

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

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**Arkansas Memories Project**

J. Thomas "Tommy" May  
Interviewed by Scott Lunsford  
March 2, 2007  
Pine Bluff, Arkansas

## **Objective**

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

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

## **Transcript Methodology**

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

The Pryor Center transcripts are prepared utilizing the *University of Arkansas Style Manual* for proper names, titles, and terms specific to the university. For all other style elements, we refer to the *Pryor Center Style Manual*, which is based primarily on *The Chicago Manual of Style 16th Edition*. We employ the following guidelines for consistency and readability:

- Em dashes separate repeated/false starts and incomplete/redirected sentences.
- Ellipses indicate the interruption of one speaker by another.
- Italics identify foreign words or terms and words emphasized by the speaker.
- Question marks enclose proper nouns for which we cannot verify the spelling and words that we cannot understand with certainty.

- Brackets enclose
  - italicized annotations of nonverbal sounds, such as laughter, and audible sounds, such as a doorbell ringing;
  - annotations for clarification and identification; and
  - standard English spelling of informal words.
- Commas are used in a conventional manner where possible to aid in readability.
- All geographic locations mentioned in the transcript are in the state of Arkansas unless otherwise indicated.

### **Citation Information**

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**Scott Lunsford interviewed Tommy May on March 2, 2007, in Pine Bluff, Arkansas.**

[00:00:00]

Scott Lunsford: Tommy, we're here today at—um—Dr. Harry Ryburn's residence in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. It is March 2, 2007. Um—I'm Scott Lunsford. We are going to have a conversation that's going to be—um—a part of [the David and Barbara] Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History. The materials will be housed in the Special Collections Department at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville campus, Mullins Library. And I can't thank you enough to be a part of that effort. We're—we're so excited about getting Arkansas history told by Arkansans. And it's just a great opportunity that I'm gettin' [getting] to sit across from you. Thank you.

Tommy May: Well, thank you, Scott. I'm—I'm glad to be having the opportunity to be here.

SL: Well, I know that you and I've talked a few times before. We—I—you've been in at least one of my other videos, and you were great then. But *now* the focus is going to be on [TM laughs] Mr. Tommy May, and I want—I like to always start with the earliest

memory that you have in your life. And it could just be the silliest thing. It could be—it doesn't necessarily mean anything, but I think if you can go back and remember your earliest stuff . . .

TM: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . it kind of gets your mind thinking about where you started from. And we'll—we'll just take you from that point onward if we can.

[00:01:30] TM: Okay. Well, I don't—you know, first of all, I—I know I was born in Prescott, Arkansas, but I was only there for two weeks. I think my—my parents [E.T. "Buck" May and Verna Lee Waters May] were at the University of Arkansas and coming to their home in Bodcaw, Arkansas—population of two hundred—and—uh—while we were there, then—then I was born. So—uh—spent most of my life, was—was reared, really, in El Dorado, Arkansas. Now, if I try to go back to the—to the point that I really remember—uh—it probably would be when we moved from El Dorado to Billings, Montana.

SL: Wow.

TM: Uh—my dad was a land man with the Murphy [Oil] Corporation. He was an attorney. And—uh—we moved there, my mother, my father, and my older brother [John] and—and me. And I don't

remember exactly how old I was, but I believe I was in about the fourth grade. And—uh of course, Billings was a—a wonderful place. I don't remember a lot about it other than there was lots of snow and that my sister [Nancy] was born while we were in—in Billings, Montana. So that's sort of a point that I—I go back to and I think I—I remember the most in my—my younger days.

SL: So back at El Dorado, you know, Murphy Oil—that was kind of a—there's—that's an oil basin . . .

TM: Right.

SL: . . . there in that corner of the state. How—do—do you 'member [remember] being in school in El Dorado?

TM: Oh, yeah.

[00:03:17] SL: What your . . .

TM: Yeah.

SL: Did you have a favorite teacher in grade school?

TM: Well, you know, when—when—the part about El Dorado that I really remember was when we moved back from Billings, Montana, we moved to El Dorado. And then I would've been in about the seventh grade. And . . .

