balloon.

SL: 'Cause they've come from the bottom.

MG: Yeah.

SL: And you've brought 'em up, yeah.

[00:17:52] MG: Yeah. So we—that's what we did in the afternoon. And then they—we joined the group, and we ended up in North Carolina [laughter] and started . . .

SL: Without your fishin' poles, probably.

MG: Yeah. [Laughter] So—uh—it—uh—it was sort of a lark for me because I knew that I was not going to be able to pass the eye test on this thing. And—uh—so the whole program, in my mind, was an experience, a lark, and so forth. Uh—we went through North Carolina, and that was more basic training, marching, close-order drill, all that kinda stuff.

SL: Uh-huh.

MG: And after a few weeks there, they sent us up to Yale University and checked in up there at Wright Hall, as it was called then. I—uh—not too long ago, maybe a year or so ago, a—a group of—uh—students from Yale came down here on a boat ride of some kind, and they came in the store, and we were reminiscing. And I asked 'em if—if Wright Hall was still there, and they didn't know what I was talkin' about. And I said, "Well, it was a—uh—it was an ivy-covered—uh—building, brick building. Had a courtyard. It was

surround—the whole courtyard was surrounded with a fence." And it finally occurred to 'em that they call that WH. It's an historic preservation area now. I don't think the—that it's used by students anymore, from what they were tellin' me. But it's still up there and kept—kept up, but they put a lotta modern stuff in up there now . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

MG: . . . I think, I'm sure. But—um—so—um—anyway, I got there, and—uh—each—each course was one week long.

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:20:06] MG: There were no written examinations that I recall. All of the time was consumed completely there. There were three of us in a suite there in the dormitory area of Wright Hall. The discipline was the same, they told us, that they had at West Point. It was followed on the West Point plan. In the academic department, there were never any written handout tests or things like that. The examination, pass or fail, was with the instructor. Each student sat with the instructor, and he asked questions about the subject of that . . .

SL: One-on-one.

MG: . . . that test. One-on-one.

SL: That's good.

MG: And it includes some confidential stuff. Do you remember the term Norden bombsight?

SL: I do.

MG: Well, that was my specialty, and it was highly classified information.

So—but—and then bombardier or gunnery—you got—they have what they call an MOS, which I believe stands for military operations specialty, I think.

[00:21:49] SL: Okay, I'm gonna stop . . .

MG: Okay.

SL: . . . this right here.

MG: Yeah.

SL: It's time for me to go down and see Sonny.

MG: Yeah. Sure.

SL: And Joy will come out and sit with you.

[Tape stopped]

[00:22:01] Joy Endicott: So we were talking about Guam and you getting . . .

MG: Yeah.

JE: . . . not passing the eye test and havin' to be armory instead of . . .

MG: Yeah, armament officer in . . .

JE: Kay.

MG: . . . the squadron there.

JE: Okay.

MG: And the group armament officer was a major that I had no respect for whatsoever.

JE: Uh-oh.

MG: I thought he was dumb, *[laughter]* I guess. I don't know. I was probably a bit arrogant myself, but anyway, I went to the commander there, and he was a colonel. And I just told him, sorta like I'm tellin' you, that I'd like to be dropped out of the group. And he said, "Why?" And I said, "Well, I don't wanna work under Major so-and-so." I forgot his name long ago. But—so he said, "Okay."
[00:22:57] So then I went into what they call the pool of armament officers, and then I was called out and went to—on the luxury liner called the *George Washington*. It was the ship that President Wilson went to the League of Nations on, so it was a deluxe ship. And we went to Le Havre, France, and from there went on into Austria and Bavaria . . .

JE: Okay.

MG: . . . and joined up with the 79th Fighter Group, P-47 fighters.

[00:23:40] JE: When did you arrive there?

MG: When?

JE: Do you remember?

MG: The date?

JE: Uh-huh.

MG: Wow. *[Laughter]* I'm afraid that escapes me. It was . . .

JE: Well, that's okay. *[Laughs]*

MG: . . . sometime in [19]45, I think.

JE: Okay.

[00:23:59] MG: Now, the conflict in Europe had—was over at that time.

JE: Okay.

MG: The . . .

JE: Well, that's good.

MG: Yeah, oh yeah, that was real good. So the only conflict that was developing with the Russians—they were beginning to—they had a zone that they were in over there. It was divided up into four zones, I think. And the Russian zones—their fighter craft were beginning to buzz our transport planes. So we had to rearm all the P-47s with their four .50 caliber machine guns, and the P-47s would escort—there was no conflict there, as it turned out, but they would . . .

JE: Were ready.

MG: . . . escort the transport planes there.

[00:24:51] JE: Did you fly then? Were you . . .

MG: I didn't fly in the fighter groups then. My—all my flying was in training with the B-29 group and the—I trained some on the B-17. But no, I mainly took care of their guns.

JE: Okay.

MG: That was my job. And I was the group officer then, at that time.

[00:25:20] JE: So when did you get to come back? Now, that one you have to remember, right? *[Laughter]*

MG: Well, I think it was in the spring of [19]46, but I'm not sure about that . . .

JE: Okay.

MG: . . . either. Yeah, so . . .

JE: And did you come back to Helena directly?

MG: Came back to Helena. Mh-hmm.

JE: Okay.

MG: And so, I went into work with my father.

JE: Okay, you told us a little bit about that yesterday—that you had some money saved up, and you kinda . . .

MG: No, we . . .

JE: . . . goofed around for a while. [*Laughs*]

MG: Yeah, okay. Well, for the first year, I didn't do much of anything except drink whiskey and smoke cigarettes and . . .

JE: Right. And then the . . .

MG: And the . . .

JE: . . . doctor got you straightened out.

MG: Yeah, I got that straightened out.

[00:26:09] JE: And so, you went to work here. Had the—had you opened the music store yet?

MG: No, it was in [19]53 when we opened this music store.

JE: Okay.

MG: We were around the corner with jukeboxes . . .

JE: Jukeboxes.

MG: . . . in there.

JE: And then you started sellin' the guitars.

MG: Well, yeah, and when we—that building became too small for our coin-machine business, so we . . .

JE: Okay.

MG: . . . started lookin' for another building. This building became vacant, and we rented it and moved in here. But we only needed the back half of the building, really. So we started selling guitars. The first were guitars and sheet music.

JE: Okay.

MG: Yeah.

[00:26:58] JE: And what was Helena like then? Was it still pretty busy?

MG: Real busy, just every night. We would stay here sometime till well after dark just about every day. And on Saturdays we'd have to—we'd stay open till about midnight.

JE: So was it still primarily a Saturday night, everybody gettin' in a car, come-to-town . . .

MG: They would come to town.

JE: . . . situation?

MG: Yeah. Uh-huh.

JE: And the rest of the week, you said, was busy, too?

MG: Yeah, the rest of the week was all—it was always busy. We had a lot of chain stores here. JCPenney was next door there and . . .

JE: You called 'em change stores? You had a lot of . . .

MG: Chain stores, like JCPenney or Sears, Roebuck.

JE: Okay.

MG: Sears, Roebuck was right across the street.

JE: Oh, okay.

MG: They were . . .

JE: Chain stores. I got . . .

MG: Chain.

JE: Yeah.

MG: Yeah.

JE: All right. I got it.

MG: Okay. [*Laughter*] And it was quite a busy, busy place.

[00:27:58] JE: And were the older clothiers still around, Mayer's
and . . .

MG: Now, would you say that again?

JE: Were the older clothier stores—the older clothes stores still . . .

MG: Oh, they had a lot of clothing stores here.

JE: The Mayers? The Mayer's stores?

MG: Yeah, C. E. Mayer's was a clothing store. Mike Lazar had a clothing
store. Sam Elardo had a clothing store. Jay—Sammy Ciener had a
clothing store. His name's still on the building down there.
Ciener's.

JE: Really?

MG: So we had a lot of that here. We had a lot of everything here
at . . .

[00:28:36] JE: And who were the people buying things? Were they farmers, or what was the industry that was supporting Helena then?

MG: Well, we did have some industry. We had a company called Bobbie Brooks. Does that name ring a bell with you?

JE: Well, to me it means suits.

MG: Huh?

JE: To me, it means suits. Clothing. Bobbie Brooks is a . . .

MG: Yeah, they made women's clothing out there. Quality stuff, I think. We had another place called the . . .

JE: Oop!

SL: Oop!

JE: Scott's back.

MG: Well, come in a while. [*Laughter*]

[Tape stopped]

[00:29:13] SL: I—let me say that I'm back from . . .

MG: Good.

SL: . . . being on the *King Biscuit Time* . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . *Show* down the street with Sonny, and it was fine and all that. And you were just saying that you just thought of something that—of a time you had with Sonny.

MG: Oh, with Sonny. Well, of course, we told war stories, you know. There was a fellow named Pete Centenio here. Was in the army, also, and Pete happened to be on the same base with Sonny Payne.

And this is Pete's story, as best I can remember it. And Sonny was there when he was tellin' it, so I guess it's fairly accurate if my memory is. But Pete called Sonny on the base and said, "Let's get together sometime." So Sonny said, "Okay, I'll pick you up in the car this afternoon." Well, now, troopers—that sounded suspicious because troopers never had cars [*SL laughs*] on base. [*Laughter*]

SL: Okay. A little red flag already.

[00:30:39] MG: Yeah, but [*laughs*] anyway, Pete went out to wherever they were gonna meet, and Sonny [*laughs*] drove up in this limousine. It was olive drab army stuff, and it had a flag on the front with a star. That's the way the generals drive up. [*Laughs*]

SL: Okay.

MG: And so, Sonny put Pete in the car with him, and they drove around all the—all over the base. And Sonny—and I—we might—you might ask him sometime when you see him if he remembers Pete tellin' me that. But Pete asked him where he got that car, and he said, "Well, I just went down to the car pool, and there it was with the key in the ignition, so I took it." [*Laughter*] And so, they—there were a lotta stories like that that—you had to—in the military you were in trouble if you didn't keep your sense of humor, really.

SL: Yeah.

MG: You had to.

SL: I can understand that.

MG: Yeah. And . . .

SL: There was a lot of patriotism back then. You . . .

MG: Oh yeah.

