

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

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Arkansas Memories Project

Blanche L. Lincoln
Interviewed by Scott Lunsford
June 22, 2012
Washington, DC

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 Blanche L. Lincoln on June 22,
2012, in Washington, DC.**

[00:00:00]

Scott Lunsford: Listen, we're gonna—we're gonna go ahead and
get started.

Blanche Lincoln: M'kay.

SL: Um—and—uh—so I start with who we are, where we are,
and . . .

BL: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . when we are. Uh—so we're—uh—I'm Scott Lunsford. You're
Senator Blanche Lincoln.

BL: I am Blanche Lincoln.

SL: Uh—thank you so much . . .

BL: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . for being with us. You're—we're here with the Pryor Center
and—uh—Stacy and—uh—Dave Lambert and Lee Williams have
arranged for us to be at the 116 Club in Washington, DC. And
that in and—in [*BL laughs*] and of itself, I think, is a miracle that
there's actually a camera in this building. [*Laughter*] Um . . .

BL: It's a . . .

SL: . . . and it . . .

BL: . . . remarkable place, actually.

SL: It is. And Stacy has been totally, totally remarkable. It's just . . .

BL: That's great.

SL: She's just wonderful.

BL: That's great.

SL: Um . . .

BL: Well, they love DP . . .

SL: Well, and . . .

BL: . . . as does everyone . . .

SL: . . . why wouldn't they?

BL: . . . in Washington. I know.

SL: [*Laughs*] Yeah. We're very—we're very blessed to have . . .

BL: Yeah.

SL: . . . him among us.

BL: Mh-hmm.

[00:00:53] SL: Um—you know, we—uh—um—uh—record these interviews and—in high-def . . .

BL: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . high-definition, and you will get a copy of everything we do. We'll scan the pho—some photos that you brought us today. You'll get a DVD of what we do here today . . .

BL: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . and anything else in the future.

BL: Good.

SL: Um—we—and we also transcribe the material.

BL: Mh-hmm.

SL: And we do it verbatim. We don't do it for readability. We do it the way you and I are gonna be talkin' . . .

BL: That makes . . .

SL: . . . and . . .

BL: . . . good sense.

SL: It makes it more interesting. Uh—some people are uncomfortable with that because they don't think they sound very good when you just really write what people say, but we think it's more valuable that way. And we don't wanna put any words in your mouth . . .

BL: That's good.

[00:01:36] SL: . . . you know. Um—also, when you look at this material, the DVD, and you read the transcript, if there's anything in it that you're not comfortable with . . .

BL: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . sharing with the rest of the world, we'll take it out. It's not about trying to get you or . . .

BL: It's not a gotcha.

SL: It is not. It is . . .

BL: Well, in . . .

SL: . . . your . . .

BL: . . . this world of politics as it is currently right now, "gotcha politics" is . . .

SL: Ah!

BL: . . . a big—it's—it's—I don't know. It's such a sad thing, what it's doin' to our country.

SL: I know. An—and we . . .

BL: It's such a sad thing.

SL: . . . we can talk about that at length.

BL: Sure.

SL: But—um—we're not like that, and we want you to be very—we feel that you own the inter—interview.

BL: Good.

SL: We'll be good stewards of the material. We will—once you're happy with it, we will encourage—uh—students to look at the stuff. Research . . .

BL: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . it. Write about it. We're a part of the Arkansas history lesson plan. There'll be kids in public schools that'll have access to this. We'll encourage—uh—uh—college students and

researchers . . .

BL: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . to look at this material. Um—even documentarians . . .

BL: That's good.

[00:02:39] SL: . . . that—that make documentaries. But we'll make sure that the pur—you know, that it adheres to the purpose of—of what we . . .

BL: Right.

SL: . . . wanna do. And basically, Barbara and David felt like it was time for the people of Arkansas to tell their own stories instead of New York and DC and LA . . .

BL: Other places.

SL: . . . tellin' 'em for us.

BL: Yeah.

SL: So that's kind of what it's all about. Um—and if you're comfortable with that, Blanche, we're . . .

BL: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . we're gonna keep going.

BL: Absolutely.

SL: Okay. Great answer. [*Laughs*] All right. So today's date is—um—the twenty-second of June 2012.

BL: Correct.

[00:03:13] SL: And—um—I usually start with, first of all, your full name. Wha—what is your full name?

BL: My full name—uh—before I married was Blanche Meyers Lambert.

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: I was named for my paternal grandmother—um—who was Blanche Ione Meyers, and she had traveled down the Mississippi River after her father died—from Wisconsin, and landed in Helena, Arkansas. Um—I married Stephen Reece Lincoln . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: . . . um—who also comes from a fifth-generation—uh—Arkansas family, and so my name now, currently, is Blanche Lambert Lincoln.

[00:03:54] SL: Now, that's interesting. Uh—Dave—uh—Lambert, he was kinda tracin' his folks down through Tennessee and up but—is—so there's a Wisconsin connection, too.

BL: Well, that was my grandmother on my father's side . . .

SL: Oh, okay.

BL: . . . my paternal grandmother.

SL: Mh-hmm.



BL: Now, my paternal grandfather—um—his family actually came to Arkansas, I think, in, like, 1810, 1811.

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: Um—my cousin, David Lambert, is also one of your subjects, and he probably has the most correct [*laughs*] date there. But—uh—he was sent—we actually—there's a—an article that was written, and he was sent—he was in Kentucky and sent from Kentucky. He was a Presbyterian minister.

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: And he was sent from Kentucky—uh—to—um—be a missionary to the Native American population down around Holly Grove and Maddox Bay and Indian Bay, in that area—uh—in southern—uh—Monroe County and Phillips County. And he came to Arkansas, and he had nine sons, and all nine of those sons survived and had families of their own, which was obviously unheard of . . .

SL: Uh—yes.

[00:05:01] BL: . . . in that time. Uh—so if you find a Lambert west of the Mississippi, I'm probably [*laughter*] related to them. And certainly in Arkansas. I'll run into 'em all the time in Arkansas, and they'll say, "I think we're cousins from way back when." And I said, "You're probably right."

SL: "You're probably right." Yeah. Well . . .

BL: So . . .

SL: . . . we had a . . .

[00:05:16] BL: And then my mother's family was quite interesting, too.

SL: Okay.



BL: Uh—my—and of course, I come from a very old part of our state. Uh—Helena is now the oldest city in Arkansas. Uh—Arkansas Post was the oldest city, but it's no longer a city.

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: It's a state park . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: . . . and—uh—I think Helena's now the oldest. And—um—so I come from a—a—a town full of stories. Um—my grandfather—my grandfather on my mother's side, my maternal grandfather—uh—actually was from Yazoo City, Mississippi. And his father was a—a—a sheriff or a deputy, I believe . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: . . . um—and so he was killed when my grandfather was very young. And then—uh—so my grandfather kinda—um—grew up, not on his own, but with his mother and aunts and others, and then he moved over—uh—with Helena Cotton Oil and married my grandmother, who had grown up in Helena, my maternal grandmother. And she was a spitfire. [SL laughs] [00:06:15] Uh—she came from a very long—she used to talk about her—

um—I don't know if it was a—I think it was her grandfather who had fought in the Civil War—uh—Captain John—and actually, he ended up being buried in Fayetteville, and it was an unmarked grave. And—um—we actually—all the cousins went together and got a tombstone, and—um—uh—he was a captain in the—in the—in the Civil War—and put a—a headstone on there so that it would be—be a marked grave. But we—what—th—they—they went back through all of the—the historical documents and figured out which one was his, so . . .

[00:06:50] SL: Wow! So is he in the Confederate Cemetery there?

BL: I—I think so. My cousin Thad—uh—Kelly, who's an architect . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

BL: . . . up in Fayetteville—Thad and—and his brother, Bob, are both architects there from the school of architecture.

SL: Uh-huh.

BL: And—um—they did—I think Thad did all the research to find it all out, so it was quite a—but anyway, so we—we've come from a—an area that's full of stories and long history and lots of activity. Uh—Father Marquette and Joliet when they—Father Jo—when they came up the—um—Mississippi River in their explorations—um—they—they came off at Helena—um—and began to—uh—you know, track west. So there's—it's fun to be from a place

that's full of stories.

[00:07:34] SL: Well, so, now—um—when and where were you born?

BL: I was born—uh—in Helena. I was born in Helena. I'm the last of four children.

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: I was born in 1960. Uh—my mom and dad had been high school sweethearts and remained devoted to each other forever and ever and ever. And—um—so I grew up within walking distance of my grandparents and aunts and uncles, and you know, we spent—I—when I got married, my husband said, "I don't even know some of my cousins." And I said, "Yeah, but it's different when you grow up in a city. When you grow up in a small town, you not only spend holidays with your cousins, but you go to school with 'em; you're in the band with 'em; or you do cheerleadin'; or you play sports with 'em; and you take piano lessons with 'em and" [*laughs*]*—you do things together, so they also become some of your best friends. And—um—that was a wonderful part of growin' up, as well.*

[00:08:26] SL: Well—um—gosh, I—I—I—I don't know how well versed you are about your—your mom's side of the family, your dad's side of the family, and all the stories and all the names, but I usually start with talkin' about your parents . . .

BL: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . and—uh—so can you tell us—tell us . . .

BL: Yeah.

SL: . . . a little bit about your parents.

BL: Um—well, they—uh—they grew up in homes that they worked very hard to duplicate—uh—or replicate, and—and they did a great job. They grew up in wonderful, loving homes—um—with siblings that they were close to. And—um—my mom's—uh—uh—uh—father worked for Helena Cotton Oil, and—uh—my grandmother was kind of a—um—I don't know. She was a modern woman before it was cool to be a modern woman because my grandfather was older. I didn't—I never knew my grandfather on my mother's side because he passed away before I was born.

SL: Oh.

[00:09:21] BL: Um—but they were very, very devoted to each other. And so she was a widow for quite some time, almost twenty-five years, I guess, twenty-five.