SL: Okay.

TM: . . . and—and I did go to—well, I went to Yocum Elementary School, so I guess I would've been in about the sixth grade

there. I went to Yocum Elementary School, and then I went to the El Dorado Junior High and El Dorado High School. Now, one other place I—I went to school was when we first moved back from Billings—while my father and mother were—were building a house, we lived in Strong, Arkansas . . .

SL: Hmm.

TM: . . . which is about twenty miles from—from El Dorado. And—uh—we—we lived in a little log cabin there right outside of Strong that was owned by Chad Durrett Sr., and—uh—we—he was also associated with Murphy Corporation. And we stayed there for a year and then moved back to El Dorado when the house was—was built. Now as far as my favorite teachers, you know, when I was—when I was growing up, especially, I think, in—in junior high and high school, I had a lot of things on my mind. I think girls [*SL laughs*]*—I think—I think football and athletics—and academics was not as high on my list as—as they should have been, so the teachers that I might remember might be the ones [*SL laughs*] that wore me out the most.*

SL: Mh-hmm.

TM: But, certainly, I had some—some great teachers. I guess the one person I remember the—the most would be—uh—uh—a—a teacher in high school, and that was my—my head football

coach's wife—Garland Gregory's wife. I tell everybody she taught typing, and if it wasn't for her, I'm not sure I would've [SL *laughs*] graduated from high school.

[00:05:35] SL: Well, that's good. The—um—when—um—I'm tryin' to think—what kind of—well, first of all, I'm interested in this house in Strong. That was just a friend of the family . . .

TM: Right.

SL: . . . that said, "Y'all can stay here while this house is being built." So . . .

TM: That's exactly right.

SL: . . . were you out in the woods? Was it . . .

TM: We were. It was—you know, Strong is not a big city . . .

SL: Well I'm . . .

TM: Like I said, it's twenty miles from El Dorado.

SL: Mh-hmm.

TM: El Dorado's about thirty thousand population, and Strong was probably two thousand population at—at the most. And we were living probably about two miles out in the—uh—the wooded area, if you will, of—of Strong. They had a home out there that they had built, and this little log cabin was just a second house for them. And had a little pond out front. I mean, it was a great place to—to live while we were waiting to move in our own

home.

SL: So did you get to fish . . .

TM: Oh yeah.

SL: . . . and hunt and . . .

TM: Oh, yeah. In fact, th—probably my first association with—with fishing was right there in my front yard, where I'd go out and catch a bass and pull it out. At the time, I wasn't sure if I wanted to pick it up, so I'd just drag it toward the house [*SL laughs*] and let somebody else get it off the—off the hook.

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

TM: Great way to do it. [*Laughter*]

[00:06:57] SL: Well, what about—how—in early school years, were you athletically inclined? Did you participate in . . .

TM: Oh man, I'm tellin' [*telling*] you, I'm the greatest quarterback that never did get to play. [*SL laughs*] You know, I—I—I did love athletics, and I played football from the time that I was in Boys Club through junior high and—and high school. And—and, certainly, some of my greatest memories were playing baseball, basketball, and—and football in the Boys Club there in—in El Dorado. Uh—and I remember like it was yesterday a lot of the things that—that I learned beyond athletics, I mean, how to—how to do the right thing and how to take care of yourself and—



and your friends and—and—and to appreciate people for what they do was learned right there in the Boys Club by a gentleman named Cecil Kellum. And Cecil was the person that was in charge of the—the Boys Club, and—uh—and he's living there in El Dorado today—a great guy.

SL: Yeah, it's funny how athletics teaches—kind of prepares you for the rest of your life.

TM: Oh, it really does.

SL: It's got all the elements of . . .

TM: Teamwork.

SL: . . . teamwork. That's right.

TM: Well, when I—when I played, I was—when I was talking about—uh—the quarterback situation, I was just almost always there. You know, in—in junior high I was second-string quarterback. When I got into—to high school, I was second-string quarterback right behind one of my really good—uh—good friends and—but I did have the opportunity to play some, and—and I loved it. I just never was really good at it.

