

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

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Arkansas Memories Project

Bill Lancaster

Interviewed by Scott Lunsford

August 30, 2012

Sheridan, 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.

The Pryor Center's objective is to collect audio and video recordings of interviews along with scanned images of family photographs and documents. These donated materials are carefully preserved, catalogued, and deposited in the Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville. The transcripts, audio files, video highlight clips, and photographs are made available on the Pryor Center Web site at <http://pryorcenter.uark.edu>. The Pryor Center recommends that researchers utilize the audio recordings and highlight clips, in addition to the transcripts, to enhance their connection with the interviewee.

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 16th 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 and words emphasized by the speaker.
- Question marks enclose proper nouns for which we cannot verify the spelling and words that we cannot understand with certainty.

- Brackets enclose
 - italicized annotations of nonverbal sounds, such as laughter, and audible sounds, such as a doorbell ringing;
 - annotations for clarification and identification; and
 - standard English spelling of informal words.
- Commas are used in a conventional manner where possible to aid in readability.

Citation Information

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**Scott Lunsford interviewed Bill Lancaster on August 30, 2012,
in Sheridan, Arkansas.**

[00:00:00]

Scott Lunsford: Bill, I'm gonna—um—I've got a—a—a little bit of business to take care of here at the front. First of all I've gotta say thank you [*camera clicks*] for puttin' up with us today and agreeing to put yourself through this. I hope that we're gonna have a good time. I know—I know we will. But . . .

Bill Lancaster: I hope so.

SL: . . . um—uh—I've—identify us. You're—uh—Bill "Scoop" Lancaster, and I'm Scott Lunsford. I'm with the Pryor Center. We're here at your residence in Sheridan, Arkansas. And today's date is the thirtieth of August, 2012. And we're gonna be—uh—talkin' about your life—uh—from beginning to the present day. Um—we're recording this in—um—high-definition videotape and hard drive and high-def audio. Um—you will get a copy of all the raw footage. Uh—you will—uh—that'll be followed up by a transcript, and we transcribe stuff verbatim. We don't do it for readability. It's just exactly how we sounded and what we said. We think that's an added value, and it doesn't mean that we're

puttin' words in your mouth that you didn't say or—so—uh—
we're kinda particular about all that stuff. We'll ask you to look
at all that, read all that. And if there's anything that you are
uncomfortable with—uh—we'll take it out for you. We're—it's
not . . .

BL: Okay.

[00:01:26] SL: . . . about gettin' anybody or hurtin' anybody's
feelin's. It's—it's—uh—all about your story the way you want to
tell it. And—and we hold true to that. When you're happy with
all that—with the content—um—you'll—um—we'll wanna post it
on the web—the Pryor Center website. And we'll post what we
call highlight clips—video clips of the interview 'cause our
interviews are very long, and it just—no one wants to go through
five or six or eight or fourteen hours of interview.

BL: Hmm.

SL: So we—we do—uh—highlight clips. And we'll send you a DVD of
the highlight clips so you'll know exactly what people will be able
to look at and listen to on our website. Now, we'll also post the
entire audio of the interview. Maybe it's five, ten, fourteen
hours, and people will be able to download that and be able to
put it on their MP3 players or their CDs, and they'll kinda have
an audiobook—uh—uh—of the interview. We'll also post the

entire transcript, you know, the one that you're happy with, and—uh—they'll be able to download that. Course, people can read through a whole interview much more quickly than they could . . .

BL: Right.

[00:02:46] SL: . . . uh—watch or listen an interview, and—uh—that'll help with search engines and subject matters and all that. We're also scanning images—uh—there in the critter room. Uh—Bruce is back in there, and we'll end up gettin', I don't know, forty, fifty images, maybe a little more. And we'll post those on our website, and they'll—they'll be a slideshow—um—that happens on your featured interview page. The—um—you will also get all those scans back to you, so . . .

BL: Okay.

SL: . . . you and your family will have those. We'll take all this material, and we will preserve it forever. So that's—that's the big deal . . .

BL: That's wonderful.

SL: . . . here that . . .

BL: Yeah.

SL: . . . we're getting Arkansas stories from Arkansas folks, and we're gonna preserve them. So—uh—we think—we think it's a

good—a good service, and—and—uh—we are providing you—
we'll provide you with as many copies as you want. Your family
will always have access to 'em, so I think it's a—it—it's the right
thing to do. So . . .

BL: I do too. Thanks for being here in my home.

SL: Well, thank you very much. Well, we're gonna keep goin', then.
And—um—uh—I'll try and keep us in a chronology, but it's okay
if you think of somethin' that jumps us way forward, or if later
on in the day—if you wanna go back to your childhood, that's—
there's no wrong answers. Um—there's—uh—we can stop at any
moment. We will stop every hour to change tape, and we'll
stand up and take a break. We'll—uh—we'll break for lunch.
We'll bring some lunch in, and—uh—we're just gonna have a—a
good time. I think . . .

BL: Okay.

[00:04:25] SL: . . . I think you'll enjoy this. Um—well, Bill, we
usually start with—uh—when and where you were born.

BL: Well, I was born in 1946 on September 30 at a small frame
house here in Sheridan—uh—not far from where I live now.
Uh—I was born—uh—at 2:30 in the afternoon. Uh—my father—
uh—was a carpenter and—uh—uh—fired the boiler at the—uh—
big sawmill here in Sheridan. My mother was a homemaker. I

was the seventh of seven kids. I was the last. I was the baby. And I have—uh—three brothers and three sisters, and—uh—one of my sisters has passed away, and my oldest brother has passed away. [00:05:15] And—uh—all of the Lancaster kids are kind of—uh—well known, not [*bird chirps*] just here in—in our hometown of Sheridan, but around the state and a little bit around the nation. Uh—we're—we're all writers. Uh—some have done well in business—uh—banking and—uh—other professions. And—uh—we were raised—um—in this small town of Sheridan—uh—by hardworking parents. My—I—I never shall forget how hard my father worked. Uh—my memories of him—he passed away when I was twenty-six. I'm sixty-five now. Uh—my father was the hardest-working man I ever saw. He—uh—he never stopped working. He worked in the daytime—uh—and he worked at night. And he provided for us—uh—on meager wages—uh—and it's somethin' that's ingrained in me and all of my siblings. Uh—we're hardworking people. We've worked hard our whole life, and I think that I benefitted greatly from that. My mother was forty-three when I was born. I was the last of seven, and—uh—I have a great affection for older people. I have all my life because my mother was older when she raised me. Uh—I was five years old when I started first grade, and I

didn't wanna leave home.

SL: Mm-hm.

[00:06:41] BL: Uh—my sisters have written lots of stories about—uh—my first-grade experiences. I ran away from school. Uh—uh—they couldn't keep me in the class [*SL laughs*] because—uh—I wanted to find my mother. [*Laughs*] And they would find me uptown walking around and call and get me back either in the classroom or—or back home. But I didn't understand first grade and being away—uh—from home because I had never been away from home. So—uh—that's how—uh—I remember my childhood vividly. Uh—I barely remember—and my sister, who is eighty-two, and I—my oldest sister, Nita, and I were talkin' about this last night—I—I barely remember growing up without electricity. I think I was three—uh—probably three and a half years old when we got electricity at our little house. I remember Mother—uh—filling the coal-oil lamps that she carried around for light. I remember the—the well pump in the kitchen that we had to prime in the morning with—with water to get water goin'. Uh—the well that we had on the back porch provided our water. And in dry summertimes, the well would go dry and it—we were threatened with loss of water. Uh—those were interesting times in the early [19]50s growin' up in

Arkansas. And it—I have such vivid memories of—of those times. Uh—you know, we played outside all day long. Uh—we lived on a gravel road. Mother fought the dust [*SL laughs*]—uh—because she loved her home being pretty, and she loved her curtains and—and everything in its place. But because of the—because of the heat, you had to raise the windows to have air in the house, and that let the dust in. And so that was a—uh—a constant fight for her to keep the dust out of the—out of the house while we were outside playing. Uh—I played baseball every day of my life, I guess, growin' up. I loved baseball, and I loved sports, and I loved fishing. And we would—we had the creek behind our house where the kids would—I mean, you'd leave home at—uh—early in the mornin' and play outside all day and come home. Uh—she would call us, and we'd hear her voice echoin' through the woods, and we'd come eat and still play. And that's what kids did back then, you know. We weren't exposed to things like kids are now. [00:09:23] Uh—I remember—uh—my first experience feeling air-conditioned air. Uh—we had friends—my brother Bob and I were very close in age, and we played together all the time. And we walked through the woods to visit the Freeman brothers, and their mom and dad were able to afford an air conditioner. And I went in



their house one day, and I felt air-conditioned air for the first time, and I—I remember it now. I remember how it felt. I remember how it smelled. And I knew then at a very early age that I never wanted to be without air-conditioned [*SL laughs*] air again. I loved it. And—but you—but you remember those things, you know?

SL: Sure.

[00:10:11] BL: Uh—and it's—but everybody grew up like that in our town. It's—it's not that—nobody—uh—was poor. We had everything. We had good meals. Mother was an excellent cook. Uh—we had groceries delivered from the—the sawmill mercantile company. Uh—the—the old gentleman would bring the—the groceries in the truck and bring 'em to your house. The milkman would deliver the milk in the mornings and leave it on the porch. So you had all of this—uh—Mayberry kind of growing-up experiences that I wouldn't take anything for. I—I went to school here in Sheridan like all my brothers and sisters. Loved school here. Went off to college at—at Arkansas A&M in Monticello, which is now University of Arkansas at Monticello. Uh—I—I went to school on a baseball scholarship. I was kind of a celebrated—uh—American Legion baseball pitcher and won a scholarship to college. And then after college I—uh—became a

sportswriter and—with the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. They gave me my first job. And you know—um—talkin' about my dad and how hard he worked, he was amazed that my brother Bob and I as newspaper people could sit at a typewriter and make a livin'. He marveled at that, and we talked about it a little bit before he passed away. He—he was amazed that as a sportswriter and sports editor, I could go watch a football game and go back to the office and write about it and make—and be paid for it. [SL laughs] Uh—because he had spent his whole life, you know, working so hard raisin' seven kids, and now here we are—we're walkin' around—uh—interviewing football coaches and gettin' paid money for it, and it fascinated him. But he was so proud of us.

SL: Well, I've got about four hundred questions here for you now.

[Laughs] Just on what you . . .

BL: Okay.

[00:12:27] SL: Um—first of all [*vehicle passes*]*—um—your dad was a carpenter and—um—he—he—um—uh—you were talkin' about him firin' up the boiler at the sawmill. Now, when I—when I think of a boiler, I—I—I—I'm thinking [*clunking sound*] in terms of heat, you know, some kinda radiator heat or something. Were the—was that for heating the sawmill or . . .*

BL: It—it was for some—running some of their equipment. But mainly, believe it or not, back then they—when the logs were chipped up—uh—they just burned the sawdust to get rid of it.

SL: Uh-huh.

BL: And—uh—Sheridan was a huge sawmill town. Uh—back in the [19]50s and [19]60s—uh—that was our main source of income here. We're still a lumber town in a way, in that we—timber is our main product in south Arkansas and in Grant County.

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: But back then we had three huge sawmills that employed hundreds and hundreds of people. Uh—when the White House did some renovation back in the [19]50s—uh—lumber products from Sheridan, Arkansas, were used in some of the construction at the White House in DC. I mean, we were world famous for the lumber production, and hundreds and hundreds of people worked in the mills here. It was a huge industry, and it gradually went away—uh—as paper products kinda moved into the big paper mill industries.

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: And lumber was no longer processed as much as it is—as it was then.

[00:14:00] SL: So—um—did your dad—uh—build any of the

structures here in Sheridan? Is . . .

BL: He did. He built—he worked on houses—uh—and he—he put me to work. Uh—I—I did carpentry work. I—uh—did—um—roofing. Uh—we—we—I roofed—I—I—I could carry shingles on my shoulders. Dad was very proud of me. As a young man I—I was very strong and athletic, and I think he was a bit of a psychiatrist in—in—like—like my mom, who—Mother would always say, "Oh, here comes the grocery man. You're gonna get to help me put up the groceries." Well, she—it was her way of gettin' us to do the work.

SL: Sure.

BL: Well, Dad was that way. He would brag on me to—when the stepladders—back—back then you carried shingles up to the roof.

SL: That's right.

[00:14:50] BL: They didn't lift 'em up on—uh—mechanical devices like they do today. So I could put two bundles of shingles on my shoulders and walk up the ladder with 'em and flip 'em over. And I painted houses. And—uh—and—uh—I remember as a senior in high school—uh—Ray Thornton's mother—Miss Wilma Thornton was one of my teachers. Great teacher. And she hired me to paint her rent house. I—I painted the whole house by

myself as a senior, and I was paid a dollar an hour. I thought I was gonna be a rich person.

SL: Mmm. Yeah.

[00:15:24] BL: But I worked after school every afternoon painting houses, and—uh—you know, I wouldn't take anything for that experience. Kids worked back then—uh—in the grocery stores—at the sawmill in the summertime. And I worked with my father, and I—and I learned to paint. I still like to paint houses. I don't—uh—enjoy painting outside houses—out—the outside part, but I enjoy—uh—that to—to this day, and I thank him for that. And Mother—uh—was so skilled. Uh—she was a—a brilliant woman. She was born in Kentucky and grew up in Tennessee, and at age six, her father, who was a judge in Ken—in Tennessee—in Nashville—he read an advertisement in the paper about—uh—land available in Sheridan, Arkansas. And he loaded up his daughters and his son, and they—he moved 'em to Sheridan in a covered wagon. And my mother—that's how we got to Sheridan. Uh—my fourth great-grandfather on my mother's side was John Sevier, the first governor of Tennessee. Uh—he was a famous—uh—Revolutionary War—uh—person.

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: And—uh—fought the Indians, and—uh—you can read a lot about

John Sevier in the history books. And that—that's kinda the pioneering spirit and the love for history that we have—was from our mother, I think.

SL: So th—that was her grandfather?

BL: Uh—John Sevier woulda been my mother's—uh—third great-grandfather. He's my fourth. And—uh—Sevierville, Tennessee, is very famous today.

SL: Yeah.

BL: Uh—that was named after our grandfather.

[00:17:12] SL: I wanna—uh—I wanna ask you about your grandparents. But first—uh—can you give us the names of all your siblings?

BL: Yeah. My oldest brother was Harold.

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: Uh—Harold was a navy veteran. Uh—he was on the lead ship during the Cuban crisis. He . . .

SL: Mmm.

BL: . . . he was headed to Cuba during all of that. He spent twenty-one years in the navy. He retired as a chief and then became an insurance—uh—owned his own insurance agency in Sheridan. Uh—he was just a rock to me. Many people thought he was—my—my dad. There was such an age difference between me

and my oldest brother. He's passed away. Uh—then my sister Nita is next. Her name's Nita Webb. Uh—Nita's a wonderful writer and historical person. She's done all of our family research—researched our family tree. Uh—she's written for lots of newspapers.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:18:12] BL: Uh—then there was my sister Joy—uh—Joy Greer.

Peop—people all over Arkansas know Joy. She was—uh—a civil rights leader. She was a wonderful banker. She was the first woman to be a vice president of a large bank in Arkansas. Spent her entire career at First National in Little Rock—or most of her career . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: . . . which became First Commercial. Uh—she founded VIPs in public schools in Little Rock. Still in existence today. Uh—she passed away a few years ago.

SL: Hmm.

BL: Then there's my sister Bet, who's a homemaker—had two sons. One's a—a college professor—a minister—and the other one is a college professor and a medical researcher at—um—University of Michigan. So she had two—uh—over—high-achieving sons [*SL laughs*] that we're very proud of. Uh—so let's see, there's

Harold—and then my brother Jim. Uh—Jim's an engineer. Uh—ran the Arkla plant here in Sheridan for many years. He owns a patent on all—uh—gas—uh—meters. Uh—he's—so he's an inventor and a wonderful grandfather—uh—now. His—uh—daughter's Sandy, and so—uh—then there's my brother Bob, who was three years older than me. A well-known writer—uh—uh—was a Nieman Fellow to Harvard and—uh—has written several books, like I have. Uh—I think he's a much better writer than [*SL laughs*] me, but—uh—I'm very proud of my—my brother Bob. So there was Harold, Nita, Joy, Bet, Jim, and Bob and me.

SL: That's quite a brood.

BL: It was a—uh—we—we—you know, my family's the most important thing in the world to me. Uh—my wife and my two kids and my grandkids and my brothers and sisters. And—uh—I—I think we've done a whole lot for our community—uh—for the churches here. Uh—for—uh—and for the state of Arkansas. We've been—all been involved—uh—politically. Uh—we're—we're political animals. We—we believe strongly in—in—in being involved in the—uh—the political process.

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:20:39] SL: Okay, let's talk about your grandparents a little bit.

Did you know either set of grandparents at all, or were you . . .

BL: My . . .

SL: . . . so . . .

BL: . . . my grandparents on my mother's side—his name was Arch Willard Speck. *S-P-E-C-K*. He was my grandfather, and he was a judge—justice of the peace judge here in Sheridan. And my grandmother—we called her Momma Speck—she was a homemaker for him, and he—like I say, he moved here from Tennessee and brought his kids here to raise 'em in Sheridan. Yeah, I knew 'em. I was—they were old when I was young.

SL: Yeah.

[00:21:21] BL: And we lost them at—oh gosh, I might have been twelve or thirteen.

SL: Well, that's pretty good.

BL: And—but I got to know 'em. I barely remember my father's mother. I didn't know his father—my father's father, Joe Lancaster. I knew Annie Lancaster briefly. I was probably six when she died. But she was very tall and had a dark complexion. She was like a half Indian—half Quapaw Indian. And she's a very stoic lady. But I remember her, and I could—I remember seeing her walk back to her old house, which was just up the wooden—or the woods road from our home. I can see

her walkin' up the trail late at night, all bent over. But I barely remember her at all. But my mother's parents I remember well. He owned a Cadillac in Sheridan, and that was very unusual back then. But he was prominent, and he loved bein' a traffic judge—essentially what he did. He—justice of the peace judges could marry people, and he did that too. But mostly he fined people for speeding and those sorts of things.

[00:22:48] SL: [*Sighs*] Okay, so, the house that you grew up in, was it in Sheridan or was it out in the country? You talked about being able to see your grandmother on the woods road. Kinda makes me think that you were on a farm or . . .

BL: It was a rural home. It was on a gravel road. The road between Sheridan and Redfield is Highway 46 now, but we grew up in that little house. And Dad kept adding on to the house as children were born, although [*SL laughs*] I never had a room of my own. Bob and I slept in the same room, and it was so cold in the morning. But we grew up in that—I was born in that house, grew up in that house. And we were not in the city limits—still not in the city limits where I live now. We're—in fact, we were officially two miles from the school. Because back when my sisters, who were older than me, were growing up, the school bus—now, this is an unbelievable rule when you look at

transportation issues of today. But they couldn't ride the bus because they lived less than 2.10 miles—2.1 miles from the school. If you lived less than 2.10, you couldn't ride the bus. So Nita, Joy, Jim—all of my siblings—they had to walk to school every day.

SL: Oh!

[00:24:17] BL: And they had to walk back. And I did some of that.

When I was in high school, I practiced football and basketball every afternoon, and we had no way of gettin' home, you know. Kids didn't have cars back then. So I'd walk home, and I'd walk through the woods many times. From the football field to my home was about two miles, and I had a shortcut through the woods, and I had a favorite footlog that I crossed on the creek. And you know, I still dream about that. I still dream about those walks through the woods. But that's kinda how we grew up. And the—like I told you while ago, the most memorable times were outside—not so much inside the house. I remember we had the luxury—Dad bought an attic fan, and this is just the biggest blessing in my young life, was that I had this wonderful air coming through the windows at night, and it was cool 'cause I'm a hot-natured person, and I can't stand heat. And all of a sudden, you could plug this big fan in that roared in the attic,

and the breeze would come through the windows, and it was wonderful.

SL: Yeah, I grew up with an attic fan.

BL: Yeah.

SL: It was wonderful.

BL: Loved the attic fan.

[00:25:40] SL: Yeah, it just sucked all the air in and spit it out the attic, so [*BL sniffs*] it was smart stuff. So you can remember getting electricity, or you can remember the coal-oil lamps. And you had a pump in the kitchen that was connected to your well, so . . .

BL: Right, it was a . . .

SL: . . . you kind of . . .

BL: . . . red pump. It had a—you know, you had to actually pump it up and down to get the water going. Yeah, I remember some of that, but it's a—it's so distant because all of the electricity and the running water and the indoor bathroom came along when I was probably five—three and a half years old to six and a half years old. All of that quote "progress" happened in my young life, and all of a sudden better things started comin' along. I'm—I guess they were better. I remember our first television set. We were one of the first families in Sheridan to have a

television, and this was a luxury. My sister Bet—she was a—I believe, a soon-to-be senior in high school. She traveled to Virginia to be with my brother Harold, who was in the navy, for a week vacation. She came home and told Dad about this wonderful thing that my brother had in Virginia called a television. And Dad was so understanding, and it—such a good provider. He wanted to look into this.

SL: Yeah.

[00:27:15] BL: And he bought us a black-and-white television, and there was only one TV station in Arkansas—Channel 7 out of Little Rock . . .

SL: Yes.

BL: . . . and Pine Bluff.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And they started their afternoon broadcast at four in the afternoon out of Pine Bluff, and we were so enamored of this thing—this magic box—this picture. It had the test pattern, you know, with the . . .

SL: Sure.

BL: . . . Indian chief up there.

SL: Absolutely. Yeah, kind of a target . . .

BL: Yeah, it was . . .

SL: . . . thing.

BL: . . . a target with all these . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . squiggly lines.

SL: Uh-huh.

BL: And you had the tee—you had the rabbit ears that you moved around and held in a certain position to [*SL laughs*] get a picture because the picture was very snowy . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . and loud. And it would roll because you had horizontal and . . .

SL: Vertical, yeah.

BL: . . . vertical knobs on the TV . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . you could turn. But we were so intrigued that Bob and I—we would sit all day—we would get up in the morning and turn the television set on and watch the silly test pattern all day [*SL laughs*] till four o'clock. And the programming started with *Cowboy Corral* and a little bit of a kids' moppet matinee from Pine Bluff. And that started the programming, and it would go for a few hours, and then you'd shut off for the night. [*SL laughs*] But we would—we were mesmerized. We were glued to

this magic world that was coming our way, and I loved it, and I still love television.

[00:28:50] SL: Did the—was there a piano in your house?

BL: Mother played the piano. She was the church organist. My sister Nita became the church organist later. They could play anything in the world. Never—Mother never had a music lesson—played by ear—and she could play anything. She was wonderful. And my sister Nita is now the church organist—has been our church organist for over fifty years. And she plays every Sunday along with her daughter, who is a pianist at the church. My sister Joy and Bet both played. They took a few lessons. My brother Jim plays the guitar, and Bob and I watch. [SL laughs] But it's a—we used to have great Christmas gatherings. Christmas at our little house was the highlight, and Dad lived for it. He'd get us up at four in the morning . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . and you know, we were lucky to have a few presents. We'd have rock candy in a sock that was hung up as a stocking.

SL: Yeah.

BL: We'd have rock candy and oranges and an apple, and we'd shoot firecrackers. I remember that. It was a big deal to shoot firecrackers on Christmas. And one of my most vivid memories

of my mother is that—and I'm—I look back, and it's very emotional about how they sacrificed. But they bought me a green bicycle when I was about eleven or twelve. And she purchased it at Oklahoma Tire and Supply Company in Sheridan and paid it off three dollars a month, and that was my Christmas present. And it was the greatest bicycle in the world. But you know, I know how much they had to sacrifice for that. When I graduated from high school, my dad gave me forty dollars. And I was talkin' to my sister Nita [*SL laughs*], who's now eighty-two, and she said, "Well, the one gift that I remember is—was when I got married that my grandmother gave me a quart jar full of plum jelly."

SL: There you go! [*Laughter*]

[00:31:26] BL: So I thought the bicycle might be a little better than the plum jelly. Yeah. But you know, it's just the way it was. And oh, we loved Christmas. We had—there were seven of us kids—grandkids—in this small, little living room and Christmas packages stacked to the ceiling, you know.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And they weren't dynamic gifts like kids get today. They weren't thousand-dollar gifts. You might get a pair of socks and, oh, a great pair of shoes, maybe. Ray Thornton's wife, Betty—her dad

owned a shoe store—Mr. Mann—and every year before school, I would get a pair of Sears blue jeans with the reinforced padding in the knees.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And I'd get to go to Mr. Mann's store with Dad, and he would let me pick out a pair of shoes. And you'd always get shoes, like, a size or two bigger . . .

SL: 'Cause you grew into 'em.

BL: . . . 'cause they'd say, "Well, you'll grow into 'em."

SL: Right. Right.

BL: But that was part of our upbringing.

[00:32:39] SL: What about radio in the house? Did—you had radio long before the television, I would guess.

BL: We did have radio, and we listened to certain programs. My sisters loved radio, and I didn't listen to it that much, but they did. They were into different programs that they liked. In fact, when my mother was dying in the nursing home—she had Alzheimer's just like my sister did that passed away. And it was an interesting learning experience for us to watch this disease—every family that goes through it, you're just puzzled by what it can do. And scared for them because they're scared.

SL: Yeah.

BL: But one night at the nursing home—it was not long before Mom died—she was in the bed, and my sister Nita and I had taken her supper. We took her supper every night. And we were cleanin' up the dishes and puttin' 'em away, and Mother looked at me, and she said, "I'm starving to death." [*SL laughs*] She said, "I haven't eaten in days." And she'd just eaten.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And I said, "Mom, you just had a great supper, and Nita brought dessert and everything." And she looked up at me—because she was a radio enthusiast back in her day. She looked up at me, and she said, "That's not so, Fibber." [*SL laughs*] And listen to me, she recited with characters and everything a fifteen- or twenty-minute dissertation—a program from *Fibber McGee and Molly* that she had memorized back, gosh, what, forty or fifty years earlier.

SL: Yeah, yeah.

[00:34:51] BL: But she had—she memorized that. She was quite a thespian, just like her mother was. It kinda spurred me on towards some of that. But she looked at me, and she couldn't remember, now, that she had just eaten supper, but she could remember that 1935 radio program, what the dialogue was, and the different characters.

SL: Alzheimer's is a hard, hard disease 'cause it is frustrating. The short-term memory is shot, but the . . .

BL: But you go back . . .

SL: . . . long-term mem . . .

BL: But . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . long-term—it was an amazing, frightening journey for us as a family to watch it with my mom, and then my sister Joy, who was struck down way too early in life.

SL: Yeah. So you've [*siren in background*] mentioned that your mom was a thespian or . . .

BL: Yeah, she loved the theater, and she loved doin' church programs and that sort of thing. Dad—no, he wouldn't've . . .

Trey Marley: Let's let that get away from us for a second.

[Tape stopped]

[00:35:56] SL: So did he—did she act in plays or . . .

BL: She—I don't know that she acted in plays as a child. No, but she took such a big interest in that in our church. Helping kids in programs and that sort of thing. But her mother—my grandmother did, and her grandmother—my grandmother quote "performed" at church, and she would do adaptations—characterizations of characters who were visiting with different

people in the Bible and that sort of thing, so I—you know, we're all victims of our heritage. We all—the gene pool is in there, and we pick up on things, and I think that may be where I got some of that. I did a lot of that in my career.

[00:36:50] SL: Oh, let's see, I was gonna ask about—what church did y'all belong to?

BL: Christian Church. A little church in Sheridan. Sheridan is blessed with dozens and dozens of churches. My father and Ray Thornton's father built that church—the two of them along with some other men. The church was built from the ground up with lumber from the mills here, and Dad drove the nails and built the church. My dad—Ray Thornton, who I consider one of my great friends, he used to say, "Bill, tell me that story about your dad's funeral." And I've—I wrote a column one time about funerals because I find 'em interesting, especially in the South—how we quote "celebrate life." But my dad grew up here on this land where my house is. He roamed these hills as a young boy and fished in the creeks and stuff here. And when he built his house, there was—he built the house by a tree he planted. It's a giant white oak tree. And it grew and grew and grew, and we used to have a swing on this tree, and it became a giant tree. Well, Dad got sick with cancer, and he passed away.

SL: Yeah.

BL: So it came time for the funeral that day, and it started raining and rained and rained—and the front wouldn't leave. It just—the . . .

SL: Stalled out.

BL: . . . clouds just stayed over us. The house—the highway between Sheridan and Pine Bluff—the US highway had to be closed because of the rain. It was just a deluge. And at noon, it was as dark, almost, as it was at midnight. And it's kind of freaky, you know.

SL: Well, yeah, that's not a good sign. [*Laughs*]

[00:39:05] BL: So the funeral home director says, "We'll pick you up—the family up at a quarter to one." So my dad's sister, my aunt, walked out of the—our little house . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . where we'd all gathered. She went to get in her car, which was parked under Dad's tree. At a quarter to one, a giant lightning bolt comes out of the sky, hits the tree, and sets it on fire. And this—Dad's tree is on fire in a pouring-down rain, and it's like this giant torch.

SL: Yeah.

BL: The lightning bolt went into Aunt Kate's car.

SL: Oh my God.

BL: Blew out her tires. She's fine. She'd just shut the door.

SL: Yeah.

BL: We left there that day with me not thinkin' I could get through that day. All of a sudden, I was fine. I took it as some sort of mysterious sign that as we got in those cars and left in that pouring-down rain that Dad's tree was on fire in the rain. And I love to tell that story because it kind of leaves all of that in a positive frame of mind for me.

[00:40:18] SL: How big a town was Sheridan when you were growin' up?

BL: Sheridan was about sixteen hundred people when I was growin' up. We had a wonderful little downtown area. Our courthouse is beautiful—still is.

SL: Is it in the center of the square?

BL: It's in the center of the square . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . up on a kind of a hill. And we're—we were a very political town. People would gather on election night, and hundreds and hundreds of people would come, and they would announce the election results over the loudspeaker. [*SL laughs*] And my dad was right in the middle of it. He was one of the few people who

bought a poll tax to vote. Back then, you couldn't just walk in and vote. It wasn't somethin' that—a right that was given to you back then. You had to purchase a poll tax. For a while, I think it was a dollar, and then maybe two dollars. And I still have a copy of his . . .

SL: Receipt.

BL: . . . poll tax. But he was involved in the political process, and some of us never quite understood why. It's just that he—he just was a easygoin' guy with a big smile. Friendly, and he—I think he saw politics as a noble profession, which it—I think most people used to . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . see it that way. And he knew all of the courthouse elected officials, and they loved seein' him comin'. And I think one reason was they knew he was a voter [*SL laughs*] because not everybody could afford a poll tax to vote. [00:41:56] And so Sheridan was a sawmill town when I grew up. I mean, that was our main source of employment, and most people here worked in the mills. It's grown dramatically now. It's very progressive in a lot of ways. We have so many things here. We're thirty miles out of Little Rock, so it's a really comfortable life in that you can kinda live in the country and yet be at work in Little

Rock in thirty minutes.

SL: Yep.

BL: Or in Pine Bluff in twenty-five minutes. And when I was growin' up, it was called the crossroads of Arkansas because the two big US highways met at our only stoplight—Highway 167 and 270. And they crossed right in the middle of our town, so we're a very busy town.

[00:42:49] SL: That's a pretty small town, though, fifteen hundred. Did—I guess you had a general store, post office. What—county seat—is it Sheridan?

BL: It's the county seat—Grant County. It has an interesting history. Our county, Grant, was named for U. S. Grant.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And Sheridan was named for General Sheridan, and we were—we became a county, I believe, in 1869. And that was only because some people here wanted their own county, and at that time, we were a part of Jefferson and, I believe, Saline, and we wanted to branch off and have our own county. Well, the legislature was a carpetbagger legislature then, and the only way that the leaders here could get that accomplished was to . . .

SL: Was to [*laughs*] name . . .

BL: . . . brag on U. S. Grant and General Sheridan and convince

those legislators in Little Rock that "Man, we're gonna name a whole county for U. S. Grant, and our capital city would be Sheridan," and that's how we did it. I think maybe that's how Lincoln County was named also. I'm not sure. But that's how we came into existence as a county. But it was small growin' up. I mean, everybody knew everybody, and we were well known around town, and you know, you'd go to the barbershop on Saturday with your dad, and he would visit around town, and you'd get a haircut. And you'd go to Mr. Hendon's five-and-ten-cent store. And if you were lucky, Dad would buy me an all-day sucker [*SL laughs*] to bring back home.

SL: Yeah.

[00:44:32] BL: And you'd look at all the toys and dream dreams, you know. We had a bookstore, Mr. Gartman's bookstore, where you could go in and get what we called funny books [*siren in background*], which were comic books.

SL: Comics. Yeah.

BL: And they'd tear the cover off of—half off, and you'd get 'em for a nickel. We had a—we had two theaters growin' up . . .

SL: Well, I was gonna . . .

BL: . . . and then one of 'em burned, and so we ended up with one.

But I could go to the show for a nickel, and you could get a Coke

for a nickel. So you could spend a day at the movie theater for fifteen cent and ride your bike back home. We had a city swimmin' pool, which opened when I was a young kid. And this was a huge deal. I remember they had special divers come in to perform dives. [SL laughs] And you had this beautiful, blue, clear water that lit up at night. And it was the grandest time in the world, to be a Little League baseball player and a new swimmin' pool and you could go to the movie for a nickel, and it was a great time to grow up.

[00:45:48] SL: Do you remember the first movie you saw?