SL: I mean . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . folks wanted to go and join the army and fight for freedom
and . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . and the country bought into it, and the kids bought into it and
the . . .

[00:32:14] MG: And there was a stigma during that era of people of
proper age and things that did not go in, and it stayed with 'em a
long time. So it's—some of 'em kept out on different reasons
being—I think you could stay out if you were a farmer doing
essential farmwork for the country. And they had different
programs like that [*telephone rings*] that would exempt you from
the military service.

[Tape stopped]

[00:33:00] SL: Okay. Morse, it is awfully generous of you to let us be
in your shop on a business day, and I know folks are comin' in and
out and callin' you, but it's also interesting to us that . . .

MG: It's what?

SL: It's kind of interesting to us to . . .

MG: Oh, it . . .

SL: . . . see the activity . . .

MG: Yeah, yeah.

SL: . . . and to hear the activity. [00:33:24] We were talkin'—let's see. I believe we were talkin' about the stigma that folks—that men that did not go into the . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . service during the war . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . for—because of other programs or for various reasons . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . that they were not considered as patriotic as the folks that went in to serve. Is that what you were sayin'?

[00:33:51] MG: In a sense, I guess, but they were differ—it's hard to explain, but there was a stigma attached, and they felt it, I'm sure. Because when the troopers returned, they were all telling war stories. And in a social gathering, there would be this one person who was out of the loop, so to speak. I—it's a—it's hard to really explain. There was no ostracism taking place or anything like that. It—but there was that. And that was partly, probably, the reason, I would imagine, that so many did volunteer for it. So . . .

[00:34:57] SL: Did you know veterans that came back maimed or crippled or were—was the town lucky that they didn't have a lotta casualties or . . .

MG: We had a lotta deaths, but I don't remember anyone in particular that had severe injuries. We had a friend of mine, Jimmie Nichols,

was injured on the D-Day invasion of Normandy there.

Something—I think shrapnel got his leg or something like that, but he was still—he's still ambulatory and—but it's not anything like what these troopers are going through now over there. It's just—I don't recall anything like that with any of the friends that I knew. There were a lotta people that were hurt, and they were hurt bad, but none of my contemporaries. I had friends who just did not come back over—from over there but—or came back for military funerals here. We had a lotta funerals after the war that the men had been buried overseas. Then they were brought back here . . .

SL: Right.

MG: . . . to be reburied in the family plots. So we had a military guard funerals for those people. But it—I don't remember it being anything like the veterans that were—that are comin' back here now after that conflict in . . .

SL: I'm just won . . .

MG: . . . I guess Afghanistan, Iraq.

SL: Afghanistan, Iraq, yes.

MG: Yeah. So.

[00:37:00] SL: Well, okay, so you get through the war. You don't get maimed or injured in any way, and you come home. And the—when we say the music store, are we still talking about the nickelodeon business, or are we also talkin' about the guitar—or the music store with the instrument business? Was it going yet?

MG: See, that didn't come along till I got into this building in [19]53.

SL: Okay, so that's much later. Well, so how was the nickelodeon business when you got back?

MG: It was good. It was real busy. It's a twenty-four-hour, seven-day-a-week job. And my wife and I used to reminisce—until I sold the business, it became—see, you had to make service calls to the beer joints and honky-tonks and cafés whenever the jukebox stopped working and—no matter what time of the day or the night. So it reached a point when, maybe in the [19]60s, when dope came—became prominent—when the customers were drunk on beer or whiskey, they were, in a sense, manageable. When they are high or drunk on this dope, they are not manageable, and they are unpredictable, and they're dangerous—they—some could be dangerous. So during that time in the [19]60s when I began to think about getting out of it—and I finally sold all of the coin-operated businesses to a fellow named Byron Snyder and got out of it completely. [00:39:18] There were—but until I did that, Jean and I were [*laughs*] reminiscing one time, I don't think I ever got full night's sleep. Every night that phone would ring, and I'd have to get up and go to fix that thing.

SL: You were a doctor. You were [*laughs*] a doctor of nickelodeons. Dr. Nickelodeon.

MG: Well, her brother was a doctor. We [*laughter*] did compare that, in a sense. But—so I did—I really [*laughs*]—I'd become accustomed

to it, but I didn't realize what a nice thing a full night's sleep can be without worryin' about that phone ringin', you see.

[00:40:12] SL: When you got back from the war, were both your parents still alive?

MG: Yeah. Mh-hmm.

SL: And you know, we—just inadvertently we mentioned—I mentioned the word doctor. [00:40:24] We hadn't talked anything about how the medical community was around here and di—when you were growin' up, did doctors still make house calls?

MG: Oh yes. We were fortunate. We had been—there were a lot of young doctors that were trained in the military, under military service, that came back to Helena. So we had lots of good doctors, and they would make house calls. In fact, her brother was a doctor. Dr. McCarty, Pat McCarty. And occasionally—well, once or twice, we were at their house eating for supper, I guess it was. And he'd get a call and have to go on a call, so I would go with him. And it was [*laughs*]*—he had a wonderful bedside manner. As soon as he walked into their house, the people seemed to feel better. [SL laughs]* And that was a very important thing that he serviced. But they can no longer do that either because it's too danger—it's as dangerous for them to make service calls in the home as it was—that I figured it was for me to go out and work on these jukeboxes. And I was thinkin', last night, I was thinkin' about these things. And even these pizza delivery boys put themselves—put their lives

at risk when they deliver pizzas into certain neighborhoods 'cause people will call 'em in there just to take their money away from 'em. So the culture has changed tremendously. But . . .

[00:42:37] SL: Let's talk about you and your love life. We haven't really said much about your love life. Your [*MG laughs*]*—*you married*—*you ended up marrying a local girl here?

MG: Yeah, she had large family. She . . .

SL: And what was her name?

MG: Jeannie McCarty.

SL: Jean McCarty.

MG: And she was the baby of the family. Probably*—*she may've had eight or ten siblings. A lotta . . .

SL: Wow.

MG: . . . brothers and two or three sisters. It was a large family.

SL: You had to pass some muster, then.

MG: Yeah. [*SL laughs*] It*—*so one time a fellow named Frank Jeffet came in. We were sitting at the drugstore on the corner, Henry's Drug Store, and drinkin' whatever, coffee or something, at the counter. And he said, "Let's go to a movie tonight." And he told me he had a date, for me to get a date, and we'd*—*gosh, I don't know what the movie was. Something worthwhile, probably. And I said, "Well, I haven't got a date, and I really don't know anybody to get a date with." And he said, "Well, that's all right. I'll get you a date. I know somebody." And so, it turned out to be Jeannie

McCarty. Now, in the old—what we call the old hospital up there at Midland Heights—it's now Crestpark nursing home. [00:44:16]

They had what they called a nursing—a nurses' home. It was built on the property. It's gone. I think they've torn the building down now. But it's where a lot of the nurses, the bachelor nurses, lived in this nursing home. And Jeannie was not a nurse then, but she was working as a secretary for the manager of a hospital there, so she was stayin' there. So we—I went up there to pick her up, and I walked in. There was this large reception area, and it had two wings—I guess bedrooms off a little—a higher level up away from this. So I was met by [*laughs*] a nurse named Sarah Surman. And Sarah was an ex-army nurse. And ex-army nurses were always in command. [*Laughter*] And Sarah welcomed me in and sent word to Jeannie that I was here. And so, she said, "Let's sit in the—let's sit on this couch a while and wait for Jeannie to get dressed and so forth." "Okay." So Sarah began to make inquiries, and quickly I got the word, the impression, whatever, that if I did anything wrong to Jeannie, that I would have Sarah to deal with. [*Laughs*] And she asked me almost everything except my intentions. First time I'd ever seen Jeannie. [*Laughter*] Course, all I was tryin' to get somebody to go to the movie with me, but [*laughter*] it was quite a—it was almost an inquisition at that point. But anyway, Jeannie came down, and we went to the movies. And from then on, there was a—in my mind there was nobody else. So Jeannie was always

the only girl that I knew. And so, we'd been goin' together about six months to different things. [00:47:17] So then one day—one night I came back from the date. I was still livin' at home with my parents then. And my father came in—I mean, my father called me into his bedroom. He'd—they'd gone to bed. And [coughs] said, "How was your night?" I said, "Well, it was fine. We went"—someplace. I don't know. And he said, "I wanna ask you something. Do you like that girl, Jeannie?" And I said, "Yeah. Yeah, I like her." He said, "Well, I don't want you just foolin' around with that girl. She's too nice a girl, and unless you're serious with that girl, you break off with her. Because they are too nice a family for you to do anything wrong with that girl." And so, I was a little bit taken back, but he said—I forgot the phraseology [laughs] he used, but something to the effect that "You either ask that girl to marry you, or you quit goin' with her." [Laughs] There wa—and I could visualize Sarah Surman speakin' [laughs] through my father. So anyway, it was in—that was probably in the middle of October or thereabouts. So the next night that I went out with Jeannie, we went somewhere, and I asked her to marry me, and she accepted. And I said, "When would you like to set the date?" And I was thinking maybe be engaged for a year or so. [Laughter] That's when she said, "I think the first of November would be a good time."

Unknown person: [Unclear words].

MG: Hey, come on in.

SL: All right.

[Tape stopped]

[00:49:36] MG: Oh, we were talking the other day about that

documentary on the pawnshop in Las Vegas?

SL: Uh-huh.

MG: And I meant to ask you do you think or do you know whether they script and choreograph that program? Everything is scripted . . .

SL: I'm sure they . . .

MG: . . . and choreographed.

SL: . . . I'm sure they probably do. There might be some—you know, when they're out shootin' a cannon or . . .

MG: Oh.

SL: . . . testin' things or drivin' things around or—there might be some incidental, impromptu things that happen. But once you get a camera on the tripod and you got your angle, like kinda what we did here, they . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . you know, they're gonna catch—they're—they want shots of people walking up to the counter with their stuff and laying it out. And they'll want to bring someone over, you know.

MG: Yeah.

SL: It's all—but it's still very, very intriguing and very interesting 'cause it's . . .

MG: It is.

SL: . . . usually—there's some usually great stories, and it's . . .

MG: And it's so well done. It's—that I could see how it could not be scripted and choreographed.

SL: Yeah. Yeah, I . . .

MG: But . . .