SL: Well, I bet you were pretty good at it. El Dorado was always a tough team when I was growin' [growing] up.

TM: They were. They had great athletes.

SL: Mh-hmm.

TM: Some of the best athletes to—to come—well, to play for the  
[University of Arkansas] Razorbacks, actually, came out of—uh—  
El Dorado.

[00:09:10] SL: Let's go back to your parents.

TM: Okay.

SL: You—now they—you were telling me—uh—they were at the  
University of Arkansas on their way home and . . .

TM: Right.

SL: . . . and you were born s—while they were—were they in school?  
Is that what they were doing?

TM: Right. My dad was.

SL: Uh-huh.

TM: My father—uh—actually got his undergraduate school—uh—ad—  
undergraduate degree from Ouachita [Baptist College in  
Arkadelphia].

SL: Mh-hmm.

TM: And after Ouachita—uh—he spent some—some time in the  
military, in the [United States] Army, and then went to law  
school there in Fayetteville. And—uh—while—while they were  
living there in Fayetteville and while he was in law school is,  
again, about the time that I was born.

[00:10:00] SL: So, now what about your mom? Was she the—the

housewife? Is that . . .

TM: She was. She was. She—she died young.

SL: Mh-hmm.

TM: She was forty-three years old when—when she died. She had a heart attack and . . .

SL: Hmm.

TM: . . . so died way too young.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:15:35] TM: I was actually in Vietnam when—when she passed away, and, I did get to come home for—for the funeral, thanks to the Red Cross . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

TM: . . . but it was a great loss.

SL: Well, what was she like when you were growin' up? What—was she a great cook?

TM: Well, you know—uh—I know she was a good cook. I don't know that she was a . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

TM: . . . a great cook. I know that—uh—she wanted us to be involved. And she—I can remember she and my dad both—uh—if you ever started something, you had to complete it. There was—there was no options or alternatives. You weren't gonna

[going to] quit, and that was a, you know, a big thing for her.

And—uh—so I think she was very supportive. She was there at all of our—all of our games and all the things that we—we did regardless of whether we were good or not or whether we played or we didn't.

[00:11:19] SL: Um—what was the—the house like when you were growing up in El Dorado?

TM: Well, you know, we had a very basic home. We were in a neighborhood called Murril Heights. And it would be, I would think—uh—like I said, an average home, maybe—uh—uh—eighteen hundred to two thousand square feet. It's three bedroom that I recall, but very small bedrooms. Uh—my dad was—uh—uh—he was a good steward of the money that he made. Uh—he—he—he was a little bit tight. [*SL laughs*] And I think I—I got a little bit of that—that from him so—you know, he—he felt like that the—the home we were in is the home that—where we ought to be, and that's what we, you know, that's what we—we had. And actually he lived in—in that home—uh—from the time that we were there in El Dorado until probably about ten years ago when he sold it.

SL: That's—that's amazing that he st—kept that house that long . . .

TM: Yeah.

SL: . . . and . . .

TM: It is.

[00:12:35] SL: Yeah, my—my parents were kind of like that, too.

Um—what about the di—the meals? Did—was there—did everyone have to be present for dinner, at least, or did—was—um—uh—I mean, was it just expected—was the table set and everyone sat down? Or was it a . . .

TM: Probably not, except maybe on . . .

SL: Sundays.

[00:13:02] TM: . . . you know, on Sunday. I think that—you know, there's a pretty good age difference between—uh—my brother's four years older than—than I am, and my sister was nine years younger th—than—than I was. So probably she was expected to be at all the meals when they—they had 'em [them], and the rest of us were, you know, going here and there. But, generally speaking, you know, on Sunday or—or—or at some time we would—we would all be together. Now, when we were together and when she cooked a meal, the fact is that we all ate the meal. [SL laughs] I can remember—uh—my father, who was a strong disciplinarian, I mean he—he expected you to, number one, act right, and—and if you didn't, he expected you to understand that there would be—uh—there would be a price to