BL: There was a—yes I do, and it scared the pants off of me because my sister Bet took me. It was called *Creature of the Black Lagoon*. [SL laughs] And you know what? My friend Ron Robinson in Little Rock—great ad agency guy—he's . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . he's a special friend of mine. He has the movie . . .

SL: Poster.

BL: . . . the big poster of that—*Creature from the Black Lagoon*. And he showed it to me one night, and I said, "Take that thing down. It still scares me." [SL laughs] But I remember that. Yeah, I sure do. And then we had a drive-in. We had a drive-in, and you know, I just remembered about that because we'd sneak

into the drive-in when I was in high school. Several of us would get in my car, and we'd pile into the trunk. We could get five guys in the trunk and close the trunk on a hot August night, and [SL laughs] one guy would drive through and buy a—you know, a thirty-cent ticket or quarter or whatever it cost. And then you'd get in and set your speaker in the window of the car with all the mosquitoes flyin' around. And then you'd go back and open the trunk, and all your buddies'd get out, so they got in free.

[00:47:04] SL: Well, you never got caught doin' that?

BL: Yeah, Mrs. Fletcher owned the [SL laughs] drive-in there for a while . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . and she did catch us one night. I mean, how stupid were we to . . .

SL: Well . . .

BL: . . . for her not to know that . . .

SL: Right.

BL: . . . one guy is gonna come in and watch a movie, you know.

SL: By himself.

BL: We weren't rocket scientists, but . . .

SL: Right.

BL: . . . but I drove in and—so Mrs. Fletcher just walked in behind me and walked up to the car and said somethin' like, "Well, Bill, I bet you enjoy this movie," or whatever, and all my friends, John and Tom and David Holloway and all these guys, are stacked in my trunk like sardines, and they start coughin'. And she said, "You can tell your friends to get out of the trunk." [SL laughs] So she knew.

SL: Yeah.

[00:47:49] BL: Yeah, she knew. It was a—my high school and situation—it was much like you saw on *Happy Days*. We had a old town marshal that we pulled stunts on. We [laughs] kinda tormented the guy, really, lookin' back [laughs] on it. We did some practical jokes we shouldn't have. We'd—we stole the light off of his car one night—his [SL laughs] red light while he was napping. [SL laughs] We eased up and took a Phillips screwdriver and took the light off, and then we'd go to the bank and shine a flashlight in the alarm, and it'd make the alarm go off, and he'd—came driving up, and there was no light, and he said, "What happened to my light?" [SL laughs] And then one time we got a store dummy—one of these things . . .

SL: Mannequins.

BL: . . . you put clothes on?

SL: Yeah. Mh-hmm.

BL: And so I get up on top of one of the buildings and—with this store dummy, and my friends find the marshal and tell him that two guys are fighting on top of the pool hall, and he rushes down there, and he's shining his spotlight up there. And I'm wrestlin' with this dummy and throw him off the building. And the marshal runs up like he's gonna give mouth-to-mouth to this guy . . .

SL: Right, right.

[00:49:11] BL: . . . or save his life, and it's a dummy. And we all laugh, and then we scamper away. So it's just what you did. I mean, we were very creative and innovative. You know, Halloween was a big deal in small towns . . .

SL: You bet.

BL: . . . in the South.

SL: You bet.

BL: And you kinda—we were mischievous kids, but not destructive. You know, it—there's a . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . big difference. Today, kids are kind of destructive and mean, but we were havin' fun and—but we'd do some—the town'd get kinda torn up occasionally. But there were pranks,

and we'd do things on Halloween. My big job on Halloween—my assigned task from the older guys [*SL laughs*] that I was in training under . . .

SL: Right. [*Laughs*]

[00:50:01] BL: I had to go to the—Mr. Grover Davenport's grocery store, and he had a sign out front that said, "We Give Top Value Stamps" sign—it was a sign that said, "We Give Top Value Stamps." Back then when you bought groceries, you got stamps. You put 'em in a book, and you cashed 'em in later.

SL: Yeah, Green Stamps.

BL: Well, my friends kind of ordered me to go secure the "We Give Top Value Stamps" sign and put it in front of the funeral home.

SL: Oh!

BL: And that was my assigned task [*SL laughs*] on Halloween. But a tradition was started in Sheridan because of Halloween and kids kind of misbehaving, and it got kinda out of hand one year because several of the older boys climbed a ladder and accessed the superintendent's office at the school. And the superintendent was not well liked. They cut a hole in the roof [*SL laughs*] and lowered a billy goat . . .

SL: Oh my God!

BL: . . . down through the roof—the hole in the roof—and this was

on a Friday night. And they dropped a whole crate of laxative down for the billy goat. And on Sunday morning, the superintendent opened his office, and he was not a happy man. But it led to him—and this went on for years—he said, "If all of you kids"—he called a full assembly. He said, "If all of you kids will promise to not tear up the town and do these kinds of things from now on, that I will give all the boys and all the kids that wanna go hunting—I will give you the first day off of deer season." And that's how that tradition started, and it lasted a long time because deer season in Sheridan's a big deal, and it opened on Monday. So that's how that tradition started. It was over the billy-goat episode. And so the kids swore that they would never do things like that again because they could have the day off to go deer hunting.

[00:52:16] SL: Did you have a soda shop of any kind? Was that in the general . . .

BL: A what?

SL: A soda shop?

BL: We did. We had McCoy Drug Store, and they had wonderful grape slushes. [*SL laughs*] And we would—our little group, when we were in high school—tenth graders, eleventh graders—we'd stop at McCoy Tygart Drug Store after school and go in,

and Dot and Joyce, the two ladies behind the counter, would fix you a grape slush. They were a dime. And we'd gather there with soon-to-be, we hoped, girlfriends . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . and exchange—back then, a football player—you'd take a cleat off of your football shoe. It was a big . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . plastic cleat.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And you could put lead in there and make a little loop and give it to your girlfriend, and they'd make a necklace out of it, and they'd wear your cleat. [*SL laughs*] And it was a big deal. You know, I had—this is a memory that just popped in. [*SL laughs*] [00:53:27] My first real girlfriend was in the seventh grade, and her name was Anita Duncan.

SL: Okay.

BL: And Anita Duncan was this beautiful little blonde-headed girl.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And she had the brightest, bluest, turquoise eyes that God ever made. And I just was just crazy over this girl. [*Laughs*] And I was havin' all of these feelings that were cropping up . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . you know. [*SL laughs*] And I remember going to Woolworth's in Pine Bluff, which was a big deal, with my mom and my sister Nita. They . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . were goin' shoppin'.

SL: Yeah.

[00:54:07] BL: And I came home with a big plastic button that I stuck on my shirt that said "Anita." And I wore that button around like I belonged to this girl, you know.

SL: Right.

BL: I was so happy [*SL laughs*] as this seventh grader. And you know, she broke my heart and dumped me for an older guy who had a bicycle or somethin'.

SL: Yeah. [*Laughs*]

BL: But listen, years later, now, like when I'm fifty-eight years old . . .

SL: Geez.

BL: . . . I'm at Sonny Williams' restaurant in Little Rock [*bird chirps*], and I love goin' there. And they have this bar, and I'm sittin' there, and B is the bartender's name. And B is a—has this photographic memory as a bartender. And when you could come in—anybody who'd come in, he'd bring 'em a drink. He

could remember that. So I'm sitting there, and I've known B forever—years. And I had left the Capitol and moved back home to Sheridan to a new job, and this woman comes in, and she had known me and my work in politics. She said, "Well, Bill, how are you like—being back in Sheridan again?" And I said, "Oh, I love it a lot. I just, you know, love bein' home with my family all around me and seein' old friends." Well, B, my bartender friend, said, "Bill, I didn't know you were from Sheridan." And I said, "Yeah. You've known me forever." And he said, "Well, I didn't know that." And he said, "I wonder if you knew my mom when she grew up there." [SL laughs] And I said, "Oh, your mom grew up in Sheridan?" He said, "Yeah." And I said, "Well, what was her name?" He said, "Anita Duncan." [SL laughs] Man, you coulda knocked me over [SL laughs] with a feather. I said, "B, we gotta talk!" You know? [Laughter] And all—you know, it's so Arkansas. Arkansas is sto—you know, you love Arkansas because you just run into these things all the time in our little state. First time I went to New York City, I stepped off of a bus, and a guy said, "Lancaster!" [SL laughs] And it was Jerry Bob Poole from Fordyce, you know. So you never get away from Arkansas people.

[00:56:18] SL: So let's talk a little bit more about your mom. You

said that she was a good cook. Were the meals—did you—were you expected to be at the table at a certain hour every day or at dinner, say? Was that the time . . .

BL: Yeah.

SL: . . . when the family got together and . . .

BL: Yeah, we always had the family at the table. Mother was just a fantastic cook. We had pot roasts a lot, I remember that, because I think those were easier to cook in a big Dutch oven kind of thing.

SL: Yeah, you cook it all day long.

[00:57:04] BL: I remember a woodstove she cooked on. I remember bringing in kindling to fire the woodstove. I barely remember that. Then we got, course, gas ranges and stuff. But yeah, I mean, it was a big deal, the meals. Dad worked so hard, and he wanted a good meal at lunch and dinner. And breakfast—Mother—I figured this up one time—how many biscuits she had cooked in her lifetime. She made homemade biscuits every morning of her life from the time she had her first kid, I guess, till I was grown and gone. But she made homemade biscuits every morning. There were probably ten in a pan and one big one in the middle, and I wanted the big one. [SL laughs] But [laughs] oh man, they were so good, you know.

[*SL laughs*] And we—and she created this—she was such a smart person in the way that she not manipulated kids, but led them, you know, in this quiet, motherly, unassuming way. She wanted us to eat before we went to school or whatever, so she created this wonderful dish called coffee bick. And this was simply a cup of coffee with cream and sugar for kids—a homemade biscuit stuffed down in the coffee with sugar and cinnamon on top, and it's to die for.

SL: I've never heard such thing.

BL: But she called it coffee bick. You know, "Come get your coffee bick before the bus gets here." And so that's what we grew up on, was—were homemade biscuits in the morning, wonderful lunches when we were at home, and dinnertime was very special. Dad loved Kool-Aid. It was a big deal to—when Kool-Aid came along.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And he liked mixin' red Kool-Aid and grape Kool-Aid into a punch. I remember that.

SL: Yeah.

[00:59:15] BL: Funny what you remember—about ice cubes. Ice cubes were a treat because, you know, your—you could actually fill little trays and put 'em up here and have ice. So it was—

those were very special then. The preacher at our church always wanted to eat with us on Sunday. [*SL laughs*] He tried to be diplomatic and not hurt other people's feelings, and he did some of that, but he always wanted to come home with Joe and Pauline Lancaster and their kids because of the food and the conviviality and the warm feeling I think that he felt there.

SL: On those . . .

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

[Tape stopped]

[00:59:58] SL: Okay, Bill, we're startin' our second tape. You've survived your first hour of Pryor Center interview.

BL: Okay.

SL: You've done really well. I always like to go back to the dinner table because that's kinda where the families usually gathered and whatever . . .

BL: It's a great Southern tradition too.

SL: It is, and . . .

BL: Yeah.

SL: . . . knowing that your mom was a great cook, I'm sure everybody showed up.



BL: They did show up, and you know, I remember big picnics on the Fourth of July, too, and all of the people would bring food. And

the neighbors would come, and Dad would put a number 3 washtub out in the yard and fill it up with ice, and we'd have all sorts of soft drinks. Clem's Cola from Malvern was a big hit. The NuGrapes from Camden that David Pryor liked so much.

SL: Grapette.

BL: Grapette, yeah.

SL: Yeah. Mh-hmm.

BL: Which became NuGrape and then back to Grapette.

SL: Yeah, yeah.

BL: The Grapettes were always the big hit.

SL: Yeah.

BL: But we had the bottling plant at Malvern nearby, twenty-five miles away, that made all sorts of Clem's Colas. It was the Clem Bottling Company, and so the kids were just feasting on this [*SL laughs*] plethora of soft drinks, you know, floating in the ice. It was wonderful. But yeah, Mother was—she'd enter things in the county fair, you know, different—she canned all the time in the hot summertime.

SL: Yeah.

[01:01:39] BL: They'd can in the big pressure cookers back then. You pressurized everything. Pickled peaches, pickles, jellies, jams. My sisters still do the same thing. We raise our own

muscadines here now, and we have jellies that we do now even today and—that we give away. We're a big hit. And my brother-in-law Joe, who's married to my sister Bet—he does homemade wines out of it now. So some of that's carried over from Mother. I—I'm—I pride myself in bein' a really good cook now. I read lots of cooking literature and watch the shows, and I'm—I learned that from Mother. But I remember her—and the kitchen would be so hot, you know. It was hot. Hot weather all the time, and there was no relief from it. But she'd stand and have—always have an apron on—never cooked without an apron—and she'd wipe sweat with the apron while she was cookin' for us. Don't forget that.

[01:02:51] SL: So when y'all gathered around the table, was grace always said or—I mean . . .

BL: Not always, but . . .

SL: No?

BL: . . . but most of the time.

SL: Most of the time?

BL: Yeah.

SL: Was that your dad's deal or your mom's deal or . . .

BL: It was mostly Dad's. He was a deacon in the church, and you know, I never heard Dad say a bad word in his whole life. I



never got a spankin' my whole life. I probably should have. [SL laughs] I got some in school [SL laughs], which is another story. But we were just respectful. I mean, you didn't talk back to your parents back then. Some of the things that happen today are mind-boggling to me. The disrespect—not just that we—that you see in families, but toward each other in politics. I don't care who the president—I mean, I care who the president is, but I think you should always be respectful of the office and the presidency. And I think that goes back to family upbringing. I think we've lost some of that along the way, and I hate that. But there were never any bad words or upset feelings in our family, ever. And isn't that a wonderful blessing . . .

SL: It is.

BL: . . . that you can sit at my age now and say that? It's part of who we are as a family that we had that kind of positive feedback and positive upbringing that kids so many times today don't have. It's heartbreaking to see it now.

[01:04:33] SL: Yeah, and it's also remarkable that your family was so large growing up. And—now, had—by the time that you're, you know, five, six years old, had any of your siblings already moved out? Was the spread . . .

BL: Oh yeah, Bob and I were the last two, really, at home. And my

sisters laugh even today to say that my feet didn't hit the ground till I was five because somebody was always carryin' me around. [SL laughs] But I was spoiled. You know, Mother was forty-three when I was born, so I was her little baby. And I'm sure coming along that late in life, I really was special to her. I don't say that out of ego or anything; it's just that I understand that more now. But Bob and I were kinda the last two to come along later in life. Jim—my brother Jim was gone. He had gone off to college and gone to work with Arkla Gas and a company in Indiana. [01:05:35] Harold was in the navy. Joy was a banker, and Bet and Joe—my sister Bet was in Little Rock. And Nita was next door. She was working in the post office. She had a wonderful career in the Postal Service. So they were some around and some in Little Rock, some in the navy. But Bob and I were still at home. He was three years older than me, and he went off to college at Southern State and left me his prized car, which I got to drive when I started to be a sophomore in high school. I was one of the few kids that had a car, and it was just a—like you see on some of the old movies—I named my car. I called it the Tarantula. [SL laughs] And I got paint and painted a giant tarantula on the dash of the car [SL laughs], and it was just a piece of trash. The muffler was hangin' on. I'd wire it

with Mother's wire hangers. I wanted whitewall tires, so I took Daddy's paintbrushes and painted the white on the tires. It—I had to park it on the hill at the house and at school and coast down the hill and pop the clutch to get it started because the battery was dead.

SL: Was dead.

BL: It had no brakes, so I used [*SL laughs*] the hand brake to stop. But I loved it becau—and my buddies did too 'cause it—we had had a car, man! [*SL laughs*] We could go around town on—you know, gasoline was twenty-five cents a gallon.

SL: Yep.

BL: So a dollar's worth of gas would get me by for two weeks, and I don't really like braggin' about this now, but there were times when you had a special credit card. It was called a siphoning hose. [*SL laughs*] So if you saw another car that maybe is a buddy of yours that you didn't like so much, you could very carefully take that hose and get you a gallon or two of gas for your car. [*SL laughs*] And that kinda went on. I think I swallowed a lot of . . .

SL: Oh!

BL: . . . regular gasoline over the years.

[01:07:43] SL: Well, was it a Chevy, Ford—what kind . . .

BL: It was a [19]53 Plymouth.

SL: Is that right? [*Laughs*]

BL: Gray. [*SL laughs*] But the Tarantula kinda became legendary around Sheridan for a while. It [*SL laughs*]*—*you know, when you—you know, kids and their cars—we'd park at the court square every night and back in.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And everybody would gather at the court square, and all the kids would come up, and you'd just sit and talk and sit on your car and talk about havin' a car. Man, it was cool, and it led me into a lot of new areas and expanded my horizons and my personality, really, because it let me be kinda cool, and I wanted to be cool like Dickie Haynes. Dickie Haynes was a senior in high school, and he had a Corvette.

SL: Whoa!

BL: And he had all of the pretty girls, and he was just our Fonzie. He was the Sheridan Fonzie growin' up. [*SL laughs*] And everybody wanted to be like Dickie Haynes. And so I kinda parked my Tarantula beside his red Corvette and did the best I could.

[01:08:54] SL: [*Laughs*] That's great. So getting back to the house and—so it was basically just your mom and your dad and your

older brother and you. I . . .

BL: Right.

SL: . . . I kinda understand that. I . . .

BL: And we played baseball every day. Every day. You know, Sheridan Little League came along. We—Little League was kinda unheard of back then, and it was kinda growing around the country, so Sheridan men got together and said, "We need a Little League baseball program." And I was about nine—I think it was in existence one year before I became eligible. Maybe I was eight. I couldn't wait to be in a Little League uniform. It was the most precious thing in the world. I got selected, and I became a Yanks. Yanks were our team—*Y-A-N-K-S*. And I had my uniform, and Bob, I think, was in the Cards, or maybe we were on the same team. But one year we were the Yanks; one year we were the Cards. We would get the—on game day we'd get up in the morning—much like our—my TV discussion I had earlier . . .

SL: Yeah. [*Laughs*]

[01:10:14] BL: But we'd get up on game day, and we'd put our uniform on at eight o'clock in the mornin' . . .

SL: Ready to go.

BL: . . . and wait all day in our uniform to get to the ballpark at six

o'clock to play the game. And it was a huge deal. There were hundreds of people because this was the big deal. When Sheridan Little League started, they opened it with a parade from downtown at the courthouse, and hundreds of people lined Main Street of Sheridan with the, you know, the sheriff leading the parade in the fire truck. And all the little boys gathered in their uniforms and walked behind the fire truck to the Little League field [*SL laughs*] for the first pitch of the first game. But we played baseball all day—I guess every day that we weren't fishin' at the local ponds or in the creek. But we loved baseball because it was the goin' thing then. You know, it's not a huge deal anymore for a lot of kids like football is, but it was then. We had Mantle and Maris and Mays and all these heroes that we got to see on the one game that was broadcast on Saturday television, the *Game of the Week* with Dizzy Dean and Buddy Blattner and Pee Wee Reese . . .

SL: You bet.

BL: . . . and brought by Falstaff Beer.

SL: That's right. [*Laughs*]

[01:11:33] BL: And you lived—my dad lived for—to watch that ball game. And we would play all day outside in the front yard in the dirt, throwing and pitchin'. My cousin Gopher and I one day . . .

SL: Gopher?

BL: Gopher. [*SL laughs*] Gopher was my fi—second cousin, and he was like my brother. We were the same age.

SL: Yeah.

BL: He was the only reason I stayed in the first grade at school. They finally—because of my desire to run away and go back home with Mother, they decided, "Well, we got an idea. We'll put Gopher in there with him." So they put—took Gopher out of another class and put him in there with me, and I was fine. I was fine with school. But what I was gonna say—we decided one day we were kind of bored, I guess, with the baseball game we usually played, and we put two chairs in the front yard about probably six or seven feet apart. Each of us had a glove, and we had a baseball, and we threw the ball to see how many times we could throw it without droppin' it. And we threw it over four thousand times. I remember that. And isn't that crazy? See, that's what you did. You were—you had to be innovative. We played mumblety-peg in the dirt with a knife . . .

SL: Yeah, yeah.

[01:12:55] BL: . . . and you'd flip it. We had marbles. We shot marbles with a ring in the dirt. We had tops. You wind your top with a string. You put your prized marbles out there . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . and the other guy put his marbles out there, and you threw, and if—and your top hit the marble, it knocked it out of the ring and you got to keep the marble—the cat-eyes. And you had a prized cat-eye collection of marbles. But that's what we were. We were little boys in shorts. No shoes, no shirt. Brown as little Indians runnin' around in the dirt and playin' baseball. And most pictures I have in my early years, I'm holdin' a baseball bat or glove, and that's why it became my passion. I loved it. I loved every day I could play baseball. And now it seems to have kinda faded away. It's a—I don't know why that happened in our country, but it did. We just kind of—seemed like we—unless you live in a major city that has a franchise, we just don't idolize baseball much anymore, it seems like.

[01:14:07] SL: Did you ever get to go to Little Rock and watch baseball?

BL: Yeah, I wrote about that in my novel. Dad would take us to Travelers Field. It was later renamed Ray Winder Field.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And I watched—Mel Geho was a great player. And Dave Nicholson. Dave Nicholson led the nineteen—I believe it was 1962 Travelers—that they set an all-time Pacific Coast League

home run record—that team did. They were the boom-boom boys [*SL laughs*], and Dave Nicholson was the biggest hitter they had. He was a—he left there and went to the Chicago White Sox and became a big-time slugger for them. I saw Richie Allen at Travelers Field when the Travelers were affiliated with the Philadelphia Phillies. [01:15:00] Richie Allen was the first black man to wear a Travelers uniform, and he took left field and played for the Travelers, and a lot of people booed him. They didn't want a black man in the Traveler uniform. And I remember that vividly—him—he could hit a baseball farther than anybody I ever saw. He became a great slugger for the Phillies in Philadelphia. Man, he killed 'em up there. But he was a Traveler. I saw Bo Belinsky, the famous playboy pitcher who went to the California Angels and later married Mamie Van Doren, the Hollywood actress.

SL: Yeah.

BL: But Bo Belinsky was a Traveler pitcher. I mean, I knew 'em all. I knew—I had baseball cards. I knew their batting averages—Harmon Killebrew, you know, Gus Triandos—all of those guys were our heroes 'cause that's what kids did back then. We idolized baseball players. I saw—believe it or not, our senior trip in high school—I graduated in 1964—to show you how things

changed, we had, like, eighty-two people in our class. We took a senior trip to New York with four teachers as chaperones. And would you take eighty kids to New York now if you were a teacher? But we got on three Trailway buses and headed to New York, and Coach Zimmerman, my high school basketball coach, was one of our leaders. [01:16:39] And we went to New York—we went to Yankee Stadium, and I saw Roger Maris hit a home run. And you know, you don't take any—yeah, you wouldn't take anything for that. I'm standin' on—I'm standing in New York in Times Square one night—I don't think it was the same day we went to the game—and I'm standin' there, and this—jazz musicians are playing. It's outside a restaurant. [01:17:05] And I turn and look, and the man standin' next to me is Mickey Mantle.

SL: Oh!

BL: And he had a beautiful girl with him. And I'm standin' there with the Mick, you know. [SL laughs] And as a young kid, man, that's big stuff, now. I got to meet a lot of important people later on in my career. You know, movie stars, presidents—those kinds of people—Muhammad Ali—those people. But at—when you're a senior in high school and you're watchin' Roger Maris hit a home run and standin' next to Mickey Mantle, that's pretty

good stuff.

[01:17:42] SL: You know, you had it comin'. You had the passion for it, and you got in the right place at the right time.

BL: Yeah, I was—my life has been a blessing. I've had some tough fights.

SL: Yeah.

BL: I've overcome near-death experiences several times. [*Laughter*]

SL: We're gonna talk about some . . .

BL: A bit of a klutz on some of it—led to [*laughter*] some of that. But man, you know, somebody told me one time I had nine lives, and I've used up a lot of 'em. [*SL laughs*] But I was fortunate to grow up when I did. I wouldn't take anything—you know, I still—my best friends today are two guys that I've been in with since the first grade. We still fish together, we hunt together, play golf together. We celebrate New Year's together every year, and that's been that way for sixty years, and I'm still with 'em. And I'm so privileged because I don't know that kids have that anymore. We're—we move around a lot now in society, and we're kind of shut in because of cultural concerns or whatever—crime.

SL: Well, and technology too.

[01:18:57] BL: Technology. Kids do this a lot, you know. [*Imitates*

texting] We've grown—we got through the telegraph, and now we're back.

SL: Yeah.



BL: But I don't know that kids have those close friendships anymore. I hope they do. But sometimes I don't see it, and that's sad to me that we had those kinds of happy days where you had friendships and pals and you sat on a creek bank with a can of worms, and . . .

SL: Cane pole.

BL: . . . and you talked. You talked. Kids don't talk anymore. You know, we'll have family gatherings, and I notice that I might be tellin' a story or somethin', and the kids just kinda sit there, and I—it concerns me that we're losin' those communication skills because of technology, where you're locked into a website—a distant kind of magic land out there where you can't sit around a campfire and tell funny stories, and you don't broaden your experiences. I was watchin' a—the World Series last year, and it was, like, 3–2 and bottom of the ninth, the winning run on third base, and the camera's showin' the batter, and in the background all these people are sittin' there textin' to somebody, and they're not watchin' the game. And I'm goin', "Why did you buy a \$2,000 ticket to sit and scan" . . .

SL: Do what you could do at home.

BL: . . . "scan the Internet while the guy's on third base?" [Laughs]

SL: [Laughs] Winning run.

[01:20:29] BL: So—but it's just different. And I don't wanna sound old because my dad, you know, my dad wouldn't let me watch *The Mickey Mouse Club* in the afternoon 'cause he wanted to watch Douglas Edwards and the CBS News.

SL: Yeah.

BL: Which came on in the afternoon for fifteen minutes. They had fifteen minutes of national news back then. And fifteen minutes of local news. You had—local news—you had, like, seven minutes of news, two minutes of weather, and then the sports. And then the Venable Quartet sang for fifteen minutes.

SL: There you go.

[01:21:06] BL: But now [SL laughs] we're inundated—we're bombarded with everything that's happening in the world with this immediacy that kind of drives our schedule now and drives who we are. We're saturated with immediacy now, and it's changed who we are. We don't seem to escape issues anymore. So—but that was kind of the world I grew up in. I—in the afternoon, *The Mickey Mouse Club* came on, and Dad would . . .

SL: Annette.

BL: . . . Dad would make me [*SL laughs*]*—*you know, I was in love with Annette.

SL: Sure. What . . .

BL: Every boy was.

SL: . . . what young boy was? Yeah.

BL: And I wanted to see Annette and Cubby and Karen and . . .

SL: You bet.

BL: . . . Frances and everybody. But Dad would make me switch the channel to the news, but that was okay. [*SL laughs*] He deserved the news.

[01:21:59] SL: Well, did you have any responsibilities around the house? Did you help your mom and dad do stuff around the house or—like, did you make your own bed?

BL: I did not. Mother did all of that. But I worked with Dad, and I painted houses. And we'd bring—I remember the big—one of the big task in painting houses was . . .

SL: Prep?

BL: . . . painting the screens.

SL: Oh.

BL: People had wooden screens on their windows, and you had to take all these screens off of a house. And a house may have, like, twenty screens, and they were, like, six feet long and three

feet wide. They weren't lightweight aluminum things like you see now. They were heavy, and they were wooden. And it was meticulous work, and you'd bring all these screens home, and then—so I would—while Dad's finishing the houses and stuff [*clears throat*], I would paint screens at home and go around the woodwork with a paint brush 'cause I was pretty good. I was careful, and Daddy'd just throw it on 'cause he's . . .

SL: You knew how to cut the paint.

BL: Yeah. I never will forget—we worked for Mr. Sam McDonald.

SL: Okay.

BL: Dad's good friend, Mr. McDonald, owned a couple of stores, and he owned rent houses. So we'd paint and work on his houses a lot. And we were about to finish up Mr. McDonald's house where he lived.

SL: His home, yeah.

BL: The big home.

SL: Yeah.

[01:23:27] BL: The big house. And we were finishing up, and Mr. McDonald came over to my dad, whose name was Joe, and he eased up to Joe, my dad, and he said, "Now, Joe, when we start finishin' up around that molding up there, I want Billy to paint that 'cause he has a steady hand." [*SL laughs*] Oh, my dad got

mad. He said, "Well, we'll just let Billy paint the whole room, then." But it was—Mr. Mac wanted me on the close-in work [*SL laughs*] because I'd—I was takin' my time with it. Yeah, I did a lot around the house. I helped mow the grass. We had a push mower. You didn't have a . . .

SL: That's right.

BL: . . . gas-operated mower and them pretty lawns. You had to push a mower that ran on muscle. We did that.

[01:24:15] SL: How—do you remember how old you were when electricity hit the house?

BL: I had to be about four.

SL: Okay.

BL: I barely remember. I have little flashbacks of Mother holding the coal-oil lamp walkin' around with it. And I remember—I have little bits and pieces of her washing the globes . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . 'cause they'd get black.

SL: That's right.

BL: And so at the—sometime during the daytime, she'd put 'em—all of that in a sudsy tub and make sure the globes were sparkly clean at night. So I have little bits of that. But I think I was four when electricity came to the house.

SL: The laundry—the washing machine—was—had the wringer . . .

BL: Yeah.

SL: . . . on it?

BL: Yeah, you say that. I have a horrible memory of that . . .

SL: Okay.

BL: . . . that I hadn't thought about in a long time. She did have a wringer washer. And I'd forgotten about this, but I know I was in about the ninth grade. And I was home alone with Mother, and she was doin' her laundry. And she had the agitator and the wringer in the kitchen, and it was full of water, and it was sloshing around, sloshing around.

SL: Yeah.

[01:25:40] BL: And I know it was on a Friday night because the doors were open in the back of the house and I could hear the football game crowd through the woods. So they were playing football about a mile away, and I could hear the noise. And all of a sudden, Mother screamed. And she had caught her arm in the wringer.

SL: Oh!

BL: And it had pulled her up into the wringer, and she was caught in this thing. And I snapped the lid off and got her out. She wasn't hurt—it—but her arm was flat for a while. But had I not been

there, it would've been tragic.

SL: Yeah.

BL: But I just remembered that when you talked about that washing machine. And she was tough. She lost sight in an eye because she was chipping kindling for the wooden stove . . .

SL: Woodstove.

BL: . . . with a hatchet, and a piece of the kindling flew into her eye and put her eye out. So she lost the—she lost that probably when I was a baby—sometime in there. [01:26:48] We had chickens. I had a horrible—we had a horrible, mean rooster. [SL laughs] And I have [bird chirps] horrible memories of the chickens because I had to go out and gather the eggs sometimes in the afternoon or the morning. We had about—probably twenty chickens. They'd peck around in the yard, but we kept 'em in a pen most of the time. And I'd go and gather the eggs. But this mean rooster—I had—I was a little kid. I never wore a shirt or shoes. So I walk out in the backyard to get the eggs, and this rooster didn't like me—kinda like horses didn't like me. [SL laughs] He jumped on my back, and he started scratchin' me and clawin' me and peckin' in my head and—all the way in the house. And I'm screamin' and tryin' to get the rooster off, and I go in the house, and I get my BB gun, and I put an end to

that rooster, and we had rooster for supper. [SL laughs] That's a—and you know, I remember Mother puttin' salve on my wounds—salving my wounds. [01:27:55] And the other memory I have of gettin' the eggs out of the baskets up here—the wooden baskets—I went in there at the—in the henhouse one afternoon and reached up, and when I put my hand up there, this giant snake went around my arm. I have a horrible fear of snakes to this day, but I think it's—it all goes back to that day. It was a giant black snake, and he wrapped around me three or four times, and I sling him out through the pen and ran to Mother. And I don't know if I got any eggs that day or not.

SL: Probably not.

[01:28:27] BL: But it was a bad scene. We had hogs. Daddy raised hogs. I slopped the hogs. You had a container where you threw corn, coffee grounds, peeling—potato peelings. Anything—they'd eat anything. And we kept four or five, and I would do that, and I thought this was just pretty cool. I thought they were fun, and I liked watchin' 'em grow up. And this is kind of a Jodie Foster *Silence of the Lambs* moment for me. The time came that it was time to . . .

SL: Hog day.

BL: . . . make bacon.

SL: Hog day.

BL: Hog day. Cold day.

SL: Yeah.

BL: The pot's boiling, and I don't know what this is all about, but neighbors started comin' up to the house. And then I hear the .22 rifle, and it was just like *Silence of the Lambs*—this—these noises—and I ran to Mother and said, "What are they doin' to the hogs?" You know, and she had to explain this to me. And it was terrible. I just, you know, I just—I couldn't comprehend this in my little finite mind.

SL: How old do you think you were then?

BL: I had to be probably six or seven.

[01:29:44] SL: Did you watch 'em do what they did to the hog?

BL: No, I didn't watch it at all. No, I didn't wanna know 'cause she—Mother just told me—said, "Well"—she called me Baby. She said, "Baby, they raise the hogs" . . .

SL: To slaughter.

BL: . . . "so we can have food to eat."

SL: That's right.

BL: And you know, I was okay with it, I guess, but I do remember that, and it was not pleasant. [*Laughs*] It was not pleasant. But you know [*laughs*], Mother would chop the chicken heads

off, and we kinda liked that. [*Laughter*] We'd get—me and my brother Bob and Gopher—and when Mother'd—you know, we had to have chicken for supper or whatever, and she'd take the hatchet and chop the chicken's head off. And Bob and Gopher and I would—we didn't bet, but we'd try to guess how far the chicken was gonna run [*laughter*] with his head cut off.