[00:50:53] SL: That, too, but I do believe that they pick out the items that . . .

MG: They edit it.

SL: . . . they want to talk about . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . 'cause they're—you know, they try to mix it up between authentic and . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . knockoff items, and they bring in an expert. You know, you've gotta call all those guys and have 'em waiting in the wing for . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . them to walk up and get on camera. So it—yeah . . .

MG: Well . . .

SL: But it's a very successful show.

[00:51:17] MG: One interesting thing—have you noticed they'll bring some guns in . . .

SL: Yep.

MG: . . . and he'll be very careful to find out if this gun is made before

nineteen—I mean, 1898 or something—that he's not allowed to have a gun—sell a gun that is not made before 1988. You've got—you've seen that routine.

SL: No, I haven't seen that, but . . .

MG: Oh.

SL: . . . that's interesting.

MG: Well, I wish you had because I was talkin' to a—I used to be a gun dealer, and I had the federal license and so forth. I gave all that up. But I was talkin' to another gun dealer who used to be a gun dealer, too. We were reminiscin'. And what he was sayin' there made no sense to me whatsoever. [*Laughs*] If you are a licensed gun dealer, you can sell any gun to anybody who can pass the government test. They—you take—you let 'em fill out a form, and then that is wired in, and they're approved by the government. If you don't have a license, a federal license, unless the law has changed in the last few years, and I don't think it has. I haven't kept up with it, really. You—the gun becomes your personal property, and you can sell your personal property to anybody that you want to. So what this big—I wish you—it doesn't make sense to you until you've—unless you have seen one of these episodes.

SL: Well, I'm just wondering if there's some kinda state law that they . . .

MG: I don't know.

SL: It could be a Nevada thing. I . . .

MG: But . . .

SL: . . . I don't know.

[00:53:18] MG: But this fellow told me that—and this wouldn't make much interest to you, either, but [*SL laughs*] he said in that same shop, they've got a whole wing full of guns. All pawnshops sell guns.

SL: Yeah.

MG: That's their [*laughs*] high-profit item and in the others—in another part of the shop, he said it's full of all kinds of guns. Have you ever watched the pawnshop out of Louisiana?

SL: *Cajun Pawn Shop?*

MG: Cajun.

SL: Yeah, I have not, but I've seen it on my guide, and I, you know, I have this habit of watchin' that stuff at night. Right—I'm actually in bed.

MG: Oh yeah. Okay. [*Laughter*]

SL: Whi—and I kinda watch that stuff to kinda fall asleep to.

MG: Yeah.

SL: But I have seen that on the guide, and I've often wondered if it was—I'm sure it's a great show.

MG: Well, they show their guns. They—in that particular—in the Louisiana pawnshop. That store is—half of that store is devoted to various guns. He's got 'em stacked around and everywhere.

SL: Well, I'll watch it.

MG: Yeah, I was . . .

SL: And I may give you a call after I watch it one [*laughter*] evenin'.

MG: Okay. If you get to see that fellow in Las Vegas denying his ability to sell a gun, that's what we found interesting in it.

[00:54:47] SL: Well, you know, we got interrupted right when you were proposing to Jeannie. You—just a few nights after your father kinda laid the law down . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . what—or his position down and, you know, I think all that speaks very well of Jeannie and her family, and . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . I think it—I—and I think that's—it speaks well of your daddy, too. He, you know, he was tryin' to have the right thing happen, I think.

MG: Yeah.

SL: And I think he could probably see that you were in love with her, too, and he—I think he kinda read the situation well.

MG: It worked out well. Yeah.

[00:55:37] SL: [*Laughs*] Well, okay, so you asked her to marry you, and you were thinking you'd have a year, year and a half . . .

MG: Oh. [*Laughs*]

SL: . . . engagement. And her response—her idea was what? What was her idea?

MG: [*Laughs*] She thought the first of November would be a good time.

[*Laughter*]

SL: So this was—you did this in the middle of October.

MG: Middle of October. [*Laughter*]

SL: Couple of weeks.

MG: Yeah. So it—but anyway, she was the one that—so—and that did good. You know, we—we've got good children, good life, and so.

[00:56:22] SL: So did y'all marry in the Episcopal church?

MG: Yes. Uh-huh. We went to the Methodist church. They were Methodists. Her whole family had been Methodists for a long time. Her father—course, they came over from Ireland. He came over from—her father came over as a child from Ireland during the potato famine or something. I don't know. But [*laughs*] he didn't like anything about the pope. It was nothing about the pope that he . . .

SL: Right.

MG: . . . he liked, so they evidently, early on in their family life, became, maybe in his family, became Methodists after they got here. So it was a history of Methodist—Methodism in her family. So we went to the Methodist preacher to sit with and be advised and so forth. And he advised us—he advised her to join the Episcopal Church and gave us a bit of spiritual counseling and so forth. So then we went to—we got married at St. John's.

[00:57:51] SL: And that was okay with her dad and her family that . . .

MG: Now, say that again.

SL: It was okay with her dad that went to the Episcopal church and not the Methodist?

MG: Oh, I think so.

SL: Okay.

MG: They seemed pleased with her choice. See, I went up to get his permission after the engagement, and it was real interesting. We—I went up—her family lived up on—in a house on a hill. It was a large house. A lot of 'em live there. So I went in—he was bedridden. He never recovered, whatever his illness was, during my time with Jeannie at all. But he was in bed, and they were—the family was sitting there, and it was sorta like some scenes I've seen in the movie. They received me, and we sat there and talked to him and so forth. And then her mother thought of something she had to do in the kitchen. Her sister thought of something she had to do somewhere else. And "Jeannie, would you come help me with this?" "I will." So I was in *[laughs]*—I was left there with her daddy. They just sorta disappeared from the room and left me with her daddy in that—and I got his permission to marry Jeannie. So it was an old custom. I don't know whether they still—whether that custom still prevails or not but . . .

SL: I think that it's on an individual basis. I know my sons asked permission . . .

MG: Well . . .

SL: . . . before they were married.

MG: Yeah.

SL: I think it's a great—I think it's an honorable thing to do and . . .

MG: Oh, I think so.

SL: . . . and I think the girls in that case—in your case, they knew
[laughter] that there was some business to get done and . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . it was between the men. And they honored the tradition
themselves, so.

MG: Yeah.

[01:00:21] SL: I think that's very, very rich and very wonderful that
that occurred. All right. So what year is this, now? Is this [19]53?

MG: [Nineteen] fifty-one.

SL: [Nineteen] fifty-one?

MG: Mh-hmm.

SL: And you guys are still—your family is still in the nickelodeon
business at that time. Is that right?

MG: Oh yeah. Yeah, that was the main business then.

[01:00:44] SL: And did you all start havin' children immediately, or did
you wait a while or . . .

MG: It was a year or so later, the first children.

[01:00:58] SL: Well, we . . .

MG: Twins.

SL: . . . we should go ahead and get your children's names and the

order of their births.

MG: Okay, Mary Ann and Morse were twins. They were born—Mary Ann was born first, and fifteen or twenty minutes later, Morse was born. And then two years, I believe, later, Pam was born. Then a couple of years later, Charles was born, the younger.

So . . .

SL: Twins right out of—you had twins right off the bat.

MG: Yeah. Uh-huh.

SL: You know, when Frank Broyles had twins, he fainted. [*Laughs*]

MG: Say that again.

SL: When Frank Broyles had twins, he fainted.

MG: Yeah. [*Laughter*] Well, I—it was a surprise to us. They—we were at the hospital when Mary Ann was born. And then the doctor came in and said, "We got more coming." [*Laughter*] So I was completely bewildered by the whole process so it—the family was there in the waiting room, and I was stretched out on a couch tryin' to sleep or something. I don't know. I—it was an exhausting affair for me but it—we were there a long time and . . .

[01:02:56] SL: So did y'all have the delivery at the hospital or at home?

MG: At the hospital.

SL: At the hospital.

MG: Yeah.

SL: Okay. Well, back in those days, the fathers didn't really—weren't

really a part of the . . .

MG: No.

SL: . . . delivery. That became a more modern thing . . .

MG: Yeah, that's . . .

SL: . . . when they . . .

MG: That's up to date, I think.

SL: Yeah.

MG: Yeah. No, I always kinda felt like I was sorta in the way.

We . . .

SL: [*Laughs*] Well, I think that was the attitude back then . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . that the men should [*MG laughs*] just stay outta the way.

MG: I know the nurse, Sarah Surman—I mentioned her . . .

SL: Yeah.

MG: . . . before . . .

SL: The military nurse.

MG: . . . was there. [01:03:39] And she was tending to Jeannie, and the doctor was not her brother. The doctor was another doctor here. And Sarah called him, and he was at a party and was not gonna leave. [*SL laughs*] And Sarah became real irritated, and she called, and "We need you right now." You know, that kinda thing. But then she came and told me that the doctor would not come, you see. The—then her brother, who was a doctor, also, said he would just take over the case. So he took it over and made the deliveries

and so forth on it. I never did call—I never did find out why that doctor wouldn't come, but in those days, he attended—Jeannie went to him I guess once a month or something, and each visit, I think, was ten dollars—the doctor visit in those days. And the delivery, the doctor's fee was seventy-five dollars. And so, then after the delivery, I got a bill from that doctor, and I called his secretary and told him—told her I wasn't gonna pay that bill. And it became a commercial thing with [*laughs*] me at that time. And they were—they said, "Well, we'll turn it over to the collection agency." And I said, "Fine. I'll just tell 'em why I'm not gonna"—but I never did hear anymore from that. But . . .

SL: Right.

MG: . . . I . . .

[01:05:53] SL: He may've been just having too much fun at the party.

He may not have been in any kind of condition to actually be at work.

MG: I don't—I really don't know. They . . .

SL: Yeah.

MG: But he didn't please—Sarah was not pleased. She was terribly angry about that—whatever. But that could—I hadn't, until this moment, I hadn't really thought about it at that point, but it coulda been something like that. Yeah.

[01:06:23] SL: So did y'all have your own house now? Did you—how soon was it before—I mean, you got married so quickly.

MG: Well . . .

SL: You had been livin' with your mom and dad, so . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . it's—did you continue to live with your mom and dad or . . .