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: A little over twenty-five years, she was a widow. And—um—so she was a very independent woman. She had been dependent before that, but she was very independent. Uh—she had

businesses. You know, she did real estate. Uh—she had a children's shop. Uh—she taught dance lessons. [*Laughs*] I mean, you know, she did what she had to do—um—really, to be able to—uh—provide for her family. I mean, I think Mother was the youngest of the three children but—um—so they were—and they were grown and had married and had children. But my grandmother still—you know, she was still active in—in providing . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: . . . um . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: . . . in many ways for herself. And—um—so that required her to be in the workforce. And—um—it was interesting. It was interesting how the men in town really respected her for what she did—um—and that was kind of curious. Um—as a—you know, as, again, as a real estate agent or as a—um—store owner or small business owner—um—those kind of things. Um . . .

SL: Were these . . .

BL: . . . so it was a great role model in many ways . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: . . . to see that it could be done—um—in a time when it was very

uncommon—um—to do it in a—in a respectable way.

[00:10:40] SL: So—um—did she and her husband enter these businesses together and—and then when he passed, she . . .

BL: No.

SL: No.

BL: No, she—uh—um—because—um—uh—I—I don't believe so because he worked for a company.

SL: Uh-huh.

BL: Now, he worked for a big—uh—company that was there, Helena Cotton Oil. And he was a jovial man, apparently. I—my—my mother—um—she adored her daddy, as most little girls do. They all . . .

SL: Sure.

BL: . . . adore their daddies. I adored mine. Um—but she said, you know, when he died—uh—he had a heart attack, and he was in the hospital, or—I—I guess he really wasn't in the hospital. I think he was at home, probably.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:11:18] BL: And the doctor came by to check on him, and she said he was—he'd had—well, he had a little portly tummy on him, I suppose, and—uh—she said [*laughs*] he—he—the doctor was checkin' him out, and—and—um—I guess the stethoscope or

whatever on his—on his tummy, and she said he looked up, and he says, "Okay, Doc, is it a boy, or is it a girl?" [*SL laughs*] And she said, "He just closed his eyes and just peacefully passed away." And she said, "How wonderful to see my dad, you know, for what I remembered, which was a very pleasant, kind, you know, wonderful person to be with—uh—to see him pass that way, to go, you know, to go on to—um—to life thereafter." And so it—it was—you know, I—it—life was full of those kind of stories for me, growin' up . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: . . . which was—uh—you know, a positive look at life and the things that were there and—um—you know, how—how to live each moment and—and to really get the most out of it.

[00:12:19] And so—and watchin' my grandmother after that.

You know, she—uh—she, as I said, started businesses and worked hard, and—uh—she was tons of fun. [*SL laughs*] Um—you know, we'd—we'd—we'd—had—we did Christmas Eve at her house every—uh—Christmas. And we did it with all of our cousins, and one—uh—one of my cousins, Bob—uh—played the trumpet. So he would play the trumpet, and we'd march in behind—uh—him into her house, singin' Christmas carols or somethin', and she was—she was just—she was always going—

she—she was—uh—incredible with her hands. Uh—she did beautiful handwork—um—and when we were little—um—Mother would buy us a doll for Christmas, and my grandmother would make these beautiful, handmade clothes. She would knit sweaters and caps and booties for the doll and little, French day gowns and, oh my gosh, our—my doll clothes were exquisite. [Laughs] [00:13:13] But she wou—that was her gift was she would make the clothes for the doll. And you know, we'd had the doll and then—oh my gosh, it was just amazing. But it was—you know, you've—it was a—it was a wonderful, happy upbringing. You learned things along the way—um—and you had people that loved you that were there to teach them to you. So—um—I used to love spendin' the night with her. Um—she [laughs]—she loved those orange—um—marshmallow cir—you—they called 'em circus peanuts. Do you—I don't know if you . . .

SL: Oh, yes!

BL: . . . remember that.

SL: Yeah, yeah.

[00:13:43] BL: You remember the little oran—and she always would have those and Mallowmars [SL Laughs] and just really bad candy. [Laughs]

SL: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Right.

BL: So it was always fun to spend the night with her when you were a little kid. [*Laughter*] But—um—[*SL laughs*] that was wonderful to—you know, it was great. She had a big house—uh—at first, and then my uncle, who—uh—who was the mayor of our—of—of—of Helena for about fourteen years, I think—um—then he and Aunt Nancy had five children, and so—um—they took my grandmother's big house, and—um—she moved into an apartment. And it was always fun to go down to her apartment. And she was not—um—a material person. Um—I never will forget—um—when—when she passed away, I was helpin' Mother with some of her stuff, and she had a old cigar box full of nails and screws and, you know, that kind of stuff that everybody . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: . . . has in their kitchen. And I was lookin' through it, and there was this beautiful cameo. It was a gorgeous, old, antique cameo with little seed pearls around it. And I [*laughs*] said, "Mother, what is this doin' in the nail box?" And she said, "That was your grandmother. You know," she said, "she'd—m—material things were not that important to her. She'd—you know, she—she used 'em and loved 'em and appreciated them, but they—they weren't what she lived for." Um—they were all—all of my family have been wonderful people of faith—um—and believing not only

in God, their creator, but their fellow man that God created, and that it's our responsibility and—um—it's what God wants us to do is to love our fellow man. And she was forever helpin' somebody out, you know—um—somebody that was down on their luck or—and my mother is the spittin' image of her, so
[laughs] . . .

[00:15:30] SL: So—uh—was it—um—um—what church did they belong to?

BL: Um—the Episcopal church.

SL: Episcopal.

BL: Mh-hmm. Mh-hmm. We have been lifelong Episcopalians. Now, I do love goin'—my husband is—uh—comes from a family of lifelong Presbyterians.

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: And so in Little Rock we go to Second Pres, which is wonderful.

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: Um—my uncle was—um—at the cathedral. My uncle Lawson Anderson was a—um—a—is an—a—Episcopal minister . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: . . . retired now.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:15:58] BL: But—um—he is—um—he was at the cathedral. So

lots of times I still sneak over to the cathedral for Christmas and Christmas Eve and those kinda things. But Steve Hancock is at Second Presbyterian, and he is, oh, he is wonderful. His sermons are stories. He's a storyteller.

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: And they are just fabulous. [*SL laughs*] Um—you—I—I—I walked up to him a couple Sundays ago. We were home in Arkansas, and—uh—we were at church, and I said, "Steve, there's no way I would've gotten that out of that scripture." [*Laughter*] I said, "But you made it fit so perfectly." So—so yes, I grew up as an Episcopalian. Actually—um—my Uncle Jack—uh—was the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church worldwide.

SL: Wow.

BL: It's a twelve-year term.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:16:41] BL: And so he was globally the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, which meant he and my Aunt Ann, who's my mom's older sister, they—uh—lived in New York and Connecticut—uh—while he was there 'cause the main headquarters of the Episcopal Church is in New York City. But they traveled globally because, really, I think the largest

constituency in the Episcopal Church is in Africa, which is amazing.

SL: Is that right?

BL: Yeah. So . . .

SL: Oh yeah, I've always—uh—heard and—and the times that I've been in an Episcopal service—tha—that there's a romance about that—uh—uh—abou—about that church. There's—it's—there's a romantic, wonderful warmth about it that is—it's not—it doesn't seem to be as strict as the Catholic, and it doesn't seem to be as secular—uh—uh—as the other churches. There's a . . .

BL: Uh-huh.

SL: . . . a—a balance there that . . .

[00:17:32] BL: Well, if you grow up in it and you really do learn—um—about the church and you learn about—um—you—you know, the—the history of the church, but more importantly—um—you know, the—um—uh—the service, the actual service, and what it means . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: . . . um—there's—there's really a tremendous amount of meaning in it.

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: Um—I know, growin' up—um—we, course, went to Sunday

school and—um—uh—my cousins and I—my—my—my cousin Martha and I were both in the junior altar guild. So we learned about the rituals and the—um—you know, the—the service and—and all of the different things that you use in the service of Holy Communion and other things. So you really learn—um—you—you know, what that meaning is—uh—what it stands for, what it represents. Um . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:18:27] BL: . . . and then you also—uh—we were in the choir, the junior choir. And course, our—the thing I remember most about the junior choir was the cupcakes [*laughter*] at practice. Miss Johnson always injected—um—the most wonderful custard in the inside . . .

SL: Oh!

BL: . . . of her cupcakes, so that was a tempting thing to get us to practice.

SL: Well, sure. [*BL laughs*] And it worked.

BL: It was great.

[00:18:50] SL: [*Laughs*] Well, so—um—it sounds like to me, in the house that you grew up in, then, the church was really—um—a central . . .

BL: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . part—uh—uh—uh . . .

BL: It was a big part . . .

SL: . . . of your upbringing.

BL: . . . of our life, our faith and our church and . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

BL: . . . um—what it taught us. Uh—Mother and Daddy were always very—um—they were encouraging for us to develop our own ideas and our own minds and our own faith.

SL: Hmm.

[00:19:17] BL: Um—but—uh—they did so by takin' us to church where they grew up . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: . . . and both on my mother's side and my father's side, they were both—um—they grew up in the Episcopal Church.

SL: Mh-hmm.

BL: We wen—and from early on—um—St. John's, which is the parish we—we grew up in in Helena, is one of the older churches—um—in—um—in Arkansas. It burned. My grandmother remembers. She was about, I think, three or four. I think it burned in 1901 because she was born in 1897, and she remembers—um—runnin' down the street because everybody started, you know, hollerin'—uh, "The church is on fire! The church is on fire!"

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:20:00] BL: And she ran down the street. And she said, "I can remember bein' there in my nightgown and bein' scared and seein' the fire and stuff." And then she realized—she says, "And then I realized I was there in my nightgown," [*laughter*] you know, but I think at three or four that probably didn't matter.

SL: That was probably just fine.

BL: Yeah.

SL: Well, that's interesting that . . .

BL: Yeah.

SL: . . . that she had that kind of drama that early, you know, and to see all the people scurrying about . . .

BL: Oh yeah.

SL: . . . and all the . . .

[00:20:23] BL: Well, but course . . .

SL: . . . excitement.



BL: . . . you know, that's the thing that we miss so much in this day and age is the fact that, you know, you do share those things with your neighbors. You know, when I first came to the United States Senate, Dale Bumpers was so wonderful. And he said, "Blanche," he said, "I'm very excited for you, and I know you're gonna work hard and do well." He said, "I just wish you could

have known the Senate that I knew."

SL: Oh!

BL: He said, "You know, some of my best friends were Republicans."

And he said, "It wasn't because we agreed on the issues." He

said, "It was because we spent time together." He said, "You

know, we had to suffer through band concerts with our kids in

high school, or you know, we did barbecues on the weekend."