[*Laughs*] You know, it's a slow day in Sheridan, man! [*SL laughs*] You know, we had to do somethin'. But, you know, that's just part of growin' up in the country. Kids today, I don't know, I guess they think food just kinda grows at the Kroger supermarket now [*doorbell rings*], but . . .

SL: Or probably Chick-fil-A.

BL: That's your—go . . .

SL: All right, let's stop.

[Tape stopped]

[01:30:53] SL: Okay, Bill, we got interrupted. It was kind of funny—we were talkin' about how kids just think that food just appears at Kroger's or Chick-fil-A, and the doorbell rings, and we're havin' our lunch delivered from the Yellowjacket Drive-In, and it—times are different now and . . .

BL: Times are different, yeah. I don't mean to disparage my son-in-law, who I love, but I was working on a Thanksgiving dinner

here two years ago. And I have the turkey in the oven, and I'm—I—my family looks forward to my mashed potatoes, and so I've got all this goin' on tryin' to get over to my family, and there's fifty of us for Thanksgiving dinner.

SL: Yeah.

BL: Big family gathering. So I'm peeling the potatoes, so I said, "Patrick, finish peeling these potatoes while I take care of the turkey." So he stands there and looks around, and he says, "Where's your potato peeler?" And I said, "I don't have one." I said, "I peel my potatoes with a knife." He said, "I didn't know you could peel potatoes with a knife." And Patrick—you know, he's got eight or ten degrees and is a schoolteacher. And I'm goin', "Just get out of the way," you know. [*SL laughs*] But I guess I'm one of the last . . .

SL: Old school.

BL: . . . people who peel potatoes with a . . .

SL: A knife.

BL: . . . paring knife.

SL: Yeah, yeah, you are.

BL: But it's just an indication of how young people are today. They just—everything's prepackaged and that sort of thing. And once again, sounding a little old, but that's okay.

[01:32:36] SL: Well you know, and you think back—what your parents went through before you were even born, and then . . .

BL: Oh yeah.

SL: . . . what their parents went through. I mean, it was hardscrabble surviving. I mean, you worked . . .

BL: Hey, it . . .

SL: . . . to have a meal . . .

BL: You're right.

SL: . . . on the table.

[01:32:53] BL: I ran the museum here. We have a beautiful museum, one of the prettiest museums in the country in Grant County. Witt Stephens Grant County Museum . . .

SL: Okay.

BL: . . . and I was the director of the museum. And if you go back and look at all the old pictures of the men in the 1930s and [19]40s, you'll notice one thing: none of 'em had any fat. They were rails—rakish stature. They were—they worked all the time, and they didn't eat any prepackaged stuff. You know, they worked it off. And we're superhydrated and fed now, and we're a bit more sedate, but I did notice that. But you know, we'd go blackberry pickin'. We'd pick blackberries and huckleberries, and Mother would make jams and jellies, and like I said earlier, put

up lots of food in the summer from the garden. We had a family garden. Daddy plowed with a mule, and I remember walkin' behind him when I was a little boy, and he'd have the leather over his neck, and he would be plowin' with a mule. And Bob and I—my brother—would walk behind him and walk in the fresh dirt that smelled so good. And he thought, once again, to keep him—keep us out of his hair, I think, he said, "Come here, and I'll show you"—he said, "We're gonna make some frog houses." And we'd take our fists and put dirt—the fresh dirt all around it and then pull our fist out, like you do, kinda, at the beach now.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And he said, "Now, you come back in the morning, and might be a frog in there." [*SL laughs*] So he got us out of the way, you know, and we never found a frog. [*SL laughs*] But I guess part of the fun was lookin', you know. But yeah, we—I mean, we grew stuff in the garden. We picked pears from neighbors' trees. That's what you did back then.

[01:35:01] SL: Did you take your lunch to school, or did the school provide lunch?

BL: Both. I remember [*SL clears throat*] I got a spankin' in the second grade from Miss McClung, my teacher. I had my lunch, and it was in my little Roy Rogers lunch box.

SL: Yep.

BL: And it was under my desk, and I guess I had a midmorning craving of some kind. And I knew that I had a candy bar. It was a Baby Ruth candy bar in that dadgum thing under my desk. So I, you know, reached under my desk and pulled out my Baby Ruth and took a big bite, and she caught me, and I got a spankin'. I got several spankins in school. I got my first one in the first grade. I was—after I'd settled in, I guess, after a while, I chased a little redheaded girl named Betty around the table. I guess I liked little redheads at age five [*SL laughs*], and Mrs. Stuckey whipped me. She spanked me for chasing Betty Posey around the table. But yeah . . .

[01:36:15] SL: Now, that may have done some irreparable harm to you. [*Laughs*]

BL: No, no. [*SL laughs*] Yeah, I never liked redheads again, but [*SL laughs*]*—yeah, I carried my lunch some, and you know, you just folded it up in a napkin or a paper sack from the grocery store. We didn't . . .*

SL: There . . .

BL: You mighta had wax paper, maybe. But you didn't have any Ziploc bags and all this freshness goin' on. And you know, the schoolroom smelled like that. It smelled like apples 'cause every

kid had an apple. So the rooms all—the school smelled like apples, and I remember that too. So—did both. I loved the cafeteria food, believe it or not. And when we'd take football trips, after the game, you'd get on the bus, and everybody got two sandwiches apiece. You had a ham sandwich, cartons of milk—chocolate milk came in the little cartons.

SL: Yep.

[01:37:13] BL: And you had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich after the football game. Now, the basketball players—they were treated like royalty, you know. You—we got to stop at towns along the way and eat.

SL: Smaller numbers.

BL: Smaller numbers, and Sheridan was a real basketball town. We had the 1957 state champions, the Jerrys. Four of the five starting five were named Jerry. And I recently as my—in my position at the Sports Hall of Fame, I got Jerry Carlton, who became a great Razorback—led the Hogs in scoring and led the nation in scoring—I got Jerry inducted into the Sports Hall of Fame two years ago, and it was a real treat for me. I know it was for him. But for me, growing up here as a little kid watching the Jerrys play, and here I am. I've achieved this position with the Arkansas Sports Hall of Fame, and I was able to convince my

colleagues on the board to vote my ol' Yellowjacket hero into the Arkansas Sports Hall of Fame. A great deal. But school food was all right. You had little cups of ice cream.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And you took the lid—the paper lid off. And then you had a wooden spoon that they gave you, and you ate the ice cream with a spoon, and you drank your milk every day. You know, you had to drink your milk. But Sheridan cafeteria food was good, especially the homemade rolls.

SL: Oh yeah.

BL: Those were wonderful.

SL: Yeast rolls.

BL: And chicken pot pies. I'd never had a chicken pot pie in my life. [01:38:53] I'll tell you a funny story about—in the ninth grade—it was kind of my introduction to politics. Mr. Witt Stephens, a Grant County native who became legendary in the finance world . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: He was from here, and he was serving in the Arkansas House of Representatives. A lot of people don't realize that Mr. Witt served, I believe, two terms in the house. And he left because they were gonna make him speaker, and he didn't—he was

embarrassed over the publicity. He didn't think he had been there long enough to have this notoriety, so he just kinda eased out of politics and became a kingmaker. But I was a ninth-grade student at Sheridan, and I got picked to be his page in the legislature because of my good grades. He would pick people to come up there and serve as his page for a whole week. You got two dollars a day, and I got to spend five days in the house. But the big reward was I got to be a guest at the Coachman's Inn hotel that he owned at Ninth and Interstate. The interstate wasn't there then, but it—oh, it was a—just the most beautiful pl—I'd never been away from home. I'd never spent a night away from home. [*SL clears throat*] And here I am. I go to Little Rock, and I'm Mr. Witt's page for a whole week. I get two dollars a day, all my meals free. My room's free. But the kicker was that I'm the only kid serving as a page that had a chauffeur-driven limo to the Capitol every day. His limo would pull around, and I'd get in this backseat, and I'm lovin' this, man!

SL: Sure!

[01:40:38] BL: And I'd go to the legislature and run errands that day, and then I'd go back to the hotel. Well, they have a menu—and I still have one of the menus to this day from the Tack Room. And I saw the menu, and I was starting to order,

and this waitress says, "We have a new item on the menu. It's called a club sandwich." And I said, "Well, okay." Whatever I said, you know.

SL: Yeah.

BL: Long time ago. [*SL laughs*] They brought me a club sandwich. I was just—I couldn't believe that a sandwich had more than one piece of meat!

SL: [*Laughs*] And . . .

BL: You know, I'd never—I didn't know a sandwich could have more than one piece of meat on it. And it was just stacked up with four or five, and it had this good st—and it had a toothpick through it with a little tassel on the end of it. Well, I ate 'em for lunch. I ate 'em for supper.

SL: [*Laughs*] If they'd had it, you'd done breakfast.

[01:41:36] BL: I gorged on—and I love 'em to this day. I still love club sandwiches. Well, my la—it's toward the end of the week—it was, like, a Thursday, and Mr. Witt—the legislators then—they'd flip a button on their desk, and it—their light would light up, and the page would go to their desk and ask 'em what they needed, like, "Go get me a piece of some chewing gum" or whatever errand he wanted run. So it's, like, late in the day, and Mr. Witt was a very colorful, slow-talkin', cigar-chompin' ol'

guy [*SL laughs*], and he said, "We're gonna be here a little late today." And I said, "Yessir." And I'm kneelin' down by his desk, and he said, "Why don't you go on back to the hotel, and I'll see you in the mornin'." And he said, "Take this"—and he reaches in his pocket, and he pulls out this wad of money—all these bills. And I'd never seen anything like it in my life. And he starts thumbin' through these hundred-dollar bills, and he gets to a twenty, and he hands me a twenty-dollar bill, and he said, "You take this, and you go on back, and if the driver's out there, you split this with him." I said, "Okay." [01:42:59] Well, time rocks on, okay. And I go to the legislature in a working capacity as an adult, and it's, like, 1979, so it's eighteen or twenty years after this happened. And Mr. Witt and I are havin' lunch at his Prattsville home, which is nine miles west of Sheridan. He has a big ranch over there. And we'd finished our lunch, and we went out on the porch to talk a while, and we're sitting there, and I said, "Mr. Witt, I need to confess somethin' to you," and he said, "What is it?" And I said, "Well, it's kind of been a burden to me for a long time, and I wanna tell you what happened." He said, "Okay." So I start opening up, and I go through this story about being his page, and he said he remembered, but you know, he didn't remember, but he was nice to say that he did. And I went

through this thing about how he took the money and he found this twenty-dollar bill and he told me to go out and find the driver and go back and la-da-da, and so he said, "Yeah." And I said, "Well, I—my confession to you today is that I went out the west door of the Capitol and walked all the way back to the Coachman's Inn and kept that whole twenty." [*Laughter*] And I felt like this mountain had been lifted off of me that I had had this confession, you know. And he looked at me, and he said, "Well [*SL laughs*], I always knew you's a smart boy." [*Laughter*] And then—so I'm—my burden has been lifted, you know. [*SL laughs*] I fessed all, and we had a big laugh about it. But I did—I don't know what happened to me. It's this—you know, and then I got to thinkin', "Maybe I have a taste for politics. I just want all the money and keep it myself." [*Laughter*] So I did. And I went out that back door, and I walked all the way—it was about a three-mile hike.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And I kept it all, brother. I kept that whole twenty-dollar bill.

[01:45:02] SL: You know, course, the Coachman Inn was like the political back room, wasn't it? I mean . . .

BL: It was.

SL: . . . it was—it's where all the deals were made or where they

gathered.

BL: That and the old Marion Hotel.

SL: Yeah.

BL: They were infamous and famous at the same time. But the—yeah, I mean, you sit there in that little Tack Room restaurant, and you could see everybody. The governor and every—Orval Faubus and all—everybody was in there drinkin' their Sanka coffee, which cost twenty-five cents, and eating their two-dollar sandwiches—and the beautiful pool out back with the gaslights all around it. See, Mr. Witt created the gaslights. His whole farm and his sister's home in Prattsville were, you know, they were ringed with gaslights that had this soft glow at night. And it was a big deal to get a gaslight. Dad got one. We had a gaslight at our house.

SL: Yeah.

[01:45:56] BL: And boy, they were pretty.

SL: They were pretty. Yeah.

BL: They were.

SL: I member when those came in. [*TM coughs*] I don't know what spurred all that, but we ended up havin' two at our house. One in the front and one in the back.

BL: Well, he was just an innovative, clever man, you know. He

had—he pushed the envelope on creativity a lot, more than people ever knew. He had a vision that he thought Arkansas should be the blueberry capital of the world. He really wanted blueberry farming. And course, he made Sam Walton what he was. I mean, he created Walmart—Mr. Witt did. But you know, he never wanted publicity. He shunned the limelight. But he created politicians, and he funded things through "put parties," you called 'em. He'd have people come to his office and have lunch. And you'd have corn bread and field peas, and then you'd put money in the box to fund so-and-so's campaign. All very legal. But he raised the money, and he was the kingmaker.

[01:47:04] SL: Well, he also did this: some of those lunches—he just would put really unusual combinations of people together too, that . . .

BL: He would. He'd put a newspaper editorial writer with some guy he'd written bad editorials about just to watch the give and take.

SL: [*Laughs*] Sparks.

BL: Oh yeah. You know, he's [*SL laughs*—he didn't want people to be in conflict. He was generous beyond our comprehension, I think. I talk glowingly about him, and I knew him somewhat but not like others knew him. But he's a—he's one reason I ended up at the State Capitol as an adult, though, and I could talk

about that . . .

SL: We'll get there.

BL: . . . at length. Yeah.

SL: Yeah, we'll get there. Let's—well, that's fascinating stuff, and I—
of course, I love that early page stuff. That's . . .

BL: Oh yeah, it was a big deal to have—to get two . . .

SL: No kiddin'.

BL: . . . dollars a day.

SL: No kiddin'. That's big dollars.

BL: And I ended up meeting a young man there who became my
dear friend later as he—as I worked at the Capitol, and he
became a senator. And it was Jon Fitch. And he was down
there paging at the same time, we figured out later. So you
never know where life's gonna lead you.

[01:48:25] SL: So how did you get selected to be the page?

BL: Grade—I had . . .

SL: Your grades? You had good grades?

BL: . . . I had good grades. Yeah.

SL: So . . .

BL: I was a good student. I made mostly straight As. I was in the
National Honor Society and got pinned. Mrs. Calloway was our
adviser, and she's a very serious lady, and I was the class clown.

[*SL laughs*] I mean, I got sent home one time for my humor. But I remember when she put the National Honor Society pin on me that I kissed her in the assembly, and everybody went crazy. [*SL laughs*] But I did it just to mess with her. [*SL laughs*] And you know—but yeah, I got sent home for a half day when I was a junior—sophomore or junior. I grew up—I loved comedy, and I would listen at night before I'd go to bed. We didn't have television. And I would listen to these LP albums that my brother had—Jonathan Winters.

SL: Oh gosh!

BL: Shelley Berman.

SL: Yeah.

[01:49:36] BL: And I memorized 'em. I did. I, you know, I just memorized 'em verbatim. Well, we had assembly programs, you know. You remember in school you . . .

SL: Sure.

BL: . . . had assembly.

SL: Yeah.

BL: So you had a talent contest, and for a while I had a singing quartet. We had a band. I had a—I was in a—singer in a band. But I did a Jonathan Winters routine in assembly, and it was the one about the spaceship landing. And it's well known back then.

Jonathan Winters was really a—he was a very unique comic.

Pretty far out there, like a Robin Williams . . .

SL: Yes. Mh-hmm.

BL: . . . in his day. But this routine was—he was interviewing different people who had seen a UFO land.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And I did it all. I did the interview part and the characters.

SL: Different voices.

BL: Different voices, inflections, that sort of thing. And—but my principal didn't think it was very funny, and I got called to his office, and I was sent home for the afternoon to think about whether or not I wanted to do that again. But I still think it was funny. I mean, you know . . .

SL: [*Laughs*] Well, of course it was funny!

[01:50:52] BL: And it—it's kinda—it's launched that in me, I guess. It was my outlet. I mean, humor is an outlet. And then we—in my senior year, we had this wonderful speech teacher who became a good friend of all of ours. He had been to Hollywood, and he moved back here, and he started doin' these elaborate productions for senior plays. We did *Teahouse of the August Moon*. I played Captain Fisby. And then they later did *South Pacific, Oklahoma!* He became . . .

SL: Big stuff.

BL: . . . he became a kind of a news item in Arkansas because of his production. But he brought a lot of that out in me, that I started writing comedy stuff and writing more and more, and it became my passion and led to my career, really. I love to write comedy. I did some of it—from *Farkleberry Follies* days, I had a director for a while named Bob Ginnaven, who had done a lot of TV and movies. He's in several . . .

SL: I know his son.

BL: . . . movies.

[01:52:08] SL: I've—actually, I've met Bob.

BL: Okay. Well . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . Bob was a good director. Well, he—after it was over—after one of the *Follies* was over, he said, "I wanna talk to you about doin' a little more." And I said, "Well, like what?" And he said, "Well," he said, "we need to work this into somethin' and take it on the road." [*Laughs*] And I said, "Well, what are we talkin' 'bout?" So we talked about it, and we worked this thing up, and Betty Fowler was our music director, and I actually did a stand-up deal for a year. And I went to different locales in Arkansas. I did a—I'd do an hour. I did it at Murry's—four hundred and fifty

hpeople. Did Murry's. I did Hot Springs, Little Rock, Poca—
Paragould, and you know, it was very rewarding financially. It
was amazing that people were starved for . . .


SL: Comedy.

BL: . . . program and comedy. And I'd got written up. Leroy Donald
at the *Gazette* wrote me up in a big column in the business
section, and that led to phone calls. But gosh, I had three girls
as opening dancers, and it was just a lot of fun, you know. I
was just livin' a great life. But boy, it's nerve—finally, you just
can't do it. You know, that and a real job too, so . . .

SL: Right.

BL: But I loved writing that stuff, and it was really my forte, I think,
to write comedy. I . . .

[01:53:43] SL: So you think this speech/drama teacher sparked—
were you already writing anyway before he came along or . . .

BL: Yeah, you know, here and there. But he grabbed these kids and
made somethin' out of 'em because—I don't know, he just had—
 he had some indefinable quality that—you know, a good teacher
can make you wanna do anything. Mrs. Calloway, who pinned
me with the pin, she told me somethin' one time. I wasn't doin'
what I needed to be doin' in her class, and she, you know, she
was—boy, she's good. She said, "Do you read the Bible, Bill?" I

said, "Yes, ma'am, I do some, you know. I go to church." And she said, "Well, you need to read the Scripture about the man that buried his talents. And you may have a talent, and if you wanna go bury that talent rather than expanding on it, then you're just gonna have one talent, just like the man in Matthew in the Scriptures." And I remembered that, so I started tryin' to listen to what she said and what my speech teacher said and Mrs. Thornton, this wonderful math teacher. We had—we were blessed. We were blessed to have these wonderful, caring teachers who, I think, really took an interest in kids. I hope they still do. I think some teachers do, but they really did, and it made a difference.

[01:55:23] SL: Was the Sheridan school—I mean, did you have an elementary school and then a high school, or was it all one thing or . . .

BL: No, we had an elementary school. Then you went to junior high—seventh and eighth back then.

SL: Right.

BL: And then you were—at ninth grade, you went into senior high. But we had a—our senior high school burned down when, I believe, I was in the ninth grade. Lightnin' hit the school and burned the school down, and they had to cram us all into

makeshift spaces in a mobile home or two. So we had to go through that horrible time. But yeah, it was a standard deal back then about grade school, junior high . . .

SL: Separate middle school.

BL: . . . and then high school. Good times. I look back on that—I remember more about the athletics than I do anything, I guess. But I remember—I had two classmates show up at the museum where I was working about three years ago, and I asked one of 'em, Nancy Pittman—I said, "What do you remember about me? I mean, if you say, 'Well, I remember him,' what comes to your mind?" 'Cause, see, you know, I—that kind of stuff interested me 'cause I remember her as being real studious, you know. Very—real serious. And she said, "Oh, Bill, you were so funny, you know." And I said, "I'll take that," 'cause I think we're way too serious nowadays. We're too mean to people. We don't kick back anymore, seems like to me, like we used to. Good friends make fun of each other and don't get mad. And we had that ability. We had a—and maybe I learned that listenin' to comedians like Jonathan Winters—Steve Allen.

SL: You bet.

[01:57:25] BL: I was on the—you know, years later, I was at my senate office, and two of my staff came in and said, "Bill, call

this number." I said, "What?" And they said they'd been listenin' to *Steve Allen Show*—radio show from LA—comin' back from lunch, and he was accepting calls from around the country on people that did weird impressions. [*SL laughs*] And they had heard some of mine. And I said, "Oh, I'm not gonna do that." They said, "Go ahead and call." And so I did. And I'm on the phone with Steve Allen in LA [*SL laughs*], and we're havin' the best time. We're just talkin'. He wanted to know what I did, and so I went through all that, and I ended up doin' a little deal with him. But what an honor to—I mean, you watched his old TV show, the man—and I went through this with him—he said, "Well, how did you learn how to"—and I said, "Well, a lot of it was from your old TV show with Don Knotts and Louis Nye," Tom Poston, and these great comedians who could entertain. They didn't have to be vulgar and tell off-color stuff. They were—Don Knotts was the most nervous dynamite lighter in the world.

SL: Yeah.

[01:58:36] BL: I mean, can you see that, you know?

SL: Yes, yes. [*Laughs*] I remember that.

BL: Isn't that funny? [*Laughter*]

SL: Yes, it is. [*Laughs*]

BL: You think about Don Knotts lightin' dynamite, you know. [*SL*

laughs] And Louis Nye was—I'm—whatever his character was from Brooklyn—and so I—you know, I knew all that, but I learned it and memorized it, and he was [*SL laughs*] honored, I think, that some kid from Arkansas—I met Soupy Sales.

SL: "If it does not" . . .

BL: I'm in North . . .

SL: . . . "wiggle, it is not Jell-O."

BL: Yeah. [*SL laughs*] I'm in North Carolina . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . at a Southern Legislative Conference, and guess who the entertainment is? He's—I guess he's from over there. So the entertainment is Soupy Sales. Well, I haven't heard from him in years, you know.

SL: Right.

[01:59:17] BL: Well, the audience—you know, they don't know who Soupy Sales is. Well, he's doin' his same stuff he did on television . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . and I am rollin' in the aisle. I mean, I am fallin' in the floor laughin' [*SL laughs*] at this stuff. But I'm the only one. Well, he didn't like it very much. Well, after the show's over, I walk up, and his manager's undoin' some stuff, and I said, "Is there any

chance I can see this guy?" He said, "I don't think this'd be a very good night." And I said, "Well"—you know, I talked to him—I said, "I grew up watchin' him. He's my idol." And he said, "Where are you from?" I said, "Arkansas." He said, "Give me five minutes. If I wave you back, you come on back." So I waited. And I remember this arena was—they were workin' on it, and there were paint buckets everywhere, and he's back there. So this guy waves me on. So I walk back there to see [laughs] Soupy Sales. And he's got his back to the door, and I'm standin' there in the door, and they're takin' his makeup off—they got stuff all around him.

SL: Yeah.

[02:00:19] BL: And he's cussin' this audience. He's ranting about this audience that he just acted in front of. [Laughs] And this guy sees me—he says, "Oh, Soup, there's a guy here from—wants to meet you." And he stands up with that big toothy grin, you know. He doesn't have a shirt on. He's just standin' there. So we start talkin', and he said, "Well, where are you from?" I said, "Well, I'm from Little Rock." He said, "I hear great things about that." I said, "Yeah, you need to come play there sometime." I said, "It'd be a hell of a lot better than this audience you had tonight." [Laughs] He said, "Wasn't that

awful?" And I said, "Oh, I loved it." And he said, "Were you the guy out there laughin'?" I said, "I'm the guy." And I said, "I thought you might bring White Tooth or Black Fang with you tonight." He said, "You remember that?"

SL: Sure.

[02:01:03] BL: I said, "Yeah." I said, "Do you remember the time that you're in your studio, and there's a bunch of cattle moonin' out there, and there's a knock on the door, and you open the door and [*SL laughs*] a guy says, "Hey, you got a Band-Aid?" And you say, "Why do I need a Band-Aid?" He said, "'Cause I got a bum steer out here." [*SL laughs*] He said, "You remember that?" I said, "Yeah," and I start doin'—he said—so he says, "You guys, come here to listen to this guy." [*SL laughs*] So I'm tellin' him his stuff.

SL: Yeah.

BL: His whole attitude changed because . . .

SL: Sure.

BL: . . . here's this young kid that grew up in Sheridan, Arkansas, who watched his show and who memorized his whole act. Well, his whole mood changed from being so down over the audience to that. And Lord, I don't know why I remember meetin' Soupy Sales, but I do.

SL: Well, you know, you—because [*BL clears throat*] you made a difference.

TM: Scott, we need to change tapes. Excuse me.

SL: You made a difference right then.

BL: It did. He was wonderful.

[Tape stopped]

[02:01:57] SL: Well, that was a good episode. You know, I do believe that as much of an effect that Soupy Sales had on you and growin' up and [*BL laughs*] what it meant to you to see him perform that day—it—probably it meant more to him than you can imagine, that you came back and you were able to . . .

BL: Make him feel a little better. I hope so.

SL: Well, you made him feel good, and that's a big deal.

BL: Well, it is a big deal . . .

SL: That makes a big difference to people.

BL: . . . to somebody like that and . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: I don't know why I thought of him, but I did.

SL: Well, that's the nature of the—of these gatherings here, is that there's no telling what you'll remember, and it's okay that we . . .

BL: Yeah.

SL: . . . that we maybe don't follow a script or anything. I mean, we'll get to the stuff [*BL sniffs*] that we all wanna talk about, but this kind of stuff is golden. This is precious . . .

BL: Well, thank you.

SL: . . . stuff.

BL: Thank you.

SL: It's a good thing. So here's a straight-A student, arguably the class clown . . .

BL: Yeah.

SL: . . . gettin' spankins in grade school—gettin' sent home for doin' Jonathan Winters.

BL: Yeah.

SL: And you mentioned football as if you had been on a football team. Did you also play football?

BL: Yeah, I was good except we had three All Staters ahead of me.

[Tape stopped]

[02:03:18] SL: So we had a power outage. We've got . . .

BL: Yeah.

SL: What's the hurricane that just hit?

BL: Isaac.

SL: Isaac. So we're startin' to get the Isaac storms now, and you know, we may get another power outage here soon.

BL: Yeah.

[02:03:31] SL: But it sounds like no harm was done as far as the gear goes and the recording. So—I just mentioned that—or I just commented that you had mentioned football and traveling with the football team and the meals and . . .

BL: Right.

SL: . . . sandwiches they'd pack for you and—we hadn't really talked about—other than the Little League baseball that got started and the big hoopla and the parade and . . .

BL: Right.

SL: . . . following the fire truck. But we haven't talked about other organized sports, like basketball and football, and were—so you were an all-around athlete? Is that . . .

BL: I was. I was a really good basketball player, and I loved basketball. I loved shooting hoops, you know, as—you kind of get tired in other sports, but it seems like you can always, you know, shoot hoops. You ever noticed that? But we played it all. I played football, but I wasn't that good. I was kinda slow. But I was playin' behind three All Staters. I mean, our football team was exceptional. We were 10-1 and—let's see, 10-0-1. We tied one.

SL: Tied one game.

BL: We didn't lose. And our coach was Charlie Whitworth, who came here during my junior year, and he took us to a whole new level. We won championship after championship. So you know, I got out there and got my head knocked off. We had tough players and—but I was playing behind an All State fullback and two All State halfbacks, and so my time was limited, although our second team probably could've won most of its games. I mean, we were that good, second team. But it was a pleasure to watch 'em, and I loved Coach Whitworth, who later became my golfing partner and my friend. He was an all—academic All-American at Fayetteville for the Hogs, and he was a—became our principal. He was a very educated person and just a wonderful coach who took the Sheridan Yellowjackets to many championships in his ten years here. He won over a hundred games in ten years.

[02:05:52] SL: Is he related to Donna Axum Whitworth?

BL: No.

SL: No.

BL: No relation.

SL: No. No relation. Okay.

BL: No. And basketball—our team won the district championship. I was one of the leading scorers. We had a great—good team, and we thought we were really good. We beat Little Rock

Central . . .

SL: That's big.

BL: . . . in a big game here in Sheridan. [*SL laughs*] And we thought we were really good till we got to the state tournament, and some team set a state tournament scorin' record on us. Ran us into the ground—into the floor—and just beat the tar out of us. Set a state record, like, they scored like a hundred points in this high school game. And we were out of time-outs in the first quarter because my cousin Gopher called all of our time-outs because he was so out of breath. It was embarrassing.



[*Laughs*] But you know [*SL laughs*], the—your best lessons in sports and probably in life are learned through defeat.

[02:06:53] I get a little upset now—I went to see my nephew play when he was in, like, the sixth grade in a basketball game, and I was cheerin' him on, and I said, "Grant, we won! We won!" He said, "Well, nobody wins or loses in our league. They don't want any of the kids to feel like they lost." And I'm goin', "What?" You know, maybe this is a little bit about [*laughs*] what's wrong in our world that we shelter and protect our kids maybe too much. I mean, it's okay to lose 'cause you might work a little harder, you know. I cried—when we lost a Little League baseball game, Bob and I cried all week. We cried all the

way home. We cried all night. But I went out the next morning, and I practiced a little harder, and I just—I believe in that. I think our best lessons sometimes—you know, you fall a couple of steps back and then you move a step forward. But basketball was fun because you just—man, you—there were only ten of you, and the crowds were good. And we traveled a lot. Coach Zimmerman was an excellent coach, all-star coach. And we played big boys. Sheridan had made a name for itself in the [19]57 team that won the state championship, and because of that, he pushed us hard. We traveled to Jonesboro. We played Central. We played Hall. We played El Dorado. I mean, we played all the big schools, and we learned from that, you know?

[02:08:30] SL: So your senior year was [19]57?

BL: No, my senior year was [19]64.

SL: [Nineteen] sixty-four. Okay.

BL: [Nineteen] fifty-seven was when the Jerrys won it all here.

SL: Okay, okay.

BL: Jerry Humphries, Jerry Carlton, Jerry Crouse, and I'm forgetting one—Jerry Brewer.

SL: Jerry Brewer.

BL: Those were four of the five starters. [*SL laughs*] They were all Jerrys, and the . . .

SL: Jerrys.

BL: . . . the newspaper all called 'em the Jerrys.

SL: Well, that kinda—you just mentioned [19]57—so that . . .

BL: Yeah.

SL: . . . takes me back to segregation/desegregation—and . . .

BL: Yeah.

[02:09:04] SL: . . . and so we probably oughta talk about—was

there an African American community around Sheridan when you were growin' up?

BL: When I was growing up, there was. It was very segregated.

You know, I grew up in a segregated world, as we all did. But

there was a part of town where all the blacks lived. And there

were hundreds and hundreds of blacks in Sheridan, and all of

'em worked at the sawmills—tough labor. They weren't allowed

to—into the—our high school football games. And when the

Sheridan Yellowjacket team ran onto the field—the sawmills

were all around the football field, and they stacked the green

lumber in huge stacks, like twenty feet tall—ten feet wide,

twenty feet tall. And the black people and the black kids sat on

top of the lumber stacks and watched the white kids play. They

had their own baseball teams, and I was the batboy for the black

baseball team that played on Sunday afternoon. I'd walk

through the woods, and I was their batboy, and I—boy, they could play, too. And [*SL laughs*] they had a guy named Sugar Man. They called him Sugar Man. He'd hit the ball five miles. And that was, you know, such a—people today just don't realize what it was like—what the civil rights movement was like for us growin' up in the [19]60s—how it was coming of age—the tension in this country. I experienced it more in the newspaper business because I started covering a lot of that as a young reporter. And got pulled right in the middle of it a couple times. And it was tough—it was a tough time for our country and something we got through, and I hope we never, ever experience [*laughs*] again.

[02:11:07] SL: Yeah, I'm afraid that it's probably not quite over.

BL: Oh, it's not over, and we see it today. We see it in our politics this very day. And I don't know what the answer is. On a very personal note, I—I'm on the Arkansas Claims Commission now. Mike Beebe, my dear friend, the governor, appointed me to the commission, and there are five of us, and we sit in as a three-member group and rotate around. And one of my dear friends is Richard Mays, a very prominent black attorney in Little Rock. And Richard fought the fight. He was a civil rights lawyer with Walker, Kaplan & Mays in the [19]60s. He lived through all that.

He's—he saw stuff, and he lived stuff that we don't understand. We didn't have to experience that. But when my friend Bill Gwatney, the former senator, was murdered—shot down at the Democratic headquarters a few years ago—it really shook us up—myself and Mike Beebe and all of our close group. He was a key person in that group. We had fought the senate wars together, and Zilla—we called him Gwatzilla [*SL laughs*—nicknamed him Gwatzilla. [*SL laughs*] Zilla was our little brother.

SL: Yeah.

[02:12:39] BL: I mean, he—we protected him, and we loved him.