MG: No, we started lookin' for a house right away. And we found one that was recently vacant in the West Helena community and so went on and bought that house. And we started cleanin' it up and fixing it up and gettin' it ready and so forth. And I remember—I think I mentioned earlier—did I mention the Rightors' name?

SL: Yes, the . . .

MG: Okay.

SL: . . . doctors . . .

MG: Dr. Rightor.

SL: . . . the family across the street from where you grew up.

[01:07:22] MG: And his wife was sort of a matriarch of the town, so to speak, of the community, social community, or whatever. And so, I member Jeannie and I were workin' in the house. We were cleanin' it up or something. And she drove up. She had a chauffeur that drove her up in a big car [*laughter*] and called me out to the car. And at that time I grew up in the—course, right across the street from her, and she had taught me to call her Aunt Jennie. Her name was Jennie Rightor. And she said, "Morse, I wanna tell you somethin' right now—that don't y'all start livin' in that house until you are married." [*Laughs*] And I really was sort of taken back. I

didn't realize what exactly she was sayin' 'cause nothin' like that
had ever crossed my [*laughs*] mind. But for some reason, I
remember that with some humor. But—so . . .

SL: It sounded like she was in the middle of everybody's business.

MG: Well, yeah, I guess she was.

SL: I mean, she—I bet she meant well, though.

MG: Huh?

SL: I bet she meant well.

MG: Oh, I think so. I think . . .

SL: Yeah.

MG: . . . really—she was sorta—I always felt she was a sort of a
surrogate mother or something. I—'cause I was a very small child
that grew up right across the street from her . . .

SL: Yeah.

MG: . . . and knew her real well.

SL: Well, that's sweet.

MG: So she could say most anything to me and—just like a parent sorta
thing.

[01:09:26] SL: So, now, how old are your mom and dad about this
time? I mean . . .

MG: All right, they were born right before the turn of the century, so
they were in their . . .

SL: In their fifties, sixties.

MG: . . . fifties or sixties or something like that.

SL: Well, was your father still—I mean, he was still . . .

MG: Oh, he was still active in the . . .

SL: Still active and . . .

MG: Yeah, he . . .

SL: . . . still . . .

MG: . . . he was the boss. I was working for him. Yeah.

[01:09:53] SL: Uh-huh. And so, it was about two or three years after you're married that you start thinking about—y'all move the shop down to here, and you start thinkin' about what to do with this front part of the building? Or when did the music—when did the instrument store start coming into play?

MG: Well, I may've mentioned it earlier that he had this acquaintance. I don't know how close they were, but this fellow owned St. Louis Music company in St. Louis. Did I mention that before?

SL: Well, yes, I think you did.

MG: And he . . .

SL: A very large musical instrument . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . supplier.

MG: And he called one day and wanted to send some instruments down here. He thought we could sell some. And he sent us three guitars and one rack of sheet music, printed music. So if you can visualize—the whole store was empty except sitting in the middle of the floor here were three guitars on a [*laughs*] cardboard, fold-out

guitar stand. They didn't have these metal stands at that time.

And then this rack with a—it's still in the back of the store there.

The . . .

SL: I saw it.

MG: Did you see that?

SL: Uh-huh.

MG: Okay.

SL: I did.

MG: Was full of sheet music, and it sat nearby. So that's how it started out when . . .

[01:11:40] SL: Were they electric guitars?

MG: No, they were acoustic guitars.

SL: Acoustic guitars. Okay.

MG: Yeah, I think electric guitars had not come along or . . .

SL: Until late [19]50s.

MG: . . . very prevalent then.

SL: Mid-[19]50s.

MG: I'm not even sure they had 'em at that time. Maybe . . .

SL: Well, no . . .

MG: Surely they made them.

SL: . . . I think so. I think Les Pauls were . . .

MG: Yeah, it came out earlier . . .

SL: . . . mid-[19]50s.

MG: . . . didn't it?

SL: Early mid-[19]50s.

MG: Yeah. Okay.

[01:12:02] SL: So do you member what brand they were?

MG: [*Laughs*] Well, in those days they were not the American-made, name-brand guitars. But in those days you ordered in guitars, and they would send you a whole package of labels, and you would select the label you wanted to put on that guitar.

SL: Wow.

MG: So you more or less had an exclusive of these—they were made in Japan. In that era Japan made cheap guitars.

SL: Yeah.

MG: And so, you glued on the headstock whatever label you choose out of this package. And then if there were other dealers, the theory was—there was no other dealer in this area, but if there were a dealer, then he would select from that package labels different from what you chose, so the customer would not know he was buyin' the same guitar with a different label on it. Trade-secret sorta thing. And I still got a bunch of those labels back there now that—it was a year or so or two or three later that the manufacturers started putting labels on guitars. We sold a lotta pianos, and the piano company, the manufacturer, was in Memphis there.

[01:13:45] SL: Do you member that name, that brand?

MG: Well, the parent company was in New York. The parent company of the Memphis factory was in New York. And I can't—I have not been

able to come up with a name. I've tried . . .

SL: Okay.

MG: . . . to remember it, but it was a large corporation. At one time there were probably three to four hundred individual piano manufacturers in America there. But during the [19]20s and the [19]30s—probably during the [19]30s in the Depression most of 'em went bankrupt and closed up. A few of 'em survived, but this particular company bought up the trade names of those companies that went outta business. So they had a list of I don't know how many brands of pianos that they could label your piano. So you could order the piano, we did, outta Memphis, and they would give me a selection of labels. And they would put that on the fallboard of the piano. Whatever label I picked out. And then if there were another piano store in the vicinity, that label would be restricted to me. So you—it was the same thing. We—two dealers would get the same piano, but they'd have different labels on 'em, different trade names on 'em.

SL: Never knew that.

MG: Didn't know that?

SL: I never knew that. That's . . .

MG: And . . .

SL: . . . somethin' else. Well, now, correct me if I'm wrong.

[01:15:34] Didn't the *King Biscuit Time* radio start—it started in the [19]40s, didn't it?

MG: I don't know. I really couldn't tell you.

SL: But it see—I mean . . .

MG: I was . . .

SL: . . . there was a music—performance music, anyway, was . . .

MG: Oh yeah.

SL: . . . proliferating here in this town.

MG: Are you talkin' bout the King Biscuit Festival?

SL: No. No . . .

MG: Oh.

SL: . . . the hour—the radio show.

MG: Oh, that was early, yeah, in the . . .

SL: And so, you had . . .

MG: . . . maybe in the [19]30s. I don't know.

[01:16:06] SL: Yeah, you had some music happening in this town . . .

MG: Oh yeah. You did.

SL: . . . that involved guitars.

MG: Lots of music. Yeah, the musicians would, on maybe Saturday or something, would be on the corner playing with a—well, they usually used a guitar case, and you'd put money in it.

SL: Husking.

MG: Yeah.

SL: Husking. Yeah.

MG: Yeah. So yeah, the blues music—and they played anywhere that

anybody would listen to them. There were—in the—in that community of the blues community, you had, generally, two classes of people. One of 'em were the churchgoers, and they owned businesses—the Blacks, I'm talkin' about, owned their own businesses in the south end of town. They had—I think we mentioned movie theaters and clothing stores and so forth.

SL: And it was pretty thriving.

MG: Huh?

SL: It was pretty thriving. I mean, they . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: Self contained but . . .

MG: That's right. There were owner-operated companies there. Now, the musicians in the honky-tonks, the people that hung out in there, were referred to as lowlifes. And I don't know if they use that term anymore or not, but that was a class distinction within that community. Now, all of the musicians were rated—in fact, historically, all show business people were rated as lowlifes. If you recall some of your history that—so that all fit in with the show business stigmata that was on [*laughs*] that trade. But anyway, they would often be on—and on a busy day, Saturday, mostly, they—they'd be out playin' on a street corner for whatever they could get.

SL: Well, so I think yesterday we were saying that you'd—you guys would sell a guitar, and you'd buy two more.

MG: Yeah, usually.

SL: Something like that.

MG: Yeah.

SL: And so, you didn't—you weren't really taking any—you kept reinvesting in the musical instrument side of your all's . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . business. [01:19:00] And so, what I'm getting a picture of is that over time, the nickelodeon business, when the drugs hit the area, you felt like it was just—it was not—it was too dangerous . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . to keep maintaining and servicing that business to the . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . to your clients 'cause the clients start—you know, were in juke joints and if it was midnight or something or two . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . in the morning, you might be gettin' a call to come get the thing playin'. And so, did—was your father still alive when y'all let the nickelodeon business go?

TM: Scott, excuse me. We need to change tapes. We're gonna pick it up with that.

SL: Okay. [Claps] All right.

[Tape stopped]

[01:19:50] SL: So we—I was tryin' to get around to the transition from the nickelodeon business to the musical-instrument business.

MG: Okay.

SL: And it sounds like to me that once you guys started selling a few guitars and then pianos and you had the sheet music that you continued to reinvest in the musical-instrument business. And you were still in the nickelodeon business but by the [19]60s it—you just felt like it was too dangerous. So all . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . through the [19]50s, I'm getting a picture that, yes, you're still in the nickelodeon business but you're also building your musical-instrument . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . business. Is that an accurate—fairly—generally speaking, is that kinda what was goin' on?

MG: I think so. Yeah.

SL: Now . . .

MG: Now, the actual dates I'm not familiar with because it was all generally smoothly moved.

[01:20:52] SL: Well, what I'm curious about is—as—who were you selling—were you selling the instruments initially to the upper class or middle class—upper-class folks? When—did the lowlife, the entertainment and the show business people, did they start coming to you for instruments early on, or was it later?