And you know, it's that kind of fellowship, not only there, but

growin' up in a small town, that allows you to respect people's

differences because you know them as a person. And if you've

got respect for them as a person, then you're gonna respect

their differences. And that was one of the great things I had

growin' up, and it was one of the things I wanted desperately to

bring to the United States Congress because as a staffer, I

noticed that members didn't get to know each other as well as

they could have or should have. And when I got here, it was

much the same way, but I made an extra effort to get to know

my colleagues. But you get that growin' up in a small town

because you do know everybody, and you know, you respect

their differences. We grew up in the Episcopal church, but it was

catty corner from the synagogue . . .

SL: Ah!



BL: . . . which, you know, most people, when I left Helena, people thought I grew up in the, you know, the Deep South, the Bible Belt. They didn't know that, you know, my sister's best friend was Jewish. We used to say the blessing in Hebrew on Friday nights when we [*laughs*] had our fried chicken, you know, because of that small-town, you know, atmosphere and—you know, we shared youth group sometimes with the Jewish synagogue. They had less children because the Jewish community had gotten older, and a lot of the, you know, the kids had left and gone off to school and were workin' and livin' in New York and other places, but it was pretty amazing. [00:22:39] I mean, Rabbi Shillman was amazing. His wife, Mrs. Shillman, was probably one of the best Arkansas history teachers in the public schools. And then the Methodist church was next door, and they had great youth group, you know. So we went to MYF—sometimes collaborated and went to MYF, or the Presbyterians had a, you know, a wonderful music program. So we did summer musicals with all the youth group kids. And the Baptists had Vacation Bible School, so we'd go to the Baptist church for Vacation Bible School. But you know, everybody kinda had their niche, and they shared, and you know, you got to know each other, and you knew that you—there may be a

little bit of difference, but there wasn't that much difference. There was more commonality than there was difference, and that's where we gotta get back to. And it's tough 'cause there's not that many small towns anymore.

[00:23:28] SL: That's true. And the small towns that are are getting smaller.

BL: That's right.

SL: And it's a sad passing.

BL: It is, but there're those of us that remember what that structure meant to us. And I, you know, I don't know. It—you gotta pass it on in some form or fashion, even though my kids, you know, have not necessarily been growin' up in a small town, whether it's been Arlington or Little Rock. You know, I—Steve and I have made it an extra effort. Our—their niece—our nieces and nephews, their cousins, come live with us in the summertime, sometimes for three or four or five weeks, so they get to know their cousins. You know, they know their family. They've got that continuity that they've come from somewhere. They've come from certain people and I—that—that's—it gives people a grounding that's important for them to then become who they want to become. You know, I'm sure if you'd asked my mother or father, "Would your youngest child become a United States

senator?" If you'd asked me, [*laughter*] I would've said, "No, that's crazy." Well, what—well, you know, I was gonna be a nurse. I [*laughs*—so I—but there's those—there's so much to that that gives you the ability to step out and do somethin' different or be who you want to be—is that strength of knowin' where you came from.

[00:25:00] SL: Okay. Let's get back to Blanche.

BL: Kay.

SL: [*Laughter*] Describe the house that you grew up in Helena. What was it like?

BL: Well, the house I grew up is still the house Mother's living in today. It was the house Mother and Daddy built in, I think, 1960. It was the year—which was the year I was born because my aunt and uncle built the house next door to us the same year, and their daughter that's my age—she and I are about three months apart. But we were raised like twin sisters . . .

SL: Okay.

BL: . . . 'cause we shared everything. But it's just a ranch house.

SL: Okay.

BL: One level. You know, it started out one size, and then Mother and Daddy added on—I think they added on a living room, and then they added on two more bedrooms and then they or—

added on a little sitting room in their bedroom. So they began—they started and then sprawled. And it was a wonderful home. We all took a great deal of pride in it. It wasn't the biggest home in the community, nor was it the smallest. It wasn't the fanciest. But there were interesting things that Mother always brought into the home, whether it was a piece of furniture or a new decorating technique. All of it was comfortable, and none of it was off limits. You know, she always invited our friends into our home. I remember helping Mother one time. My middle sister was—I think she was captain of the cheerleading squad, and so Mother wanted to do somethin' nice for the cheerleading squad. So she had a big, fancy dinner in the dining room and Mother and I—I was the server. And she fixed Baked Alaska . . .

SL: Oh gosh!

BL: . . . which was, you know, not something commonly you have in the South . . .

SL: No.

BL: . . . but certainly not something commonly you have in ho—at home and . . .

SL: It's not something you just . . .

BL: . . . so I had so . . .

SL: . . . whip out. [*Laughs*]

BL: . . . much fun, you know, helpin' her—well, yeah. But it—and not necessarily somethin' you fix for teenagers.

SL: Right.

[00:27:01] BL: But anyway, that was great fun. And I can remember those kinda things 'cause I was the last of four children, so I was always the helper. Mother always said I helped her raise the other three [*laughter*] 'cause I was just kind of her sidekick. But you know, I—and then she had a big birthday party for me one time, and I never will forget because we all were decidin' somethin', and we decided we were gonna bang the utensils on the table and say, "We want whatever," you know. We were tryin' to be funny and havin' a good time, and we, oh, we damaged her dinin' room table . . .

SL: Oh!

BL: . . . what—we were mortified about. But you know, to this day that table's damaged. [*SL laughs*] But Mother never—you know, she always used it as a learning experience. It was like, "Oh, girls, don't worry. This is just a table. I'm so glad none of you all were hurt or nothin'"—you know. She said, "But now you know that—you know, you—you're gettin' older. You gotta behave yourself. You gotta, you know, act a certain way." And she was always engaging our friends. I member one trip the—

was it the Royal Danish Ballet? I can't remember—one of 'em that came to Memphis. [00:28:13] And so she gathered together my little group of friends and took us up to Memphis to see the ballet. She got tickets. And we drove up old Highway 61 in Mississippi, and with all the huge farm implements that would drive on that road, the asphalt would get ridges in it.

SL: Sure.

BL: And so when it would rain heavily, they would fill up with water, and it was very easy to hydroplane. And we were goin' up the road and, sure enough, it—there was a toad-strangler of a rain, and she, you know, she was drivin' one of those big, old, huge station wagons. She had all of us girls in there, and she just hydroplaned right off the road into the ditch.

SL: Oh!

[00:28:53] BL: And a couple of the girls were in the way back screamin', and she hollered out, which she never did. She said, "Hush! Be quiet! Every one of you, be quiet." And then she said, "Is anyone hurt?" And we all looked around. We were stunned. We were, like, "Well, no, nobody's hurt." She says, "Well, then, let's get outta here, and let's get"—you know. And the—course, the car was fillin' up with water. So we got out on the side of the road, and some gentleman stopped and took us

all over to the Blue and White cafe in Tunica, which was [*unclear word*] still a landmark, and helped Mother get the car out. And they, you know, winched it out of the ditch; took it to the Blue and White. They vacuumed all the water out, put us back in it, and we made it to the ballet. [*SL laughs*] You know, it was amazing that—you know, and she said—she—the most important thing was, "Is anybody hurt? Well, if they're not, let's do somethin' about this and move on." [*Laughs*]

SL: Strong woman.

[00:29:52] BL: Well you know, she was and still is amazing. I mean, but that—I remember those things. I remember those, you know, wonderful lessons in how to become a good mom and how to be a strong woman and how to do things right. What's the most important thing? Prioritize. Don't frighten the kids, you know. Get back on focus. It—just so many instances like that that were—but it was always—they were always engaging us and our friends. [00:30:26] The schools were integrated in Arkansas when I was in—going into the fifth grade. My oldest sister went through completely segregated schools and then my middle sister—I think it was maybe her last year, perhaps, that they integrated the schools. And it was my fi—I was goin' into the fifth grade, and so it was a very interesting time because I

went from a school, an elementary school, that was probably 7 percent African American to a school that was probably 70 percent African American. And you know, the families in the community were all tryin' to figure out what they were gonna do. What was gonna happen? How was this gonna transpire? And Mother and Daddy sat down with all of us and said, "You know, we really believe that as a community we need to stand behind our schools. We want you all to be a part of this decision, and we wanna tell you what's gonna happen and how things are gonna change. And we don't want you—we want you to be engaged in the decision we're making, but we also want to impart upon you what we believe is important, and to have a good, strong community, you need good, strong schools. And to have good, strong schools, you have to have people support them." And so there were, you know—families made choices. Some families stayed in the public schools, and other families made other choices. And we were part of families that stayed in the public schools, and it was amazing to watch how they rallied behind that and working hard to be a part of this new consolidated school system. [00:32:18] And I remember Mother started a group called Girls' Club.

SL: Kay.

BL: And it was amazing because it was beneficial to everybody that participated because there were a lot of the young African American girls who, at that time, did not have showers at home and didn't have the kind of, you know, guidance, perhaps, in hygiene and toiletries and other things. And so Mother had gone around the community and gotten, like, the dollar store to donate towels and soap and some of the beauty salons to donate some things and to come and teach us all at—you know, these were all, you know, young girls that are startin' to go through—getting ready to go through puberty and other things like that. And we would meet—oh, was it every—I think it was, like, on Wednesdays or somethin'. I can't remember. But I can remember goin' in there, and it was such an education for Mother. We didn't notice it as much until we started talkin' about it, but to realize that, you know, this was an opportunity for some of these children who didn't get to have a bath every night at home, who didn't, you know—were sharing, you know, their bedrooms with two or three other siblings versus what opportunities we had at home. And it was an amazing time, and it was amazing to watch Mother and her contemporaries really pouring themselves into tryin' to make that integration of schools and the schools work and to do it with dignity.