And to see your friend gunned down, murdered, shot in the head four or five times—it brings it all home to you in a way that I'd never experienced. And I talked to Richard about this, and it changed me as a person to maybe begin to see what other people in our culture live on a daily basis in the inner city. Drive-by shootings, drug wars, innocent kids shot, your friends gunned down for no reason walkin' home from the grocery store or whatever. And I talked to Richard about that, and he said, "I understand what you're sayin'." But it was a—I didn't mean to get into that, but it—we—we've lived a protected life in a lot of ways in the white community. And we don't understand. We—

you know, we try, and we do a good job. We've come a long way in my lifetime. I mean, the changes that I've seen in my sixty-five years are astounding. [02:13:52] I got to meet Neil Armstrong and the lunar crew. I spent the day with him, had lunch. I mean, I saw a man walk on the moon, and I got to have lunch with him. I mean, how privileged is that? So I saw that. You know, Ray Thornton used to give a speech called—we called it the "Man in the Moon" speech, and it's true—a lot of our problems today—we say, "Well, if we can put a man on the moon, we can do that." Or "If we can put a man on the moon, we—surely we can tackle that," and, well, you can't. It's easier to send a rocket with three men to the moon in a lot of ways than it is to solve some of the everlasting, nagging problems that haunt us as a society. But we're dealing with 'em, and we're—we have human frailties, and we fail, but we just have to keep trying. We have to get up—like we talked about a while ago, some of our better accomplishments are achieved after defeat. And the civil rights issue—we made great strides—we have made strides, maybe not great—we've made strides. I see it in kids today. It's better in a lot of areas, worse in some areas. I hate it that the inner city is struggling not just in the big cities, but in Little Rock, Pine Bluff. A lot of black schools

when I was growin' up—good schools. Southeast in Pine Bluff—a lot of great schools are gone now, and that community doesn't have a place to rally, to meet, to go to. And it hurt. And I don't know what the answer to that is. We sure didn't fund 'em the way we should've funded 'em through the legislature and through the government. If we had, maybe they wouldn't have failed. But I don't know what the answer—I don't think anybody really has the answer. I think the answer is to keep trying to get better jobs for people and to lift everybody up and float all of our boats that we can.

[02:16:10] SL: You were talkin' about being the batboy for an African American baseball team on Saturdays. And did you experience any animosity for doing that from your white friends? Did—were you teased or . . .

BL: No, no, they went to see 'em play too. I mean, I—it was a . . .

SL: It was good ball.

BL: . . . it was an honor, I think, for me to get to be the batboy. I mean, I don't know that I remember, honestly. I was just a young kid, and I'd run out and get the bats and come back. But there was no animosity that I ever saw as a young kid. Now, I saw it later on. I mean, we all have. And if we don't—if we're not honest and acknowledge that, then we're not—we're—you

know, we don't have any hope. I think you have to acknowledge—Bill Walker, a former senator [*laughs*]*—Bill's one of my best friends. And when he came over to the senate from the house—his dad had fought a lot of civil rights wars, and I knew his history—and he came over to the senate when I was the senate chief of staff, and he had been in the house, and he'd make some pretty fiery speeches. [02:17:31] And I think—honestly, I think that he had a little tough edge to him. Well, when he got to the senate, Mike Beebe was in charge, and we had a good group of senators who were very progressive and forward thinkin', fair. And Bill started to see this, I think. But we had some tough conversations in my office about white community and black community. But we worked it out, and I was always honest with him. And the last time I saw Bill, he and I were pallbearers together at one of our senate friends' funeral. And he's—he became one of our dearly beloved members, and now he's my pal. Well, I didn't know about that growin' up. And it's nothin' against me. It's just the way it was.*

SL: Yeah.

BL: People today probably don't understand that. But I think we all grew a lot during the [19]60s and [19]70s in that regard.

SL: Do you remember where you were and what you were doing

during the [19]57 crisis . . .

BL: No.

SL: . . . at Central High?

BL: I don't. I remember watchin' it on television. I know my brother Jim was in the National Guard that got called out. And I remember that, that he had to be in Little Rock, I think, stationed somewhere in that area during all of that. But no, I was, you know, I was just a kid.

SL: Right.

BL: I didn't—I just didn't know what was goin' on, really.

[02:19:26] SL: Well, let's—I'm anxious to get you out of high school, and of course, we can always go back if you—if something pops up.

BL: Right.

SL: All the way back to, you know, when your—earliest memories, if you—if . . .

BL: Sure.

SL: . . . something comes up. I don't want to miss anything and—but—so what did you do? You graduate high school, and you made virtually all As.

BL: Right.

SL: So what doors were open to you at that time?

BL: Well, the college door opened because of my baseball, and I was recruited by several universities and ended up at Arkansas A&M because I liked Coach Steelman. Harold Steelman came to recruit me, and I liked him, and I signed with them. And after A&M . . .

[02:20:18] SL: Now, where was Arkansas A&M?

BL: Down at Monticello.

SL: Okay, okay.

BL: And I was a Boll Weevil baseball player.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And played with some great guys. And after college I went to work at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, which was really the best little daily newspaper in Arkansas and one of the best in the country. And . . .

SL: And that was owned by the Freemans.

BL: Freem—Ed Freeman the—Edmond Freeman III was my publisher. His brother Armistead and their family owned the paper. It was a great place, and they gave me an opportunity as a sportswriter, and boy, you talk about gettin' thrown into somethin'. About a month or two into my new job, which I was learning to do page layouts and dummies the pages—I was tryin' to learn it from a tough ol' guy that was a sports editor. I

come to work one morning, like at six fifteen, and he's gone. He had left the premises and gone to Memphis to work in the newspaper there and didn't tell anybody. He was mad at the Freemans—mad at the paper—so he just packed up and left. And I'm in charge. [Laughter] And boy, you talk about havin' to learn quick. I did.

SL: Yeah.

[02:21:38] BL: And you know what? It goes back to what we were talking about while ago. I was—I learned under fire, and I had to. And I mean, I'm by myself puttin' out seven- or eight-page sports sections some days 'cause it was a big paper then. It was headed toward its largest circulation ever. And we were very well liked in southeast Arkansas. It was a great paper. We had wonderful talent in that newsroom from New York and everywhere else. And so I'm privileged to be there learning under fire. Well, this lasted for about three years, and the arkan—*Northwest Arkansas Times* in Fayetteville came calling, and I go there as their new sports editor and started coverin' the Razorbacks, and Coach Broyles was there. And I'd spend time with him in the afternoon sittin' up sometimes in the stadium all by my myself—just him—and we'd talk a little bit. I was still a very young man, but I learned again. And then my local paper

in Sheridan wanted me back as their editor, so I came back home and edited the local newspaper here for a while. But my publisher and I got crossways, and he told me not to be writing any more editorials about the Kennedys. He hated the Kennedys. [02:23:05] Yeah, so I'm experiencin' editorial situations that I'd never gone through. And then Kennedy— Bobby Kennedy gets killed, and I write a really nice editorial about him with his picture, so my publisher says, "You know, maybe you need to go somewhere else." And I said, "Maybe I do." So I went back to the *Commercial* as their state editor, and that was a good job. It was a demanding job. And then the *Gazette* calls and said they want me, and so I went to the *Arkansas Gazette* and became their south Arkansas guy. I was part of the state desk where Leroy Donald was the state editor, and he's wonderful. He knew everybody—the—whoever he didn't know in Arkansas, I knew or Wayne Jordan knew—that—we're—we were on the state desk together. And the *Gazette* was boomin'. Boy, it was at an all-time record circulation. And I came there at a very interesting time in *Gazette* history, and it was about 1972, and they were publicizing me and Ernie Dumas and Doug Smith [*SL laughs*] and John Woodruff and Dub Bentley as the—kind of the columnists who were gonna cover the

politics. They had a house ad with our picture in it.

SL: Yeah.

BL: Kind of a—you know, it was kind of fun.

SL: Yeah.

[02:24:36] BL: So the only thing that, really, lookin' back that I regret—it was a—the *Gazette* newsroom was about to vote on whether or not to go union, and the vote was, like, I don't know, 32–30, let's say.

SL: Right.

BL: And I was kind of one of the swing votes [*SL laughs*], and I didn't wanna make anybody mad, you know.

SL: Right.

BL: I couldn't win. I'm the new guy.

SL: Right.

BL: And I hated that. It—they voted it down by two or three votes. But because of that the publishers wanted to make everybody happy and make 'em stay, so they almost doubled some salaries. I mean, we got a huge increase, and then I went out to eat with my big boss, Bob Douglas.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And Bob's just an easygoin' guy.

SL: Right.

[02:25:33] BL: He talked real slow, and he'd smoke cigarettes, and
[*SL laughs*] I'd drink—I'd have drinks with Bob and Buddy Portis,
who wrote *True Grit*.

SL: Yeah.

BL: A pretty good bunch of guys . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . to have a drink with. So we'd had several [*SL laughs*], or
Bob had, and he said, "Well, Bill, what can I do for you?
Everything's goin' great. We appreciate your job you're doin',"
and all that stuff, and I said, "I want a car." [*Laughter*] And he
said, "Bill, the *Gazette* doesn't buy cars." I said, "Well, I want a
car." [*SL laughs*] I said, "Look, y'all are tellin' me I've gotta
cover everything in south Arkansas, Bob." I said, "You know, I
gotta go in the middle of the night. I gotta go all the time. I'm
on the road all the time." He said, "Well, the *Gazette* doesn't
buy cars." And I said, "Well, I want a car." [*SL laughs*] And I
didn't mind askin', you know.

SL: Yeah.

BL: I—it wasn't that I was brash or anything; it's just that you don't
know till you ask, right?

SL: Right, right.

[02:26:27] BL: So you know what? I—we left that night. And in

fact, we joined Governor Pryor that evening for dinner at the newly opened Coy's in West Little Rock. David came by, and we had a bite to eat. Well, I went to work, like, next week or the next week, and Bob Douglas called me, and he said, "I tell you what we're gonna do. [SL laughs] We'll [laughs] give you forty-five dollars a week as a car allowance, and you go pick out whatever you want. It's up to you." So man, I am ridin' high. I'm [laughs]—my salary's just boomin', and I got a brand-new car, and it was wonderful. It was a wonderful time in my life. You know, I grew up as a little kid in Sheridan, and I walked out of that *Gazette* office one night—and the *Gazette* was somethin', buddy, back then. It was . . .

SL: It was hummin'.

BL: . . . it was one of the greatest papers in the world, not just in America. And I walked out of there one night about eight thirty, and I'd put my story to bed or whatever, and I walked past Ernie Dumas and Orville Henry and Jim Bailey and all these guys that I grew up with. And I walked out, and there's the *Gazette* name on that buildin' in Little Rock, and I felt pretty good about myself. And I really never looked back, honestly. It meant a lot to me to be a part of that 'cause it was high cotton for Arkansas and a kid that grew up here in Sheridan wantin' to do some big

things. I really wanted to. I told—I was thirteen years old, and my friend Tom Allen and I were playin' basketball in his backyard, and we took a break. And we were having a drink, a Coke or somethin', and he asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up, and I always remembered that. And that was kinda important talk for two kids, thirteen. And I remember tellin' him that I wanted to grow up one day and be somebody that people came to and asked their advice. And I don't know why I thought of that, but I did, and I said it, and it got to be that way. I got that—to that place in my career, and I'm—I was always thankful for that, that I got to do what I always wanted to do 'cause I—because I left the *Gazette* and went with Ray Thornton, and that led me to the State Capitol, where I finished out my career.

[02:29:06] SL: Let's talk a little bit about the *Pine Bluff Commercial*.

BL: M'kay.

SL: 'Cause it was also a good paper.

BL: Oh man.

SL: And you mentioned the ed—there was some talent there. Give us a list of some of the folks that you worked with there.

BL: Well, Harry Ashmore was there, I think, and before Greenberg—Paul Greenberg—it was a little, tiny newsroom, and at one time in that newsroom, it was me and my brother Bob—Bill and Bob

[*SL laughs*] from Sheridan, and Bill and Bob Stroud from McGehee. And they both went on to huge careers at St. Louis and Detroit—Philadelphia, I believe. Gene Foreman was the boss who hired me, who went on to the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Newsday*. But Gene was as tough—every day when you got your pages back at the end of the day—solid red ink. [*SL laughs*] He highlighted everything in red pencil. [02:30:07] It wasn't ink. So you got—you have Foreman critiques to wade through. So there's Bill and Bob and Bill and Bob and then Greenberg, Harry Pearson—a fleet of talent. But the *Commercial* was doin' what the *Gazette* did for a while, and that is they knew—they were hiring Arkansas people who knew the state. And when you quit doin' that, I think you run into trouble in Arkansas as—in news media. You need people who know this state 'cause this state's very unique, and I knew everybody—when I was with the *Gazette*—if I—like I said earlier, I knew so many people—prosecutors, sheriffs, judges—call me in the middle of the night—coroners. Leroy Donald's secret to bein' a great state editor: he knew every funeral director in Arkansas. And the funeral director is the greatest newspaper source there is in a small state 'cause they know everything that's happened. If somebody got killed in a car wreck, they know it. If somebody



got shot, they know it. They're usually the coroner. They—
Leroy knew 'em all. [*SL laughs*] And I think—I believe this in
my heart of hearts—that the *Gazette* made a horrible strategic
error in takin' Leroy Donald out of the state editor's job. The
Gazette didn't recover. I think it was a factor. But they had all
this other stuff swirling around in the late [19]70s and [19]80s
that took 'em under. The newspaper war was vicious. The
Democrat—Arkansas Democrat won it, and they—and Walter
Hussman, I'm sure, will tell you that they were that close to
throwin' in the towel. But they hung on just long enough for the
Gazette to self-destruct. And they self-destructed with a bunch
of out-of-state people that didn't know beans about this state.
Nothin'.

SL: That's right.

BL: Charts and graphs and color.

SL: Yeah.

[02:32:22] BL: And they let quality go away, and they lost their
good people. But the *Pine Bluff Commercial*—I remember
coverin' a murder trial in McGehee, and we covered big trials.
And it boosted readership, and I think Ed Freeman liked me
because I was a team player. And I remember goin' in to see
Ed, and I told him—I said, "I'm coverin' this huge trial in

McGehee next week—beginning of next week. And I'm gonna have to stay down there 'cause it's gonna run late." And he said, "Well, that's no problem. You just check in and keep up with your expenses." And I said, "You know what you might want to think about doin'?" I said, "You might want to start throwin' extra papers in McGehee because this is huge." It was a young businessman who was being tried for first-degree murder—killin' his pregnant wife. And it had all the glamour.

SL: Right.

[02:33:19] BL: And it was a huge trial, and it—and man, they threw extra papers, and they boosted circulation by several hundred papers, and he appreciated that. But the—my biggie—the biggest murder trial, I think, maybe in the history of the state—maybe except for the one in Russellville—was late in my career at Pine Bluff, and it was just an awesome experience. Four DeWitt teenagers were standing trial for killing a duck hunter. Jimmy Wayne Wampler of Wynne drove through DeWitt, and four teenage boys abducted him, savagely beat him, and shot him in the head—killed him. And they were put on trial, and the first one to stand trial was Joe Newton Kagebein at age fifteen. And I got there to cover the trial. Well, he was convicted of murder and sent to death row at age fifteen. And the publicity—

my stuff hit the wires. I started getting correspondence—phone calls from around the world. They wrote a song. Two guys in North Carolina wrote a song, "Joey K. doesn't wanna die. No one to listen when he cries." So because I was there all the time—Joe Kagebein is on death row at fifteen. And Dale Bumpers is the governor, and he's wrestling with this death-row sentence, which is automatically appealed, which gave them time.

SL: Yeah.

[02:35:03] BL: But Joe agrees that I could interview him on death row, and I'm pretty cozy with the prison guys down there 'cause I'm down there all the time.

SL: Yeah.

BL: I get in to see him on death row, and I take a available-light photo with my 35mm of him in the cell, and it went . . .

SL: Viral.

BL: What do they say—viral—today? It goes crazy. UPI—everybody wants it. I sell it to a German magazine because of his ancestors. I got a \$500 check for that one photo, and that's in 1972. Lot of money.

SL: Yeah.

BL: But I'm—I start getting letters in the mail at Pine Bluff with cash

money stuffed in the envelopes to get to this boy's lawyer in Stuttgart—an old man who did a poor job of representin' him. But people around the world—two dollars, a dollar, twenty dollars—it's pouring into my mailbox at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. Well, Dick Cavett calls—their show calls, and they want me to fly to New York to be on *The Dick Cavett Show*. And I go in to see Ed Freeman, and he's smokin' an ol' cigar, and he held it like this. [Pretends to hold cigar between pointer and middle fingers]

SL: Yeah, yeah.

[02:36:25] BL: "Well, Bill, what do you think? [SL laughs] It'd be good for the paper." I said, "Edmond, this thing is gonna be on appeal, and it—I might say the wrong thing, you know. I mean, I'd love to be on *The Dick Cavett Show*, but I just don't think our paper needs that. Maybe I could handle it, but if our paper says the wrong—if your guy says the wrong thing on national TV, that could hurt his chances or whatever." So we didn't do it.

SL: Declined.

BL: But that was . . .

SL: That's the higher road.

[02:36:58] BL: I covered a lot of big—the *Gazette* and the *Pine Bluff Commercial*—we were big into coverin' big murder trials back

then. You don't see it anymore. They don't cover stuff like that anymore. I went—I covered that one and then ended up, I think, covering it for the *Gazette* when the other boys were tried or somethin'. And Kagebein served twenty-five years. And they let him out. And he bought him a motorcycle, got on the motorcycle, and drove to Las Vegas, and an eighteen-wheeler ran over him and killed him. That's the way his life ended. But I think they murdered the guy. You know, they say, "Well, you think he really did it?" I said, "Yeah, they did it. They killed the man." And that jury—when that jury came in, they were cryin'. They knew that they were about to sentence that boy to death. Back then, you—the jury went ahead and sentenced, I believe, and it was a bad deal. Tough. The worst—huh—the worst thing I ever got in on—Sheriff Gene Garrison from Stuttgart calls me. He said, "Bill, you need to get over here quick." I said, "What's goin' on, Gene?" He said—I mean, that's the relationship reporters had then.

SL: Right.

BL: I mean, sheriff . . .

SL: You don't get that now.

BL: No, you don't see that anymore because we lived with 'em, you know. We—they trusted us, and we were okay with 'em. But

Gene said, "We've had a horrible killin' here at Casscoe." It's a little farming community out from Stuttgart.

SL: Yeah.

[02:38:30] BL: There were, like, seven people shot. Four died.

Three thugs from Detroit had come to Little Rock—that—one of 'em had worked over there in that farmin' community that summer and knew this little grocery store. They knew who worked there—the hours—so they kill—these—all three of these guys are African American. They kill a—an African American guy in Little Rock to get his car to drive down there. They didn't care who they killed—what color they were, men, women, what age—they didn't care. They were on a killin' spree, and they walked in that little grocery store and tied people's hands behind their back, put 'em on the floor, and shot 'em. And I got over there before the bodies were taken out, and I wish I hadn't 'cause I didn't like seein' that.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And years later, those guys were put on death row, and one of 'em was executed. I don't know what happened to the other two. And it was a horrible scene, but reporters then—we lived that stuff, boy. I mean, all hours of the night. It was our life, but we—I think we did a good job for the paper we represented.

Sure do.

[02:39:48] SL: What was Paul Greenberg like when—I mean, he was young then, right?

BL: He was young. He—aspiring. He ended up leavin' there and goin' to Chicago for a while. And he didn't like the big city, and he ended up comin' back. I knew Paul and his wife and his kid. He had a young son born while we were there, and he later served in the Arkansas House of Representatives. But Paul was fun to be around. You could hear him cackle in his office when he laughed out loud. And he—the good thing about him then—I don't know how he works now. I'm sure it's the same way. But he would talk with the reporters. If I covered a big murder trial, or if somethin' happened on our beat, he would come to you and say, "Explain this to me a little better. Tell me more about this. Do you think I ought to write about it?" He was a good writer. And my brother Bob—when Paul left for Chicago, Bob took over the editorial writing for the *Pine Bluff Commercial* for a while before he left and went to Philadelphia. Had some good talent in that room.

[02:41:00] SL: No kidding. So was that the—that gave Arkansas a big connection there at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* then.

BL: Yeah, and I did some correspondence work for 'em here. I did—

I was just what they called a stringer. I was a stringer for the *New York Times* and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. I did some work for them. I mean, we—you know, you did stuff like that, really, to not just get your name out, but to make a extra dollar 'cause it didn't pay—you didn't . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . make any money.

SL: Right.

BL: You ?could? starve to death workin' at the newspaper. [*SL laughs*] And I remember [*laughter*] the last week I worked there. This is—Edmond and them had a good paper, but they had a weird overtime scale 'cause the more you worked, the less you got. [*SL laughs*] But my last week in sports as a sports reporter at the *Pine Bluff Commercial* was during Arkansas's high school basketball tournament.

SL: Okay.

BL: And we had about four or five teams up there. And I walked in and told my boss that I was leaving and I'm takin' this offer at the *Northwest Arkansas Times* as their new sports editor. He said, "Oh, Bill, don't leave, man! You're doin' good here, and you've been in the"—la-da-da and went through all this stuff. He said—I said, "Jack, I don't know if I can get to my car." [*SL*

laughs] He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "I don't know if I can get to my car to leave." I said, "I turned in nearly eighty hours this week," and I had. That's how much I worked. I mean, it was a grueling schedule, but you learned. I mean, you were just constantly coverin' and writing and editing—writing and writing—on the phone. Football games—we made a real effort to start coverin' the black schools and Altheimer and Wabbaseka. We wanted them to feel a part of our coverage, so they were phoning all their games in. And we—we'd have people come in on Friday night just to help us 'cause you had, I don't know, a hundred—two hundred games to write up in [*SL laughs*] just a few hours. But boy, you learned a lot.

[02:43:08] SL: So you get up to Fayetteville, and you're doing sports at Fayetteville? Is that right?

BL: Sports editor, yeah.

SL: Sports editor. And you get to spend some time with Frank Broyles, and this is, like, in [19]72?

BL: Six. [Nineteen] seventy-six, probably.

SL: [Nineteen] seventy-six? So . . .

BL: Razorback team was terrible. Johnny Eichler was the quarterback. He was all right, but he didn't have much to work with. Coach Broyles was wonderful. He had Johnny Majors on

his staff. Had Mackenzie—all those great coaches. You know, he made head coaches out of everybody.

SL: Right.

[02:43:48] BL: But he was more laid-back than I had imagined he would be. I mean, he would chitchat. If the two of us were in the stands watchin' practice or whatever, he'd just talk about stuff, you know. But I loved Fayetteville. I wrote about it in my novel. I kinda used that character to talk about my experience up there with the Razorbacks. It was big time. I remember—one of the best memories I have of coverin' the Razorback practices was Bruce Maxwell was a tough fullback from Pine Bluff. He was an old Pine Bluff Zebra. Jim Barnes had gone up there with Maxwell. I knew all those guys. But I walked out the ramp one afternoon to watch practice. Well, Bruce was runnin' in, and he ran past me. And he said, "Practice just started. Ten minutes." I said, "Bruce, where are you goin'?" He said, "I got these four teeth knocked out [*SL laughs*], and Coach told me to go in there and put 'em on a table and then come back." So he—and he's got these bloody teeth in his hand. He goes in there and puts his—puts the four teeth on the table and goes back out to practice. [*Laughter*] Now, you know, if that were today, we'd have Wally Hall on—as an in-depth series on what

the teeth looked like [*SL laughs*—how many were there? Were there really four, you know. How long he's gonna be on injured reserve? Who tackled him to knock the teeth out? I mean . . .

SL: Why didn't he have a doctor?

BL: Yeah.

SL: [*Laughs*] Yeah.

BL: But now—I mean, back then—nah, it's just—that's how tough . . .

SL: Smashmouth.

BL: . . . Bruce Maxwell was.

SL: Smashmouth football.

BL: It was.

[02:45:33] SL: Yep. Those were—so was it Lou Holtz then?

BL: No, Coach Broyles.

SL: It was still Coach Broyles.

BL: Yeah. Yeah, he was the man in charge. Had a guy named Charlie Coffey was his defensive guy. He was a little mean guy [*SL laughs*], and he would take his hat off and put it on backwards, and he was a short guy, and he'd grab those big defensive linemen and spit tobacco in their face.

SL: Oh!

BL: And then take his cap off and rub it in their face. I mean,

that's . . .

SL: That's mean.

BL: Oh, it was—he was a dictator, man, on defense. [*SL laughs*]
But they were—you know, it was just fun and colorful, you know. They were characters. We've run out of characters. We've run out of characters in politics. We're runnin' out of characters in the legislature. I mean, I hate it that we're runnin' shy of characters. People don't have nicknames anymore, and we can't kid anybody anymore without them filing a lawsuit or callin' a press conference. But back then you had characters, you know, and it was fun coverin' 'em.

[02:46:40] SL: Okay, so—now, how long were you in Fayetteville?

BL: I was there two years, and then I'm—the *Headlight* in Sheridan—the local—two—one or two in Fayetteville, and then the *Headlight* asked me to come back and be their editor. And I wanted to edit a small-town paper. I thought that would be fun and a good experience. And it was for a while until my publisher went kind of nuts on me. And he had had a state job, and I didn't find this out till later—and he had gotten fired from his state job, so he had to come back to do the paper and make some money. So he kinda made me a scapegoat on the Bobby Kennedy thing, but I didn't care, you know. I mean, if you're

gonna have a newspaper, I think newspapers should have a voice. I think they gotta have some semblance of a backbone, whether you agree with 'em or not, and he didn't want that. He was afraid somebody might be offended that you hated it that Bobby Kennedy got killed, you know. So it didn't take me long to see his true colors, and so the *Pine Bluff Commercial* asked me to come back as their state editor. They were needin' somebody, and I was . . .

SL: You were ready.

BL: . . . I was tickled to . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . get back over there 'cause that's a good place. It was a great place to work.

[02:48:09] SL: So any of the folks still there when—from when you left, or have they all gone on, too, to . . .

BL: I think they had all gone. Yeah.

SL: They had all gone.

BL: Yeah, probably. I think John Gannaway was still there. He was a good cop reporter. And John was a Warren kid, and he got banged up in a bad car wreck goin' home and ended up a paraplegic—unable to eat food and . . .

SL: Oh!

BL: . . . and later passed away. I went to see him several times. He was a good guy. He was still there. And Lamar James was there. He was a reporter who later I got a job for at the *Arkansas Gazette*. The *Gazette* was needin' a cop reporter when I was at the *Gazette*, and I said, "I know a guy you ought to talk to," and they hired Lamar, and he ended up at the *Gazette* up there while I was there.

[02:49:03] SL: So how long were you at the *Pine Bluff Commercial* this time?

BL: This time, three years, I think, and then Leroy called and said they were really into an expansion mode and would I come be his sidekick.

SL: Yeah.

BL: We had done the *Farkleberry Follies* together. He was the producer, and I was one of the actors, and we struck up a friendship. We'd been—I'd been doin' the show about four years, and he wanted me, and I went, and I loved it. I loved the *Gazette* and the, I don't know, the buzz in the newsroom. It's a—it was somethin' to look around and see that kind of talent in a newsroom. When you're sittin' there and you see those guys that were impact players on Arkansas history and society—our culture—*Gazette* dominated, and it was fun to be a part of for a

while.

[02:50:05] SL: You know, some people think that the present is not history—that history's all about stuff in the past.

BL: Right.

SL: But—and I theorize this about television reporters and camera operators. They go out, and they shoot a story, but they're not really thinking in terms of history. They're just thinking in terms of today's news.

BL: Right.

SL: So—but it seems to me, when you're working with a newspaper the caliber of the *Gazette* at its height that had such a rich history, was there an attitude or an atmosphere that you guys were making history while you were there, or was it just . . .

BL: I think so.

SL: . . . getting the news?

BL: I think so. That's a very interesting question. I think because of its history and the fight that it had fought and just the very nature of its existence—how it got started in the mosquito-infested delta of the state and made its way to Little Rock, and all that came into play. Mr. Heiskell was still alive, and we had a party at the Little Rock country club one night for him. He was ninety-six. And my dear friend Steve Barnes rode out there with

me. Barnes is a great writer and a great—he was the anchor at Channel 7 at the time.

SL: Yeah.

[02:51:44] BL: And you know, he's always very serious. "Are you goin' out to see the old man's party at the party," you know. [SL laughs] I said, "Yeah, you want a ride?" "Yeah, I'll ride out to see the old man and"—[SL laughs] so we go out there, and we leave after a while, and mist—he was up there shakin' hands as the line formed. So I get back to my car, and I said, "You know, Steve, I never did go through the line and shake hands with him." And he said, "Well, neither [pronounced nī-ther] did I." [SL laughs] And I said, "What'd you say?" And he said, "Uh, neither [pronounced nī-ther] did I." I said, "Steve! You were born in Morrilton, okay? [SL laughs] You're not gonna say—you're not gonna get in my car to ride back with me until you say neither [pronounced nē-ther] ten times." [SL laughs] But you know, that's the attitude I have of Barnes. But [SL laughs] the *Gazette*—yeah, I think there was that—I mean, Orville Henry had worked since he was sixteen years old.

SL: Yep.

[02:52:38] BL: And Bailey. You know, when I applied for the job at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*—my first sportswriting thing—my

brother Bob said, "Let me give you a little advice. When you go in to meet Gene Foreman, tell him you like to read Jim Bailey." And I said, "Why?" He said, "He loves Jim Bailey. He thinks he's the greatest writer in the world." [SL laughs] And you did. They were the greatest. Jerol Garrison was a great reporter for the *Gazette*. They took his notes one time when a federal trial lost all of its transcripts, and they used Jerol Garrison's notes . . .

SL: To reconstruct.

BL: That's how thorough he was—for the record. But I was a young reporter when—at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, I was the state editor. I covered a prison board meeting, and Jerol Garrison covered it for the *Gazette*. Our Sunday papers come out—my lead paragraph was exactly what Jerol Garrison put in the *Gazette*, except for one word—we were verbatim—and I never forgot that. I said, "I'm almost as good as Jerol Garrison." [SL laughs] But that was the example. That's where you wanted to aspire to, and that's why I enjoyed it so much. I loved the tradition of that. And when you walked into a room and—a courtroom or a judge's chamber—and you were with the *Gazette*, it meant somethin'.

SL: Yeah.

[02:54:01] BL: It did. Although I got arrested one time.

SL: Oh, what happened there?

BL: [*Laughter*] Well, there was a murder [*SL laughs*] trial in DeWitt.

SL: Yeah.

BL: Okay?

SL: Okay.



BL: I had a little bit of an edge or a—not a temper, but [*SL laughs*] I stood my ground. All my life I stood my ground. Well, there was a prosecutor named Jesse—I forget his last name—but he was from Pine Bluff. He said, "Bill, you gotta get over here and cover this big trial." And it—what it was—a federal escapee had killed an Arkansas state trooper, and I think his name was Ron Brooks. But it was Brooks, and it was colorful coverage because Brooks was the state trooper who had written a Christmas song, so it was kind of the Christmas-carol-singing state trooper had gotten murdered by a mean, old federal escapee—had great cover. So I go over there because Jesse wants me to come give him some publicity, probably. They have some pretrial motions, so Jesse said, "Come on back, Bill. We're goin' in the judge's office for these pretrial motions." So I go back there. They've got this guy shackled—about fifty handcuffs on his hands and feet 'cause he's a cold-blooded killer. And he's sittin' there a

foot from me, and I'm standing behind him with the prosecutor, and they're goin' through these motions. And this judge doesn't like me because years earlier he was the prosecutor. And I called him one day when I was with the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, asking him about a seven-year-old girl who was raped and murdered, and he lit into me and all reporters—how sorry we were. I'd never even met him, but that's what he thought of reporters. He hated 'em. [02:55:52] So I'm standing there, and the judge is about to rule, and he looks up and sees me. He said, "What's he doin' in here?" Talk—points at me. And Jesse said, "Oh, this is Bill Lancaster, Judge. I asked him to come back here. He's a friend a mine." He said, "He doesn't need to be in here." He said, "That's unfair to this client here." And I leaned over, and I said, "Do you care if I'm in here?" to the killer. He said, "I don't care." I mean [*laughter*], why should he care, you know. So I said, "He doesn't care, Judge." And he said, "Well, this air conditioner is not workin' very well, and there's too many people in here." And Jesse said, "Well, Judge, I asked him to come back here. It's my fault." And he said, "I don't care. I don't want him back here. This air"—I said, "Judge, I'll be glad to leave; it's your chamber. I respect your opinion, but," I said, "you need to come up with a better excuse

than your air conditioner not workin'." And he banged his hand down on the desk, and I was taken down to the jail. And Leroy called to check on things and found out about it, and all I know was I'm down there about to sing for supper, I guess.

SL: Yeah.

[02:57:02] BL: And our attorney in Little Rock called the sheriff and got me out. But the judge didn't like me and—but you know, if you live long enough, things come full circle. Years later, Judge Randall Williams, a wonderful man from Pine Bluff—my friend—he called me one night about midnight. And this is, like, five or six years later. [*SL laughs*] And he said, "Whatcha doin'?" I said, "Well, Judge, I'm asleep. [*SL laughs*] What are you doin' callin' me?" And he said, "I thought I'd tell you a funny story. We're over here at the bar association meeting in Hot Springs, and your ol' buddy"—and he called the judge's name. He hated him. And this judge drank all the time. He said, "Your ol' buddy's over here, and they had to haul him out of the auditorium tonight." I said, "What in the world happened, Judge?" He said, "He was so drunk, he got up to make a motion [*SL laughs*] on a point of order that he fell over the seats in the auditorium and banged his head, and they took him to the hospital." [*Laughs*] He said, "I thought you'd wanna know how



your buddy's doin'." [SL laughs] But yeah, I did. I had—you know, I had some great experiences as a reporter. I guess I could share this one, because I really got in trouble. Lyndon Johnson was president.