MG: Well, they—you're talking about the professional people who made their living playing on the road and so forth. They seldom bought

anything here unless it was an emergency, like a broken guitar strap or a set of guitar strings and things like that. In fact, most of 'em that I was with that came to Helena, anyway, for these things didn't have much money. So their guitars were pretty well patched up. They didn't buy anything like that from me. The people who bought the guitars in those days were the people who—they were the wannabes. They were the *[laughs]* people who had money, and they saw somebody playin' a guitar, and it looked so easy they thought they would get a guitar and do the same thing. And that—that's generally the people who actually bought the guitars. And it became important—the brand became terribly important on a guitar. I was at one time a Martin dealer, a Fender dealer, a Gibson dealer, Ovation dealer and so forth. But the brand was a—was one of the most important things in those days. And in those days the factories were very pleased to have a mom-and-pop shop as a customer. It really wasn't hard. Today the factories—the whole industry has changed. They want the big stores, the Guitar Centers and so forth, that can buy hundreds of guitars and move 'em in and out and the mail-order guitar companies and so forth. [01:23:49] So the factories no longer try to deal with the mom-and-pop shops, and I've given up or lost the franchises for every major brand guitar now because I couldn't move enough of that merchandise. Fender or Gibson would want me to fill the store with their product, mainly, so—in those days I could order—I would—there were three, as I

remember, three brothers in the Martin factory. And I would talk to one of 'em when I would want a guitar, and they would send me one guitar or something. When Leo Fender was workin' at the—was running his own factory out there, often when I'd call out, I would ask him if he had a certain model of Fender guitar in stock and what color, and he would, while he was holdin' the phone, he would holler back to somebody in the warehouse somewhere to see if they got this in this color and so forth. So it was that personal. It was a very personal operation. And with Gibson's I never talked to the boss, but I would call in Kalamazoo and talk to the shipping department or the repair department or somebody. I knew some of the names of the people in there. And they would do the same thing. They'd go see if they had this in stock or that in stock. It wasn't this mass-production psychology that's hit the industry now. Most all of those guitars had a lot of handwork on 'em. They—so—but the whole industry has truly, truly changed now and really left me behind. You—a mom-and-pop shop has got to have online services to sell stuff to people now if they wanna stay in business. So . . .

[01:26:23] SL: Those were great days when they were just startin' out, Martin and Fender and Gibson and I just—you know, it's just—I just assumed that you being here in Helena and Helena having its own stake in music history that any musical-instrument manufacturer would love to have their stuff here, you know, and I guess early on

they did.

MG: Yeah, yeah, in the old days, they did.

SL: Uh-huh. So you—the musical-instrument business, then, the wannabes is what kept—was what kept you in business, then.

MG: Yeah.

[01:27:17] SL: And maybe—did you ever sell to—work with the high school to outfit the marching band or any of the churches . . .

MG: No.

SL: . . . with the choirs or . . .

MG: No, the school business in this area, and I understand other areas, too, they buy everything—in that era—I haven't even talked to the school. I—the schools are in such disarray now. I don't know what's goin' on in the sch—they're all in bad shape now.

SL: Well, you've had consolidation and . . .

MG: Yeah, and all of that stuff.

SL: Yeah.

MG: And the money is short—in short supply. But during the time when there was lots of cash flow in the school system, they purchased everything out of the community and, more or less, out of the state. I've talkin'—it—I've talked to people in charge of—well, the Helena Wholesale Grocery Company, they sold all kinds of—they supplied the grocery stores in the whole neighborhood and everything. The school system in that era, I asked if they ever bought from him. He said only if they ran out of something. They might order a—twelve

cans of peas from him, you see. Emergency stuff. [01:29:03]

With me, they would—when the school was going to buy certain band instruments, they would send me a list of what they wanted to band—buy and I was to give 'em a bid. According to state law, as I understand it, they—if it was a certain amount of money they're buying—spending for something they have to get three bids from people. My bids were never the low bid. It was—they were using me as the third bid on it.

SL: Right. [MG *laughs*] Yeah. That still goes on.

MG: Yeah, I'm pretty sure it does.

SL: It does.

MG: Yeah. So—and they bought—all of that stuff came from out-of-state suppliers where—I'm not sure, but maybe there would be less complaints or so forth. I went before the school board one time with a—with that information and they all listened politely to me, and nobody asked any questions of me. And then that was—I left, and that was the end of it. Yeah, it was like talkin' to a brick wall or somethin'.

SL: Uh-huh. The die had been cast.

MG: Yeah.

SL: Yeah.

[01:30:39] MG: I never did—I had [*laughs*] band directors who would tell me that if they could get a commission, 10 percent commission, on everything that they bought, they'd buy everything through the

store. [*SL laughs*] Now, that was strictly against the law. You're bribing . . .

SL: Sure.

MG: . . . a federal official when you . . .

SL: Yeah.

MG: . . . get into that situation . . .

SL: Yeah.

MG: . . . with 'em. A state law—vio—you're violating the state law.

SL: Yeah.

MG: So you really put yourself in jeopardy, and that may be the reason they'd buy from out of state . . .

SL: Out of state.

MG: . . . because there'd be less whatever there. So [*laughs*] there was one fellow I knew, and I had talked to my lawyer about this because he came to me with a proposition like that. So I, my family lawyer, I told him about it. And so, following his instructions, what I did—there was a company in Memphis that he was buying from—the band director. [01:32:09] There was another fellow who was an assistant director that I knew real well, and this assistant director said that the director had signed a contract with this company in Memphis to buy everything from them. And it was laid out—so much commission he would get from every—whatever the student bought from that company, he would get a commission on it. And there was a clause in that contract that if he bought anything, as I

recall—I may still have a copy back there in an old file somewhere.

If he bought anything from another company, there was a penalty that that company in Memphis would place . . .

SL: Levy.

MG: . . . on him, you see. It was a pretty [*laughs*] tight thing. Well, this friend got me a copy of that contract. He got me some checks . . .

SL: Wow.

MG: . . . that had, you know—I don't know. He had some connection with that company in Memphis, too. So now, this was under the guidance of my attorney. So I got the band director in here, and in those days they first came out with a voice-activated recording machine. Do you remember when they came on . . .

SL: Sure.

MG: . . . the market? So I [*laughs*—he came back to the office, and I took one of those machines and set it under his chair. [*Laughter*] This all seems so primitive now, but anyway, I sat there with him and made a discussion and tentative agreement to pay him this money, and I would ask questions like, "Now, does it make any difference to you what I sell?" [01:34:25] Because they were buying junk stuff from the Memphis supplier, and the school was payin' for it. When that stuff needed repairing, it would go back to this company, and that company would charge the school to repair this stuff. Often, they would charge the school for repair work that was not done, and I had information on all that, paperwork and

stuff. So [*laughs*]*—*and then I had this recording that he agreed to everything. He said he'd like to buy 'em here, and you know, we made agreements on, seemingly so—that he would get paid, and I asked him, "You don't care what kinda instruments I sell 'em or anything like that." And, "No." And, "Whatever you sell 'em, I'll approve, and we'll give you"—so it was that—it was quite extensive [*laughs*], the conversation. [01:35:34] So I took all of this stuff that I had accumulated, includin' that recording, to my attorney and turned it over to him and said, "What should we do?" Now, I had—I really wanted to go to court and sue those folks . . .

SL: Sure.

MG: . . . or somethin'. I don't know what I expected to do. [01:35:54] But then in about two weeks—John Ike Moore was my attorney. And Mr. Moore called me. Said come up and he'd talk to me about it. So I went on up there, and he said, "Morse, we better drop this whole thing." And I said, "Why?" He said, "If we bring charges against any of these people, they will, in turn, bring charges against you for attempting to bribe 'em. And that's up to the prosecutor." So, see, all of these people somehow are involved in this thing at that time.

SL: Yeah.

MG: And the prosecutor—at one time I—this was later, years and years later. I was a friendly—friend with a prosecutor and one of his remarks was he could bring—he could prosecute that telephone pole

out there if he wanted to. And he could get it indicted through the grand jury. You see [*laughs*], they can indict and prosecute anybody they want to. And he said, "They might not be able to convict you, but you'll have a long, public case there, you see. That's what may happen if we press this thing any farther." So we quit. We didn't. That's—and I think it's the same way, and I've talked to other dealers and distributors.

SL: Yeah.

[01:37:29] MG: It's—and I think it really goes on in other facets of our government, too, but I know they wouldn't buy any insurance from local insurance agents at that time. It was all bought from—they wouldn't buy tires from the truck. I had a friend who was in the tire business, and they wouldn't buy tires from him. I had a friend who was in the paint business, Sherwin Williams Paint Company. They wouldn't buy paint from Sherwin Williams, no matter what the bid was on there. So [*laughs*] he said one time his district manager came down and fussed at him because he wasn't selling anything to the school. They were always painting something, the gymnasium or the football field stadium.

SL: Just maintenance, yeah.

MG: All that stuff. And he told 'em the story. He said, "Well, don't say anything to anybody, but we'll contact the school." So pretty soon he got a call. The dealer, the local fellow that I knew, got a call. And the—they wanted to come down and talk to him about some

paint to paint the football stadium with. [01:39:02] [*Laughs*]

Now, do you remember the term, it may've been before your day, Kem-Tone?

SL: Kem-Tone.

MG: It was something like a whitewash.

SL: Okay.

MG: It was color and calcium and water mixed up, and you could paint the walls inside your house with it.

SL: That's kinda like—oh, what's the—well, it covered stains and stuff?

MG: Well, I don't . . .

SL: No?

MG: I don't know.

SL: Okay. Well . . .

MG: But it was [*laughs*] just a cheap . . .

SL: Just a whitewash.

MG: . . . waterproof [*beeping sound*]-water-based paint.

SL: Based-whitewash. Yeah.

MG: It wasn't anything like the water-based paint they got now. It was just cheap. Everything was oil. Any good paint was oil paint.

SL: Yeah.

MG: Yeah. And lead paint. We had a lotta lead paint, if you remember readin' about that. [01:39:55] But anyway, they came in. Said, "We wanna paint the stadium. We want you to supply the paint."

[*SL laughs*] "Okay." "I want you to submit a bid." "Okay." He

said, "What kinda paint you want?" And he said, "Well, what's the cheapest paint you got?" He said, "Well, the cheapest paint is Kem-Tone, but if you paint the stadium in Kem-Tone, the first rain's gonna wash it away, see." "Well, give us that. Give us a bid on Kem-Tone to paint the whole stadium." So he gave him a bid, and they won. His dealership won the bid. And then this same fellow from the school came in and said, "You told me that Kem-Tone would wash away, I think. You said it's not good for the stadium." Said, "Yeah, I told you that from the beginning." He said, "Well, I've confirmed it. I've talked to other people, and we were tryin' to get something cheap, you know, to do it. But we can't use that now. What is your best paint?" So whatever Sherwin Williams's best paint was then. He said, "That's what we want. Go ahead and send me that paint." And he said, "Okay, I will. I'll—that'll be so much a gallon, and we'll give you a discount for buyin' this, and you can save this much money and so forth on it." And he said, "No, I don't want any discount. We wanna pay full price on that."