[00:34:10] Not—you know, it was—and I remember her talkin' about that, her sayin', "You know, this is an opportunity to share with some folks who may not have as much." She says, "But it's not a giveaway. This is not—this is gonna be done with dignity, and that's—you know, we—that's why all of you all are here. This is to share and to learn and to, you know, and to grow." And it was a very interesting time. I remember that well. I member—I remember her—she came to the school to help with a lot of the—and it wasn't just Mother. I'm—I speak of her because I know what she did, but I saw all of my friends' mothers that were there, too. And as a group of women, they were very focused on makin' this work. But they came to help enroll the young African American kids that were integrating into the schools 'cause they used all the schools. I ended up goin' to the all-black junior high after the—havin' been at the Helena Elementary. But anyway, she was signin' up this one little girl, and the mother was talkin' to my mother, and Mother was sayin', "Well, it's very easy for you to sign her up here. All you have to do is tell me who her teacher was last year, and then I'll know what grade to put her in." And she said, "Well, she dropped out of school last year to have a baby." [00:35:55]

And Mother said—she was stunned. I mean, this is a fifth grader

or sixth grader. And she said, at that point, she said, "I thought to myself, oh my gosh. You know, what is this experience?"

And she said, "And then I quickly thought how all the more important for us to make this work, [*laughs*] you know, to be a community and to grow as a community and to better understand what everybody's needs are and what everybody's, you know, situations are." And so it was pretty amazing. And you know, she—I think it was a, certainly, a journey for her . . .

SL: I was going to . . .

BL: . . . as much or more than it was a journey for us.

[00:36:47] SL: . . . I was going to say it was something that was helping your mother grow, too . . .

BL: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely, it was a . . .

SL: . . . and all of her friends.

BL: . . . a journey for all of—for her and all of her contemporaries because I think they had been shielded from that for quite some time.

SL: It was the culture of the time . . .

BL: It was a culture difference.

SL: . . . that they grew up in.

[00:37:05] BL: And it was interesting. I—she still was very, you know, engaged with me and my little group of friends. But we—

she had—she started the Thursday Club for us, and she would pick us up on Thursdays. We'd have to write a note so we could leave campus, and she'd pick up about six of us. There were six of us—there were six—we all lived within walking distance of each other. And our older siblings were, like, in the same grades. And so our parents knew each other and were friends and our siblings were fr—our older siblings were friends, so it was kinda natural for us to gravitate to each other. But she would pick us up on Thursdays, and we'd have a sack lunch, and we'd get to go by the Burger Ranch and get a chip-cherry vanilla Coke. [*SL laughs*] And then we would go somewhere in town and have a picnic. [00:37:54] And it would kinda give us a little outing as a group and we—our favorite place was the Confederate Cemetery up on the hill 'cause you could—we would—we could walk among the Confederate graves, but you had a beautiful view of the Mississippi River, and you were under these big, huge magnolia trees. And so we'd go up there sometimes, and you know, we'd think about—we'd read the tombstones, and we'd think, "Now, who was this person?" And we'd make up stories, or you know, they'd—we'd design a play around a character, you know. That's why I was so pleased. I—the—I think it was UALR. I can't remember who did it in Little

Rock. Maybe it was the preservation society. But they did some films where they—there were people, actors, some of the young, talented actors in Little Rock played the roles of—they got the history of some of the people in the cemetery, and they played the roles of who those people were, where they lived and grew up, and then they moved and gravitated to Little Rock.

[00:38:53] SL: Living history.

BL: It was interesting. Huh?

SL: Living history.

BL: Yeah, yeah, it was . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . wonderful because it was a lot of what we would do as kids growin' up in an older part of the state where you would kinda find those adventures. And then you'd make up the stories instead of documenting [*laughter*] the real history. But those were great times growin' up like that, where our parents were very engaged in what we were doin'.

[00:39:14] SL: I was goin' to ask you—did your parents get any kind of pushback for their activism on supporting the desegregation movement? Did they—what about the rest of the Helena community? Was it—I mean . . .

BL: No . . .

SL: . . . I would assume . . .

BL: . . . it just kind of divided—you know, people were not—they weren't really ugly about it; it's just that there were some people who chose something different. And you know, that was Mother and Daddy's explanation to us because our—we—ours started young enough that our friend group were divided. My brother was—he's two classes ahead of me, so he was in the same boat. And then they said their families have just made another choice. [00:39:56] They just made a different choice, and you know, "You used to go to school with 'em, and you're not gonna be goin' to school with 'em. That doesn't mean you can't be friends with them. And it's certainly not that they're not gonna be friends of ours, that they are. They're gonna continue to be friends of ours, but they've just made different choices." And I think, you know, that was an important lesson in itself. Again, people make different choices, but you learn, you know, what it is that you stand for and what you wanna do by the guidance that you get in those kind of circumstances. And it was interesting. By the time I got to high school—I never will forget. [00:40:34] I was in the Thespians.

SL: Okay.

BL: I was the youngest Thespian [*SL laughs*] 'cause I got enough

points in workin' backstage and other things that I was able to, you know, be initiated in the ninth grade, which was unheard of, apparently. [*Laughter*] But I wanted to have—we were havin' our banquet . . .

SL: M'kay.

BL: . . . and I wanted to have like a preparty for the banquet.

[00:40:55] And so Mother and I concocted this—we were gonna have one at our house. We were gonna have our little preparty at our house, and then we'd go to the school and have our banquet. We thought that would be very fancy, and we could dress up and . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . do tha—all that kinda stuff. And Mother and I were gonna fix all the hors d'oeuvres and that kinda stuff. And I never will forget the—one of the teachers sayin' to Mother, "You know that—you do know that there are some African American students that are in the club and that means they're gonna—they would have—they would be invited to your home." And my mother was like, "Well, yes, of course. They're Blanche's friends." And you know, it sh—it was sh—it was just a slow progression of learning that, "Yes, [*laughter*] this is who we are. This is—you know." And I don't know. It was interesting. It

was a real growth process that I think was beneficial to all of us.

[00:42:01] SL: You know, that part of the—of Arkansas has some fairly violent . . .

BL: History.

SL: . . . black/white relationships. And I—we've been to Helena. We've interviewed some folks in Helena, and it's interesting. The African American that we interviewed over there really didn't have much to say about that history, even though her—she and her family have been there for forever. [00:42:34] And there seems to be a reluctance to really talk about how hard it was before now.

BL: Well, it had to have been far more difficult for them than it was for me. I mean, because there were some people that didn't accept them. And I mean, that's a tough thing to deal with . . .

SL: Yeah, they . . .

BL: . . . to be unaccepted.

SL: It's a—I got the feeling that the wounds are—were still there, but the African American community had worked hard to . . .

BL: Oh, absolutely.

SL: . . . establish themselves in the communities currently, and they were reluctant to bring up the past because they thought it might hurt the existing relationships, that it might, you know,

stir up old wounds and . . .

[00:43:32] BL: Well, and I think that what's important is, you know—oh my gosh, some of my teachers, when they integrated the schools—Muriel Wilkins, she was an amazing math teacher. She's also an amazing musician. She was a pianist. I mean, she played the piano. She was an amazing musician. She used to play over at—in Hollywood, Mississippi, the home of fried dill pickles or whatever. [*SL laughs*] I don't know—some—you know, it was a restaurant over there that was known for its blues music and—but she was also—and it was funny because I looked back when all the studies came out about the strength—the supposed connection of strengthening mathematical skills with musical . . .

SL: It is math.

[00:44:26] BL: . . . musical skills—I thought of Muriel Wilkins because she was a good math teacher, but she also opened our minds and our eyes and our ears to music. You know, she was an amazing African American woman. Maureen Billingsley, she was the librarian. She was a wonderful, amazing person who taught us a love for books, but a respect for the library. She was just—you know, still is a remarkable woman. I run into Maureen, you know. Who—there was—I mean, I just—you

know, I can remember a lot of my teachers, and they were teachers that I should remember. Dr. Davis, down at UAPB, University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, his brother was my fifth-grade Arkansas history teacher, and he was brilliant, absolutely brilliant, and knew how to run a classroom. So . . .

[00:45:40] SL: You know, this—I think this is the first interview I've had where the interviewee was actually being taught by African Americans. You know, most of the integration history I've covered, it's the students are coming into the white school, and there's still all these white teachers. And all the adjustments are based around that. But in your case . . .

BL: No.

SL: . . . you got to be among the African American teachers, and that had to be really [*laughs*] fulfilling for you and . . .

BL: Oh . . .

SL: . . . maybe not—I'm not sure when you realized how special that was but . . .

BL: Well, it wa—I mean, I—to be honest, it—I think that Mother and Daddy were workin' so hard to make sure that the transition was seamless. You know, Mother was quick to reassure us, and she said, "You know, the schools are comin' together because they should be together. They have excellent teachers, and we have

good teachers, but you kids need to be goin' to school together. There's no reason to have separate schools." And that's, you know—so I mean, the reassurance that we were—and you know, we experienced, as I said, great teachers. [00:46:56] So I was—it was interesting. And then, of course, when I—then when I went to junior high, I went out to Eliza Miller. Eliza Miller was the—it had been the African American high school 'cause you had two high schools and two . . .

SL: Two junior highs.

BL: . . . two—you had two everything.

SL: Yeah.

BL: And I, you know, I didn't think anything of it. It was just the junior high we were supposed to go to, and it didn't really dawn on me that it actually had been a separate high school. I had just, you know—but now, my sisters didn't go out there. I'm tryin' to think—my brother must have. Yeah, I think my brother did go out there. So it's . . .

[00:47:42] SL: Yeah, you know, all the African American families I've interviewed, you know, the—during this integration process—desegregation process—their parents would come to their children and say, "We want you to go to the white school. We're asking you. We think this is the right thing to do." And

I've just never heard the reverse, you know. It's . . .

BL: Yeah.

SL: . . . it's so great [*laughter*] to hear that, and it just . . .

BL: Yeah.

SL: . . . kinda reaffirms, you know . . .

BL: Yeah.

SL: It's really good.

BL: It is. It is.

[00:48:17] SL: You know, we haven't said much—hardly anything about your father yet.

BL: Oh, he was wonderful. [*SL laughs*] Just wonderful. I adored him. He was a rock. Daddy was—he was always about bein' fair and honest. He adored his mother. He was precious to her and to his father. And he has two si—he had two sisters, and they spoiled him, [*laughter*] which is good. We spoiled my brother, too. But Daddy was—he was a very principled man, and I can remember, you know, when I first ran for office, you know, nobody thought I had a prayer of a chance. And Daddy said—he says, "I don't want you to have any expectations that are gonna break your heart." He said, "You're," you know—he said, "But we have taught you to reach for the sky, to do what you think you can do, to"—you know, he said—he always said—he said, "I



haven't raised a bunch of whiners." [*SL laughs*] He said, "If you, you know, if you see somethin' that you don't like, I don't want you complainin' about it. I don't want you whinin' about it." He said, "I expect you to be a part of the group that's out there workin' to change it and make it better." And I—that's what I felt. I came to Washington. I worked. I loved my country. I was so enamored with the—my government. For all of its faults, it ha—it was still the greatest in the world. And I thought, "You know, there's some things that I can do to hopefully make it better, and that's what I need to do."