SL: Kay.

BL: And he's dealing with the Vietnam War that he inherited. And J. William Fulbright was our US senator who opposed the war and Johnson and all this madness goin' on that he thought—well, the *Arkansas Gazette* loved Bill Fulbright. They're gonna endorse Bill Fulbright. It didn't matter what he did. They loved him.

SL: Right.

[02:58:37] BL: So Lyndon Johnson has ordered more bombing raids into Cambodia. And it's a big push. Well, the *Gazette's* desperate to find Bill Fulbright to get his opinion on the new bombing order, and we're fightin' a deadline. But we gotta find Fulbright's opinion, you know—get it in the *Gazette*. So Leroy calls me—he said, "Senator Fulbright's somewhere in south Arkansas. Is there any way that you have any idea where he might be?" I said, "Yeah, I know exactly where he might be." He said, "Where?" I said, "He's probably at the Slovak Oyster Supper over by Stuttgart." He said, "Do what?" I said, "It's an oyster supper the Catholic Church has. It's a little Catholic

community, and hundreds and hundreds of people come. If you're runnin' for office, you gotta go." He said, "Well, so and so"—he told me about Lyndon Johnson. I said, "I'll take off. I'll see if I can find him." He said, "You think you can?" I said, "I'm gone." [SL laughs] So I take off to Slovak, and there's this long line. It's, like, a quarter of a mile long just to get in the little church, and they're havin' a big party. They're drinkin' beer and eatin' oysters. [SL laughs] I finally skip through the line and get up there and told 'em that I needed to find Senator Fulbright. And they said, "Yeah, he's in the line in there." So I get in line, and I said, "Senator Fulbright," and I identified myself—"Oh yeah, Bill, come on, get somethin' to eat with me. We'll talk about that." So we make our way through the little line and get over here to these wooden picnic tables. Well, all the way through the line, this man with Senator Fulbright is pounding me. He's called me every name in the book.

SL: Probably 'cause you cut in line.

[03:00:22] BL: [Laughs] No. He said, "That's the way you reporters are. You won't leave this man alone." He's callin' me cuss word . . .

SL: Oh.

BL: . . . after cuss word. I mean, hammerin' me right here in my

ear, and Fulbright's right here. Well, we make our way through the line, and the guy is right with us. So I sit down here, and Fulbright's right here to my right.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And I got my little notebook, and I'm askin' him about President Johnson 'cause I gotta get back to a phone somewhere.

SL: Phone it in.

BL: I got an eight o'clock deadline.

SL: Right.

[03:00:51] BL: And he's tryin' to talk, and this man sits down over here, and he is barkin' at me, and cuss word after cuss word—just a stream of obscenities like you've never heard.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And finally I said, "Senator Fulbright, I'm sorry, but if your man here doesn't leave me alone, I can't write down what we're sayin'." And he is so nice—he said, "Well, Bill, I don't know who this gentleman is." [SL laughs] And I said, "You mean he's not with you?" And he said, "I've never seen him before." And I thought he was Fulbright's aide all this time.

SL: Right.

[03:01:25] BL: And I said, "Hey buddy, listen, I gotta get some quotes here. Now leave me alone, or this is about to get

personal." And he said it again, and I said, "Senator, I'm sorry."
And I said, "Why don't we go out here just a minute and talk this
out?"

SL: Yeah.

BL: And he went out there, and I don't really remember all that
happened, but he wouldn't back off, and I hit the guy. [*SL
laughs*] I'm a reporter, and I slugged this guy, and he falls into
this big white rope hooked to a tent, and I said, "Oh my God!
What have I done?" And I get in my car and leave. I file my
story with Leroy. It's on the front page the next day. And he
calls me the next morning—said, "?Bill?, great job, man! How in
the world did you find him?" And we went through all—I said,
"Leroy, we got a problem." And I told him what I just told you.
He said, "Oh my God, Bill." And I said, "I—y'all will have my
resignation today. I'm sorry. I've embarrassed the *Gazette*."
He said, "Well, come on up here, and let's talk to Douglas about
it." Bob Douglas . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . the managing editor. So we're in there, and I'm tellin'
Douglas like I just told this story. And Douglas said, "Hell, I
believe I'd've hit the guy." And I said, "Bob, I did." He said,
"You did?" And I said, "I did, and I don't know what happened.

I left." He said, "Oh man!" So he said, "Just go on home, and let's think about this." I said, "Okay." Well, I had the *Farkleberry Follies* to do that night at Murry's Dinner Theater. [SL laughs] Well, I'm about to go on stage, and we got the show goin', and Margaret Carner's our director, and she's peekin' through the curtain. I'm about to go on. And there's a problem in the audience. I said, "Margaret, what's goin' on?" She said, "Some drunk's out there standin' and yellin' at the actors on stage, yellin' at Tucker Steinmetz from the *Gazette*, callin' the *Gazette* all sorts of bad"—I looked through the curtain, and it's the same guy . . .

SL: Guy.

[03:03:18] BL: . . . that harassed me at Slovak. Same guy. This very next night, he's drunk again and comin' up to get a hold of Tucker, I guess. Margaret says, "Watch this!" And Margaret Carner bursts through the curtain and grabs the guy and dances with him like it's part of the dance number, waltzes him out the front door of Murry's and throws him out in the parking lot. [SL laughs] The cops arrest him for public drunkenness. I'm off the hook. I mean . . .

SL: That's a good ending. [Laughs]

BL: Yeah, I mean, how lucky was I that this . . .

SL: Well, how . . .

BL: . . . idiot shows up . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . and they arrest him?

SL: So did anyone ever find out what his deal was . . .

BL: I don't know what the deal was.

SL: . . . why he was so angry or . . .

BL: I don't know.

SL: Just a mean drunk.

BL: No, I didn't wanna know anything else. [*SL laughs*] I was . . .

SL: It was out of your life.

BL: . . . saved by the bell.

SL: Yeah, no kiddin'.

BL: Yeah.

SL: Yeah.

TM: We need to change tapes.

SL: Okay. All right.

[Tape stopped]

[03:04:10] SL: All right, Bill, we're on our fourth tape here.

BL: Kay.

SL: Your voice okay? Your . . .

BL: Doin' okay.

SL: You got some water next to you now. You can drink that anytime. You don't have to wait for the break.

BL: Okay.

[03:04:21] SL: So we've been talkin' newspaper stories. I wanted to ask you—did you ever run across Roy Reed?

BL: Never did.

SL: Never?

BL: His son worked for me. I hired his son, John, at the senate. I mean, I talked to Roy before. He's been by the senate to visit his son, John, who I hired at the senate. But I never worked with him, no.

SL: He did a lot of interviews for us.

BL: Oh, he's a wonderful man.

SL: But he took on—he started the *Gazette* project. I don't know if you've ever . . .

BL: Right.

SL: . . . read any of that stuff, but . . .

BL: I have.

SL: Okay, yeah.

BL: Yeah, he's good, and his son's very talented too, just like him.

SL: Yeah. Well, I'm crazy about Roy. He's a good guy.

BL: Oh well, he's a good Arkansas guy. I mean—and he [*SL laughs*]

lives up there in the hills.

SL: Hogeye.

BL: Yeah.

[03:05:20] SL: Okay, well, so let's see—now, where did we leave off? We had been talkin' about . . .

BL: I think I just punched a guy or somethin', didn't I?

SL: Oh yeah, yeah. And it . . .

BL: It's not one of my prouder moments, you know.

SL: I know, but how—I wonder what was wrong with the guy. What—I mean . . .

BL: Oh, I just think he was just in a crazy drunk guy runnin' around the state. But I don't know. But you know, after a while, somethin' might just become a little personal with you.

SL: Yeah.

BL: Especially if certain names are called, talkin' about your mother.

SL: Oh. Yeah.

BL: You know, and things like that—little things like that. [*SL laughs*] I'll . . .

SL: That'll add up quickly.

BL: . . . I'll put my notebook down and challenge you after a while.

SL: Yeah.

[03:06:02] BL: I mean [*sniffs*], it just—it shouldn't've happened. I

doubt if you read people's contributions of proud moments in the *Arkansas Gazette*, it's probably not one of 'em. [*SL laughs*] But it was somethin' I had to do. I mean, I'd had all I could take, and I know Senator Fulbright was embarrassed because people were thinkin' that this guy was with him. He's goin' around—he's puttin' his arm around him and, you know, just slurring his words. And Bill Fulbright—you know, he's just a little bit above that.

SL: Yeah.

BL: I mean, he's the man in DC, and he's the *Gazette's* golden boy.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And I'm there representin' the *Gazette* to him, and we're tryin' to do a job. And this guy just—he would not leave me alone. And I look back on it and kinda laugh about it now. I'm just glad—I'm glad he wasn't an ex-prizefighter and knocked me down, or I'd've missed the story. But anyway, I moved on. [*Laughs*]

[03:07:09] SL: Well, okay—so what was going on with—so you were sent to find Senator Fulbright because of what Lyndon Johnson was doing with Vietnam.

BL: Right.

SL: And had Lyndon just increased the . . .

BL: He had. It was goin' into Cambodia, and there was a term for it

that he used—what do they call it in the war nowadays?

SL: Escalating? Or . . .

BL: Escala—a surge?

SL: Surge, yeah.

BL: A kind of a surge back then. Whatever was goin' on. And you know, we wanted Senator Fulbright's take on it. Because what he said was not just important to Arkansas or the *Gazette*, it was important to the world.

SL: That's right.

BL: Because his opinion was respected, and he was the critic of the war, and justifiably so. We had a big stick in Washington then that we don't see sometimes anymore, but those were the days, as they say. But it was a moment in my *Gazette*—shortly after that another more proud moment was George Wallace was stirring around again, and he was running for president. And he had just won the Ohio primary if I—if memory serves.

SL: I think that's right.

BL: I think that's right.

SL: Yeah.

[03:08:35] BL: And he's headed to Pine Bluff for a huge rally, and course, this is Wallace country.

SL: Right.

BL: And so Leroy says, "Hey, George Wallace is comin'. Get down there, and let's get somethin' dynamic." So he sent another reporter down there. We had two people "on the ground," as they say. So Wallace is up there rantin' and ravin', and the crowd's goin' crazy. There are probably, I don't know, eight or ten thousand people there.

SL: That's huge.

[03:09:04] BL: It was huge. This was Hestand Stadium, a big rodeo arena—a great story because it's the South and Wallace is in his element. Crowd's goin' crazy. And he—but it's the same old canned speech. So I see one of the Secret Service guys—his name was Pat. I remember that for some reason. I don't remember—so I said, "Hey, what's the chance of me gettin' him by myself after this is over?" I mean, you didn't know till you ask. And he said, "Well, I don't think the chances are very good." And I said, "Five minutes, man." He said, "Who are you with?" I said, "*Arkansas Gazette*." He said, "They hate him." I said, "Well, I don't hate him. I just want to talk to him, kay?" And he said, "I can't help you." I said, "Two minutes. Give me two minutes. One question. Two minutes." He said, "I tell you what I'll do." He said, "We're leaving here, and we're goin' back to Grider Field [pronounced Gri-der]," he said. It's pronounced

Grider [pronounced Grī-der].

SL: Right.

[03:10:08] BL: But he said Grider [pronounced Grī-der]. And I said, "I know where that is." He said, "You meet me out there. If you're at that chain-link fence—and we got a twin-prop plane, and the props are gonna be runnin'—we—when we pull him in there. If I wave you on the plane from the stairs, you come. If I don't, deal's off; we're out of there." I said, "I'll be there. I'll go—I'm goin' now." Well, the other reporter came up, and she said, "I just can't find anything interesting about any of this. [*SL laughs*] I'm goin' back to Little Rock." I said, "Okay, see you later." I didn't tell her anything. I wanted it. I leave, and I head to Grider Field, and I pull in there, and I'm standing by the fence, and the props are turnin'. And it's loud and windy. Well, here comes the caravan, and they pulled around in front of the plane and come on my side. And the stairs come down—boom, boom, boom—people are up in the stairs, and I think they're fixin' to pull it up, and this guy steps off the plane and looks out and goes like this [*waves toward camera*—waves me on.

SL: Wow!

[03:11:18] BL: And I race out and get up the stairs, and George Wallace is in the front—first seat on the right—or on the left as

you come in. And he said, "Who you with?" And I told him, and I said, "Bill Lancaster with the *Arkansas Gazette*." He said, "Your paper hates me." I said, "Yessir, I know, but I don't." Same thing. And I said, "I just want to visit with you for a minute. I'm coverin' this thing, and you know, we wanna hear what you have to say." I asked George Wallace one question. I had my tape recorder. I asked him one question, and he talked seventeen minutes. He gave me seventeen minutes, and I had it all. I had the exclusive scoop. [SL laughs] Well, I got off the plane. I called Leroy. He said, "Well, I understand"—the other person had got back, and "I understand not much happenin' down there," he said. I said, "Leroy, I got George Wallace by myself on the plane." He said, "You gotta be kiddin'." I said, "Nope." I said, "I got him—I got seventeen minutes of tape, and here's what he said." And I—he said, "Hold on." Well, he starts writin' the story, and I'm givin' him quotes, and Leroy was a master. You can just hear the typewriter flyin'. [SL laughs] Well, the next mornin', pop open the *Arkansas Gazette*, on the front page, editor's box—editor's note—"After the speech, Bill Lancaster of the *Arkansas Gazette* was able to get on the plane with George Wallace, and here's a transcript of what he said." We had it all. Two or two and a half weeks later, he was shot.

And I was in McGehee coverin' a story down at McGehee, and I heard it on the radio. And it just—I had to pause because it's different when you know somebody.

SL: That's right.

[03:13:07] BL: It's just so different. And I'm thinking, "What a terrible tragedy," 'cause at the initial phase of that report, it appeared he was dead. And I'm goin', "Holy cow, you know, are we gonna live through this again?" But I always felt compassion for him in a way that it was different than I would have 'cause I spent time with him, and it makes a difference. It just really does.

SL: Well, and he gave . . .

BL: But he changed politics. He set—I think he set the sta—he set the plate—set the dinner table for the Republican Party . . .

SL: No question.

BL: . . . in the future because he was rollin', and we'll never know the whole story of being shot, but you know, I'm kind of a conspiracy-oriented kinda guy. But they took him down. Somebody did. He was a dangerous factor to some people because his story was resonating—not just in the South, but into Ohio and everywhere else, and it—and he was through after that, of course.

SL: Yeah. Well you know, he gave you—a gift to you. I mean, he didn't have to talk for seventeen minutes. And he . . .

BL: He didn't, and I—you know . . .

SL: . . . and he didn't even have to talk to you.

BL: He didn't, but he knew that his appearance in Arkansas . . .

SL: Was a big story.

BL: He was shrewd enough to know that the *Arkansas Gazette* meant, by golly, next morning . . .

SL: Lot of rumors.

BL: . . . his name's everywhere, and you know, a hundred and fifty thousand readers are gonna read that he was in Pine Bluff. And he was shrewd enough to know that. But it was a big exclusive, and it was typical of what the *Gazette* was able to do then. We were rollin'. It was . . .

[03:14:56] SL: You know, a crowd of eight thousand people to see a candidate speak . . .

BL: Oh.

SL: That's a huge crowd.

BL: Oh. Well, he was a huge crowd-pleaser.

SL: Yeah.

BL: He was a flame-throwin', dynamic, Southern ex-Democrat, I guess. I don't know what he—he was runnin' as third party

then, I believe—third-party candidate . . .

SL: Independent.

BL: . . . seems like.

SL: Yeah.

[03:15:25] BL: I don't remember. But it was a—it's a good memory for me. I interviewed Elvis in Pine Bluff shortly before he died. I—maybe I'm killin' off everybody, but . . .

SL: Oh no! [*Laughs*] Wait a minute.

BL: . . . but—yeah.

SL: Now I'm startin' to feel a little bit strange. [*Laughs*]

BL: Well yeah, you need to get out of here quick. [*Laughter*] Get the car. But Elvis Presley opened the Pine Bluff Convention Center in 1976—bicentennial year. It was a big year for me. I got to meet Elvis at Pine Bluff and Johnny Cash—I like to call him my friend. I was with him a lot. Johnny Cash brought the Freedom Train to Rison and Kingsland, where he was born, and I rode the Freedom Train for a while with Johnny and June and Geraldo Rivera and . . .

SL: I've got video of all that.

BL: Really? Oh, it was . . .

SL: Yeah, they—see, it was in the. . .

BL: . . . a great day for Rison.

SL: . . . it's in the Channel 7 collection.

[03:16:20] BL: Oh, it was a great day. There were thousands of people—lined the streets. The train pulls up, and I was there—I'd interviewed him on the train, and I was coverin' it for UPI International too. And [*laughs*] he had been to Arkansas several times already with Governor Rockefeller and others. And I'd met him three or four other times, I believe. [*Laughs*] One time ABC had him as a summer fill-in show for *Hollywood Palace*.

SL: Yep.

BL: Back then, TV shows took a summer break, and then they had a fill-in show that filled in for 'em, and then they'd come back in the fall. Well, Johnny Cash was asked to do the summer replacement for *Hollywood Palace*. Well, this was on ABC, and Channel 7 was the affiliate. They bring him in, and he—they're gonna take him to Cummins Prison to film down there. Channel 7 was gonna film the show that was gonna air. Channel 7—I won't call his name—but I had a great friend that worked there. And *Hollywood Palace* was a sh—kind of a variety show on ABC, and they had a multicolored curtain where people performed.

SL: Yeah.

[03:17:38] BL: Well, Channel 7 thought it'd be great to have this same kind of backdrop at Cummins Prison. [*Laughter*] And so

Johnny and the Statler Brothers and this caravan of big trucks and crew that—everybody heads down there, and I'm with 'em, for some reason. I don't remember what it was. We pull into Cummins Prison, and these producers from New York get out, and there's this Johnny Carson kind of curtain thing painted—it's a wooden, painted backdrop for Johnny to perform on. That guy looked at that, and he said, "What is this?" And our good friend from Channel 7—he said, "How do you like our backdrop stage we did for you?" And this guy never blinked. He went—he snapped [*snaps fingers*] his fingers, and he said, "Get the sledgehammers." And these guys pile out of these trucks, and they demolished this stage. And he said, "I want" . . .

SL: Prison.

BL: . . . "guard towers in the back of Johnny Cash when he sings," 'cause he—they wanted him at prison.

SL: Sure.

BL: But the Channel 7 magical stage was history. [*SL laughs*] But that [19]76 thing—that was when Pine Bluff opened its beautiful new convention center. And they brought Ringling Brothers, Barnum & Bailey circus, the big one, and Elvis Presley to Pine Bluff. And I was with the *Gazette*, and I helped Simmons Bank people kind of on the side—helped PR it a little bit 'cause it was

big, man. You know, you got the biggest entertainer in the world . . .

SL: Yeah.

[03:19:19] BL: . . . comin' to Pine Bluff. And then there's Ringling Brothers—there's a good story to that. I don't know if it's true, but Buddy Whittaker was a Pine Bluff native—worked for Fulbright and maybe McClellan and others in DC. The story I got that wasn't printable—not provable—was that the reason Ringling Brothers, Barnum & Bailey—big-time circus—the biggie—came to Pine Bluff was that Buddy Whittaker was in a poker game with the Ringling Brothers people, and he had 'em pretty much over a barrel, and he said, "Okay, then I'll bet you that if I win this hand that y'all bring Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey to Pine Bluff [*bird chirps*] for the opening of the convention center." And they said he won the game, and they had to come. Now, I don't know if that's true, but it's a great story.

SL: It is a great story.

BL: And I don't—I wouldn't doubt it one bit.

SL: Nope, I wouldn't either.



[03:20:12] BL: No, it's the way things were done. But you know,

Elvis and all those—Johnny Cash—my visits with him and quiet

time with him was good, but during that time the most talented guy I met was the lion tamer from the circus. He was world famous. He was—Gunther Gebel-Williams was his name, and I wanted to interview him. And I wanted that interview a lot. And I went out there, and their PR guy said, "Oh, he can't take time away from his animals—the white tigers and—because he's somethin' else, man." And so I said, "Come on, just—I'll come out there, and I'll stay out of his way, and I'll even watch him while he's workin'. I won't"—he said, "Okay." So I went, and he—they had these giant tents besides the arena, and this guy—I walk out there, and he's got—he's a German guy with this great blond hair—Hollywood looks—and he's in a white suit. And he's out there sweepin' up under the elephants. I mean, the headliner doin' this. And I watched him, and he would give a command, and that elephant would raise a leg, and he'd sweep under him, and he'd give a command, and he'd put the leg down, and then he'd rai—they did everything. So I interviewed him out there, and I asked him—I said, "Why do you do this work? I mean, why do you have to sweep [*laughs*] up? You know, it seems like everybody'd want to do that." He said, "I do everything for my animals." He said, "They know that I'm responsible for everything about them. They know that I bathe

'em and I feed 'em and I sweep up after 'em. And if they don't know that, I'm in trouble when I put my head in one of those lion's mouths." Now, isn't that somethin'?

SL: That is somethin'.

[03:22:10] BL: It was amazing. I was just so impressed with this guy. I mean, yeah, entertainers are great, and it's—they're famous and all that. But this guy was amazing, and I never forgot that. He never left those lions and tigers and elephants, and he was totally responsible for everything that happened to 'em. He couldn't delegate one thing about it because they would be obliging to them rather than him, see, and he knew that. But he was their headliner, and I always remembered him. It was a good assignment.

SL: That was—that's a good story, and it—you know, you understand that. You can understand that he . . .

BL: Yeah, yeah.

SL: . . . would have that commitment.

BL: And you know, that's the way our pets are. I mean, they know who feeds 'em and takes care of 'em.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And he carried that forward into the big arena—the biggest. And I don't know what ever happened to him. I guess he probably

retired. But it was a treat for me to meet him. And that was a big time for Pine Bluff too. I mean, they—the convention center was opening, and they had some wonderful acts come in there. They were doin' well for a long time. I mean, you start off with Elvis Presley and Dionne Warwick and the Ringling Brothers and a few others, you're doin' all right.

[03:23:36] SL: So how long were you at the *Gazette*, now?

BL: Six and a half years—seven, probably. Somewhere in that range. And Ray Thornton, my friend from Sheridan, he decides he's gonna leave Congress and run for the US Senate, and that would've been in [19]78. So we talk over at his little home in Sheridan, and I go to work for him. I was his first hire to kick off this wild campaign. And it turned into maybe the biggest one ever in Arkansas history as far as pitting three well-known, good men against each other. It was tragic, in a way. It was heart-wrenching, in a way, to see three guys like David Pryor and Ray Thornton and Jim Guy Tucker have to square off against each other. John McClellan was retiring, and John McClellan was set to endorse Ray Thornton in, like, two or three weeks, and John McClellan up and dies. So that set Ray back a little bit, I think.

[03:24:49] David was just the most popular governor that ever drew a breath, and he was the sitting governor, I guess. And

Jim Guy was moving up in Congress as Wilbur Mills's replacement—highly touted, brilliant, good lookin', super talented. But they all wanted that US Senate seat. So the Thornton campaign is doin' well, and we did well. We did some innovative things. I got to know Ray better. We always had our Sheridan talks, he called 'em. I always spoke my mind. And he told me somethin' one time that I never forgot, and I tried to use this philosophy in my work at the Arkansas Senate. But he told me—he said, "Bill, I used to get so mad at you." [*Laughter*] And I said, "Yeah." He said, "Well, I did." He said, "I'd get so mad at you, and then drivin' home I—I'm—I realize that you were tellin' me what I needed to hear rather than what I wanted to hear." And that's hard to do. But I think my newspaper career kinda set me up for that—prepared me to be that way. And a lot of self-confidence from my mother and father—the way I grew up that—always reassuring me. That makes a big difference. But I did that at—with Ray. He was just a great candidate, and it was sad to see him lose. People were just devastated. But David Pryor and Ray are good friends.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And were then. And I tell you this, the day Ray Thornton lost by a thousand—eleven hundred votes, I believe—eleven hundred

votes in the whole thing—over Jim Guy, who moved into the runoff with David. David Pryor's people called me the next day and . . .

SL: Don Harrell.

BL: Don Harrell, yeah.

SL: Yeah.

BL: What a great guy.

SL: What a great guy.

[03:27:05] BL: Don Harrell worked for David, and we had conversed over the years—now, let me digress just a second in a minute, but . . .

SL: Okay.

BL: Anyway, I went over there and worked for them. And they picked me up in the car, came and got me, and I worked for David the following two weeks, and he was successful. But—speakin' of Don Harrell [*laughter*—just to show you—I guess you could say a good deed never goes unpunished in this regard, but I had an old friend in Sheridan named Tom Gray.

SL: Okay.

[03:27:38] BL: And he was an old construction guy. And we deer hunted together, and he was like my second father. I loved that man. He was funny and loved outdoors. He was a construction

guy, a little guy—a little wiry, mean, little guy. Well, when David Pryor was governor and I worked with Don Harrell on some things, Tom's wife was dying of cancer. And he was watchin' over her every day and feeding her and taking care of everything—just watchin' her die. And she finally passed away, and I called Don Harrell in the governor's office, and I said, "You know, Tom Gray is a friend of mine." I went through this—who he was and what he'd been through. And I said, "You know, he's a big union guy, Don, and he always thinks—he always thought a lot of David Pryor. And I was wondering if y'all might just write up a resolution of some kind commending him for all of his years of work and bein' a loyal husband and watchin' over his wife," la-da-da. So—"Oh, Bill, we'd be glad to do that. I'll personally do that. I'll handle it." So they did. And Tom calls me one day. He said, "Come over here. I wanna show you somethin' [*SL laughs*] I got in the mail." And I played dumb, and I said, "Man, Tom, that's somethin'." He had it framed and in the livin' room. Well, the Ray Thornton race begins with David and Jim Guy, and you know, Sheridan's a given. Ray's gonna sweep Grant County, his home county, la-da-da. Everybody knew that.

SL: Yeah.

BL: Just like David's gon' carry Camden.

SL: Yeah.

[03:29:16] BL: So that's a given. Well, I get a call. All these David Pryor signs start showin' up in Sheridan. I said, "Well, what in the world?" So I start [*SL laughs*—I said, "Well, I better go down there and check it out." So I come down here—yeah, you got it. You know who's puttin' 'em up? My old buddy Tom Gray! [*SL laughs*] So I went over there to say—I said, "Hey, Tom, how you doin'?" "Hey, come on in," you know. We talked a minute. I said, "Hey, I need to ask you somethin'. Are you not gon' help Ray Thornton in this race down here?" He said—and he had emphysema, and he grunted when he talked.

SL: Yeah.

BL: He said, "By God, I was. I was gonna help Ray. You know, I think the world of Ray. But let me show you somethin'. You remember that?" And he points to this resolution. [*SL laughs*] This framed thing up on his wall [*laughter*] that I got for him that I couldn't tell him about. I said, "Yeah, I see that, Tom." [*SL laughs*] He said, "Now, I can't turn my back on a man that'd do that for me. And by God, I'm helpin' David Pryor." I said, "And you need to."

SL: You know . . .

BL: I mean, I couldn't spill the beans, man.

SL: No kiddin'.

BL: [*Laughs*] But my good deed had circled around.

SL: You know, that's a good example of politics. I mean . . .

BL: It is.

SL: . . . that's the kind of stuff that . . .

BL: It's all interconnected.

SL: It's all interconnected, and . . .

BL: Yeah.

SL: . . . it's promises [*BL laughs*] made, promises kept. I guess that's the . . .

[03:30:39] BL: Yeah, but da—I mean, you know—[*sighs*] well, it almost sounds like I'm talkin' against Jim Guy, but David Pryor—you know, everybody loved David Pryor. It's just—the name—until you run against that name, you have no idea what you're up against. And Ray Thornton nearly pulled it off. I think Ray made a strategic error in that campaign. I never talked to him about this. But at ten o'clock that night, election night—and you know, you do all this crap in a campaign. You beat your brains out, and you raise money, and you put a—pick out colors for yard signs and all this stuff. And then you sit and watch TV to see if you won.

SL: Yeah.

[03:31:26] BL: It's crazy. But anyway [*SL laughs*], Ray goes on live Channel 7 news that night. He's leadin' the ticket. He's beatin' David. He's beatin' Jim Guy. Votes are pourin' in from places we didn't think we'd do that well. And the reporter asked Ray about it, and he said, "Well, we feel good." You know how Ray was, "We feel good, and I think we're gonna do well the rest of the night because we're doin' well in some counties, like so-and-so, so-and-so, so-and-so, that we didn't expect." I'm goin', "Oh man." So they sign off, and, well, guess what? We end up losin' those counties. For some reason, somehow, the tide turned, and we lost 'em. And I always wondered, "What in the world? Oh, if we just hadn't come out of that room at that time, maybe it woulda turned out different." But I don't know, I just—I had a sinking feeling. It—you just do that. You just—your instincts [*SL sighs*] in politics—you live off your instincts.

SL: That's right.

BL: You do. I remember the worst thing—worst experience in that campaign—and I guess I'm talkin' bad about a guy, and he's passed on now—Deloss Walker. The guru—the ad agency guru who had gotten Dale Bumpers elected and was the brains behind it, they said, although I always thought, "Yeah, like, give me

promoting Dale Bumpers, and I believe I can win."

SL: Right. [*Laughs*]

[03:33:02] BL: But anyway, Deloss had made a fortune off of living off Dale, but Ray Thornton hired Deloss Walker, and it was a coup back then—considered a coup to get Deloss. So we gather all the big staff together at the headquarters 'cause we're gonna all get to hear this saint come in and tell us how to run an election.

SL: Right.

BL: Like you're gonna tell Paul Berry and me and some other people how to do thing? Well, he announces to the crowd—get this—he said, "I want you to rest easy, people. We're not runnin' against David Pryor. We're runnin' against Jim Guy Tucker 'cause David Pryor will not even be in the runoff." I looked at Paul Berry, and he looked at me, and we walked out of the room. And I—I'm sorry, if you start underestimating the Pryor name in Arkansas, you need to pack your suitcase 'cause I knew that and Paul certainly knew that, and I just—I lost some respect for the guy that day. And I didn't wanna talk to him anymore. [03:34:09]



But talkin' about Ray Thornton, I had an Old Guard politician come to see me in that headquarters up there, and I said, "I'm—I'll meet with him," I told my secretary. And I did. And he'd

brought his son to town with him. They were from down South, that's all I'll say. [*SL laughs*] And I said, "What can I do for you?" And he said, "Well, we wanna work for Ray, and we can guarantee you such-and-such vote and such-and-such counties, but it's gonna cost you some money." I said, "Okay, well, tell me what you think it's gon' cost." And he said, "Well, I tell you what, we'll be back in town tomorrow, and if y'all can talk this over," he said, "we'll work for you for a hundred thousand dollars." And I said, "Okay." I said, "Come back tomorrow, okay? Give me a little time." I mean, I—it sickened me . . .

SL: Right.

BL: . . . you know. So I see Ray that night, and we're talkin' about stuff, and I tell him what happened. He said, "Oh, is that right?" I said, "That's what the man said, Ray." He said, "And they're comin' back tomorrow?" And I said, "Yeah." He said, "Good." He said, "I won't be here, but if they come back tomorrow and want to do this, have the prosecuting attorney here." I said, "I sure will." And they never came back. I think they were makin' the rounds.

SL: Yeah.

BL: You gotta watch that kind of feeding frenzy in a big statewide race—bloodsuckers everywhere, man. Everybody wantin' a job.

Everybody wantin' a favor, and they're the candidate's best buddy, you know. But Ray wasn't gonna put up with that kind of stuff, and so it was one of my better memories of the campaign.

[03:36:03] SL: You know, David Pryor and Dale Bumpers do this—they used to do this show that they—that David Pryor called "The Antique Roadshow" [*laughter*], and it'd just be the two of them talkin' . . .

BL: Yeah.

SL: . . . up on a stage, back and forth, real informal, just stories. And Dale tells a story about election boxes comin' in in a north Arkansas county, and he had called the election official there and said, "Now, I figure I've got this many votes. My polls are tellin' me I have this many votes there in your county, and I'd like to know that that's gonna happen, you know, that" . . .

BL: Right.

SL: . . . "you're gonna let that happen." And you know, the guy said, "Oh, come on now. You'll be fine." Well of course, it comes in, and he gets beat two to—3:1 in that county, and Dale wins anyway. And so he tells this story where they're in the hotel suite, election night—or the next night—and all these folks that had worked against him show up, and they're throwin' money on his bed in his bedroom—restitution.

BL: Yeah.

SL: He called it restitution—that they had—you know, they were showing that they now supported him, you know.

BL: Oh yeah. Best new friends.

SL: New friends, yeah.

BL: Yeah.

SL: That kind of stuff . . .

[03:37:39] BL: Well, it's just—there's a side to politics that is like watchin' sausage being made that will—you just have to shore yourself up, and you come away tough from it. It's no place for the faint-hearted sometimes, and I learned that. I learned that at the Senate. After that big US Senate campaign, I moved on to the Arkansas legislature. John Miller—speaker-elect John Miller of Melbourne—he was gonna be the new house speaker. And you know, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, and to be quite frank—and I think you need to be when you're talkin' history—I was talkin' with Mr. Witt, and he said, "You oughta go out there and work for John Miller. He's a good man." And I said, "Well, I don't know anything about him, Mr. Witt." And I get a call—John Miller. [*Laughter*] And I said, "Well, yessir, I would be happy to come out and talk with you." And I did, and John was—had been there twenty-eight years, I believe.