SL: Hmm.

MG: "And we wanna help the dealers, and you know, we wanna help—buy locally and that kinda thing." So he sent that paint out at full price, no discount for any of it, and they paid it. And he doesn't know what else happened. But Sherwin Williams somehow remitted to somebody—he—that's what he remitted to somebody . . .

SL: What was going on.

MG: Yeah, what—some financial remuneration for that contract. So that's what we were dealin' with. Now, I—and I talked to my father one time, and he said, "We know. Don't even answer any of their requests for bids anymore." Said, "We can do without their business, and we don't wanna deal with 'em." So that kinda—I don't get any trade outta the school system now.

[01:42:58] SL: When did you first sense that things were getting tough in Helena as far as the business community and the . . .

MG: Would you say that again?

SL: When did you first sense that the business in Helena—just business in general and Helena, the town—when did you first sense that something was on the downturn?

MG: [*Laughs*] Well, it took me a long time 'cause business was so good. But my wife, Jeannie, really had so much more wisdom than I. And when the kids were growin' up—this would be in the [19]60s or something, [19]50, late [19]50s. And then they finally reached college age, I thought—and a lot of 'em—you know, there were four—liked the store. They worked in the store since they were—I've got back there on the books ledgers where I paid 'em ten cents an hour to [*SL laughs*] come in and clean up the store and so forth.

SL: Yeah.

MG: So they started out early working in the store. And they liked it. So I was hopin' they would stay here and just run the business. Because it was so good, it was just, you know, worthwhile. And

then we'd keep the family all together.

SL: Yeah.

[01:44:54] MG: Well, Jeannie would have none of that. She said they had to go to college and stay in college as long as she could keep 'em there, long as they could stay. And then one time Morse, our son, was at Fayetteville, and he came home at midterm. We thought he had—was comin' home for a visit but when he started unloading his car, he had all of his everything in there. And [laughs] he—Jeannie asked him what he was thinkin' about, and he said, "Well, I quit. I wanna come work with Daddy in the store." Well, that pleased me endlessly. I—oh, that'd be wonderful. [Laughs] And I can remember—Jeannie was somewhat shorter than I. She was about five two or three or something like that. [Laughs] And we were standin' in the front yard, and I remember she reached up and grabbed him by the shirt collar and shook him and said, "You're [laughs] not gonna come back here and go to work. You're goin' to finish your college." So she got him to agree—he went out to Phillips College for the second semester and got his credits and then went back up and finished at Fayetteville and then went on into law school and so forth. [01:46:40] But it was her wisdom—she knew instinctively, I think, that this was not the place for them to stay. And it—from that point it started—see, industry moved away. You remember Asia opened up, and all of this industry went to Asia. The . . .

SL: Yes.

MG: . . . garment factories and the tire factories and everything began to move out. But I wasn't aware that that was happening. I remember I was—everything was gonna stay the same.

SL: You kinda had blinders on, I guess.

MG: I did. I guess I did, yeah, really.

SL: Well, I think it's quite natural for a father to hope that the children will come into the business, and . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . we all live together and get to see each other and be close to the grandkids and all that. I know . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . you know, all my—well, I just had a child just move back, but my two sons are in Washington, and you know, I'm—they're just now—I just had my first grandchild, and it's hard that you're missing . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: Miss that—those early years and stuff. [01:47:56] Well, so—but you determined—you decided to hang on to the business, and you just ran it—you and Jeannie just ran it yourselves.

MG: Now, wait. Would you say that again?

SL: You determined—you decided to hang on to the instrument business, and . . .

MG: Oh yeah.

SL: . . . and you and Jeannie just work the shop yourselves. Is that . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: Did she come down and—was she always helping with the store?

MG: Well . . .

[01:48:25] SL: I mean, she was a nurse at one point, right?

MG: When the kids were preteens, the college opened up. I don't know what year that was, really. But the college opened up, and they put in a school of nursing.

SL: Okay.

MG: We may have mentioned that. They took over the old Coast Guard Academy south of Helena.

SL: Yeah.

MG: Five or six miles down there. [01:48:53] And so, she was in the first class of nursing. So she was real bright. She was able to maintain the home, raise the kids, and go to nursing school. I think it was two years, I believe. And so, she became an RN there and went to nursing. And she would study every night, and I think, also, I'm—well, I know her doing that inspired the kids, and they studied hard, too, at night there. She and a couple of buddies would meet around the dining room table and study. They were in the same class together and studied. They all graduated and became nurses. So then—so she carried a big load with—she went to work for the hospital—oh, at the hospital, nursing down there.

And the kids, she kept them in school until they all got advanced degrees, and so, they're doing real well. [01:50:19] At one time when we were in the jukebox business, I had about—had men operating maybe five different trucks out of here. And we had at least three or four young girls working [*voices in background*] in the store here sellin' things, so it was real active. But then it began to go down and left it almost—well, it's a negative factor now, really. It—but we've been blessed with financial stability where the store is not of much importance financially to any of the children or to me, really. But I come down. Gives me a reason to get outta bed and . . .

SL: Sure.

MG: . . . come down here.

SL: It's—that's the best . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . way to beat gravity [*laughs*] . . .

MG: Yeah. [*Laughs*]

SL: . . . is get up.

MG: Get up.

SL: Get movin'.

MG: Yeah.

SL: Yeah.

MG: Well, that's kinda how it's developed.

[01:51:38] SL: Uh-huh. Well, over the years, though, you've made

friends with musicians with . . .

MG: Do what, now?

SL: Over the years, though, you've developed relationships. You've made friends with musicians and entertainers.

MG: Yeah.

SL: And obviously, the community that I'm aware of here, that I've spoken to, they're all—they all think the highest of you and . . .

MG: Well, thank you.

SL: So there's something that you fostered here that people appreciate. And it may not be a big economic, financial . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . success, but there's something about this that is very welcoming and homelike. And I would just assume that the same thing that attracts me to here are the same things that, say, a Levon Helm or . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . anyone else would find attractive about this space, this room.

MG: Yeah.

[01:52:40] SL: Can you talk about any of the folks that—any of the friends that you've made in the entertainment business since you've been here?

MG: Well . . .

SL: I mean, you did know Levon and Linda Helm, right? And . . .

MG: I did not know Linda.

SL: You did not?

MG: Uh-uh. I knew of Linda, but I'm not sure that I ever met Linda. I don't recall ever having met Linda.

SL: Well, she had her own washtub bass.

MG: Yeah.

SL: She didn't [*laughter*] need to come buy a bass.

MG: Yeah. I don't—I think they built it themselves. I'm not sure.

SL: Uh-huh. I'm sure they did.

MG: Yeah.

SL: Yeah.

[01:53:22] MG: But yeah, Levon—these kids kinda grew up here, you see. His—Levon, for instance, or Levon [pronounced LĒ-von], I think is the way he used to like to pronounce it.

SL: You know, I've hear—I hear both. I've always called him Levon [pronounced LĒ-von], but . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . the folks I'm talkin' to this past week have said Levon [pronounced lě-VON] and . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . you know, so . . .

MG: Well, I think he preferred Levon [pronounced LĒ-von].

SL: Okay.

MG: But anyway, he came in as a child. They lived out at a place bout fifteen miles from here, I guess, called Turkey Scratch.

SL: Yep.

MG: [*Unclear words*]. And he bought his first Martin guitar here. His daddy brought him in, and he picked it out. There's a picture back there on—did you see the picture on the wall?

SL: I—maybe not of that . . .

MG: With his guitar.

SL: No, I don't know that I have, but we'll . . .

MG: All right.

SL: . . . we'll look for that in a moment.

[01:54:33] MG: So—and I never did confirm my memory with him, but I always wanted to ask him, and when he was in here a few times, I would not think about it. But it seemed like I remember that Levon paid it off fifty cents a week with an agreement with his father, you see. One time he was in here, and we were talkin'. This was several years ago. And I asked him if he still had that guitar. And he said, no, he wish he did, but he doesn't, and what happened to it. Well, he was in New York, and there was a fellow musician, a girl, who hadn't had a gig in a long time and came to him—to his room one time and said she's got a gig for a night. First one she's had in a long time. But she had pawned her guitar or something. Didn't have an instrument. Would—could she borrow Levon's guitar? And he said, "Yeah." He loaned her that Martin and never saw either of them again, you see. So that was kind of a little side story on Levon. He was quite—he was a generous person.

Completely generous. And—but anyway, those musicians kinda came and went through here. Some of the pictures are on the wall. But I didn't have a lot of social or personal relations with 'em that I recall. [01:56:35] C.W. Gatlin moved—grew up around here, for instance. Mack Self over there on the wall grew up around here. Let me see. The—where is Mack? Well, there he is [points to wall] playin' the guitar right to the right of that white guitar hanging up there. So there were some that actually grew up here that I saw more often. But the rest of these folks are traveling musicians that have come through here and visit a few minutes. And some of 'em I don't even remember their names, so . . .

SL: I got to meet C.W. last time I was here. He came . . .

MG: Oh, did you?

SL: He came in the store . . .

MG: Oh, great.

SL: . . . while you and I were talkin'.

MG: Okay.

[01:57:25] SL: Do you know—can you tell me a little bit about C.W.?

MG: He's the only one I know locally that's a full-time musician. That's all of his income, and he travels. It's becoming—he's—C.W.'s got some handicaps now. They come along with age. He's got—what is it? Carpal . . .

SL: Arthritis? Or carpal tunnel?

MG: Yeah, in his—he's got some diabetes he's workin' with and different

ailments, but he keeps goin'. He keeps—he'll—he travels down to—
oh, well over into Mississippi and down to Louisiana for gigs. But
it's getting harder and harder on him because . . .

SL: So do you remember him as a youngster or . . .

MG: Oh yeah.

SL: . . . a young guy?

MG: He kinda grew up in here, too. He was several years behind Levon.

I don't know the age difference, but he's—he was younger than
Levon. But those kids would come in here and he just—they were
just kids that came into the music store and wanted to *[laughs]* talk
about music. So . . .

[01:58:50] SL: What about Ed Burks?