[00:50:15] I mean, I heard people complainin' about Washington and complainin' about government and complainin' about this. Okay, there's some, you know, there's some things that are wrong, but let's work together to make 'em right. Let's—and that was Daddy's—that was always Daddy's—you know, "Don't complain about things. Get out there and change it. Make it better." And he was always very hands-on, you know, like farmin'. His crop was always immaculate because if there was a weed out there, he took a hoe, and he went out there and got it. You know, he took a great sense of pride. He was a perfectionist in that sense that he, you know, took a great pride in what he was doin'.

[00:50:51] SL: Now, what was it that he did do for a living?

BL: He was a farmer. He farmed rice and soybeans, wheat. Wasn't a cotton farmer. Didn't—he was—cotton was a challenge, and for the ground that we had, it probably wasn't the best crop, but he believed very much—he was one of the—if not the greatest conservationist I've ever met. He believed very strongly in the land, but he believed even stronger in his responsibility to be a good steward of the land, which was one of the things I came to Washington worried about because I had seen this unbelievable conflict between the environment, environmentalists, and the conservationists, and agriculture. Because the true agriculturalists were the best conservationists. I mean, Daddy was a tree farmer. He took ground that was, you know, not very productive and put it into trees. He put it into WRP land. He, you know, he took good care. He always took his tests to ensure that whatever application he was using, he was doin' it by the law and what was not just the law, but what was best for the land in terms of water quality and things like that. He was very diligent, a very diligent man. He was very—he would be pensive at times, too. I mean, he was very serious about things sometimes. He loved country music. I used to sit up in the chair with him on Saturday nights. He and Mom would have a

date, and I would be the youn—I'm—I was the youngest, and so my mother was always late. So I come by it naturally. [*SL laughs*] She was never on time . . .

SL: Okay.

BL: . . . and . . .

SL: I'll remember that. [*Laughs*]

BL: . . . Daddy would get dressed and ready to go out, whether they were goin' to supper club or a bridge club or, I don't know, whatever. And he was always ready. And I would sit up in the—his big chair with him, and we would watch the *Grand Ole Opry*. Oh, he loved the *Grand Ole Opry*. And we—then we'd watch *Hee Haw*. [*SL Laughs*] He loved *Hee Haw*, too. He thought that was funny. But I loved sittin' up in that chair with him, and we would wait on Mother, and so soon she'd come flyin' through, doin' whatever, puttin' on her earrings or grabbin' her purse or doin' whatever, you know. [00:53:07] But—and Dad was very—he was very adamant about us makin'—learning to make decisions for ourself. That was important. I member my sister, my oldest sister, [*laughs*] grew up in the [19]60s. She went off to college. She left in [19]68, [19]69, I guess, to go off to school. And I can remember she—I adore all of my siblings and—back then, growin' up, I can remember she was so hip.

[*SL laughs*] Her clothes were so hip. They were just—I mean, she had a fashion sense about her. She's an artist, you know, but she had this credible fashion sense about her, and she was very popular and beautiful. And [*SL laughs*] it was amazing. I remember we drove her off to—we drove her to Memphis to catch her flight. She was goin' to school in Denver, and she left, and she had on this very proper navy linen suit. She had a hat and her gloves, patent-leather purse and her little slide slingbacks. And she had her matching luggage, and you know, we put her on the plane, and she was just the picture perfect, you know. And [*laughs*] we go to pick her up at Christmas, and she comes off the plane in this outfit that was—I think she'd gone to a Salvation Army, and she'd bought a bunch of men's old ties, and she'd opened 'em up and made this dress. She'd sewed 'em all together and it [*laughs*]*—put this—it was crazy.* She—and she had on, like, you know, flip-flops. And she got off the plane the total opposite of what we had put her on the plane. [00:54:53] And I [*laughs*] remember—'cause Daddy and I used to drive to Memphis to pick her up sometimes and—when she'd come home. And I never will forget, one time we pulled up—and she would get off the plane in wild outfits, and Daddy was rock solid. Never blinked. Never said a word. Said, "Oh, darlin',

we're so glad to have you home." You know, and one time [laughs] we went up and Daddy—we pulled up in front of the Memphis Airport. He looked over at me, and I couldn't have been ten, I guess—"Wonder what she gonna try to shock me with this time." [Laughter] Yeah, he had her figured out. He had her figured out. But she'd come off in just some crazy outfits, and Daddy would never flinch, and he was great. He was rock solid, but he was not—as I said, he encouraged us to be ourselves and to do our own thing and, you know. When I came home and announced that I was runnin' for the United States Congress against a twenty-four-year incumbent who happened to be one of his old fraternity brothers, you know, I told him—I said, "Daddy, this is what I wanna do. I think I have somethin' to offer." And he looked at me, and he said, "Darlin'," he said, "if you think that's what you wanna do," he said, "I don't have a whole lotta money to give you." He said, "But I'm there for you." He said, "I believe in you, and we'll back you up, and we'll do what we can to help you." He said, "But you just have to make me one promise." He said, "Do not borrow money to do this." He said, "I seen too many people who have borrowed money, and they spend the next ten years, if they don't win, payin' off" . . .

SL: Paying off.

[00:56:37] BL: . . . "a debt that they really shouldn't have taken out." He was not about debt. He did not like debt. And my grandfather, his father, was the same way.

SL: That's . . .

BL: And it's fa . . .

SL: . . . Depression . . .

BL: Huh?

SL: . . . Depression stuff.

BL: It was the Depression. He and Mother were Depression babies. Daddy was born in [19]27, and Mother was born in [19]29.

SL: Yeah.

[00:56:55] BL: And—but it—debt was—you know, a reasonable amount of debt, but you know, you don't buy a car till you have the money to buy a car. You know, yeah, you're gonna have to take a mortgage out to build a house or to ha—to buy a house, but you know, that's about the only thing you should be, you know, borrowin' money for is to buy a house. And so he was adamant about that, and he was just sweet as he could be.

SL: Let's stop right here. We're gonna change tape.

[Tape stopped]

[00:57:23] BL: There's a picture—I used to have it in my office. It's



a picture of my grandmother, and when she was growin' up, Helena was the midpoint between St. Louis and New Orleans. So all the riverboat traffic came down, and they would stop in Helena. And all of the big shows, the opera, would come from New York to St. Louis and then come down to New Orleans, and it would stop in Helena. And they had a big opera house in Helena, and my grandmother got to be an extra [*SL laughs*] in some of the operas, in some of the plays and the shows and stuff. And I had this wonderful picture of her dressed up in this crazy-lookin' costume from, like, I don't know, like 1913 or somethin'—1910. I don't know. But I mean, just those kinda stories—my granddaddy used to say that the men used to—that, you know, on the cobblestone streets that the—after a rain there would be water that would kinda, you know, go to the side, and there'd be a little gully. And the—he can remember watchin' the gentlemen turn their top hats over, and they'd put money in the top hat and float it down, you know, and whoever's got to the end won all the money. I mean, just, you know, stories like that that kinda make you—if you've got enough an imagination, as I do, you know, you almost put yourself in—you feel like Oliver Twist, or you feel like, you know, listenin' to those stories, which were amazing. [00:58:51] My dad grew up—he was

old—I guess older for his age 'cause he was born in December. And he had a job. My grandfather sent him off to school his last year in high school because he was worried he was gonna get drafted without finishin' high school. So Daddy—so Daddy Jerdie sent him off to military school, and course, he graduated from military school and came home and two weeks later enlisted in the army. [Laughter] But when he was younger, in high school, he had a job, and he used to talk about his job. He read meters for the utility company.

SL: Okay.

[00:59:34] BL: And so he'd go downtown, to downtown Helena, and he said there was a drugstore, and he said it was the best place in the world. Well, there were two places. There was the old Habib's Cafe, which made fruitcakes, and then next to it was the drugstore. And he said it was the best place in the world to catch roaches to go fishin' with. [Laughter] And he would go in there and read the meters, and he said, "You know, all those drawers in the pharmacy where they had all the pills and stuff," he said, "there were roaches everywhere." And he said, "And then there was the fruitcake company that had this sponge of stuff"—you know, all the breads and stuff from the fruitcakes that they made that attracted [*unclear words*]. "So it was a

great place to" . . .

SL: [*Laughs*] Get bait.

BL: . . . "catch roaches to go fishin' with," he said. But he also got to go in the back door because there was a bookie joint where they had the tote boards and the—you know, all that kind of stuff where the—everybody was placin' their bets and—you know, on the horses or whatever. So he, you know, he—I could just see him makin' the rounds around town. And he had this job because a lot of the older young men in town had gone off to the war, World War II. [01:00:43] And he wasn't, you know, old enough . . .

SL: Old enough to go.

BL: . . . to go. But he ended up goin' to Korea. He was there right early on in Korea. But just those kinda stories, you know, and then to be growin' up in that same place. You know, you could see the remnants of those places, the old cafe and the old drugstore and the old Cleburne Hotel across the street. So you know, if you just kinda shut your eyes, you could visualize where he was and what he was doin' at fifteen or fourteen or whatever. So it was kinda neat. It's kinda fun to grow up on a—it was almost like havin' a movie set to grow up on.

[01:01:21] SL: Helena was kind of a wide-open place at—we were

talkin' with Sonny Payne, and he was sayin' there used to be slot machines on the street . . .

BL: Probably.

SL: . . . and pr—maybe outside that drugstore. Was that drugstore on the corner?

BL: Uh-huh.

SL: There was a slot machine [*BL laughs*] outside the front door.
[*SL laughs*]

[01:01:40] BL: I know. [*Laughter*] I remember Son—I love Sonny. He was—I think he was in Mother's class. But anyway, in the summertimes I would work for Daddy, and he had an office in the bank buildin'. And so I ran the radios to the farm—down to the farm and what have you. Kept up some of the books or whatever. Took notes. But anyway, the radio station was in the same buildin', and I'd go down and listen to the Sonny Boy blues . . .

SL: Wow.

BL: . . . show sometimes. Catch that.