Great—real decisive guy. I liked him. And he said, "I want you to be my new PR guy. I want you to be my information director, and that will mean me lettin' somebody go, but I want you to head that up. I wanna go new places." And I did. [03:39:20] I went out there and met with Jim Shaver, who was the outgoing speaker—great Southern gentleman, brilliant lawyer, great family tradition in politics from his dad, and he said, "Yeah, that'd be good." He said, "John could—John needs help." And Tim Massanelli was the coordinator, and I knew Tim from Pine Bluff days. He's just this fiery Italian who's very open and frank in his discussions, speaks his mind, which you have to do. You have to stand your ground and be honest. And so, long story short, the efficiency committee met, and [*laughs*] I guess—let me go back just a hair here. In my *Gazette* career, I'd gone to Stuttgart one day to interview Wayne Hampton.



SL: Okay.

[03:40:15] BL: Now, Wayne's an old Faubus ally who had moved on. He'd served as chairman of Game and Fish, chairman of the highway commission—Faubus's good buddy—Old Guard all the way, but he was being more reform-minded with Pryor and others. And Wayne called me one day—we had met at the—when I was with the *Gazette*, I went down and did a story on

him because they were wantin' to name a big Arkansas River bridge after Wayne. We struck up—he drove me around his farm, and we really liked each other.

SL: Yeah.

[03:40:47] BL: And I became friends with Wayne and duck hunted with him and stuff, and so anyway, Wayne's out at the state legislature, and he hears that I'm comin' out there to interview for the job. But before I get there again, I'm still at the *Gazette*, and Wayne's in the house of representatives. And he calls me one day out of the blue—we had been duck hunting—and he said, "Bill, we're in the middle of this legislative session out here." He said, "There's a bunch of people out here wantin' to amend the Freedom of Information Act." And he said, "I'm a little bit familiar with it, but I know it's not a good thing to mess with the newspapers." He said, "I don't like that." And I said, "Well, what do you want me to do, Wayne?" He said, "Well, you're a newspaper man, and I need some help." I said, "Well, like, how am I supposed to help you?" And he said, "Well, I wanna make a speech, by God. I wanna tell these people to not do this, but I don't know how to do a speech. I can't make a speech very well, and I sure can't write one, and I want you to help me." And I said, "Well, there's a little bit of a conflict there.

[*SL laughs*] If I'm gonna write you a speech about newspaper and Freedom of Information and you're gonna get up in the well of the house and make this speech, and then our *Gazette* guy is sitting there and he's gonna write about how great you are, and I've written the speech." He said, "I don't care." [*SL laughs*] He said, "If you don't do it, somebody else will, and by God, you're my friend." [03:42:10] Well, I did it. I wrote the speech that night. Well, Wayne Hampton takes the floor the next day of the house, and he ain't never spoken like this [*SL laughs*] on anything. He grumped around and mumbled and stuff. He gets up there, and he makes the dadgumdest speech you've ever [*SL laughs*]*—*he's quotin' Thomas Jefferson. He's talkin' about John Adams and the Wythe boys and Founding Fathers and Philadelphia and Boston, and the reporters go nuts. [*SL laughs*] They said, "My God, the Stuttgart rice [*laughter*] farmer" . . .

SL: He's been to the mountain.

BL: . . . "has seen the light." [*Laughter*]

SL: Yeah.

BL: I'm serious. He's on the front page of the paper the next day. [*SL laughs*] Yeah. And I have to shut my mouth, but it was a great speech. [*Laughter*] So anyway—so I end up out at the house, and guess who's on the committee to hire me. It was

Wayne Hampton and some of the other guys I knew, and [*SL laughs*] it was a—as they say out there, it was a done deal.

SL: Yeah.

BL: So I'm hired on in 1978—October 1978 I go to work at the Arkansas house and loved it. I loved workin' with John and . . .

[03:43:24] SL: Okay now, you gotta explain to me—this is a—it's a state position, kinda like Tim Massanelli being a parliamentarian.

BL: Right.

SL: You're the PR for the house.

BL: Information director.

SL: Information director for the house.

BL: Right.

SL: And so even though the speaker position may come and go . . .

BL: Right.

SL: . . . you're—you remain.

BL: Yeah, I worked . . .

SL: Or—but you . . .

BL: . . . I worked for the offi—management committee. It's a ten-member group. They do the hiring and firing and hire the session help and the full-time help, which then consisted of about six people. Lord knows how many they got now.

[*Laughs*]

SL: Yeah.

[03:44:04] BL: But Bill Foster was the chairman of the committee.


And he was one of the people that I met with. He's the one that nicknamed me "Scoop." That's how I got my name. After the session was over and I'd done a—what they thought was a great job, and I walked in, he said, "There's the man that's got the scoop on everything." And that's how I got my nickname and—which has kind of been with me ever since.

SL: Yeah.

BL: But Tim was fun to work with. He was tough. And we were goin' through a transition period out there. There were a lot of politics involved because John Miller was the speaker and Bill Foster was the management chairman, and they didn't always gee and haw. People have this perception of legislators all bein' a good ol' boy club that meet at night and slap each other on the back. There are more factions and horrible factions in the legislature than you could ever imagine. Staff hating other staff. Legislators not liking other legislators—not gettin' along at all. It's worse now, I understand, because it's more partisan. Back then it wasn't as bad, but Foster and Miller, while they were friendly to each other, they didn't gee and haw all the time.

SL: Right.

[03:45:31] BL: And—but I learned. I worked hard, and I worked long hours. I had a staff during the session, and we'd work all night Thursday night. I wanted to—when they left on Friday and during the session, I wanted each one hundred member—person to have a weekly report on their desk when they got to work Friday morning of every bill that passed that week. They had a radio show written out for 'em, a summary—everything. I did—I was doin' my own radio show. I was givin' them radio copy. It was a action-packed job, but fun. I liked workin' with John Miller and Tim. And this rocked on. For about six or seven years I stayed in that job and moved up. *Democrat-Gazette* got on me and Tim pretty bad about our salaries goin' up, but they were—you know, I guess they had a right to their opinion. But the senate on the other end was becomin' a little bit jealous of our product. And I had met with Senator Howell a couple of times.



Max Howell ran the senate. He was—he'd been there forty-two years at the time—ranking member. Undisputed raw power and a bit of a bully. But I helped him with his roast and toast 'cause of my hu—writing the humor stuff. I'd write the whole dadgum roast for him, and it made him a hero. And I'm glad to do it. I didn't have anything against senators—I knew helpin' them helped me with John Miller and la-da-da.

SL: Yeah.

BL: So they had approached me kinda unofficially about comin' over there to the senate, and I just kinda put it away. They even talked about merging the two jobs, that I'd be PR guy for both the house and the senate. And I told Senator Howell—I said, "Senator Howell, I can't do that." I said, "House members end up runnin' against senators, and I can't make him look good and him look bad and vice"—he said, "Hell, you're right." [*SL laughs*] Well, this rocked on for a while, but in 1985 I met Mike Beebe, and he was—already you could see the star power. He was head and shoulders above most everybody, I thought.

SL: He could talk. He could speak.

[03:48:07] BL: He just—well, and he was . . .

SL: Pragmatic.

BL: . . . he was on target. He didn't waste time, and he's honest.

SL: Yeah.

BL: By gosh, he's honest. And so we go—I walk in the Flaming Arrow nightclub one night, and I'm walkin' in with Tim and Jimmie Don McKissack. Star City. Great guy. And Beebe's there smokin' that god-awful pipe [*SL laughs*], and he'd bang it on an ashtray and put more stuff in it, and oh, it was terrible. [*Laughter*] So he said, "Hey, sit down. I wanna talk to you a

minute." I said, "Well, okay." And we'd never really talked. Oh, we'd seen each other at a fish fry or two or somethin'. He said, "We've been watchin' what y'all do in the house." I said, "Who's we?" He said, "Well, the young senators." He said, "We've got a pretty good group goin'." I said, "I know you do." And he said, "Why don't you come do it for us in the senate?" I said, "Well"— I said, "This has kinda been talked about before." He said, "Not by me." He said, "Senator Joe Ray of Havana—big on you too." And I said, "Well, I know, he talked to Lloyd George about it." And he said, "Yeah, but," he said, "I'm talkin' to you now, and we're about to do somethin' over there. We're gonna—we want a staff. We don't have anything." He said, "We got a—we got an old secretary over there that all she does is do whatever Max Howell says." And I said, "Well, what are we talkin' about?" And he laid it out. He said, "I want you to be chief of staff." He said, "We've never had one. You'll be the first chief of staff."

[03:49:41] That's just the way Mike talked. "You'll be the first chief of staff. Chou-chou-chou-chou. Chou-chou-chou." [*SL laughs*] I said, "Well, I'm honored. Thank you, and let me think about it." And I—it intrigued me, but I didn't pursue it for, I think, several days. And then I was drivin' to work one mornin', and I said, "You know, why not think about that?" So Tim and I

went to lunch—Tim Massanelli and I went to lunch, and we were comin' back in the Capitol, and I said, "Hey, Tim, pull in here behind Capitol Hill. I wanna talk to you about somethin'." And we talked a minute. He said, "Aww, Scoopy!" I said, "Tim, I think it could really work for both of us." I said, "If I go over there, I can take care of those guys, and they're friends with some of our guys, and I'll still be here with you, and we can work together on stuff." And he said, "I tell you what, if anybody can handle those egos over there, it'd be you." And he said, "You're really gonna do this, aren't you?" I said, "I think I am." And I said, "I'll let you know this afternoon." Well, the word got out, and the house had a fit. Bruce Hawkins was a house member from Morrilton. They put in a bill, a resolution, tellin' the senate to leave their guy alone. [*Laughter*] And he got seventy-nine sponsors [*SL laughs*], and he came to show it to me. I said, "Well, seventy-nine? Why not a hundred?" [*SL laughs*] And he said, "Well, I didn't have time." [*SL laughs*] He said, "You're not goin' over there." And I said, "Hey, Bruce, I think I wanna go." He said, "You're serious. You're gonna leave?" I said, "Yeah. I think I can—I think it's a—an opportunity for me and my family, but I think that it will work out for all of us, really." And he said, "Well, what do you want

me to do?" I said, "Pull that thing down, would you? Take it off the table." And he did, and I ended up goin'. And it opened up a lotta avenues that I never imagined. I had a lot of battles to fight, though. It took a lot out of me. You don't know what it's like to deal with Max Howell until you have to do it, and I can share some of those stories 'cause it was—he didn't want a staff. Max Howell ran that place with an iron fist for forty-somethin' years.

SL: Yeah.

[03:52:12] BL: And he didn't want somebody comin' over there lookin' at the finances and givin' orders and tellin' people what to do 'cause he did it. And I understand that. But it was the start of somethin' that changed politics 'cause Mike Beebe was movin', and he never stopped. And you had Max and Knox—Knox Nelson here.

SL: Yeah.

BL: The old tigers.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And then you had Nick Wilson, and then you had Mike Beebe, and that's what I inherited. I had—now, you talk about some tough factions.

SL: Yeah.

[03:52:50] BL: And I would describe—I can tell you one story that describes what I had ahead of me.

SL: Okay.

BL: I ended up at the hospital after I'd been there a short while because Tom Watson was from Monette—he was a senator. He was pro tem, and he was dying. And I end up out at the hospital with him and his wife, Gladys, and their son were in the room. And I'm talkin' with Tom 'cause he was great. And he's talkin' to me, whisperin' a little bit. And he says, "Come 'ere." And he pulled me by my tie and pulled me down to his bed, and he said, "You be careful out there," he said, "because some of those people will cut your throat and gladly watch you walk off and bleed to death." And that was from a dyin' man. He died the next day. And you don't think it didn't shake me up a little bit.

SL: Yeah.

BL: But he was right. He knew that—he knew what this new wave was in for because he had fought it. He'd seen it, and he knew ruthless power. And it didn't scare me. It almost fired me up, you know, because that's the kind of guy I was. I—you wanna take it on, let's take it on. And—but I knew what I was in for, and I was ready for it. But I started seein' it more and more in everything I had—he put stumbling blocks everywhere I went.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And I could talk more about that.

SL: Go ahead.

BL: Well, couple a three things come to mind. Senator Howell decides that we need a new phone system.

SL: Okay.

BL: And I think it went statewide, and I'm not sure if another senator might've been involved in the company that got this business.

SL: Right.

[03:54:59] BL: But he made that decision. He didn't ask anybody.

So we're told that everybody in the Capitol and everybody around the complex will be signing up with the new phone system. We'll be gettin' new phones. They worked their way around in the senate offices, and everybody gets their new phone. And they made their way over toward my wing there. And the guy says, "We're not quite through, and I'll finish up in here tonight." [*SL laughs*] So I—you know, I'm naive enough to go home and stuff . . .

SL: Right.

[03:55:40] BL: . . . and not thinkin' that much about it. Well, I come into my office the next mornin'. I'm first one there. And I

open my office door, and this phone system—you might remember there were phones that had a red light, and if you had a message somebody had left, it had a blinkin' red light, and you just pushed that button, and it told you who had called, and that was our new phone system. Well, my red light's blinkin'. I've never used the phone. And I said, "Well, that's the message button." So I walk over there and pick the receiver up and push the message button, and the man says, "Jacksonville City Police. Can I help you?" And I—it was like a Watergate moment. I mean, a cold shiver went down my spine. I never told a soul. Never told Mike Beebe. Nick Wilson and Wayne Dowd kinda suspected it—they were two senators—and they wanted to mess with Max. And I'd heard that they just took a bunch of copper wire and took it back around Max's office and in the quiet room just dropped it around behind the curtains to think that maybe their—those phones were bugged too. I don't know if that's true or not. I always heard it, and I thought it was kind of funny 'cause he's messin' with him right back.

SL: Yeah.

[03:57:00] BL: But when Beebe would call, he'd say, "Well, you talk to ol' Max?" or whatever. I said, "Well, Senator Howell was by, and he had on a new sports coat, and he really looked nice in it,"

or whatever. I never went to where I think he wanted me to go. Then he tells me that he wants me to write down everything that I did every day. And I said, "Well, what do you mean, Senator Howell?" He said, "I want daily work reports from every one of your staff, including you. I wanna know everything you did that day, and you can send 'em to me every Friday." Well, you know, he's just pokin'. And I said, "Sure. Be glad to do that. We'll be happy to do that." You know, I'm not gonna bite. And so we do. For two years, I filed—every afternoon I'd write down everything I did that day—who I talked to—everything. If I took out the trash, it was in a report. So this rocked on for a while. One day I sent him the report on a Friday, and he called me immediately. He said, "This report you sent—you can't put that crap in that report." I said, "Senator Howell, you asked me to put down everything I did every day, and I've got to do that." I said, "You know, I can't start editing, or I'll take out a lot of stuff." He said, "But you can't put that in there." I said, "Well, that's what I did part of the day." [03:58:35] And I'd—what I'd done, I'd gotten a urgent phone call from a senator sayin', "Get over to my apartment across the street and change the sheets on that bed before my wife gets to town." [SL laughs] And I did 'cause he was a good guy. But I put it in the report. He said,

"I'll be out there in a minute." Well, he was out there in a flash, and we got into it again. And I said, "Senator Howell, you asked me to do it, and I did it." He said, "Well, that's the end of these reports." I said, "Okay, that's the end of 'em," and that was. But he—you had to—Charlie Cole Chaffin was a senator from Benton—she good woman.

SL: Yeah.

[03:59:14] BL: She said, "Max Howell is a playground bully. You gotta hit him right in the nose." She said, "I've done it, and that's all you—that's the only way you can deal with him." Well, let me tell you the topper. Two more stories on Max. One about the elk. If I forget where I'm headed here, you can remind me.

SL: Okay.

BL: My PR guy at the senate is Bill Darling, and he's dying. He'd been with me from the *Pine Bluff Commercial* days. I got him that job up there. Now, he comes into my office—he's forty-one years old. He had been to the doctor—found cancer on his back, and he tells me the news. He said—I said, "Bill, what in the world?" He said, "They told me I might have six weeks at the most to live." Well, he breaks down and cries, and I'm holdin' my friend while he cries. [*Sighs*] Ugh! So he goes home or whatever. Well, I call Ben Allen, the senator from Little Rock.

And Ben likes Bill, and he's on my efficiency committee, the five-member efficiency committee that oversees the staff. Max is chairman, of course.

SL: Yeah.

[04:00:25] BL: I tell Ben what's happened. He said, "Oh my word, Bill!" And I said, "Senator, I don't know, we gotta do somethin' to help him and his family." I said, "Bill doesn't have any money." And he said, "Well, I'll tell you what we'll do, by God. We'll raise money at least for his funeral." And I said, "Can I ask you to do that? Can you head that up?" He said, "I'll be happy to head it up." And Ben Allen went to work, and we ended up raisin' ten thousand dollars, nearly.

SL: Yeah.

[04:00:51] BL: And so I said, "One other idea." I said, "We don't have Bill Darling at his maximum authorized salary at the senate." And Ben said, "Well, how far short is it?" And I said, "About a hundred dollars a month." I said, "Maybe ten or fifteen dollars a week. And if we could get him that little amount of money for two months that he's here, that'll help his wife and little kids. He's got three little kids he's gonna leave behind. Maybe that'll help them on down the road on Social Security, at least." He said, "Okay, let's do that." And I said, "I'll call

Senator Howell and see if he'll do that." So I called Senator Howell—explained all this to him. He said, "I'll call a committee meeting on it, and we'll discuss the possibility." Now, he can do this by calling, but no, he has to call a meeting and get his four colleagues in there to spend the taxpayers' dollars to talk about a dyin' man and fifteen damn dollars. So they call the meeting, and it's set for ten o'clock, and it's in the quiet room. And I walk back there, and Nick Wilson's over here on the phone. He's about to call a number, and he said, "Hey, Bill, come here." I said, "Yessir." He said, "What's this meeting about?" And I said, "It's about Bill Darling." And he said, "How long's he got?" And I said, "Probably two weeks, Nick, maybe three." He said, "Well, what's the meeting about?" I said, "Senator Howell wanted to have y'all come in and vote on whether to move his salary to maximum authorized—about ten to fifteen dollars a week—while he's still here." He went nuts. He said, "And we gotta call a meeting for that?" He said, "He's gotta have a meeting to discuss that?" I said, "Yessir, he sure does." He just shook his head. Well, in about thirty minutes, the meeting starts, and I hadn't campaigned 'em at all. I wouldn't—I never did that. So they sit down at the table, and Max gavels and says, "Meeting come to order." Nick Wilson says, "I move we move Bill Darling

to maximum authorized salary." Clarence Bell said, "I second." Ben Allen said, "I vote aye." And Senator Howell turned on me. He said, "Well, I can see my committee's been hijacked." And Nick says, "Senator Howell, Bill didn't say one word to us on how to vote." He said, "I cannot believe you'd call a meeting over this." [04:03:26] And he walked out. So it kind of broke apart. I walked over by the senate elevator a few feet from our table where we had just met, and Senator Howell walked behind me. He said—and I turned around, and I'm tryin' to still be diplomatic 'cause that's my job. And I said, "Senator Howell, I appreciate very much the committee's action today." And he reached over and patted me on the shoulder. He said, "Hey, Bill, I know how the game's played." He said, "I was ?in the? general in the army, you know." He said, "We get your subordinate salaries up under you, and then we have to raise your salary, right?" Hey, it's the maddest I've ever been in my life—in my whole life. Never got that mad in my personal life. And I unloaded, and I told him in no uncertain terms what he could do with his money and if I ever had another penny comin' anywhere, anytime—just to put it on my dyin' man's salary right now. And I said, "I can't believe you'd say somethin' like that." And I spun and went to my office. And in about ten minutes, he knocked on the door,



and he opened the door. He said, "I owe you an apology." I said, "Senator Howell, why would you say that?" And he said, "I said I owe you an apology, and I'm givin' you one." And I said, "I accept it." But he was that way. [04:04:56] When I got hired—when I went over there, Beebe said, "Go talk to Max, and y'all talk about it 'cause we gotta patronize him." I said, "I understand." So I met with him that afternoon. And this shows you the depth that this went. But I said, "Well, Senator Beebe and I talked, and I'll be happy to—thrilled to come over and work for you, Senator Howell." And he said, "I understand you're a Witt Stephens man." Just like that. And I said, "What do you mean by that?" He said, "Well, the word out here is you're a Witt Stephens man." I said, "Senator Howell, I was a page when I was in the ninth grade for Mr. Witt." I said, "That introduced me to politics for the first time in my life, and yeah, I was his page, and he's from Grant County. And I think, yeah, he did call John Miller about me workin' over there six years ago if that's what you're askin' or whatever." He said, "Did you know him and his brother tried to beat me in my first race forty years ago?" I said, "Senator Howell, I promise you I didn't have one thing to do with that race." [*Laughter*] And he kinda liked that. [04:06:16] And he said, "Well, they're on my list [*SL laughs*],

and I keep a list." And I said, "Well, I didn't have anything to do with that race." Well, about—oh, I don't know, a short time later, he called me back again, and he said, "I got a photograph of you in your local paper down there at Sheridan." I said, "Yes, sir." I said, "I understand I was in the paper." He said, "So you're a Dale Bumpers man." [*SL laughs*] I said, "Senator Howell, I've been Dale's Grant County chairman for some time. I met him when I was a young reporter. I was assigned to cover Dale Bumpers the night he won. I got low draw because nobody knew who Dale Bumpers was, and I guess you could say the rest is history. So yeah, he's—I guess he's my favorite politician, Senator Howell." And he said, "Do you know that he won't come to my roast and toast? Never has?" I said, "Senator Howell, I didn't know that." He said, "Did you know he's against the Star Wars project in Washington, and my son works on that?" I said, "Senator Howell, look. One reason you hired me for this thing, right, is because I knew a lot of people. And maybe the fact that I know Dale and I'm kinda close to him and respect him, maybe we can undo some of that. Maybe I can talk to him one day and get him to come to your roast and toast." He said, "You think you could do that?" I said, "Well, I don't know, but we can sure try." But he let me know—just like the Witt Stephens thing—

that he didn't like Dale Bumpers and that I was a Dale guy. But
the—I wanna tell you one other . . .

TM: Hold on. We need to change tapes . . .

BL: Okay.

TM: . . . real quick.

[Tape stopped]

[04:08:03] SL: Workin' on your fifth hour here.

BL: Wow.

SL: And you know what? It doesn't seem that long, does it to you,
or . . .

BL: No, it doesn't.

SL: . . . are you—okay. We've been talkin' about Senator Howell . . .

BL: Yeah.

SL: . . . and your job over in the senate that—after meeting with
Beebe and—you kinda thought it over, and you're in the middle
of it now, and you're . . .

BL: Right.

SL: . . . and you're dealing with a fellow that's been there for forty-
two years and been ruling with an iron fist most of those. So
you know, he's seeing you as a challenge.



[04:08:37] BL: Well, he saw us all as a threat. The senate books
had never even been audited. There were funds at the end of

the year left over—I don't know—nobody knew where they went. I mean, there was no accounting of anything [*SL coughs*] because it was his deal. It was his place. And he didn't want Nick Wilson. He didn't want Mike Beebe. He didn't want any of those people nosing into his business. And I—you know, that's understandable. When you're king of the castle, you don't want anybody comin' in, but we did. And we had an obligation to do that. Mike Beebe is an honest man above—he's got a jillion attributes that I could talk about—brilliant, straightforward—but he's honest. And they started an audit of the senate, and there were things that were shocking and scary and made me, I don't know, very cautious in some things I had to do. But Jay Bradford—Senator Jay Bradford of Pine Bluff changed Arkansas political history because he defeated Knox Nelson in—when redistricting occurred. I believe it was in [19]92. Jay stunned the world and beat Knox Nelson. Knox was the power in the senate. Now, Max thought he was, and he was to an extent, but Knox Nelson—if you wanted a bill passed in Arkansas, this man who had a fifth-grade education from Goatshed, Arkansas, was the man. He was the power, and he's brilliant. He was as good a facilitator for education—I mean, for legislation. He was like Lyndon Johnson in DC. You went to Knox to get your bill

passed. If he wasn't with you, it wasn't gonna get passed—house, senate, governor—it didn't matter. [04:10:52] But when Jay Bradford beat Knox Nelson, Jay Bradford went and spoke—to show you how gutsy Jay can be—Jay spoke to the Jacksonville Lions Club the followin' week in Max Howell's district and told them that they needed to take Max Howell out. And Jay called me laughin'. He said, "You're not gonna believe the speech I just made." I said, "Where?" He said, "Jacksonville." And he told—I said, "God, Jay! [SL laughs] In Max's hometown?" He said, "He needs to go." And in three weeks, Max Howell resigned. He was through. The—his last tooth had been pulled, and he knew it. He knew it was time to go. His day—his playhouse had been destroyed. And Mike Beebe and Morrill Harriman and Steve Bell and these young reformers—the young golfers, Nick Wilson called 'em [SL laughs], bein' in his derogatory nature that day—they had taken over. And I was so proud to be a part of that. I was right in the middle of it. I was their guy, and I loved bein' their guy. And I was so proud of the senate. It was becoming senatorial. [04:12:10] But to—one last story on Max . . .



SL: Okay.

BL: . . . to show you how I tried to get him where I wanted him and

that it was impossible. But he had reminisced one day in my office about deer hunting and how he used to like to do it. And he said, "You know, I killed a big elk out there in Colorado one time." He said, "I had it mounted and got it home [*bird chirps*], and I got tired of it at the house, and my wife didn't like it. So I wanted to give it to the local Elks Club. I thought they'd like it, and they didn't want it." And he said, "So I gave it to Arkansas State up there." And Dr. Reng, I believe, was president, and he said he'd proudly display it up there. Well, they were just suckin' up to Max to get more of an appropriation, which was smart. So anyway, he tells me this story, and this is, like, one of the first or second years I'd been over there, in—let's just say [19]85 or [19]86, somewhere—well, time rocks on, and it's, like, ninety-somethin'—I don't know—much later. Years later. Arkansas State on their legislative weekend. They're about to honor Max Howell for his years of service. And Don Tilton, who's runnin' their governmental program up there—he later became a big-time lobbyist and my friend—my golf partner a lot. Don Tilton and Mike Beebe are—they're inseparable. Mike Beebe's very close to Arkansas State. He went to school there. He chaired their board, la-da-da.

SL: Yeah.

[04:13:46] BL: So anyway, Tilton calls me, and he says, "Well, we're lookin' forward to you comin' up, and we can't wait to honor Senator Howell." And I said, "Don, I was just about to call you." I said, "We need to make sure, now, that Senator Howell gets to see his elk." He said, "His elk?" And I said, "Yeah. Max Howell donated a big prized elk—Colorado elk—that he killed to Arkansas State several years ago, and he wants to, by God, get up there and see it this weekend." He said, "Scoop, I have no idea what you're talkin' about." And I said, "Well, you better find out 'cause he donated an elk." [*Laughter*] So he hangs up. Well, we head to Jonesboro, and Senator Howell and his wife go up there, and he kinda calls on me for a little help. He said, "Well, will you drive me and my wife out there to the reception that night? You can drive my new Chrysler car," he said. "I think you'll like it." [*SL laughs*] I said, "Well, I'll be happy to drive you, Senator Howell." And I said, "Why don't you just swing by my room—I'll call and tell you where it is, and I'll drive you, and you won't have to even worry about the traffic." He said, "Okay." So they did. I—they drove by, and I got behind the wheel. [04:15:02] So we head out to the president's reception at six thirty, and we pull into the buildin' in the back. And Senator Howell and his wife get out, and I get out. Well,

here comes Don Tilton and the current president of Arkansas State. "Welcome, Senator Howell," la-da-da. He said, "Well, this is—boy, this place has really grown up here." And Tilton's smilin' and—"Yeah, we've done a lot and"—and he said, "Well, I wanna see my elk." [*SL laughs*] Just like that. And Tilton says, "Yes, sir, come with me right this way. It's just right here." So they walk him about twenty-five steps into this buildin', and there's this grand elk on the wall. And he talks about the story—how he killed him, how much he weighed, all this stuff. And so we leave, and we're walkin' back, and Tilton says, "Scoop." I said, "Where'd you find the elk?" He said, "We found him in a basement up here. He was covered up with a big tarp." He said, "I spent all day cleanin' a dadgum elk up and gettin' it hung on the wall." I said, "You got"—he said, "Whatever we can ever do for you [*SL laughs*]*—whatever I owe you ever—you have saved Arkansas State University.*" And I said, "I agree." [*SL laughs*] And that's the elk story, baby, and it was somethin'. If they—if it hadn't've happened—if I hadn't remembered that, see—and you know, that's just part of the job. You have to be a good listener sometimes in politics. But sometimes people talk too much and don't listen. But I remembered that, and Arkansas State was forever in my debt, the way it was—it was a

fun day, though.

SL: That's a great story.

[04:16:43] BL: Clarence Bell was one of my favorite senators. He was from Parkin. He was an ol' football coach. And he did so much for education in Arkansas. He was "Mr. Education" in the senate, and I loved Clarence. He was like a grandfather to everybody.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And he never had any hard words for staff, and we loved him. Loved to see him come in. A lot opposite—just the opposite from some other people. [*SL laughs*] Well, we had gone through another bad efficiency meeting before I headed to Arkansas State one year for legislative weekend. And Senator Howell was pushin' for somethin' that I was against, so we have this pretty tough meeting. And once again Nick and Clarence and Ben and my opinion prevailed much to his dismay. And he jumped me bad in front of all of 'em this time. And he said, "I know what you're pushin' out here, and you know, this was my idea, and you were against it, and I want it done, and you don't want it done." And I got mad again. And I said [*SL laughs*—I guess I could say this word on camera.

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: I said, "Senator Howell, I don't give a fiddlefuck if we ever do it. Ever!" And I left, and I said, "Excuse me, I gotta go to Jonesboro." Well, I'm headed up there. I gotta get a hospitality room set up 'cause I got twenty-five senators comin' by—house members—everybody comin' to my room 'cause Arkansas State can't serve booze, you know. It's prohibited in Arkansas. So I gotta be the guy to—everybody to come by and socialize with.

SL: Right.

[04:18:35] BL: So I gotta get up there and get all this stuff set up.

So we [*SL laughs*] get up there, and my employee, William, was with me. He's a fun guy. And I said, "William, be sure and get a bourbon and water ready for Clarence Bell 'cause he'll be the first one in here." He said, "Okay." And it wasn't five minutes till Clarence walked in. [*SL laughs*] And he said, "Bill"—he's sittin' on the couch over there, and I'm over here workin'. He said, "Bill, I got a kick outta you standin' up to ol' Max again today." And I said, "Senator Bell, I don't really like talkin' about that stuff. You know, I run my mouth too much sometimes." He said, "No, you don't." He said, "That's the only way to deal with Max, and don't you ever forget that." I said, "Well, yeah, but I'm the bad guy here [*laughs*], you know? I just work there." He said, "Yeah, but you do more than that." But he said, "You

said somethin'—some word [*SL laughs*] to him today. And I was drivin' up here"—he calls his—he called his wife Bell. Mrs. Bell. [04:19:34] He said, "We were drivin' up here, and I told Bell about it, and I was laughin' about it, but I told her you said some word to Max that I'd never heard, and I didn't know what it meant." And I said, "Well, I shouldn't've said that word, Senator Bell, and I sure shouldn't've said it to a senator, and I sure shouldn't've said it to the number-one senator, and I was out of line." He said, "No, you weren't out of line. I'm tellin' you, you weren't. I just wanna know what the word meant. [*SL laughs*] What was it?" And I repeated that word again. He said, "What does that mean?" And I said, "Well, it essentially means 'I don't really care what you think.'" [*Laughter*] He said, "Well, good for you." He said, "I'll have another drink." [*SL laughs*] Oh, but Clarence—oh man, what a guy. He was everybody's sweetheart. As much as they resented some, they loved Clarence that much. But I regret that I had all that tiring—oh—war to go through with him for so long. It was . . .

SL: It's emotionally draining.

BL: . . . it was awful.

SL: Physically—it . . .

BL: It was . . .

SL: . . . becomes a physical drain.

BL: . . . it was not fun, and I . . .

SL: Yeah.



[04:20:37] BL: . . . I took no pride in it. And he—but he tried to

keep my young black guy off the senate picture composite.

We'd been there one year—our first session had been [19]87—

and all the senators are pictured on this . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . composite.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And then certain staff—you have a hundred and fifty, and used to be Max's kids on the payroll.

SL: Yeah.