be—be paid. And he did not mind dishing out corporal punishment, I mean, he was—uh—he was a strong disciplinarian. But I recall one time sitting at the table, my mother had made meatloaf, and I didn't want the meatloaf. I just decided that, you know, that really was not what excited me, and—and I wasn't going to eat it. In fact, I said, "I'd like to go get a hamburger later on, if it's okay." [*SL laughs*] And I recall my dad saying, "Well, let me ask you this." He said, "You talked about getting a hamburger." He said, "Don't you like hamburgers?" I said, "I love 'em." He said, "Do you like hamburger meat?" And I said, "Yes." He said, "Do you like—you like ketchup on it? You like onions in it?" And I said, "Yes, sir, I like all that." And he said, "Sit down and eat that meatloaf. That's what it's got in it." [*SL laughs*] I remember it like it was yesterday.

[00:14:51] SL: That's good. Um—I—um—were there—did your mom have any interests that she—or any civic things that she did or . . .

TM: Not really. She nor my dad were—were really that involved in . . .

SL: Uh-huh . . .

TM: . . . in the communities.

SL: Mh-hmm.

TM: Uh—They were certainly involved, again, in our—our family life, but—and my dad was very involved in his—his work. But—uh—they—they were not overly involved in—in civic activities.

[00:15:28] SL: What about—um—music or any—y'all didn't . . .

TM: No. I mean, as far as my family—you know—my—my—my father and—and my mother—there was not a lot of—uh—uh—not a lot—not a lotta [lot of] music talent there . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

TM: . . . and we did not go to a lot of things that—that—where there would be music involved in it. I—I think probably, if anything, that the thing that they all enjoyed the most would be sports—things that were . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

TM: . . . you know, whether it'd be going to, at the time, Little Rock to a—to a Razorback game or going to a trip somewhere and going to possibly see a baseball game.

SL: Well now, was your older brother athletically inclined as well?

TM: My older brother was a very good athlete.

SL: Mh-hmm.

TM: Actually, when we were at Strong, he was on the high school team there, and he—he was very good and I guess subsequently

played at El Dorado. But he was a much better athlete than—  
than I was. He was bigger than I was and . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

TM: . . . very, very good.

[00:16:35] SL: What about—uh—church and religious stuff? Did  
you—uh—was Sunday always a church day?

TM: Probably not early on in . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

TM: . . . in our life. It was not. And I think later on it—it certainly  
became that and . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

TM: . . . I think even at a point, you know, I—I, you know, when I—  
uh—was growing up to—we would go together to—to one church  
there in El Dorado. But I remember—uh—[*doorbell rings*] that—  
um—there was a . . .

SL: Yeah, I guess we oughta [ought to] get that door.

[Tape stopped]

[00:17:17] SL: Great. Thank you. [*Clock chimes*] Um—what  
about—um—neighborhood kids and—um—kind of—give me a—  
paint me a picture of what the neighborhood was like and—were  
kids coming over to your house all the time, or did you have  
bunkin' parties, or what were birthday parties like?

TM: Mmm. Well, you know—uh—uh—again, I don't know—when I think of birthday parties, I—I think about when you're a lot younger and . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

TM: . . . I really do not remember a lot about the—the birthday parties.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:17:54] TM: Uh—as far as—uh—as far as friends and so forth, the thing I probably remember more than anything else is that most of the friends in that particular neighborhood, which was—we called Murmil Heights—uh—we would—there was a little park down there . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

TM: . . . and we would all go to the park. And—uh—generally, it was built around football games or playing basketball or baseball games, and—and so forth. Uh—you know, I—I—I remember we—right next to our house was a wooded area that had not been developed, and there were rabbits there. And we would go rabbit hunting, and—um—there were just all kinds of things for us to do. And back then in the, you know, in the [19]50s and [19]60s—uh—you'd go out, and you knew what time you had to be back, and you'd come back. And—and people were not

necessarily worried about you if you were a little bit late. Had a lot of friends right there—uh—you know, around my house. But probably some of my—my best friends, you know, lived in other neighborhoods . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

TM: . . . and—uh—as I—as I grew up in junior high and—and high school, then it was more of an issue of us gathering together, but somewhere else in the—in the town.