[01:02:11] SL: Did you ever get to meet Sonny Boy Williamson?

BL: Oh gosh, yeah—oh no, no, no, not Sonny Boy Williamson.
Hm-mm.

SL: But Sonny Payne, you know . . .

BL: Yeah. Sonny Payne.

SL: . . . you know Sonny Payne.

BL: I know Sonny.

SL: Yeah. He's a sweet guy.

BL: Oh yeah. He was a very sweet guy. Very sweet guy.

SL: Yeah.

BL: He's always nice to me.

SL: Well, we can divert into music in Helena at . . .

BL: I know.

SL: . . . at any moment, but I wanna keep talking about your dad.

[01:02:31] Do you—what is your earliest memory of your father?

BL: [*Laughs*] Gee. A lot of it was, like, at my grandparents' because they lived real close. I mean, we were within walkin' distance, and you know, every Sunday after church, we would go to my grandmother's for Sunday lunch, and she always had some help in the kitchen fryin' chicken. We always had fried chicken. And oh my gosh, they loved my daddy. Oh, they loved my daddy. Miss Lillian loved my daddy. [*Laughs*] And we'd come in, and we all liked chicken livers, and so we'd come in, and we'd all start goin' for the chicken livers, [*SL laughs*] and she would pop our hands, and she'd say, "That is for your dad. That is for your

father. You know I'm savin' that for your father." So they all—you know, everybody loved Daddy. He was not—he wasn't the class clown; he was just genuine. And he was genuinely kind. He was genuinely there for you if you needed him. You know, he was never pushy or any of that. You know, I can remember Mother sayin', oh, that it would be hard to get him to go to a party, but once he got there, he was the life of the party 'cause everybody liked him. [01:04:01] He—I can remember Easter egg hunts in my mo—grandmother's backyard. I never got to sit up at the grown-up table 'cause I was too far down the—in the peckin' order. [*Laughs*] All the older kids got to sit at the grown-up table, so we sat in the kitchen. And Thanksgivin', I can remember him goin' out in the back. She had a turnaround kind of driveway thing that went around a big tree, and there was a built-up concrete, and we'd go out there and break all the nuts that were in the centerpiece. There'd be walnuts and pecans and all kinds of stuff and [*SL laughs*—but I remember he loved to hunt, and I can remember at—late at night Mama would let me—if he'd go frog giggin' or somethin' like that, I'd get to stay up late to see what they brought home. And . . .

[01:04:52] SL: Did he ever take you frog gigging?

BL: No, but he took us duck huntin'. I can remember goin' duck

huntin' with him or dove hunting, bird hunting. But I never did any of the other—frog giggin' or deer huntin'. He liked to deer hunt, but I didn't—I never learned how to do that. And it's been great 'cause I can enjoy doin' that with my husband. He lo—my husband loves to hunt, and so do my boys, so that's—it's fun. And I remember sometimes on Sundays in the summertime when Dad was workin' real hard on the farm—the farm was about twenty-five miles, I guess, south of town, and after church he would head down to the farm. And we'd go home and pack up a big ol' picnic lunch, and we'd go down, and part of our farm backed up to the White River waterfowl refuge . . .

SL: Kay.

BL: . . . on the levee. And so Daddy would shut down his combines or whatever or somethin' or—anyway, he'd come over and join us on the reserve side. And my—we'd go over there and have a big ol' picnic lunch, and my oldest sister would—she'd find a little—someplace—'cause, you know, down in that—those bottomlands there's always someplace that's got some good clay.

SL: Sure.

BL: And she'd pull out—because she was the artist. And she'd pull out clay, and she'd make statues, or she'd make somethin' or

another. And we'd all kinda get into that and—but—and what else? Dad, I member he was—when my grandparents got older, he always stopped by to see Mom Blanche and Daddy Jerdie on his way home. And you know, I tell people today when you talk about home health and caregivers, I didn't know we were caregivers at sixteen, but we were because Mother and Aunt Blanche would always make a little bit of extra at dinner, and they'd kinda swap up and one of us, one of the kids, we'd always take dinner over to my grandparents when they got, you know, older. And that—they usually had someone there to help them, but later on we would take dinner up to 'em, and you know, we'd—it'd—we'd give us an opportunity to stop and visit with 'em, and my granddaddy would tell us stories, and you know, it was a great time. It was—you know, those were good things.

[01:07:07] My grandmother always had a big lunch. You know, she had dinner at the noonday meal. And in the summertime when we were home from school, if we were complainin'—Mother always had soup and sandwich every day. Hundred and five degrees out there, she had hot soup. She had soup [*SL laughs*] and sandwich. Daddy would come home from the farm, and he'd have lunch, and he'd say, "I'm gonna rest my eyes," and he'd go sit in his chair, and he'd just—he'd take a little

five-, ten-minute nap, and then he'd get up and go back to work. But if we complained in the summertime about lunch—my brother had a friend, Bill. [*Laughs*] Bill, one time—he used to say, "Y'all always have tuna fish and tomato soup." [*SL laughs*] And he—and my dad said, "Yeah, we do have it a lot. We like it, you know." But whenever we'd complain about lunch, Mother would say, "Well, you can always go up to your grandmother's and get a great lunch, you know. You just—all you gotta do is walk up there." And you know, sometimes we would. You'd go up, and I mean, she would have a spread. It would be porkchops and black-eyed peas and corn on the cob and fresh tomatoes and—I mean, it was a big lunch. And then she and my grandfather had a little sandwich at dinnertime.

[01:08:15] SL: Yeah, the—lunch was mostly—usually called dinner and . . .

BL: Yeah.

SL: . . . what we call dinner now was supper.

BL: Supper.

SL: And it was maybe leftovers from the . . .

BL: Big . . .

SL: . . . big lunch.

BL: Yeah, exactly.

SL: Yeah.

BL: That's how they did it. Ours was different at home 'cause Daddy had soup and sandwich when he came home, and then we'd have our big meal at—in the evenin', which was probably a change for the worst.

SL: [*Laughs*] It . . .

BL: In today's world they always tell you, you know, "Eat your bigger meal in the middle of the day. Don't eat right before you go to bed." And course, Mother was so intent on us having a family meal, so we always waited on Daddy to come home from the farm, which meant we didn't eat till eight thirty, nine o'clock at night, which drives my husband crazy [*laughs*] 'cause he's used to eatin' early. And I'm usually late gettin' dinner goin' 'cause I'm—that's how I grew up.

[01:09:02] SL: Let's talk about that dining table a little bit. Now, did your mom have help in the house?

BL: Mh-hmm.

SL: And so did they cook with your mom or . . .

BL: Yeah, usually in the daytime. I mean, they left—Mother had some help that was usually there—helped her get dinner started and then was there when we got home from school for just a little while and then would leave. And so, you know, Mother

usually got dinner on the table by herself. [01:09:36] Well, we helped, and we always sat down. Everybody had their same spots. TV had to go off. Mine was the only seat that you could actually see the TV from in the breakfast room anyway so—but I was never a big TV watcher. So—but the TV had to be off.

[01:09:56] SL: So y'all were expected to be at the table at a certain time? Was there . . .

BL: Just whenever Daddy got home.

SL: Whenever Daddy got home. And then at the beginning of the meal, was grace usually said or . . .

BL: Oh, absolutely. Yeah.

SL: And did y'all take turns doing that, or was it always your father or your mother?

BL: No, we each kinda took turns. Yeah. You know, sometimes just to be expeditious [*laughs*] Mother or Daddy would do it [*laughter*] 'cause we probably were draggin' our feet a little bit but. [01:10:26] And then, course, the—my older sisters, as they got older and were teenagers, there was always things to do. I mean, I think—you know, Mother used to always say, "If you grow up in a small town, you learn to sign your kids up for every activity known to man because if there's idle time in a small town, you're gettin' into trouble." [*SL laughs*] And so, you

know, I never will forget I was up at Camp David once with President and Mrs. Clinton, Secretary Clinton, and [*laughs*] the—it was a rainy day, and so we went bowling. And I was bowlin' with some—I can't remember who it was—but I can bowl. I bowled like a two hundred or somethin'. You know. I did . . .

SL: That's . . .

BL: . . . pretty well. And they were, like, "Why—how do you—why do you know how to bowl?" And I [*SL laughs*] said, "Because my mother signed me up for a bowlin' league [*laughter*] when I was growin' up." You know, I had dance class. I had junior choir practice. I had bowlin' league. I had, you know, junior altar guild. I had a bunch of—I mean, I was kept busy, and it was good things. It was good things to learn, you know. I played a little softball and did a—you know, all those kinda things. Swimmin' . . .

SL: Now, you . . .

BL: . . . tennis . . .

[01:11:34] SL: It seems like I've read that you were fairly athletic, and it wasn't just a little softball, was it? I mean, didn't you . . .

BL: Oh no.

SL: Were . . .

BL: Yeah, it was a little.

SL: It was little?

BL: I was not—I was—I could always hold my own in most things.

[01:11:46] I just was never really very good at anything. [SL *laughs*] I wasn't really excellent at anything, you know. I always wanted to be, but I, you know, I played a little bit of tennis and, you know, learned how to ski. And my aunt and uncle used to always go snow skiin', and so they'd always take me because Mother and Daddy didn't like to ski.

SL: It was Colorado or . . .

BL: Yeah, Colorado and places. So you know, I learned how to do most things but was never excellent at anything. I never excelled, necessarily. But I could do enough to get along and have fun so . . .

[01:12:20] SL: So after—when dinner was done, did you help with the dishes?

BL: Yeah, yeah, we usually helped clear the table, and sometimes we dispersed because we had things to do. I mean, like Wednesday nights you had dance class, and you know, sometimes there was homework or whatever. I mean, Mother always picked up the brunt of cleanin' up the kitchen. But—or sometimes in the summertime, particularly, you know, you scattered. We played colored eggs or kick the can or, you know,

other kinda games.

[01:12:53] SL: And probably church camps, too, right? Did you ever do any of the church camps?