[04:21:05] BL: And you have to pick certain ones, and I'd pick, like, my head sergeant at arms and my secretary—but all the permanent staff—we only had six—and so William Parks was my young guy—had the—first guy I hired when I went to work there. Allen Gordon from Morrilton recommended him. He's wonderful. And so I picked him, and the photographer's tryin' to place 'em, and she gives me a proof. And I show it to Senator Howell's secretary out there. Well, I got a call in about ten minutes, and he said, "What's this about you pickin' the


photographs for the composite?" I said, "Senator Howell, the photographer needs the spaces. She's got to trim the pictures with scissors and then allow for the name to be put under there. So we've got to pick a number." And he said, "Well, you picked people." And I said, "Yes, sir, I put our permanent staff on there that you hired. I thought you'd want everybody on there, like our secretary and our legal guy and our PR guy and me." And he said, "Well, we don't have room for everybody." And I said, "Well, like, what are you sayin'?" And he said, "Well, you need to take William off there." And I just—you know, I said, "Oh man, here I go again, you know. It's just another battle I gotta fight." I said, "Senator Howell, what do you mean, take William off? He's—we're gonna take one of the permanent staff off and put five on there?" He said, "I don't want him on there." I said, "Well, maybe I'm not in a position to ask this, but why?" He said, "Because I just don't want him on there. That's enough reason." And I said, "I tell you what. I'll make you a compromise." He said, "You're not in a pos"—I said, "Well, let me just offer a suggestion, okay?" He said, "All right." I said, "Let's take me off, and let's put William on there." He said, "I ain't doin' that. Beebe and them would raise hell with me." I said, "Senator Howell, I don't want this job if William's not on

there, and I'll be willin' to go tell Allen Gordon that I'm leavin' because his man can't be on there, and I don't wanna be on there." He said, "Let me get back to you." [*SL laughs*] And we got William on there. [04:23:31] But that—it was just a con—we went to Reno one time. A national legislative meeting—me and Beebe and Jon Fitch, David Malone—good senators out there. And we're havin' a big time, you know. Sometimes in the press, these people try to camouflage these trips and say, "Well, it's just all business." Well, it's not. It's a bit of a perk and a reward that you get to travel some in your job, and I like that. I think people broaden their perspective, especially in politics, by goin' to see what other people do. I did it for the Southern Legislative Conference all the time. I did C-SPAN broadcasts. I hosted national meetings because it helped me grow. Well, we're out there in Reno, and some of the senators—Beebe said, "We want to swing over to Lake Tahoe tomorrow and look at that place. I've never seen it, and we want to see what it looks like." I said, "Okay, what do you want me to do?" He said, "Let's rent three vans and get everybody in 'em and go over there for the day." I said, "Okay. Good idea." Well, I walk right up the street two blocks, and there's a rental place, and I said, "I need three vans." Went through this with—gave 'em my

credit card. [04:24:52] We go over. We have a big time. We come back. I turn in my expenses to Senator Howell's secretary. I get a call. I'm waitin'. [*SL laughs*] And he said, "Hey, what's this about van rentals out there in Reno?" I said, "Well, Senator Howell," and I went through this story about what happened. And I said, "I walked up the street and got the senators—Mike Beebe and the others wanted vans, and they wanted to take their wives or whoever over there to see this place and be a part of their trip, and I just did what he wanted to do." He—"I ain't payin' for no vans." I said, "That's fine, Senator Howell." I said, "I did what I was asked to do out there, and you know, I try to work for everybody. And I sure understand." And I said, "I wanted to turn it in and see what you thought." And he said, "Well, I—you're not brokerin' any deals." And I said, "Well, I just—Senator Howell, I did what I was asked to do, and it's fine. It's on my credit card, and that's fine." And he—and I said, "And I'll be—let me just call Senator Beebe. I'll be glad to call him and tell him you don't want to pay for his van." "Now, wait a minute. I didn't say that."

[04:26:04] I said, "Yes, sir, I'll be happy to call Senator Beebe and tell him that you don't want to pay for David Malone's van, his van, and"—"Well, no. Now, let's think about this." And I

said, "Well, it's fine with me. It's just—you know, it's my card. It's not theirs. Don't be mad at them." He said, "Well, I'll go ahead and pay for it, but let's talk about it next time." I said, "Okay, we will." [SL laughs] But you know, that's the—my shovel—I'm diggin' all the time with him. And Knox—he was—



like I say, he was the real power. He was the man. And not long ago—well, it's been three or four years now—term limits changed everything.

SL: Oh!

[04:26:49] BL: You know, eight hundred years of experience walked out the door at one time, probably.

SL: Yeah.

BL: The word "experienced legislator" would never be used again. But that's okay, you know. It—things change, and that's fine with me. But Knox was the epitome of power. He told governors what to do. He told legislators what to do, house members what to do, the speaker what to do. But a few years ago, a newly elected house member—I was at a Christmas party in north Arkansas, and I said, "So how you like it?" and everything. He said—his eyes were wide open. And he had been down there a year, and he said, "Bill, listen to me. You're not gonna believe this. I've been down there a year, and I have

yet to pay for a single lunch." And I said, "Really, man. [Laughter] That's somethin', now, how you hadn't paid for a whole lunch." I said, "That's somethin'." And I told my wife when we [laughs] left there. I said, "If that had been Knox Nelson, he woulda—he—the lobbyists woulda bought the restaurant for him [SL laughs] and bought him a new car on the way back to the Capitol," you know. But it shows you how things had changed. [04:28:08] But Knox—one of my great stories on Knox—Skip Holland was a great lobbyist for the phone company for a long time. He told the story about Knox and how they had to make sure he was a happy man. [Laughs] But Knox decides he's gonna help the Literacy Council in Arkansas, and we thought that was a pretty worthy cause, you know, and everybody wanted to help Knox help the [laughs] Literacy Council. So they have a luncheon to plan what they're gonna do to raise money, and they have it at one of the big bank—private clubs in Little Rock. And I don't know, a hundred people show up or whatever, and Knox is up there, and he stands up with a microphone to announce this fundraising effort. And he takes the microphone. He said he appreciates everybody comin'. He said, "To start off," he said, "I see my friend Skip Holland out there from the phone company, and we're gonna get this thing

goin' right, and I know Skip well. I—Skip, you'll be glad to give ten thousand dollars to get this started, won't you?" Skip said, "What could I do?" [*Laughter*] He said, "I stood up and waved at the crowd, and they applauded." But that's how—see, he was clever. [04:29:18] I mean, what's Skip gonna do, say no? But when Knox—he would walk around in this whiney, old, sick voice and cajole 'em into voting. You know, "Come on, vote for this bill. I'm not feelin' good," you know. And he'd—"I need to get on home and take my pills." [*SL laughs*] And then they'd pass the bill thinkin' he's on his last leg, and then he'd swing his jacket back on and introduce another one and order Bill Clinton around and everybody else. But he was an amazing, natural talent at passing legislation, and he's—he came from nothin'—came out of a service station in Pine Bluff to be a political leader. But when Jay Bradford beat him, the end of an era in Arkansas politics was over, and it was over forever. And we were to see the new era begin with term limits, where it—you would never have a senator with forty years of service. And that could turn out to be a refreshing, good thing. Maybe the old system—too much power was vested in a few that misused it. It woulda been—it was getting good when Beebe and his group were straightenin' out some of that mess. It would—but had term

limits not come along, Mike never woulda run for governor.

He'd've been a senator forever 'cause he loved it. So that led him to a new phase in life, which turned out to be great.

SL: Yeah.

[04:31:04] BL: We had characters in the house and the senate. I— before I leave the senate here, I'd like to tell one story about Jack Gibson.

SL: Okay.

BL: Jack was a neat guy from Boydell, Arkansas. He could talk about anything. He was experienced at everything. He was a ace World War II fighter pilot. Highly decorated. Never would know it. Never talked about it. He was a farmer. He loved to gamble. Loved to play golf. Made a hole in one at my—he and David Pryor were partners in my golf tournament at Sheridan. In 1990, Jack made a hole in one and won a \$4,000 golf cart with David as his partner. [*SL laughs*] And went to Smackover the next week to a golf tournament and won the big drawing, won a hot tub. [*SL laughs*] Went to Red Apple the next week for a golf tournament and won a set of irons for being closest to the hole. He was a natural athlete. He was probably seventy-six or seventy-seven then, playin' that kind of golf. But he was so clever and funny. [04:32:11] But two stories real quick.

One—he and I are at Dallas for a basketball tournament. I followed Nolan's teams everywhere. In fact, I was on the front row in Charlotte when Scotty shot the shot. I was about ten feet from Scotty Thurman [*SL laughs*] when he shot it. So I was there for that. But I followed Nolan everywhere 'cause I loved basketball—his brand of ball. But Jack is in Dallas. Three or four of us were down there, and our buddies had left and gone to the restaurant ahead of us. So I had put on a coat and tie. Jack rides with me, and he doesn't have a tie on. Well, we get to the front door, and they said, "Well, you can come in, but he doesn't have a tie on. He can't come in." I said, "Well, do you have one he can put on?" It's—"No. Gotta have one on." I said, "Oh, come on, man!" He said, "Rules are rules." I said, "Let's go, Jack." He's—"Come on, Scoopy. Yeah, we got better places to go to than this place." So we head out to the car, and I start to get in and put the key in the ignition. He said, "Hold on a minute." He said, "This is not my first day here." I said, "What?" And he said, "Hold on a minute." He sits down in the car seat over there and takes his shoes off, takes his two black socks off [*SL laughs*], ties 'em together, puts 'em around his shirt, and buttons his top button, and draws the knot up with that two black socks. He says, "How does that look?" [*SL*



laughs] I said, "We're in." We walked right back in. I mean, you know, who else would think of that? [*Laughter*] He . . .

SL: They're . . .

[04:33:51] BL: . . . he walks into my office at the senate one day and—"Scoop, I'll see you, now." He talked real loud, like my Aunt Kate used to. He couldn't whisper. He said, "I'll see you, now." I said, "Where are you goin', to Boydell?" He said, "No, hadn't you heard?" I said, "No, what's goin' on, Jack?" He said, "Hell, I'm leavin' the senate." I said, "You're leavin' the senate?" He said, "Yeah, Betsey Wright and Bill Clinton got a press conference at three o'clock. I'm the new banking commissioner." He said, "I'm resigning the senate and takin' bank commissioner under Clinton." I said, "No, you're not." He said, "Do what?" I said, "You can't do that, Jack. You can't resign a legislative post and take a state job. It's prohibited by the constitution of this state. You can't do that." "Well, did Clinton know that?" I said, "Well, apparently he doesn't." [*SL laughs*] I said, "But you can't do that, Jack. You can't leave your elected office unless you move out of the district or you die. You can't resign. You can't quit. You're here. [*SL laughs*] You can't take another state job." "Well, by God!" Well, I said, "Well, you better get down there." [04:34:57] Well, Betsey

called me in about ten minutes or so. She said, "Bill, we didn't know that." I said, "Well, it's the truth." I said, "Frank White tried to appoint Lacy Landers from the house as labor commissioner, and he found it out. But you can't do that, Betsey." She said, "You have saved our bacon." [SL laughs] I said, "Well, it woulda been kind of embarrassing, wouldn't it?" She said, "Oh my God!" So Jack's still with us. [Laughs] But he nearly screwed up big time. That woulda been so embarrassing . . .

SL: Oh yeah.

BL: . . . to have called that. Betsey did a good job for Bill. She ran into some problems later on, but you know, his first term in [19]79—that was when I went out there, and he was comin' off that [sniffs] attorney general thing and newly elected, and he had a bad first two years and got booted out. [Laughs] And—but he came back and did a really good job. Hired some better people. [04:36:00] And when he was elected president, it was a stunning thing, man. It, you know, shocked the world, shocked Arkansas for sure. But he came by to tell us goodbye, and it was a—one of my fondest memories of Bill Clinton—one of the senators rushed in, I don't remember who it was, said, "He's comin' over here, and I've got the photographer comin'. He's

gonna take—they're gonna take a bunch of pictures of him tellin' us goodbye." I said, "Well, that's great." And he walked in. We were talkin' over by the east door there, and I do have pictures with him. And I made this horrible mistake. I said, "You know, you really do look different." He said, "Don't say that, man." But in a way, he did, you know. It's—you just see people different. It's like your neighbor being elected—or selected Miss America, you know. All of a sudden she's . . .

SL: Gorgeous.

BL: . . . gorgeous, you know. [*Laughs*] It's . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . it's just life. So we talked a minute, and all the senators started comin' in, and we had pictures made. And I'm standin' there in the group, and the Secret Service guys—they had—I think there were two—there were probably more—but one had gone over by my office behind us about twelve feet away. And he motions for Clinton. He said, "You have a phone call in here," in my office. And Clinton says, "I'll be with you in a minute." He said, "No, sir, you need to take this call now." And you don't tell those guys no.

SL: Right.

BL: He walks over there and goes in my little office and talks a

minute, and he comes back out. I said, "What's that all about? Can you tell me?" He said, "You wanna know?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "That was Gorbachev."

SL: Oh!

[04:37:45] BL: And I said, "Mikhail Gorbachev was callin' on my phone?" [*Laughter*] He said, "Yeah." He said, "They've—they found me, didn't they?" And I said, "Oh man!" And I knew, you know, the whole thing had changed, man. As my friend Don Tilton says, "The paradigm had shifted." But it had. He was no longer our guy. He was everybody's guy. But my phone, you know—I ought to—I should've saved that phone. [*Laughter*] I hope Max Howell's people weren't listenin'. [*Laughter*] They probably wouldn't know who Gorbachev was. [*SL laughs*] But it was a memorable time.

[04:38:23] SL: What about Bill Clinton? I mean, my experiences with him is that when he gives you his attention, you're pretty much the only guy in the room. He had this . . .

BL: Yeah, and he captured a room just by walkin' in there. I watched it—my first time to see that was at the Coachman's Inn at a political gathering, and Massanelli and I were there. And Clinton was young, and I guess he—it was his first term. Yeah, it was his first term as governor. And he walked in, and I—it

just changed. You know, there's no way to describe that. You got it or you don't. He had a big dose of it, and the big dose got him in [*laughs*] trouble. But he did have that, and it—you know, when you have that and you're—he's your guy in the campaign, you know you're gonna win 'cause people like that. And some people might not admit that that's the reason they vote for a guy, but he—it is. It's a big part of it. He was very capable. He was smart as the dickens—a lot like Beebe in intellect. He screwed up that first term as governor because he had some questionable people around him, in my opinion. They were arrogant. They thought they ran the world, and they didn't.



[04:39:50] One reason Bill Clinton was so popular in that election to get elected was that a lot of Democrats gave him money because they were torn between David and Ray and Jim Guy in that big Senate race. We ran into that everywhere. Political PACs, bank presidents, union people said, "Oh man, Ray, we can't give you money, and we sure don't wanna hurt David Pryor, and we love Jim Guy, so we're gonna give our money to Bill Clinton." That propelled him to an area that I'm not sure he would've been to financially—he'd've won the race 'cause he was too good a candidate. But that first term—it—they called it the "Cubans and car tags." It was car tags. He

raised everybody's car license tag fee, and back then, you renewed your car tag on the month that you were—had gotten it before or your birthday or somethin'. In other words, one-twelfth of the population of Arkansas got mad at him all over every month, and they'd go to the coffee shop, and this guy who'd kind of gotten over a two-dollar increase—he heard this guy gripin', and he starts gripin'. And this guy that was in June—he starts gripin'.

SL: Chimin' in.

[04:41:11] BL: So it was a renewable mess. We had a meeting in his office, and I was there over this. Clarence Bell, my old friend in the senate—several of us were in there. And Clinton is smokin' a cigar. I remember that. And he said, "Well, you know, one group I hadn't heard from is people that own pickup trucks. They haven't griped at me at all." And I said, "You wanna hear one? 'Cause I own a pickup." [SL laughs] And he kind of laughed. But the point was, yeah, they're mad too. And Clarence Bell, the old sage, the old, wise football coach who loved Bill Clinton—man, he loved him—he said, "Governor, sometimes when you step in cow manure, you need to just let it dry before you wipe it off your boot. Comes off a lot easier." And Clinton said, "I need to shut up about this, don't I?" He

said, "Yes, sir." And he did for a long time. But he was beat. That car tag thing—people were so mad at him, and then Hillary's deal where she didn't—wasn't sure she was gonna take his name, and that fueled a bunch of stuff out there.

SL: Controversy. Mh-hmm.

[04:42:18] BL: You know, Skip Rutherford and I were talkin' about this the other day. I told him a funny story—what happened to me the other day. But two stories—my stories about Bill Clinton come to mind. I don't have that many, but I have quite a few, I guess. [*SL laughs*] But I was invited to a surprise birthday party at Cajun's Wharf, and Clinton was running for president, and I had on one of the buttons that everybody had. And my date said, "Would you please go to this thing? It's for my sister, and there're gonna be a bunch of people there, and I feel uncomfortable if I'm by myself and my"—I said, "I'll go." And I didn't want to go. You know, who wants to go to surprise birthday parties with a bunch of people you don't know? So we're there. The cake's out here. Well, I'm—I've struck up a nice conversation with a doctor from UAMS who's there, and we're talkin' politics. And he had seen me out at the Capitol, and he knew me, and that sort of thing. So we're just chitchatting, and this guy's sittin' across from me starin' at me.

And you know, there ain't no middle ground on Bill Clinton. I swear to God, there ain't. Have you ever met anybody who said, "Well, I kinda like him" or "I kinda hate him"? [04:43:35] And this guy's starin' me down. Hell, I can feel it. So finally he looks at me—he says, "So you like Bill Clinton." Like that. And I said, "Well yeah, yeah, I like him a lot." "You gonna vote for him for president?" I said, "Yeah, I sure am. I'm gonna help him every way I can." And he said, "All he's ever done is raise taxes." And I said, "Well, he did some of that. Sure did. Had a lot of help doin' it." And he said, "Well, I don't like him for that." I said, "Well, let me ask you a question. Did you drive up here today?" He said, "Yeah, I drove up here today. How do you think I got here?" I said, "Well, did you ride on a highway?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "What do you think paid for that asphalt?" I said, "Taxes." And I said, "You got any kids?" He said, "I've got two kids." I said, "Where do they go to school?" He said, "Benton." I said, "Does the school bus pick 'em up?" And he said, "Yeah." I said, "What do you think pays for that school bus and the gasoline and the teachers that teach your kids?" I said, "Taxes." Then I went into his mom in the nursin' home. And you know, I'm tryin' to make my point again . . .

SL: Right.

[04:44:34] BL: . . . instead of just sayin', "You know, well, leave me alone," 'cause I don't wanna punch another guy out, you know. [SL laughs] Bad memories. So finally he just says, "Well, why don't we just go outside?" And I go, "Why don't we not?" And I turned to my date—I said, "Let's please leave." And I—my point to Skip was—I said, "Do they really know what some of us go through sometimes?" 'Cause, you know, you really feel strong about certain politicians that you believe in, and he's one of the—Hillary—now, same deal. I'm in a doctor's office about a month ago. You know, I go see my knee doctor for a five-year checkup.

SL: Yeah.

BL: I'm the only guy in that office at Little Rock, so I sign the sheet in. They say, "We'll be right with you." And I'm readin' my little *Good Housekeeping* book, minding my own business in a [SL laughs] public office. Well, in walks a woman and a little guy with her—older couple. She's draggin' him around. So you know, I pretty much size them up according to my way of sizin' people up real quick. She signs in, and she tells him to sit down.

SL: [Laughs] Oh gosh.

[04:45:54] BL: So you know me. I'm thinkin' I know everything anyway. [SL laughs] But I'm sittin' there, and I'm mindin' my

own dadgum business and readin' my little outdated magazine. And the nurse comes back in, and she said, "Ma'am, did you sign the sign-in sheet?" She said, "Yeah, I sure did." She said, "Okay." And the woman says to the nurse, "What do you think about this Obamacare?" She said, "It's a mess, isn't it?" And so the nurse—diplomatic—she says, "Well, it's sure gonna change some things, but you know, we always expect change, and we'll just do the best we can. It's probably gonna increase people comin' in here—the number"—she said, "Huh! They need to get rid of him. He's nothin' but a socialist." So you know, I'm sittin' there tryin' to cool the steam down.

SL: [*Laughs*] It's comin' out of your ears.

[04:46:45] BL: And it's startin' to—you know, I have a blood pressure pill to take every day, and I'm thinkin' I—maybe I shoulda brought three or four. [*SL laughs*] 'Cause I—oh! So I am still cool. I'm thumbin' through, not readin', but I'm gettin' there. [*SL laughs*] So they've got the television on up here. CNN is on, and Hillary is getting off of a plane in some foreign country to talk to some idiot dictator, probably. This woman turns, and she said, "And there's another one we need to get rid of." Well, that did it. [*SL laughs*] So I fold up my little magazine, and I said, "Let me ask you a question." [*SL laughs*]

She said, "Do what?" I said, "Let me ask you a question. What has she ever done to you for you to say something like that? What has Hillary Clinton ever done to you for you to say somethin' like that?" "Well, you know what I mean about her." I said, "No, ma'am, I'm askin' you what has she ever done to you for you to have that kind of opinion of her?" She said, "Nothing, but they need"—I said, "Let me tell you somethin'." I said, "You opened all of this up." I said, "You need to get down on your hands and knees every night and thank the good Lord for women who will take a stand and improve life for women in this—not just this country, but around the world, and she's one of 'em." And I said, "And the Obamacare"—I said, "I'd like for you to spell socialist for me." And the husband jumps in at this point. He said, "Well, this has gone far enough." I said, "Yeah, it has, but you opened this up." And here comes the nurse to my rescue to shut me up. [*SL laughs*] And she said, "Mr. Lancaster, come on back right now. Come on back." And I said, "Okay, I'm comin'." And I don't know why—I thought of my friend Paul Berry 'cause this is the way Paul acts. But I turn around—one last parting shot—and I turn around, and I said, "I deplore ignorance." [*Laughter*] But I told Skip—I said, "You know, it's just that we have to do these things for Bill and

Hillary—still!"

SL: Yeah.

[04:48:47] BL: Because people—they incite these feelings in people.

And then right now it's very positive for him. Good Lord, they want him back, you know?

SL: Yeah.

BL: But it's amazing what he does to ignite that in people, and I don't know why. I just don't. I think some people around the country think that nobody from Arkansas should be president—think there's some of that.

SL: Yeah, there is some of that.

BL: And some people in Arkansas have low self-esteem, and they think, "Well, by God, anybody can be president if he can." You know, it's some of that. I don't know. There's just some—you reach a point in politics and life where you just kind of say, "You can just do so much," [*laughs*] you know. You can just do so much with some things. But I admire him greatly, and I'm proud that in my lifetime we walked on the moon, we invented television and the computers, and Arkansas elected a president. To show you [*laughs*]*—Clinton—Clinton's elected in [19]92, and they're gonna have this big bash in Little Rock, remember? And thousands of parties everywhere.*

SL: Yeah.

[04:50:14] BL: And we're all gonna go and do the thing, and
[laughter] I go to lunch with Skip Holland, my lobbyist buddy,
and Bud Canada, who was one of my favorite senators, and Bud
grew up in Hot Springs on the streets—tough—had tough
upbringin', and he became a great senator. Very kindhearted
man. We have lunch, the three of us, and he said, "Bill"—Bud
did. He said, "Bill, you know, we need to do somethin' election
night 'cause they're gonna have all these parties downtown.
Maybe we can gather at the Capitol and run a shuttle or two
down there for people like me. I can't park. I don't know what
to do." And I said, "You're exactly right." I said, "Let Skip and I
work on that. That's a great idea, Bud." And we came up with
this idea [laughter] to turn the Capitol Hill Building next to the
Capitol—the lower floor—into a reception area where you could
come, get a snack and a drink, sit on the big couches, watch TV,
and we'd run a shuttle downtown and then come back and pick
you up at a certain time. And that way they could park at the
Capitol, and I liked the idea. I did stuff like that all the time. So
Skip says, "I'll handle the expense. I'll get the other lobbyists to
chip in, and we'll handle the food and the drinks and all that
stuff." And I said, "Okay, I'll help coordinate all that and get

there." He said, "I'm gonna open the door at six o'clock and no earlier 'cause if I open it before six o'clock," he said, "Scoop, all them house members will come over here and eat everything we got." [*Laughter*] I said, "Well, okay." So we had our plan set.

SL: [*Laughs*] Yeah.

[04:52:01] BL: So I come into the back door of the Capitol Hill Buildin', and Skip's been workin' all afternoon gettin' this buffet set up. And I come in at about a quarter till six, and he is fuming. He's red-faced, mad, cussin'. I said, "Skip, what's goin' on?" He said, "All the shrimp's gone." He said, "I bought six hundred dollars' worth of shrimp [*laughs*], and it's gone." I said, "Well, what—who got it? Where is—what"—he said, "Hell, I forgot these house members have got apartments upstairs." And he said, "I went outside to my car to get some stuff, and I came back, and three of 'em had old bread sacks, and they were stuffin' my shrimp in there" . . .

SL: Oh!

BL: . . . "and they took it to their apartment to put in their freezer." I said, "Jesus ?made?—Skip?" He said, "I'm so—I don't know what"—I said, "I'll go get it." He said, "You're gonna go get it?" I said, "I'm gon' go get the shrimp." I said, "We gotta have the food. They shouldn't do that. They know better than that." I

said, "Maybe they're playin' a joke on you, okay?" I'm tryin' to give everybody the benefit of the doubt. [*Laughs*]

SL: Yeah, right. [*Laughs*]

BL: So I take the . . .

SL: Tryin' to find a bright side.

BL: . . . ol' creaky elevator up, and I said, "Hey, guys, you know, that's everybody's food!" And they said, "Well, we just messin' with ol' Skip." And I said, "Well, can we have the shrimp back?" And he said, "We'll bring it down." Well, I got back down there and shrimp—I mean, Skip had done reloaded. He had it all set back up. He said, "I don't need their shrimp." And I said, "Well, I'm not sure they're gon' bring it." [*Laughs*] And they didn't. But it just showed you a little bit about the inside stuff that we went through and the craziness sometimes of stuff that went on. But it was [*laughs*—sometimes it was a battle.

[04:53:49] SL: You know, it's that little moment-to-moment, face-to-face stuff that creates all the paths that you have to take . . .

BL: Oh yeah.

SL: . . . to get work done—to get it done.

BL: And I left after a long time. I was gonna leave when Beebe got elected attorney general.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And we talked in my office, and he had a place for me, and we're very close. Think the world of him.

SL: Yeah, me too.

BL: Well [*laughs*], the next—that afternoon—Jim Hill was from Nashville—he's a state senator from down there, and he's gon' be the next pro tem. And I'm about to leave, and Beebe's leavin', and Morrill's leavin', and Jon Fitch is leavin', and hell, you know, the whole crew's gone. It's like workin' at the funeral home. [*Laughter*] So Hill and I are playin' golf at Chenal with—I don't remember who else was playin'—and he stopped the cart on number five. I—we'd teed off, and we were in the middle of the fairway, and he—I said, "What's the deal?" He said, "I gotta talk to you." And I said, "About what?" And he said, "You goin' with Beebe?" And I said, "Well, Senator Hill, yeah." And he said, "I don't want you to." And I said, "Well, I appreciate that, but I'm goin' to." And I said, "He's asked, and I've asked, and we've worked this out." He said, "Well, I talked to him too, and I want you to stay two more years at least 'cause I wanna be pro tem. But my health is not good, and I'm not gonna take this thing if you're leavin'. I'm just not gon' do it." I said, "You'll be fine. You've got Percy Malone and John Riggs and Steve Bryles and some good guys to help you." And he said, "I'm not gon' do

it if you're leavin'." He said, "I'm serious." I said, "Oh man, let me think about it." [04:55:40] So I stayed—I guess it was two more years. And had this opportunity come up in Sheridan, my hometown. And Mr. Witt gave a lot of money to this town and this county in the mid-[19]90s to build the wonderful museum. And the longtime director was leavin', and my brother Jim was head of the foundation, and he offered me this position.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And I could stay on state government payroll through the county and get my twenty-eight years in, which I did. I stayed there four years, and we built the museum up to an all-time record high in savings and money. And I retired and then wrote my—finished my novel, which I was so relieved to do. It was called *Benchwarmer*. And I'd written another book called *Grant County Scoops*, which was a collection of my old columns. It did really well locally. It surprised me. People still buy it every Christmas. And the *Benchwarmer* novel did well, and I was so relieved to get it out of my system.

SL: It's hard work.

[04:56:52] BL: It's the most draining thing. I don't—you know, my wife reads a book a week. I'm havin' a real hard time even wanting to read anymore. All my words are used up. It's a—it's

hard to explain. I think it's why all the great writers go crazy or jump off a bridge drunk or somethin'. It's so exhausting to pull everything out of there—words and spellings and—I don't know, your imagination [*beeping sound*] has to work not just overtime—you can't sleep. I'm workin' on another book right now, and I was up at three this mornin' because I thought of somethin'. And when you're in that mode, you can't sleep. You can't seem to kinda put any kind of thoughts other than that together. So . . .

SL: Hard to relate to anything else that's goin' on around you, and you . . .

BL: Yeah, it's just hard. You'll just—"Well, what [*beeping sound*] am I forgetting about that?" You know, so you go in there, and you work an hour, and then another hour comes around, and you've been there two hours. And so it's exhausting. But I loved it the way it turned out, and I'm—I heard from people I hadn't heard from in years. A young journalist from Fayetteville called me who I had helped when he was eighteen, and we talked again, and he told me what he'd been doin'. So that was a good experience. And I am workin' on another project right now, so—enjoyin' that and enjoyin' my life and retirement and serve on the claims commission. Meet once a month in Little Rock. It's a

demanding task to sit in judgment of others like that, but it's a fun job, in a way. I like that. And I play golf with the governor and all of our still-close friends. We share a lot. We've lost a lot. We lost Bill Gwatney.

SL: Yeah.

[04:58:59] BL: Took so much out of us. And then we turn around and lose Jon Fitch. He just has a massive stroke and dies overnight. And it was—I told Senator Hill when I called him from the hospital—I told Jim, who's in—whose health is not good right now—I said, "You know, Senator Hill, the Gwatney thing's bad enough, and I don't think I can get through this one." Well, he started cryin'.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And he said, "I know what you mean, Scoop." And it's hard to lose a friend. You know, it's hard to lose a family member, but what—the Beebe group—we went through a lot together, and we're still hangin' in there, and he's done a magnificent job. He's the only guy to ever run for governor in Arkansas to carry all seventy-five counties. That speaks . . .

SL: That speaks . . .

BL: . . . that speaks volumes . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . for somebody in politics, this day and age.

SL: Yep.

[05:00:00] BL: He was born on a dirt floor in a shantytown in a river levee, and look where's he's gotten to.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And we're all proud. It's a neat thing to have your buddy as the governor and to eat at the mansion and share the things that I've gotten to share. I've had a great life. I've met wonderful people. One of my last experiences at the senate—Bill Gwatney told a group one time in a speech that—they were talkin' about me at this dinner—he called me the Andy Griffith of the Arkansas Senate [*SL laughs*] because he said I was like Andy on the ol' TV show in that I pushed everybody out there to get them the credit and stayed away. And it meant everything to me, and it sure did after we lost him. So I'm—it's toward the end of my time at the senate, and my secretary walked in one afternoon. It was, like, four o'clock. She said, "Bill, there's a Mr. Thornton here to see you." Well, I thought it was Ray, you know. And I said, "Sure, send—yeah, come on—have him come on back." And in walks Billy Bob Thornton, the Hollywood producer from Malvern.

SL: Right.

BL: Native and—little guy. Little, tiny guy.

SL: Yeah.

[05:01:29] BL: He walks in and—you know, *Sling Blade*, one of my favorite movies . . .

SL: Absolutely.

BL: . . . and I know all the lines and stuff and had portrayed that character in the *Farkleberry Follies*. So he walks in—I said, "Well, hi there." And I stand up and greet him, and we start talkin', and come to find out he had—he was in town to film a movie he was doin'. And he wanted to film a part of it right outside my office in the marble hall and stuff, and he liked the looks of it. And I said, "Sure, you know, make yourself at home." They were gonna start the next day. Well, he started to leave, and he looks down on my desk, and there's a book that I kept on my desk called *Life's Lessons from Mayberry*, and it was about the episodes of Andy Griffith's show. [05:02:15] And he said, "So you're a fan of Andy Griffith, I see." I said, "Yeah." He said, "How would you like to meet him?" And I said, "Well, I'd love to do that. I've met a lot of fine people, but yeah, why?" He said, "He's in my movie." He said, "I'll call you at nine o'clock in the mornin' if we can work this out." Well, you know [SL laughs]—next morning my phone rings, and it's Billy Bob. He said, "Fifteen minutes. We'll be there." [SL laughs] So I

spent two hours on the couch talkin' with Andy Griffith and his wife, and we talked about the old show and reminisced about everything. I knew all the history of the characters, and it was—it meant so much to me to spend that time. I talked with his wife as we were leaving. She said, "He really likes you because he can tell if somebody really knows about his career." And that meant a lot to me, but I thought about Bill Gwatney that day.

SL: Yeah.

[05:03:24] BL: And how much he woulda liked seein' the two—the real one and the other one together. But a lot of good memories flow over me at times about all of that. I hate that I had some of the horrible battles, but that makes you—it gives you a tough hide, you know. It helps you through some other things. I've had to battle cancer. I've whipped that. So—I battled a horrible injury in 1988—November 4, 1988, I nearly died.

SL: What was that about?

BL: It was about falling out of a deer-hunting stand, and I hit the ground. I was alone in an isolated area a day before the season started. Nobody knew I was there. That was part of the risk. But I woke up sometime later on the ground with my head buried in the dirt, and my whole right side was shattered. My leg was layin' out this way.

SL: Oh!

[05:04:33] BL: And I didn't know what had happened or where I was. I knew I was hurt. And I thought about my kids. I said, "Well, I'm gonna die right here." And you do. I thought I probably was takin' my last breath. My Ford Bronco was parked about two hundred yards away probably, and I knew that was my only chance. So I started crawlin' through the sage grass and over logs and hopin' I didn't find a rattlesnake. But you check in and out of consciousness. You're in shock. 'Cause your brain checks you—it checked me out on the way down. But I finally got to the Bronco, and I couldn't get up in it 'cause my legs were shattered. So I finally pulled myself up with my hands and got inside, and the—I tried to call on my CB radio. I remember that. Nothin'. And then my camp was about a half a mile away, and there were people at the camp. So I started the engine, but I couldn't push the accelerator because my leg was like a—I don't know—curtain in your house.

SL: Yeah.

BL: Dangling.

SL: Yeah.