MG: Yeah, Ed and I were closer contemporaries. There's his picture over
there somewhere.

SL: Yeah, I saw it.

MG: You saw that?

SL: It's his little . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: Yeah, I saw it.

MG: Now, Ed *[laughs]* and I are almost kinfolk. We're kin to the same
people, and he was a—he might be four or five years my junior.
So—but he's—I saw him a lot through the years but not as a child.
He was so close to my age that—so . . .

SL: He became a fairly—a pretty versatile piano player I . . .

MG: Well, yeah, that's a—he plays several instruments. And he used to have a drummer and a guitar player with him, a trio, that would—and he still plays, I think, in private parties and some—I think there's a lounge over in Little Rock somewhere he plays in quite regularly. But he's solo now because [*laughs*] these musicians were severely undependable. And Ed would set up a gig, and somebody wouldn't show up. [*Laughs*] So anyway, they came out with a machine. I think it was Gibson, I'm not sure, called the Side Man. Have you heard of the Side Man?

SL: I have heard of the Side Man.

MG: And you could produce drums and music—all kinds of different . . .

SL: Bass and . . .

MG: . . . musical instruments . . .

SL: Yeah.

MG: . . . with it. So when they came out with that, I think Ed got one. He's got something more sophisticated now. But he doesn't fool with workin' with anybody else. [*SL laughs*] He does solo.

SL: Learned his lesson.

MG: Yeah.

[02:01:23] SL: Did you ever get a chance to meet Ronnie Hawkins?

MG: Yeah, Ronnie would come in. They were all kids at the same time, and they were—there was a fellow named Jimmy Luke. I forgot Jimmy's last name. But they were all about the same age and

would come in and play, and they played together. And now,
Ronnie, I think he was from up around Fayetteville . . .

SL: Yeah, uh-huh.

MG: . . . originally. Did you know him up there?

SL: Yes, I—yes, I know Ronnie.

MG: Well, tell him hello for me if you see him.

SL: I will. I will.

MG: Doesn't he live in Canada now?

SL: He still lives in Canada.

MG: Yeah. Well, in the days when I knew him when he was around
here, he didn't look so much like Santa Claus. [*Laughter*]

SL: I'll tell him you said that.

MG: But [*SL laughs*] I—so . . .

SL: Oh brother.

MG: Ronnie was one of those good—they were all good people. They
were the good people in the industry. All of 'em were. And I have
good memories of them but they—let's see. I think Jimmy Luke
played—you know, you might ask Ronnie about . . .

SL: Paulman.

MG: Huh?

SL: Jimmy Luke Paulman.

MG: Paulman. Jimmy Luke Paulman.

SL: Key . . .

MG: Did you know him?

SL: No, I didn't. And I—was he keyboards or bass? I can't remember.

MG: I think he played keyboard.

SL: I think he could knock the keys off a keyboard.

[02:03:04] MG: Yeah, he [*laughs*]*—one time they—the last time I saw 'em together, they came in here and bought a piano [SL laughs], one of these big uprights that had been rebuilt, and put it on the back of that pickup truck, [laughs] and I could still hear Jimmy Luke playin' when he was way down at the end of Cherry Street there. He was bangin' on that piano. And that may not—something—another time they made a curve down somewhere they were goin', and that piano slid off the back of the truck . . .*

SL: Oh!

MG: . . . and crashed. [*Laughs*]

SL: [*Laughs*] Oh gosh!

MG: And they had to come get another one or something. [*SL laughs*]
It [*laughter*]*—but they were interesting, gosh, they were interesting people. They just really were and . . .*

[02:04:02] SL: So I . . .

MG: So . . .

SL: . . . guess—I—did you get to meet any of the fellows from Canada ever?

MG: No, I don't think so.

SL: Rick Danko or Robbie Robertson or Garth Hudson?

MG: I didn't—I don't think I met any of those folks.

SL: Okay.

MG: In The Band?

SL: Uh-huh.

MG: Yeah. Huh-uh. I don't remember. Now, a lotta times groups of—
well, musicians would come in here, and . . .

SL: You wouldn't know who they were.

MG: . . . I didn't know who they were . . .

SL: Right.

MG: . . . or anything, so they may have come in and . . .

[02:04:37] SL: What about a slightly earlier generation? Say, the Elvis
era?

MG: Well, Elvis came in here one time. I've got his—he gave me a [*car
honks twice*] glossy picture back—you saw that up on the wall,
didn't you?

SL: I'm not sure I have, but we'll look for . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . it here in a minute.

MG: Well, it's up there near that child picture of my . . .

SL: Okay.

MG: . . . grandfather.

SL: Okay.

MG: And he was one of the nicest kids I've ever met. He really was. He
was polite. He came in and every—everywhere that—he was
playing at some occasion at the Catholic Club down there, so he

was in here. They always go into the music store to see if they have records, their records, the latest hits and so forth. [02:05:33] Well, Elvis was never a big seller of records for me, and he didn't register many sales on the jukebox, either. He, for some reason, he didn't. But anyway, I had a rack with his name on it back there. And I would only order two or three of Elvis's records. And so—but when he went back there, he looked, and he said, "I see my rack is empty," or something like that. And I said, "Yes, it's hard to keep 'em in stock, I guess. [*Laughs*] They sell out so fast. I've got some on order." And I don't know. I appeased him some way like that.

SL: Right.

MG: But then I—he wasn't a very important musician. He was just like any of the other musicians that come in here whenever they hit town, look around. So I left him in here and went over and got a cup of coffee, and while he was in here, I was over there at the drugstore drinkin' coffee with my friends. And course, I often thought if I'd stayed here with Elvis and got him to play and sign every one of these guitars, they would [*laughter*—but hindsight is better but . . .

SL: Yeah, it is.

MG: So . . .

[02:07:10] SL: Well, let's see. What about Johnny Cash? Did you ever get to meet him?

MG: I don't think so. I don't think Johnny was ever in here. If he were in here, I didn't recognize him at that time. And Johnny was just a—I mean, in my mind—his records sold pretty good, and they played pretty good on the jukebox, too. But he was really, in my mind, just another pothead, drunk kid playin' music. He had that reputation even then. And I think he'd had reputa—he had done some time over in Mississippi in the county jail and things like that, so I really didn't respect him very much. But I don't know whether he ever came in here or not. He may have with another group or something. But . . .

SL: Anyone else of that era, maybe? What about . . .

[02:08:42] TM: What about Conway Twitty and his dad?

SL: Yeah, Conway Twitty. Do you ever remember . . .

MG: Conway Twitty grew up around here. His daddy operated a ferryboat across the river. That was before the bridge was put in. And he worked for a friend of mine called Charlie Halbert, who owned the ferryboat system. [02:09:03] And [*coughs*—scuse me. He, now, he was of the Korean War era. He was in the navy, I think, during the Korean War. So he was—I guess he was older than the rest of the folks. And he was tryin' to make it in the business. He would come in with a stack of records. They were demos. And he would ask me to listen to 'em and tell me what it— they—lotta these musicians would bring these demos in here for me to listen to for some reason. It takes a lotta time.

SL: Yep.

MG: And [*laughs*] I usually didn't wanna spend that time listening to some musician's demo. But he—so I never did listen to any of his demos. And—but he was singing—he changed from—what did he sing first? Was it jazz or something? And then he changed to pop and country.

SL: Yeah, he . . .

MG: And he made the hit.

SL: . . . he was a crossover. I thought he may've been in that early rockabilly stuff. I thought he . . .

MG: He mighta been.

SL: I think he started . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . out that way and then did kinda the crossover. I . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . I'm not just real familiar with his career, but what was his real name? Harold? Was it Harold . . .

TM: I think so.

SL: . . . Harold Jenkins, maybe, or . . .

MG: Harold Jenkins. Yeah.

SL: Yeah.

MG: Thank you.

[02:11:13] SL: Well, so, he was a local boy that made good, then.

MG: Oh yeah, he really did. He went to the top. And I think he was

straight. I don't think he ever fooled with dope. In fact, he wouldn't allow it on the bus. And I knew one of the—I believe he was a keyboard player that played in the band, and he was tellin' me that he wouldn't allow any pot, marijuana, on the bus when—and they all traveled—all of 'em traveled on one big bus in the early days. And he was tellin' me a story that one fellow—I don't know whether he lit up and started smoking some marijuana or somethin' on the bus. And they stopped in the middle of nowhere, and Ronnie put him off the bus. Got rid of him right away. So he tried to run a straight group there. [02:12:20] One time in his early days, he bought—I think it was a Mercury automobile, and it wasn't satisfactory. It kept breaking down, doin' all kinds of problems with him. And he tried the dealer, and the dealer couldn't solve it. And he called the district manager and talked to them and somebody at the Mercury headquarters, wherever that was there. Couldn't get any satisfaction out of 'em at all. And so, he took that car [*laughs*] and got an artist to paint lemons all over the car. [*Laughs*] And he started driving it all over the country, wherever he was doin' a gig, and they gave him a new car. [*Laughs*] And so, they were—those were amusing antics that those—they were ingenious people. They were—well, all those musicians are cre—we call it creative in there.

SL: That's right.

MG: Yeah, so . . .

SL: Whatever it takes. [02:13:37] I'm tryin' to think of any of those

contempor—what about Carl Perkins? Did you ever get to meet him
or . . .

MG: No. I don't think I ever met Carl Perkins, either.

[02:13:51] TM: Hey Scott, are there any stories about the ferry? You
said you knew the man who ran the ferries, the guy who ran the
ferries on the river?

MG: Now, wait, that wa—what did I say about . . .

SL: Oh, you said that Conway Twitty's—Harold's father . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . ran a ferry.

MG: He was the pilot on . . .

SL: He was the pilot. Now, there were . . .

MG: . . . on the ferryboat.

SL: . . . there were a couple of different ferries. There was a train ferry,
and then there was a . . .

MG: Oh, that was . . .

SL: . . . car ferry.

MG: . . . different. That was run by Missouri Pacific Railroad, I think.

But this was a ferry for transporting personal automobiles across
the river. And it was owned by Charlie Halbert. He also owned one
down—I never did see it—but worked out of a Mississippi town
called Friars Point about twenty miles south of here on the river.

[02:14:44] SL: How did he—did he come from a family with money?