BL: Yeah, we did. I did summer camp. I used to go to Brookhill over in Hot Springs. My oldest sister went to Camp Mitchell up at Petit Jean. My brother went to Boy Scout Camp, and then my middle sister, Ann, she did not like camp. She wasn't as fond of camp as the rest of us were, but it was something I loved. I loved summer camp. But we also—it was an interesting group in our neighborhood. There were five families, and when the kids were small, the parents needed an excuse to get together. And so it started on Sundays, and they would get together and—you know, at somebody's house, and you know, the older kids would take care of the younger kids and play games and watch us a little bit. And then the parents would get to have a drink, and they cooked hamburgers and hot dogs out on the grill and fed the kids. And it was just a social time, but it was, you know, families that lived close by, and we were all—the kids were all about the same age. And we did it for, like, forty years. [SL *laughs*] Sunday night. Every Sunday night we had dinner together. In the wintertime we would watch Walt Disney 'cause it would get dark early. We couldn't play outside. In the

summer we'd play, you know, ditch it and kick the can, colored eggs. We'd, you know, we'd be out . . .

SL: Okay, now . . .

BL: . . . all night long.

[01:14:23] SL: . . . ditch it—tell me what ditch it . . .

BL: Ditch it was [*laughs*] ridin' your bikes. We'd ride our bikes, and when you saw a car, you had to jump off your bike into the ditch. [*Laughter*]

SL: Sounds awfully painful.

BL: It kinda was. [*SL laughs*] It wasn't very good on your bike, either. But it was the Faulkners and the Higginbothams and the Choates and the Lamberts. And then sometimes the Topps, my Aunt Ginny and Uncle Pete would come. And then sometimes the Alexanders would come, but it was really those four families, and it was every Sunday. And we'd just come home, like, in the summertime we'd—sometimes we'd have it at the lake because Aunt Blanche and Uncle Tom had a lake house over in Mississippi on Moon Lake. And so after church we'd have Sunday lunch, and then we'd all load up and go to the lake and go waterskiin' And then we'd have cookout. We called it cookout. And so—and—but you'd come home on Sunday—or you'd say Sunday after you say, "Okay, where's cookout tonight?" And we'd go in

alphabetical order, and then whoever, you know, had it last, then you knew who the next one was. [01:15:34] And I knew how every one of those adults ate their hamburgers. Mr. Billy had—he liked a cheeseburger, open face, with chili and chopped onions on top. [SL laughs] Dr. Faulkner liked hot dogs. You know, the—it was just a—it was kind of—it wasn't unheard of in today's world that you would get together with neighbors, but to do it so regularly. I mean, we did it every Sunday night. And I can remember—let's see. Who was the oldest. I guess Bicky Higginbotham was the oldest. He's a doctor in Fayetteville now.

SL: I know the Higginbothams . . .

BL: Yeah.

SL: . . . very well.

BL: Yeah.

SL: And my son is best friends with Will.

BL: Will? Yeah.

SL: Yeah, yeah.

[01:16:20] BL: Well, Bicky was the oldest, and God bless him. He used to have to always take us to the Dairy Queen in the summertime because he had a car. And he would [SL laughs] load up everybody in the car and take us to the Dairy Queen. And then Steve—Steve is the godfather to my boys . . .

SL: Okay.

BL: . . . Bicky's younger brother. And then I'm tryin' to think who else—so it would've been Bicky and then Steve and Mary and Ann, Bobby. But it, you know—and then after we all left . . .

SL: They kept doing it any . . .

BL: . . . our parents kept doin' it.

SL: Of course.

BL: And so when you'd come home from college, you'd say, "Okay, where's cookout?" And, "Oh, I don't know. We gotta figure it out. [SL laughs] With you kids gone, we don't know, but." [SL laughs] It was a ton of fun. We had a great time. And it always, you know—it just—it was kind of a continuation of your day. It was the same people you trick-or-treated with, and the same people you, you know, sledded with when it snowed or iced. And the idea was—and when we'd sled—I member I broke my nose. We tried—you'd start at the Faulkner's back door, and you had to go down their driveway, down the big hill, make the turn, and get to Mr. Billy and Miss Ruth's—Higginbotham's back door. If you could get the whole way, if you could get enough—you had to get just the right weight and just the right momentum to—if you could make it all the way from one to the other. And my [SL laughs] cousin and I were on the sled



together and we—you'd used to yell from the top of the hill, "Clear!" Make sure everybody was in—you need somebody down at the bottom of the hill to clear—you know, that it was clear. And we took off, and I was on top of him, and we were goin' like crazy, and we didn't know somebody was crosswise in the thing and it—we hit him. And the runner of the other sled hit me in the head and . . .

[01:18:10] SL: That may explain everything.

BL: Yeah. [*SL laughs*] Possibly. But I just remember ev—they were all screamin' 'cause I was bleedin' so bad 'cause, you know, when you get hit in the head, you bleed.

SL: Oh yeah, and the nose especially.

BL: But I was fine. And then I got up, and they put [*laughs*] me in the back of the Bronco, and I think Daddy had been duck huntin' that mornin', so I was in the back of the Bronco with a bunch of dead ducks. [*SL laughs*] And they drove me down to Dr. Faulkner's clinic so he could stitch up my nose. And you know, you just—you live through 'em all. It was amazing.

[01:18:40] SL: Well, you're lucky it was not any worse than that.

BL: We were very lucky.

SL: I mean, it's just so dangerous to be two on a sled . . .

BL: Oh, I know.

SL: . . . 'cause the person on top or . . .

BL: But you think of the things that you did—it's like my husband—he'll say when our—as our boys have been growin' up. It's like, "Don't tell 'em what you did!" [*Laughter*] "I'm not tellin' 'em what I did, either," 'cause we were—you know, the things that you did—'cause your parents weren't—I mean, you—they can't watch you all the time . . .

SL: That's right.

BL: . . . you know. And so, anyway—but I mean, those were good things. We used to get in trouble for sleddin' on the golf course. That was always . . .

SL: I would assume.

[01:19:14] BL: Yeah. [*SL laughs*] We got in trouble for that big time, so . . .

SL: Yeah, that's a . . .

BL: But it was a great community, and it was fun. Fun place to grow up. My cousin Martha that lives in Fort Smith, and she and I talked—it was at Christmas. Her girls are older than my boys by a little bit, and she said—one Christmas she said, "You know, we really didn't know what we had until we tried to recreate it," 'cause we all went to—you know, in different places. I mean, she was in Fort Smith, and I was up here and in Little Rock, and

you know, my sister was in California. Her sister was in Tennessee. You know, we all got spread out, and we knew what we had. We loved it, and we wanted so much for our kids to feel a part of somethin' like that. And you—but you don't really know what you had until you try to recreate it in a whole different day and time. And there's parts of it I think we've been able to do good and—you know, makin' sure that, you know, they know their cousins and that they get, you know, they get to spend Christmas. We do Thanksgivin' every year at our cabin at DeValls Bluff. We had twenty-seven this year, so [*SL laughs*] you know, it was a fun time. And the boys, they—I think they appreciate that.

[01:20:38] SL: I always like to go back to the dinner table because that's kind of where the family gathers in a regular way and . . .

BL: Yeah.

SL: What were the conversations like when you were around that table?

BL: They were always interesting. Somebody asked me one time, "Where's the most famous or interesting or wonderful place that you've ever traveled and visited?" You know, they were sayin', "Who's the most important person you've ever met?" And "Where's the most incredible place that, you know, you've ever

visited that you would want to go back to?" And I said, "My mother's kitchen table." [01:21:14] There were always great conversations. Some of 'em were about [*clears throat*] farming. Some of 'em were about the day, what we had done. Some of 'em were about national issues or experiences that we'd had. As my sisters got older, they brought different conversation to the table. [*Laughs*] I remember one time my sister got sent home from school because her skirt was too short and her coat was too long. [*Laughter*] [01:21:47] Then one time I learned how to fly from some ag aviators, some crop dusters—a really great guy who had had his double eye, had flown in Vietnam, and had come home and was flyin' crop-dustin' planes. And I soloed, and so I came home, and it was just me and Mother and Daddy at the table. We were havin' lunch. And I guess my brother had already gone off to school—maybe not—'cause I was—I think I was about sixteen. Maybe I was seventeen. Anyway, we were sittin' there just visitin' about it, and Daddy said, "You did it, didn't you?" And I started to grin. I said, "Yeah." And Mother's like, "What? What did you do? What—I don't understand. What did you do?" He said, "She did it." And Mother said, "What? What? What? What? What?" And he said, "Look at the back of her shirt." And Mother said, "Well, what's wrong with it?" And he

said—she said, "Well, it's torn." And Daddy said, "No, she soloed, and so they clip the—they cut the tail of your shirt when you solo." And I can remember sittin' there and Mother—and course, Mother goes, "Oh my gosh! You were flyin' by yourself?" [Laughs] Daddy was like, "That's good! That's good! I'm proud of you. You did it! You finally did it!" And I said, "Yeah, I did. I did." So it was, you know, the—it was just the kinda place where you learned what happened during the day, whether it was a national event or a personal event or a community event or a family event, you know. Oh yeah, "Where are we goin' on vacation?" So then we'd start talkin'. "Well, we can go see Aunt Sissy down in Florida," or "We're gonna"—you know. So it—it's a great place, and you know, it's interesting. One of the things that my husband, Steve, and I have tried desperately to do, and I think we've accomplished it a great deal, is to make sure that whatever we can do, our goal was to sit down to five family meals a week. Sometimes it was three; sometimes it was four; sometimes it was five; but we worked at it. And he remembers it; I remember it as a great part of growin' up and an important part of growin' up and learnin' your family and learnin' your values and learnin' who you are and what you wanna be. And we've worked hard at it. It—you know, there's several things

that I think if people just really think through it in terms of wanting to, you know, to create a better life, whether it's for you or your children or the future of your country, there's some really simple things that we can do, you know. And I think those of us that have been blessed to have those things, if you really think about 'em, you know because you do try to recreate 'em. You know, it's like goin' to church together. It's, you know, it's havin' dinner together. It's, you know, spendin' time with your family. There's—it's a good thing. [*Laughter*] It's a good thing.

[01:25:12] SL: Well, I, you know, I think most everybody that we've ever interviewed, they—there are themes that kinda run through in Arkansas, in a . . .

BL: Yeah.

SL: . . . way. And I'm sure it's a—like this across America. It's basically—there's a belief in working hard. And there's a belief in doing the right thing. And really, there's some kind of church or moral—there's a religious bent and influence that happens early in the childhood. All these things, I think, happen really before you can remember it happening. And you—you're just nurtured in those early years, and it kinda braces . . .