[05:05:55] BL: So I just put it in drive, and it had enough choke or gas to move me through the woods. And I'd wake up

occasionally against a tree or somethin', passed out I guess, and I'd back up, and I'd start again. And so I remember heading into the camp, and I could see some of my buddies, and that's all—they said I fell over the steering wheel—ambulance rides and stuff. And get to the—St. Vincent, and Dr. Dickie Bud Dickson met the ambulance because the Sheridan doctor was his friend, and he asked him to meet the ambulance. And they got me in there, and I remember wakin' up—they were cuttin' my clothes off with scissors.

SL: Yeah.

BL: I remember that. And rushed me into surgery, and I was I guess you'd say very critical. Critical's enough. My heart started swellin'. See, when you have a fall or a car wreck, the danger is your internal injuries that you don't know about.

SL: Mh-hmm. Yeah.

[05:06:59] BL: So they bring in a red-headed heart doctor—I remember that. And I made it. And it was a long, hard road back through . . .

SL: Rehab.

BL: . . . surgeries and physical therapy. Excruciating pain. But shoot, I'm good to go, man. I play golf, and it—I've had a total knee done, and then I went through prostate cancer surgery that

saved my life. My dad and my older brother died from it, and I'm good to go. So I'm fortunate. It's—life's tough, but you gotta be tough to get through it. So that's kinda what I've been doin' with my life for sixty-five [*laughs*] years.

SL: Well, you know, you mentioned your ki. . .

TM: Scott, sorry, we need to change tapes.

SL: Okay.

[Tape stopped]

[05:07:50] SL: Okay, Bill. We're startin' our sixth tape, and I can't thank you enough for all this time you've given us. I—you've told some great stories.

BL: Thank you, man.

SL: You know, there's a [*BL clears throat*]*—*we were talkin', I think off camera, about how nicknames get placed on folks. Now, were you a conferrer of nicknames to people?

[05:08:20] BL: Yeah, I really did a lot of that back, golly, grade school, probably, or high school. I—people don't have nicknames much anymore. I don't know why. Maybe we're too serious about all of that stuff. But yeah, we all had nicknames growin' up. I mean, there's—we had several around town, you know. Older guys had nicknames. Nickel Nose, and we had [*SL laughs*] Gopher and all these crazy names that kids had back

then. Kinda like the group at *Animal House*, the movie.

SL: Yeah.

BL: You had a lot of that growin' up, and we did. It spilled over into politics. You know, you used to have a lot of nicknames in national politics, and we did on the state level. [05:09:09] It all really surfaced one day big time. We had a lunch at Little Rock. I went to lunch with some of my buddies, and you know, I was pretty well known as Scoop, and we went to lunch. And it was just a group of us got together for lunch, and we had never realized the names until we got there, and we started talkin' and askin' for the salt and pepper and stuff. And I was at lunch with myself, Scoop, Skip, Skip, Slick, Spike, and Spook. Is that right?

SL: No Archie. What was Archie's?

BL: Spike.

SL: Spike?

BL: So you had two Skips. You had Skip Holland and Skip Rutherford.

SL: Yeah.

BL: Scoop—me. Slick was Cecil Alexander, Spike was Archie Schaffer, and Spook was Paul Berry. [*SL laughs*] It was hilarious. It was like a Bud Abbott and Lou Costello . . .

SL: Routine.

BL: . . . routine, you know? [*SL laughs*] You know, like, "Who's on First?"

SL: "On First?" Yeah.

BL: But we were. It was Skip, Skip, Spook, Spike, [unclear words], you know, and all that st—and so we went back to the office and had a photo made. I don't remember who all was in it, but it was hilarious that all of these had come together for—to break bread together. [*Laughs*]

[05:10:28] SL: Do you know the lineage of those names? Who—I mean . . .

BL: I really don't.

SL: You don't?

BL: [*Sniffs*] No. Paul Berry's is Spook, and he's kinda spooky and [*SL laughs*] brilliant. And Skip Holland's name's George, and Skip Rutherford's name's James. Cecil, of course, I don't know. Cecil's a little older than me, but he was a legend at the legislature. He was a wonderful speaker and then became the premier lobbyist, probably, in Arkansas history. He's still very active. Plays golf and stuff. So we—we'll call him Slick every once in a while. But—and then Spike, Archie Schaffer, soon to retire. He's Dale Bumpers's nephew who—longtime political

animal. Wonderful guy. Brilliant. Funny. So they're neat guys to be around when you have the chance. I don't have it enough now.

SL: Yeah.

BL: But they were wonderful to work with.

[05:11:35] SL: You know, you were talkin' about your deer-stand injury and survival, and you talked a little bit about your cancer surgery. And you mentioned your—when you had fallen off that deer stand, you mentioned that you started thinkin' about family and your children, and it's dawned on me that I've let you go all day long, and I have no idea—I don't have any idea about your children. I don't know how you met your wife or how long you've been married or any of that.

BL: Well, my family is the most important thing in the world to me. My wife, Scarlet, and I—we've been married seven years. She is a famous George from Yell County. Lloyd George—you might remember Lloyd George, one of my favorite politicians.

SL: Yeah.

[05:12:32] BL: She's kin to Lloyd. Her dad is an alderman in Dardanelle, where she grew up. She's wonderful. She's the light of my life. I've never loved anybody like I love Scarlet. She's wonderful and fun, and I love her to death. My kids—my

son, Eric—he owns an ad agency in Little Rock. Eric Rob & Isaac—very prominent ad agency in Little Rock. He's married to Amy, and they have a son, Luke, who is my grandson, and there's nothin' like a grandson to brighten your day unless you have two granddaughters, which I do. [*SL laughs*] My daughter, Leslie, and her husband, Patrick, live in Fayetteville. He's a teacher. He's a high school teacher at Rogers High, and she's a speech therapist, and she works for various nursing homes and hospitals there. And she's right now raising two three-year-old twin daughters, Geneva and Lexa, who were named after towns in Arkansas. I mean, how blessed is that, man. We spend time together on holidays. I travel to Fayetteville every chance I get to see the kids. I walk—they're ridin' their new tricycles that we bought 'em for Christmas now. [*SL laughs*] They're—they love doin' the "woo pig sooie" thing. Two little girls doin' that is pretty funny. And they're talkin' and jabberin' all the time now. But they're beautiful. And my daughter's special to me. Daughters are always special. My son is just so talented. To—he writes letters. He can write letters, and our Founding Fathers who signed the Declaration of Independence could write almost as pretty as he can write [*SL laughs*], which is kind of a lost art.

SL: You bet it is.

[05:14:46] BL: He's a brilliant PR man. He learned a lot at Fayetteville. He worked for Rick Schaeffer while he was there in the sports information office—loved Rick—admires him a great deal. And he still goes back and works some games. They still call him even today because he was so good at it. So Scarlet and our puppy dogs—I have two puppies, a five-year-old lab and a two-year-old dachshund, miniature dachshund, who keep Scarlet and me hoppin' because we love our puppies. And we love to vacation together. We love Florida. We love golf courses. I still play a lot of golf, a lot of it with our governor, who's special to me, and some of the senators that we still pal around with. We're a special, close-knit group, and they're like my family too. I still have sisters and brothers. I've lost a sister, and I've lost a brother. That's hard.

SL: Yeah.

BL: But we have a strong Christian belief that helps me through tough times, and I believe in that. I don't fault anybody for their belief one way or the other. I don't think that's anybody's business. I think we get into areas in politics sometimes we shouldn't be in. Things are very personal with people, and they ought to be left there. They're personal with me. I work hard in

my church. I work over at the church a lot, now that I'm retired. You know, when you're retired, you get hit up a lot. People say, "Well hell, Bill's retired. Call him. He'll do it," you know.

SL: Yeah. Uh-huh.

BL: "He'll pick up your trash," or whatever.

SL: Right. Yeah.

[05:16:39] BL: So you get a lot of that. But I look back on my career with some regrets, some personal regrets. None really professional career regrets. I had, man, I had a lot of fun and made enough money to buy land and build a nice home and get my kids through college and enjoy things now. So I'm truly blessed with family.

[05:17:17] SL: Are you still a member of the Christian Church or . . .

BL: I am. I'm a deacon in the church. And Scarlet is our Sunday school teacher.

SL: There you go.

BL: And we have three, and she's one of 'em. She works hard on her lessons, and she loves our little church. And when we go back home to Dardanelle some for—to visit her parents, we go to the Methodist church there. And so it's an important part of our life. But I wouldn't trade any of that for anything. There's no price you can put on family, and I love every day of my life

because it—like I told you, I've had it nearly taken away from me. Your life is never the same when you answer the phone and the doctor tells you that you have cancer. I urge people to have their checkups now. If I had not had that, I wouldn't be here doin' this interview. They caught it as early as they've ever caught one, I was told. And boy, it—I took care of it, and I love my doctor, and I have my periodic checkups. But men need to have their prostate exams, just like women need to have their exams. And I encourage that every chance I get. So I implore those listening to please do that 'cause it saved my life. And the accident I had November 4, 1988—it was touch and go, but I learned a lot about myself that day because when you have to, you can do some extraordinary things to salvage your life. And you know, it's nothing like any of our war heroes go through, but you have a special extra gear down there that kicks in when you have to use it sometimes. I learned that the hard way. And I had so many cards and letters. My dear friend Paul Eells, who we lost, talked about it on the Razorback broadcast that Saturday. This happened on Friday. And he talked about it the next day on the broadcast. Things like that you don't forget. I got—for a while—I stayed on crutches forever. I don't know how long. Cast up to my chest, nearly. Walked on crutches, and

then Arkansas State University sent me a nice walking cane with my name, Scoop [*SL laughs*], and an Indian engraved in it from Larry Lacewell, the head football coach.

SL: Yeah.

[05:20:11] BL: So I've had a charmed life in a lot of ways. Proud of my work. My newspaper career was fun and exciting. Met—I've met so many famous people, not that that's important, but it kinda is in that it shows the diversity that your career took on—spendin' the day with Glen Campbell or ridin' the train with Johnny Cash or meeting Muhammad Ali and Joe Louis. The lunar astronauts—presidents—you know, I had meals with Jesse Jackson and Bob Dole and triple-butter popcorn with Bill and Hillary at the movie. [*SL laughs*] I mean, you know, that's important to me growin' up as a little kid in a little town. And I'm so thankful for all of that.

SL: Arkansas is a good place to grow up.

BL: Oh, it's—you know, it's the most unique place. I get a kick out of these newspaper columnists who try to compare Arkansas. They'll say, "Well, we're a whole lot like Alabama, except northwest Arkansas is like Kansas and the Midwest." Well, we don't need to be compared to anybody. We're a—we are who we are. Let 'em—if we joined the Union ahead of them, let them

compare themselves to us, you know. I'm confused over that sometimes. We're . . .

SL: Yeah.

[05:21:51] BL: You can leave these beautiful mountains up at Fayetteville and get in your car and drive four hours—four and a half hours—and be at my fishin' cabin in the White River Refuge below DeWitt and have black bears walkin' around in your front yard. And some of the—two hundred thousand acres of wetlands—the biggest swamp left in mid-America in the Mississippi Delta. It's all right here. I mean, that's the diversity—the lakes and the rivers and the things that we have and the diversity in the people. I hope our state can continue to be together on the important things. We have. It scares me a little bit if the tone gets a little angry. I don't like that. I think we need to pull together a little more today in the political world and not be so quick to jump on people who give up time and their lives to serve the public. I think we need to do a better job of that. It's gettin' a little angry. I think it all started with Watergate. I think we lost—I think politicians lost credibility there because they watched television, and they watched our president lie to us—just flat out lie to us while we're watchin' him. And I think that took a toll. I think it still does. And it's

set up a chasm or somethin' there that we didn't need to see our president not only lie to us, but to cover it up and erase tapes and order things that he shouldn't have ordered. And I regret that 'cause it doesn't matter who you are now. It's hard bein' the president of the United States. Sure is a hard job.

[05:23:57] SL: [Sighs] I could probably go another couple of hours with you about politics, all the stuff that's goin' on now. You know, another thing that I know that you've been involved with for decades is the *Farkleberry Follies*. And . . .

BL: Yeah, the *Farkleberry Follies*.

SL: . . . that famous thing that—so you know, twenty, thirty years you've been . . .

[05:24:26] BL: Yeah, we did it for, I think, thirty years or thirty-two years—somethin' like that. I'm—Leroy Donald was the founder—the brains—the creator. He was the *Gazette* reporter—editor—state editor. He had this idea of doin' a political spoof—a big stage show—a dinner-theater show. And it started—oh, let me get my dates straight—maybe [19]68, probably. I missed the first show, and then I think I did 'em all after that. Maybe missed one in there, but I'm not sure. It all runs together over a long period. We did it every other year. And then in the other year, the Gridiron would do it—the lawyers show in Little Rock.

And I kinda secretly helped on that sometimes, but [*SL laughs*]*—*you know, we always said lawyers—the lawyers show, the Gridiron was well performed—let's see—well performed but poorly written, and the *Follies* was well written and poorly performed. [*SL laughs*] And there's a lot of truth to that. We were—some of us were very amateur actors. But we raised a lot of money for kids' scholarships to several universities that are still funded today. We quit doin' the show about five years ago, six years ago—somethin' like that. We just got—we ran out of energy. It's hard to do when you had a real job. We'd have to—for a while—for years, we would rehearse—we—Leroy and I would start workin' on the show in December. Now, it ran in May. So we would start writing in December—the music, staging it, doing contracts with Murry's Dinner Theater, where we had it—a lot of detail work, just like your work. You know, you just don't go do a show. We had young people later, when we quit, say, "Well, we wanna go do the show." I said, "Well, go do it." They—nobody understood what went into that. We had sold-out audiences in advance. There was never a ticket, hardly, to be found. People that had tickets all—it was kind of like Razorback tickets.

SL: Yeah.

[05:26:55] BL: I mean, you never gave up your table. So we had that demand, so we finally had to start doin' dress rehearsals. And we had four hundred and twenty-five people at dress rehearsal. Jennings Osborne became kind of our godfather—sponsor—in a way. He loved it. He loved seein' his family portrayed on the stage. So consequently, he just wanted to be a part of it 'cause he loved it. And so he would buy all the tickets for one of the dress rehearsals and invite four hundred and twenty-five people to come free of charge, and he paid for everything—their food, their drinks, their tickets, and gave 'em a free T-shirt. [SL laughs] He was wonderful. But that was the—it was just the most sought-after ticket. I mean, the—it was incredible, the demand. And it—boy, you'd find people callin' you—"You gotta get me a ticket." I directed the show three or four years, and I had a director's table, and Leroy had his producer table. So we could—we had eight seats apiece that we controlled, and that's all we wanted to control, although I finagled some for friends. [05:28:13] But you just didn't—you know, you didn't have time to—for that. It's a thankless job to get into that. But I could have eight every night. The show ran six nights, I believe, and four hundred and twenty-five a night. And it was very popular. The writers—the columnists loved to

write about it. They liked it. Some of 'em were in it. We had some members of the cast who had recurring roles that became very popular. I remember one year Beebe was in the senate, and he'd kind of taken over, and I was in the senate, and so I had to be kinda careful about my role here [*SL laughs*] a little bit 'cause I was wearin' two hats. But my one goal—primary goal—was to publicize Mike Beebe and get his name out there. So we wanted a skit about Beebe and the young senators, and we were just comin' up dry. We just couldn't come up with anything. So I went to a performance at Robinson Auditorium. *Les Mis* was in town, and I'm sitting there in the dark, like, in the balcony section—mezzanine. And I'm worried about the *Follies*, tryin' to watch this wonderful show that I'd seen in New York, and I—you know, it's my favorite Broadway show to begin with, and the "Master of the House" song comes up, and I said, "That's it." And I had a little keychain with a little flashlight on the end of it. So I got a piece of paper . . .

SL: Oh!

[05:30:00] BL: . . . and I got a pen out, and I got the flashlight—I had this flashlight in my mouth, and I'm writin' this song—I'm—I got the lyrics. "Master of the house, and the senate too—everybody loves Mike Beebe, everybody is his friend." And that

was it. And it's—the light came on, and it—boy, it became a showstopper. Bill Glasscock, my ol' vaudeville-lovin' guy, was Mike Beebe, and him and his wife—he and his wife were Mike and Ginger Beebe [*SL laughs*] on stage, and they were wonderful. But that was the big biggie—was "Master of the House, and the Senate Too." And it was all because I went, thank goodness, to that show that night and the little lightbulb came on. But we loved every minute. We performed, we directed, we produced, we put out a newspaper that everybody longed for, *The Farkle Finger* [*SL laughs*], and it had a spoof on everybody and everything. And I guess the Butler Center did a—they had all of Leroy's papers, and they did a great thing on the history of the *Farkleberry Follies*. And those tapes are available now. We've saved all of that history. And I'm on there a lot, talkin' about it. [05:31:28] They asked me about my role as Tommy Robinson, which I guess became very popular. It kind of took over my life for a while, I guess. [*Laughs*] But they loved that crazy, zany, unpredictable character on the stage 'cause I tried to play Tommy, who's my friend, as Tommy 'cause he is that. He's just crazy. And it [*SL laughs*] came across on stage, and the pe—I'm tellin' you, it built—and they saved most of it till the last thing—and you could feel this [*laughter*] growin'

out there in this crowd. And I was so nervous, and I'd come out. One year—oh man—one year I did him as Johnny Cash because I was the train comin' to run for governor. And Naylene Smith was this wonderful lounge singer in Little Rock. She played at the Afterthought all the time. Beautiful. Well, she played my wife. So we were Johnny and June as Tommy and Carolyn. And it was—I played the guitar and sang and did my best impression of Johnny Cash, which I love doin' 'cause I love Johnny Cash. And so that was a big—that was a biggie. [05:32:48] And then Tommy moved to Brinkley and opened a liquor store . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . and bought a farm, so he was no longer a crazy sheriff. So—and he wasn't a congressman, and he had thought about runnin' for—so we portrayed him as a guy that had lost his identity. [*SL laughs*] So he was everybody. He's tryin' to be everybody to everything, so that's how I played that one. It was—I got to work in some of my impressions—the Jack Nicholson thing—'cause Carolyn came out, and she told everybody at the farm store where she had gone in to buy feed and seed, and Tommy was comin' out of the car to come with her. And she said, "I just don't know what's gonna become of him. He's just everybody in the world, and one minute he's

Frank Sinatra, and one minute he's this," and so that's how—that was the skit. And so I did these crazy characters from *Sling Blade* to Jack Nicholson in *Five Easy Pieces* and all of that zany stuff. And I got to—and at the end, he rips off this raincoat, and I've got a tux on, and I sing "Farm Life" to "That's Life" as Frank Sinatra. And it was . . .

SL: Farm . . .

[05:34:01] BL: . . . it was great, man. [*SL laughs*] It was—oh man—and the applause was, you know, you—and it's just fun to do. You're—if you're kind of a thespian at heart, you know, it was a lot of fun. And Tommy loved it. He'd come—he got up on stage one night in the finale and handcuffed me. [*SL laughs*] Faubus loved it. Faubus went to every show. He'd come backstage and talk to the actors after the show. All the governors would come. Jack Stephens chartered a plane. One year we did a Stephens Inc. number, and [*SL laughs*] Jack liked it so much—we did it to "New York, New York"—that Mary Anne, his wife at the time, was in New York. He sent the plane up there to get her back in time for the show that night. Dale and David and all of the Washington guys would charter a plane to come in for the opening night. They'd bring their staffs from Washington, and they would just yuck it up and [*SL laughs*]

laugh at themselves on stage, you know. They were watchin' themselves. It's quite an ego thing to see yourself portrayed on the stage. So they loved it. They were a great audience, and like I say, we were popular and sold out years in advance every time.

[05:35:28] SL: Did you have a favorite character you liked to impersonate or portray?

BL: Well, I loved the Tommy thing. I seem to end up apologizin' sometimes that Tommy Robinson's my friend, but he is. I have friends that kinda cover the whole spectrum, I guess. I loved doin' the Tommy Robinson thing because the—I'm tellin' you, the audience just went nuts. [*SL laughs*] They did, especially if he was there and they could watch his reaction of this reaction. They loved doin' that. They loved to watch the governor react to whatever zany stuff was goin' on about him. So you had that activity goin' on in the audience. But yeah, I loved the Tommy character. I played David Pryor one year. David and Barbara were leavin' the mansion goin' to Washington, and we did a song called "Our U-Haul's Loaded Up, Got Me a Brand New Truck." [*SL laughs*] I played John Paul Hammerschmidt one year, and I did it—"I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Another Letter," 'cause all he did is write thousands of letters every day . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . to everybody in the world.

SL: Yeah.

[05:36:45] BL: And I did him as Paul Lynde. Do you remember the comic?

SL: Yes!

BL: And Paul Lynde was just a silly, silly [*unclear words*] [*SL laughs*]*—a silly guy, you know? And once you get into this, you have to have some imagination about what you see—you exaggerate. And I just saw John Paul as this little guy, and then the more I saw him, I saw him as Paul Lynde, and [SL laughs] oh God, it was hilarious. [SL laughs] I played a woman one time. I played Sharon Priest, the secretary of state, as Mrs. Doubtfire [SL laughs] because she was firing people at the Capitol and there was such doubt about whether they were gonna have their job anymore.*

SL: Right, right.

[05:37:26] BL: And she's cleanin' up a bunch of that trash out there and firin' a bunch of people, so we had her as Mrs. Doubtfire. And [*imitates Mrs. Doubtfire's tone of voice*]. [*SL laughs*] And then I did—got to do a lot of that silly stuff. [*Laughs*] And it was fun playin' Sharon Priest. So I'd got to do—I played Jerry

Jewell, the black legislator, in my first skit as—in *The Godfather*. We did *The Godfather* movie—back in the [19]70s it was popular. And we did Ray Thornton as Witt Stephens's lawyer, and Witt was the godfather of politics, and he—this character was gonna make everybody buy a gas grill—a barbecue grill [laughter] in Arkansas. [Laughter] And it was hilarious. But Jack Stephens loved the show. He would bring his staff and his family to some of the shows. And our biggest fan, of course, was—what's his name?

SL: Jennings?

BL: Jennings. Jennings Osborne and . . .

SL: Did you ever . . .

BL: He was . . .

SL: . . . play him?

BL: No, but we had a character in him—in the show every time. We had somebody playin' him and his wife and daughter, and they loved it, man. We had 'em in Disneyland one year—Disney World with the . . .

SL: Fireworks. Lights—yeah . . .

BL: . . . ears and . . .

SL: . . . lights.

BL: We—you know, I loved writing it. I'm not supposed to divulge

who all wrote it, but it was—I love writing comedy. I've dealt—I've delved into that some, and it was an outlet for me. It was great.

[05:39:09] SL: Didn't you— isn't there a *Seinfeld* . . .

BL: Yeah, I had a *Seinfeld* . . .

SL: . . . story?

BL: . . . happening. The greatest guy in the world for comedy this day and age, certainly—Jerry Seinfeld. But I was so into—I'm so into the—I still watch it twice a night. My wife goes crazy. [SL *laughs*] I still do every night. I watch *Seinfeld* for an hour. And I have all of his books—all of his tapes. But I study stuff like that. I—Paul Berry, my friend, does. [05:39:40] You—comedy is not just comedy; it's somethin' to study and perfect, and it changes over time. What was funny twenty years ago may—is not funny now. It evolves. So you have to evolve with it. But yeah, I had this idea for a *Seinfeld* episode. My calls ended up—I called Beth Brickell—she lives in Benton. She's a Hollywood actress. She was in several old TV shows and stuff. And we had worked together on some environmental issues back in my environmental days—you know, my tree-hugging days. And we had talked periodically over the years, and I called her about this. She said, "Bill, the woman—one of the executive producers

of *Seinfeld* is a good friend of mine. And if you're serious about this, you need to get me a copy of your idea and your—a possible script and let me work on this. I'll be happy to do it. She's great." And it progressed and progressed, and my show—my script was entitled, "The Blizzard of '96." So this would've been in 1996. And Jerry—it opens with Jerry at—on the phone to his mom in Florida, and he's tryin' to explain the difference in when the wind chill ends and the chill factor begins. You know, why you don't have a wind chill in the summer if you have a breeze, you know. And he's [*SL laughs*] goin' into this Seinfeld kind of stuff.

SL: Yeah. [*Laughs*]

BL: And it's funny. I think it's funny. So I have to write this script and send it to Hollywood, and I did. And I think they loved it—at least they liked it. They called. It involved all the characters. There's a way to—there's a very technical way to write TV scripts, and I knew how to do that. So I did it by the book, and it—in a beautiful folder—everything. So I received a call from the executive producer, and she said somethin' to the effect—it's been a while—but they loved it. And I was thrilled. I guess I coulda jumped out the window and flown.

SL: Yeah.

[05:42:14] BL: I mean, you know, I'd seen him in Little Rock live, but I studied him. And she said, "Here's the deal." She said, "Believe it or not, we've got a hundred and eleven episodes in the can—done—or ideas accepted." A hundred and eleven! Now, how many do they do a year? Like, twenty?

SL: Yeah.

BL: So that's five years. They've got a hundred and eleven accepted scripts, so I guess I'm a hundred and twelve. Well, I'll take that, with Jerry Seinfeld . . .

SL: Sure.

BL: . . . that they're gonna actually consider my idea or do somethin' with it, looks like. Well you know, I'm—my feet aren't touchin' the ground. Well, it wasn't—I bet it wasn't six months—Jerry Seinfeld announced he's retiring.

SL: Oh!

[05:43:09] BL: They've got five—four and a half to five years of stuff written for him, and he says, "I've had enough. I'm going out on top." He left as number one, and one of the few people to ever do that. And course, I'm just like, "Whoa, man! You know [*SL laughs*], that's the end of my great idea." But at least I got in the ballpark.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And I still have it. It's hilarious. It's—involves all the characters. Kramer [*SL laughs*—this—it was called "The Blizzard of '96" that hit New York. You might remember.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And they just go crazy. They're tryin' to get ready for the blizzard of [19]96. Kramer ends up goin' to buy whole-wheat bread because he won't eat any kind of bread. He—you know, how meticulous crazy he is.

SL: Yeah.

BL: So he's got to—"Oh, I gotta have"—you know, he tells Jerry, "I—no, no, I—you got bread, but it's not whole wheat." So he leaves to go get whole-wheat bread, and on the way he gets run over by a whole-wheat truck [*SL laughs*] deliverin' the bread. [*SL laughs*] And he ends up with this good lawyer friend suin' the bread company . . .

SL: Sure.

BL: . . . that was deliverin' the bread that he wanted. [*SL laughs*] [05:44:19] And Elaine ends up takin' Jerry to a public appearance at a TV station where he's to be interviewed. Well, the weather man can't get there, and Elaine ends up doin' the weather [*SL laughs*] because she had been a weather girl at the college TV station. And she ends up doin' the weather and

explaining trough alofts and stuff. So it kinda goes from there. And I'll read it every once in a—reread it every once in a while. You know, you just—it's kinda like actors don't want to go see themselves on the screen. When you write somethin', you're kinda done with it. It's like, "I can't see it again."

SL: Right.

BL: You're that way about a book. When you finish, it's like you've given birth and you just—"I can't revisit this."

SL: Right.

BL: But I'll pick it up occasionally, and it's funny. I think it is, and I think they did too. And I'm—now, I'm sure they were inundated with stuff like that. Everybody thinks they can write, but—in fact, they did a show about that one time. But I was thrilled and honored that I got the call, and I'm—it's one of my favorite memories, man.

[05:45:38] SL: That's good stuff. Well, do you have—have you got a piece of writing you can share with us?

BL: Well, I—my favorite thing from the *Follies* was a—it was a takeoff on an old John Wayne thing. He did an album [*SL clears throat*] in the [19]70s, I think. *America, Why I Love Her*. And we were lookin' for a piece to do with Tommy Robinson, and we—and I guess—I think I played him as John Wayne that year

'cause he's just, you know, I mean . . .

SL: Swagger.

BL: Yeah, not answering [*SL clears throat*] to anybody. And I wrote it about Arkansas, and it became a real signature piece for me. I did it in my comedy show. I'd close the show with it, and golly, you know, people just loved it. I mean, they were emotional about it. And I really like it. It's my favorite thing I did in the *Follies* that I wrote and performed, and I still do it from time to time with audiences if I speak or do somethin' special. And I think I can still do it from memory, but if I can't you'll have to bear with me. I'll do—I could do it, probably, if you wanted me to.

SL: Well sure, I'd be honored. Gosh, that'd be great.

[05:47:07] BL: I'm thinkin' about—I have a friend in the radio business. They may want it to open their show every morning. But it—it's about Arkansas, and it mentions things and places. But it's—we did it with beautiful music in the background. Betty Fowler and the orchestra would play, and it was a very touching thing. But it's called "Arkansas," and it starts: "Arkansas. You ask me why I love her. Well, give me time, and I'll explain. Have you ever seen a Mena sunset or an El Dorado rain? Have you drifted on a bayou down Lake Village way or watched the

sun come lifting off of Lake Catherine's bay? Have you heard a bobwhite calling in the Dallas County pines or heard the bellow of a diesel on the Cotton Belt line? Do hog calls in October thrill you when you hear the stadium roar? Do you look with awe and wonder at our Ozark Mountain lore, where men who braved a hard, new world first found the little rock? And do you think of 'em when you stroll along a scenic river dock? Have you seen a snowflake drifting on the Ouachitas way up high or seen the sun come blazing down from a bright Marianna sky? Do you hail to the Bayou Meto as she rushes to the sea or bow your head at Central High at kids' struggle to be free? Have you felt a chill in Sheridan when on a winter's day, the waters rage along Lost Creek in thunderous display? Does the word Razorback make you warm? Do you stare in disbelief when thousands of fans rise to their—do the hog call and stand next to their seats? From Gilbert's cold to the Delta flats to the Oaklawn track of fame, my heart cries out; my pulse runs fast at the might of her domain. You ask me why I love her. There's a million reasons to call my beautiful home state forever my beloved Arkansas." Hey, I did it.

SL: [*Laughs*] Good job!

[05:49:27] BL: I did it!

SL: Good job!

BL: And it's only been about, what, twelve years?

SL: Twelve years? That's good.

BL: Yeah.

SL: That is beautiful.

BL: Yeah, I remember when I did it in rehearsal, and Chuck Kelly— you remember Charles Kelly? He was a Channel 11 news man. He later went to Entergy.

SL: I kinda do.

BL: And Chuck's about to come on stage, and he's watchin' me do that. And he said, "God, that's great!" [*SL laughs*] He said, "What's that doin' in our show?" [*Laughter*] But it wowed the audiences. When you put some pretty music to that, pretty good stuff. Pretty good stuff.

SL: Well, thank you for doing that. I feel like we got . . .

BL: Yeah, I can't believe I did that.

SL: You know I'm a little . . .

BL: I mean . . .

SL: Well, you did great!

BL: Thank you.

SL: You did great. Thank you so much.

BL: Hey, I might go back on, you know.

SL: You should!

BL: Yeah, no. [*Laughter*] No, I shouldn't. It takes too much out of you.

[05:50:22] SL: Well, this is about the time that I start asking you if there's anything else that you want to talk about or tell us. You've spent all this day with us.

BL: I don't think so. You know, this is the most I've ever talked in my life. I'm thankful for this project, as an Arkansan, for recording history, which is so important. We—we're losin' that. We're—our kids aren't studyin' history, I don't think, like I think they should. There's—some of it's slippin' away, and I'm very proud of David and Barbara for putting their resources into a project that preserves this. I tried to do some of it in my work at the museum here with World War II veterans. But you're capturing somethin' that we've lost—we're losing. I reflected earlier that kids don't tell stories anymore. Concerns me. I hope that they get off the texting and e-mailing long enough to have associations and friendships and bond enough to have good memories to talk about one day. And I appreciate y'all comin' to my house.

SL: It's a big honor, Bill. It's a huge honor, and you've had a great, great life.

BL: Thank you very much.

SL: Blessed life.

BL: I appreciate you.

[05:52:04] SL: You know, there's one thing that we ask at the end, and I didn't bring this up before. But we like—we ask our interviewee to look at the camera like the camera's a person, and it's the best part—you don't have to look at me. [*BL laughs*] And just say to the camera, "I'm Bill Lancaster, and I'm proud to be from Arkansas."

BL: Oh, that's the easiest thing I've done all day.

SL: Well . . .

BL: You kept me six hours, and I get to say that? [*SL laughs*] I say that a lot. [*SL laughs*] I said it a lot in my travels, and I did moderate a lot of big meetings with television audiences around the country. And I probably said that. But I'm Bill Lancaster, and I'm proud to be an Arkansan. How's that?

SL: That's good, but I'm gonna get out of the way. I'm gonna have you do it one more time.

BL: All right.

SL: And if you want to say Bill "Scoop" Anderson, you can say that. But when you get done, keep looking at the camera for one, two [*snaps fingers*] so it gives us time to fade to black.

[05:53:11] BL: So say, "I'm Bill Lancaster, and I'm proud to be an Arkansan"?

SL: Yes, sir, and [*BL clears throat*] I'll let Trey—Trey'll give you the cue. I'm gonna get out of the way so you don't look at me when you're done. And then . . .

BL: Okay.

SL: . . . you have survived [*laughs*]. . .

BL: Yes, I have.

SL: . . . yet another trauma here. Thank you so much.

TM: And any time.

BL: I'm Bill Lancaster, and I'm proud to be an Arkansan.

TM: Great.

SL: Okay. How 'bout that?

BL: How 'bout that?

SL: You survived!

[05:53:44 End of interview]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]