'Cause he also had the Rainbow hotel and . . .

MG: He made a lotta money. He was a hard worker. He really was.

And he did things like he would buy an automobile here, a brand-new automobile, and he could sell it in California for a few hundred dollars more than he paid for it here. And it—he'd made some kind of arrangement with the local dealer or something. So he would buy an automobile—Charlie Halbert—and drive it, he would sleep on the road, and drive it all the way to California. He came outta California. He played football at one of those colleges there in California. So he had some people there that he would also visit. But he would do that kind of thing, which takes a bit of energy and entrepreneurship to do it. He was flamboyant. I don't know where most of his money came from, but he did buy that hotel up there, the Nicholas Hotel. And he was in the process of turning it into a first-class hotel. He did put a first-class restaurant in there. It had a long bar in it, and it was one of those things where they cook the meal right in front of you. It had sort of a place there where they would—you'd order a steak or—specialized in steaks and things. And he had a nightclub in the back of the—part of the same building. The back part was a nightclub called the Varsity Club, I believe, was the name of it, which was—because there was a lot of activity in those days, and so, it was always busy in there. But I think the ferryboat was real profitable for him there so . . .

[02:17:24] SL: How long did that ferry run?

MG: Until they built the bridge in—see, he bought it from a family

called—it was Johnsons. A family called Johnson owned the ferryboat and he bou—I don't know. He may've come here to work for them. I don't know. But anyway, he bought the ferryboat service from them and—now, they had slot machines on the—see, slot machines were illegal, except [*laughter*] in the middle of the river . . .

SL: The river.

MG: . . . somewhere. [*Laughter*] And so, he had slot machines in—on there in a place. They were locked up. But then he would unlock 'em, and they'd be exposed to the public while he was ferrying 'em across.

SL: In the river. Yeah.

MG: Yeah. So he was an entrepreneur personified. It [*laughs*—but—and we don't seem to have those folks around here anymore, for some re—maybe the—well, the people have left here. So many people have left here that there's not many folks left to sell things to anymore.

SL: Right.

MG: So . . .

[02:18:50] SL: So when did they put the bridge in? Do you member when that was?

MG: Hmm. Well. I have the date. Somewhere in here I've got a list of dates. [Pause]

SL: I've never known anyone that would keep a list of dates in their

wallet like that.

MG: [*Laughs*] Well, and then I can't find 'em when I want 'em. [Pause]

Well, maybe that's . . .

SL: Well . . .

MG: We're getting close.

SL: Okay. [*Laughter*]

MG: Okay, it was in sixty—kinda faded—[19]61 because that's the year my younger son was born. And as a baby one of the first rides in the automobile was across the bridge. They had one day there you could ride for free, so we all got in the car, and he was with us, and we rode across the bridge.

SL: So it was a toll bridge?

MG: It was a toll bridge for a dollar.

SL: For a dollar!

MG: A dollar each way, yeah.

SL: Dollar each way.

MG: Yeah. And dollars were pretty valuable . . .

SL: Yeah.

MG: . . . in [19]61. But . . .

[02:21:53] SL: Do you member what it cost on the ferry?

MG: It may've been more. I don't. It may've been more than that on the ferryboat. Yeah.

TM: Scott, we're gonna need to change tapes.

SL: Okay.

[Tape stopped]

[02:22:08] SL: You have made a wonderful donation so far to the Pryor Center. This is a . . .

MG: Well, thank you.

SL: It is a great gift, and it's been a great honor talking with you. On this last—what I believe will be probably be our last tape, you—we've gotten the names of your children. Is there anything that you would like to—anything more you'd like to say about your kids before we wrap this up? I know that one went on to get a law degree. Is that right?

MG: A what, now?

SL: A law degree. Did one get a law degree or . . .

MG: Yeah, Pam—or two. Pam is—her law firm is in Virginia. And she took a bir—a basic law degree from Little Rock . . .

SL: Law school.

MG: . . . Law school. [02:23:07] And then she took an advanced law degree in DC at—what are the two colleges in DC?

SL: Well, there's American University. There's George Washington . . .

MG: George Washington.

SL: . . . and Georgetown.

MG: At George Washington.

SL: George Washington?

MG: Yeah. And then Morse took his degree at Fayetteville, up there.

[02:23:41] Mary Ann is working on another degree now in Little

Rock. They require an advanced degree in order to continue teaching nursing.

SL: Okay.

MG: The federal [*laughs*], I think it's federal requirement that they have an advanced degree in statistical analysis.

SL: Oh my gosh! [*MG laughs*] I'd change careers. [*Laughs*]

MG: And she [*laughs*—she's in the middle of that. What—the only thing that she is—explained to me that their reasoning is that they have to be able to, in case of a national emergency, they have to be able to statistically analyze where the big problems are going to occur. There's a lotta politics in it, so she says, in that thing.

SL: Yeah.

MG: But anyway, that's what she's in the middle of now.

SL: Golly.

MG: So . . .

SL: Well, send her my condolences.

MG: Oh. [*Laughter*] Well, she'd like to talk to you. I know you were gonna try to get in . . .

SL: Yeah.

MG: . . . in touch with her.

SL: I'll get ahold of her.

MG: Okay. She'll tell you more about that if you get into . . .

SL: Okay.

MG: . . . that subject . [02:25:07] And then our son Charles, who I just

told you was born in [19]61, took medical degree. He [*laughs*] wanted to be a theatrical performer. So did Pam. They both put—took—Pam took a theatrical degree before she got into law at—I believe it was Memphis State up there.

SL: M'kay.

MG: She came home after she graduated, and we were back there in the office, she and Jeannie and I. And so, Jeannie asked her what she was gonna do with that, and she said, well, she didn't know, that the only job she could find in performing—she plays the guitar real well, finger-picking guitar. Classical guitar . . .

SL: Yeah.

MG: . . . technique. And she said the only job she'd been offered up there was playing in an all-night bar for [*laughs*]*—playin' the guitar in an all-night bar. Piano bar, I believe they called it.*

SL: Yeah.

MG: So she didn't much wanna do that. And so, Jeannie said, "Well, what would you like to do?" And then I think it came my turn to speak, and I said, "Well, Morse is in law school. Why don't you think about goin' to law school?" So her answer was, "Okay." [*Laughter*] So she went . . .

SL: "Thanks, Dad!"

MG: . . . up to Little Rock. "Yeah. Okay." So she became an attorney. [02:27:13] And then Charles wanted to be a performer in the theater. He was—they were both good in Little Theatre locally.

During high school they—and so, he had a friend who was also in the Little Theatre. He was—Dr. Capes is his name. A wonderful, wonderful family. They really were. And so, he had talked to Dr. Capes about the theater, and Dr. Capes had told him—said, "Find some way to make a livin', and then think about the theater."

[Laughs] And so, he went on to this theatrical school at Memphis State that Pam had graduated from. And he came home at the—oh, at the end of the first semester, I think, and said he didn't wanna go there anymore. So—well, it was kinda—it wasn't much different from Pam. I said, "Well, why don't you go on into medical school." "Okay." So he went to [laughter] Fayetteville, and it was years and years later [laughs] I asked him why he didn't stay in the theater. Course, all their life I had spoken against entertaining as a way of making a livin'.

SL: Right.

MG: They—it's just [laughs]—but anyway, they were persistent. So we decided early that whatever college they wanted to go to, that would be all right as long as they stayed in school at whatever they wanted to study. But he told me [laughs]—he said, "Well, I really didn't like the people that I had to associate with." [Laughter] But what that means, I don't know for sure. [02:29:40] But anyway, he finished that and then went into advanced training. Became a psychiatrist and then a—then specialized in—took another course in child psychiatry, which was a bit advanced from psychiatry. And

that's what his practice was. He went to California, I believe it was the University of California, for his advanced studies, and he was tellin' me that they were—he met some colleagues out there. They told him he oughta stay in California and—because—he said, "Why?" They said, "Because California is a smorgasbord of child psychiatry clients, patients." He said, "Just about all of those children in that theatrical area had their private psychiatrist."

SL: [*Laughs*] Wow.

MG: And he said "It's just"—and he didn't want that. He didn't wanna raise his children in the same [*laughs*] . . .

SL: Right.

MG: . . . atmosphere, so he came back and set up practice in Little Rock there. So they—and that was the influence of their mother. She kept pushin' 'em, and she was so wise to do so 'cause, far as I was concerned, I'd've kept 'em all here and . . .

SL: Yeah, but they're all doing well, and they're all . . .

MG: Yeah. See, that's why this store is of no financial value to them whatever. And—but it bothers them that it's going to be lost at some point unless something can be—lost to the town as a draw and an . . .

SL: It is an icon.

MG: . . . interest. Yeah. Yeah.

[02:32:05] SL: Is there anything else that you'd like to say or talk about?

MG: Can't think of anything now. We . . .

SL: Well, let me tell you what we've been tryin' to do.

MG: [*Clears throat*] Okay.

SL: At the end of every interview, we ask the interviewee to look at the camera and to just say, "I'm Morse Gist" . . .

MG: Yeah.

SL: . . . "and I'm proud to be from Arkansas."

MG: Okay.

SL: It's just a—kind of tryin' to instill some pride in being from the state. So—and what I'll do—I'll get up and get outta the way, so you won't look at me. And just look at the camera, and Trey will be your director.

MG: Okay.

SL: This is your acting career here. [*Laughter*]

MG: Well, I didn't . . .

SL: So this is . . .

MG: . . . inherit any of that talent.

SL: It's been wonderful, by the way.

MG: Oh, I've enjoyed it. I really have.

SL: Okay.

TM: And anytime . . .

[02:32:59] MG: Okay. Well, to end this interview, I'm Morse Gist, Helena, Arkansas, and I'm proud to be a member of this community. This is a proud community that's on the comeback

now. And I'm proud to be from a state such as Arkansas, which is one of the finest states in this country. And thanks for watching.

Thanks for listening.

TM: Good. Good. Let's do one . . .

MG: Goodbye.

TM: . . . let's do one—I'm sorry to talk over you there. Let's do one short one where you say, "I'm Morse Gist, and I'm proud to be from Arkansas."

MG: I'm Morse Gist, and I'm proud to be from Arkansas.

SL: Perfect.

[02:33:46 End of interview]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]