BL: Some of it's . . .

SL: . . . braces you for . . .



BL: . . . continuity, too, though. [01:26:03] You know, kids will push the envelope on things. All kids do . . .

SL: Sure.

BL: . . . some more than others. But the reason they push that envelope is they want somebody to push back. [*SL laughs*] They wanna know that there's someone there to say, "No, you can't do that. It's not safe. It's not right. It's not healthy. It's not whatever." But they push that envelope because they are testing to see if there is someone there that's gonna say, you know . . .

SL: "Tell me" . . .

BL: "No."

SL: . . . "Tell me no."

BL: Yeah. Or they're gonna say, "Yes," or they're gonna say, you know, "You're right. Tell me is this right. Is it good? Is it healthy? Is it all of those things?" And I think that's nature. I think that's children's nature to push that envelope to see. They want to know that there's somebody there that's gonna say, "This is not good for you" or—you know. And it's all about how we do that, and I've always—I always thought I gotta lot of criticism about runnin' for the Senate because my kids were one years old. And my husband is a saint for letting me do it—for

not just letting me do it, but doing it with me and working with me. And one of the things that I had read and certainly had been shared with me was that one of the most important things in raising your children is consistency. You know, if it's wrong to do this now, it's gonna be wrong to do it tomorrow, and it's gonna be wrong to do it the next day. [01:27:49] So you have to be consistent about that. And that's really hard for working moms . . .

SL: Yeah.

BL: . . . [*laughs*] because you—there's this inside that says, "Oh, well, I wasn't here earlier today, so if you really wanna do that, you know, then okay, we'll stretch. We won't have dinner now. We'll wait and have it later." Well, no. It needs to be consistent and it, you know—the consistency is a critical part, I think, of raising children. And they need to know that there's that continuity and that consistency 'cause it gives 'em confidence. I mean, you know, the—there can be some things that are just redundant. Redundant's different than being consistent, I think. And Steve was—Steve Lincoln has been wonderful in helping me to both reach my goals, as well as help us raise our kids with very consistent, you know, circumstances. You know, when [*laughs*] we came home—I came home from the hospital with

the twins, [*SL laughs*] Steve was on call, so he was still deliverin' babies, and I was there. And Mother and Steve's mother, Pert, who had actually been sorority sisters, my mother-in-law and my mother, they each took about two or three days and came up and helped us. And I never will forget, Mother got there, and she came in to me, and she said, "You need to go in there. Your husband's changin' a diaper." And I [*laughs*] said, "Yes, I hope he is." "Well, you're—are you gonna let him change diapers?" And I'm like, "You better [*laughter*] believe I'm gonna let him change diapers." But you know, from her generation, that wasn't somethin'—Daddy'd . . .

SL: That men did.

BL: . . . never changed a diaper.

SL: Yeah, that's right.

[01:29:39] BL: My father'd never changed a diaper, you know. And I said, "But Mother, it's okay. He wants to be a part of their lives, too, and this is a great way for him, and we're a team, and we're workin' as a team, and it's a good thing." And I said, "You know, I'm gonna do my share, and I may do more than my share at changin' diapers. But he'll do more than his share in other places, too. And you know, it's not"—but it was so funny. She was so worried about him changin' that—"He's changin' a

diaper. You better go in there and, you know, take over [*SL laughs*] 'cause he's probably not—doesn't wanna do that."

SL: There you go.

[01:30:12] BL: So it's—you know, there's some of those things that you—that do change. You know, and they change because times change and all kinds of things change. But you know, the thoughtfulness about it doesn't change. You know, there were some things Steve didn't like doin', and I did 'em. You know, there were things I didn't do well or didn't like doin', necessarily. And you know, so you learn—I think parenting in today's world, and certainly when we were comin' home from the hospital with little ones, were different. But there's still things that, as long as you're being thoughtful about sharing those responsibilities, you know, it works out. But it's—and course—I don't know. But as I said, Mother and Daddy grew up in a different time, and they were always very, very, very thoughtful of each other. They—well, they adored each other. They were high—as I said, they were high-school sweethearts. [01:31:15] I never will forget Mother tellin' the story. Daddy was off in Korea, and she wasn't sure if he was comin' home for Christmas Eve or not. And course, they'd grown up in the same church together, and Uncle Beau was there, and I wanna say Uncle Beau had taken Mother

to church, midnight service, that year or somethin'. And Mother said she was sittin' up in the front, and she was kinda worried about Daddy.

SL: Of course.

BL: You know, they—they'd dated forever and ever and ever, and he was off and whatever. So anyway, she—but she said she felt somethin' in the back of the church, and she said it was kind of a breeze, and she said she looked up, and she looked back, and she said Daddy was coming through the back doors in his uniform. You know, just gotten off whatever transport and done everything he could to get home in time to get home for that Christmas Eve service. And she said, "He walked in those doors, and," she said, "I just thought, 'Oh Lord, thank you. You know, here he is. He's here.'" I mean, just sweet, you know.

[Laughs] I mean, just sweet, thoughtful adoration. [01:32:18]

And I member my aunt and uncle sayin' to me when I got married—my Aunt Ann, she said, "Honey, it is not 50-50. Don't let anybody tell you it's 50-50." She said, "You give 100 percent, and he gives 100 percent, and that's what makes marriage work. Because when you're both givin' 100 percent, it's gonna happen. It's gonna—you know, you'll be thinkin' of the other one. You'll be"—and you know, I can see what she

meant.

SL: Sure.

[01:32:46] BL: You can see exactly what they meant. And you know, I think we've talked about it that, you know, we didn't have, as young people getting married, we didn't have some of the exposure to challenging times. You know, Mother and Daddy got married their senior year in college. Daddy got called up. He was—he'd been to Korea. He was a class ahead of Mother in high school, and he'd been in Kore—so then he enlisted. Went to Korea for a little over a year, so he came back and went to the university in Fayetteville, so then they were in the same class. And then they got married their senior year, and then he joined [*laughs*] the Air Force ROTC because he said they'd never been called out. And of course, he graduated, and they got called up. [*SL laughs*] So he got sent to the Azores and so Mother—they were expectin' my oldest sister, so she stayed because you couldn't put a child on an army transport. She swears she invented the car seat [*SL laughs*] 'cause she got a box from the grocery store and she hand—she and my grandmother made all these doilies and decorated the box and the whole works so that they could put the baby, my sister, in there so she could get on this transport plane and go to the

Azores. But you know, you—they talked about how the thing— Daddy had to build their little trailer they lived in over there and he—Mother was haulin' mayonnaise jars back and forth because she knew she would be doin' some cannin'. And you know, this kind of—just these silly stories. And I think about us. I mean, you know, young people today and even us, my—Steve and I—you don't really hit the kinda—not hard times, but exposure that causes you to submit your relationship, you know, your marriage, because you're dependin' on one another.

SL: That's right. To make it through.

[01:34:45] BL: You makin' it through, and you're, you know, you're in a strange place, and all you have is each other, and then you build friendships, and then you, you know, you get to another place, and you build more friendships and—but by and large, you're the only link to, you know, your early life that you have is your spouse. And you know, people today don't do that as much. And so you don't have that opportunity to say or to think, "I gotta give 100 percent. He's gonna give 100 percent. And we're gonna stick together. We're [*laughs*] gonna make it through these two years or whatever, wherever we're stationed and wherever we are." And I mean, sometimes it happens but—and you know, I think Steve and I watched our parents and

knew enough of the stories of what they had done and been through to know that, you know, that we were there for each other. [01:35:44] And he was amazing early on because, runnin' for the Senate—I never will forget. I came home one night in just tears. And I'd been to like a candidates' night or somethin', and a couple people had stood up and said, you know, "How in the world do you possibly think that you can be a good United States senator and still be a good mother? You know, how do you think you could do that?" And I came home and I just—I looked at Steve, and I said, "Oh, Steve, is this the wrong thing? I, you know, I really think I can do it, but maybe I'm just, you know, a cockeyed optimist. Maybe I'm, you know, whatever." He said, "Blanche," he said, "51 percent of the medical students that I teach in the residency program are women." He said, "Some of them have kids." He said, "Some of 'em are in the hospital seventy-two hours." He said, "They're still great moms." He said, "Think of the women that are corporate lawyers or the flight attendants or whoever that are—may be away from their children for a night or two. You know, they're still good moms. They still love their kids." He said, "You just—you're gonna be a good mom. You're gonna—we're gonna be good parents." I mean, I could've—you know, he was

wonderful to not only let me do what I was doin', but to back me up in that kind of a way was remarkable.

[01:37:14] SL: It's such a double standard because, you know, what about the fathers that are—aren't there?

BL: Oh, it is.

SL: Does that make them a bad father? [*BL laughs*]

Joy Endicott: It's about time for her to go.

BL: Okay. [*Laughs*]

SL: Okay.

JE: It's ten till. [*BL laughs*] I don't wanna make you late for . . .

BL: Thank you. I know. Well, I don't want to make ?'em wait? but . . .

SL: Thank you, Joy.

BL: Thanks.

SL: Okay. [*BL laughs*] We're gonna stop . . .

BL: Ain't we havin' fun?

SL: We're havin' fun, but I wanna . . .

BL: That's what my . . .

SL: . . . get back . . .

BL: . . . grandmother would say. My grandmother say, "'Ain't we havin' fun?'"

SL: I'm gonna say right now that when we get back together, I

wanna to get back to your father.

BL: Okay.

[01:37:39] SL: And maybe—I'll be interested if he ever told you anything about his service.

BL: You know, no. He did not like to talk . . .

SL: Okay.

BL: . . . about his service.

SL: Well, we're gonna . . .

BL: And my grandfather was the same way. My grandfather—I actually found a diary that my grandfather had kept. And he had it all the way where he took the train from Helena to Little Rock, and then they shipped him out from Little Rock to, like, I don't know, fort some—I think he went through Fort Chaffee, actually. But the pages from when he was in France, he had torn out.

SL: Torn out.

BL: He sure had. He had . . .

SL: It's tough.

BL: . . . he had torn out . . .

[01:38:19] SL: And it's not unusual that they don't talk about the . . .

BL: The only thing Daddy told me was that when he reached the

harbor in New York, he threw everything overboard, except for what was he was wearin'.

SL: Wow. [*BL laughs*]

[End of Interview 01:38:32]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]