SL: Right. Um . . .

[00:19:17] TM: At the TAC house, for example. We had a—we had something called the Teenage Club, so you went from—when you were in elementary school and—and junior high school, you were probably at the Boys Club, and after that you would advance up to the—what we called the—the TAC house. And they had games that you could play there. And, 'course [of course], they had all the dances. At that point in time that's where the girls would be, so that's where the guys would end up.

SL: So was that a community-funded place or . . .

TM: It was. It was a non-profit . . .

SL: That's interesting. Uh-huh.

TM: . . . non-profit, community funded.

SL: That sounds like a great thing for a town to have.

TM: It really was. It was.

SL: Um—wasn't affiliated with any of the churches or anything?

TM: No.

SL: I remember churches used to kinda [kind of] do that.

TM: No, it was not affiliated with the—with the church, but—uh—  
certainly some of the—the churches, and the church I attended  
there, First Baptist Church, would have its youth groups.

And . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

TM: . . . you know, again, on—on Sundays or Wednesdays—a lot of  
activities there, so you would—you would end up there. But  
usually, on a Friday night or Saturday night, after you had  
become a teenager, you would—you would find your way over to  
a activity at the TAC house. Now, the good part of that was  
that, you know, it was always chaperoned.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:20:35] TM: Durin' those times, you not only had the people that  
ran the facility, but you would have parents there for the  
activities, whether it was a dance or a party or just in the  
evening, and doin' the things that you were—and that did not  
mean there weren't some things that—extracurricular activities

that people would get involved in that they weren't supposed to. But generally speaking, it was a fairly well-controlled environment.

[00:21:11] SL: As far as—do you—I wanna [want to] get to your grandparents here in just a second, but let's talk about your dad just for a little bit. Is there a time—was there a moment or a conversation that you particularly find memorable that you and your dad engaged in early on?

TM: Yeah. I can tell you probably three of 'em. One of 'em happened after I had left high school and gone to college. And my first two years of college, you know, I once again did not necessarily have my priorities on the same page that my dad had his priorities for me. [00:22:04] In other words, when I went to [University of Arkansas] Fayetteville my first couple of years, I did what a lot of kids do; I spent way too much time partyin' and not enough time with the books. I made okay grades, but my dad didn't feel like that's why he sent me up there. So I recall coming home in the second year, and my grades came in. And he sat down and looked at 'em, and there were some Cs there that he was not pleased with. And he said—and I remember it again just like it was yesterday. He said, "Obviously, I've not done a good job of communicating with you.



I have not, apparently, convinced you that I do have an investment in this and that I do have some expectations, and you're just not meeting those expectations." And he said, "As a result of that, until we can, you know sorta [sort of] get on the same page, I'm not gonna pay for you to go back next year." He said, "You can stay here and I'll help you get a job working for Murphy laying saltwater pipeline in the woods and then we'll see, you know, how you feel as a result of that." [SL laughs] And so, I remember that conversation vividly. And actually, it was that conversation that probably was a defining moment in my life and changed me from where I was then. It certainly had a lot to do with where I am today. And the reason was that I realized that I had to be accountable, and it was that statement that stayed with me. I didn't stay home and go to work. What I did is I joined the military. And it was the military that literally transformed me from someone that could have gone astray very easy to one that had a little bit more discipline in their thought and actions.

[00:24:21] SL: Before we get to the military, you said there were three conversations . . .

TM: Right.

SL: . . . that you remembered.

TM: I think the second conversation was that when I got out of the military and I was getting ready to—this was right after my mother had died and I had—I was getting married and sorta going back to school at that point in time. That second conversation was that, you know, "You remember that your first shot at school you didn't do all that you were capable of doing." And he said, "part of it was maturity." And he said, "You're on your own investment now." And he said, "I'll bet that you're a lot more mature and the results are going to be significantly different." [*SL laughs*] And he was right.

SL: Of course.

TM: And then the third conversation that I recall with my dad was only in, I guess, August of this year. He had been very, very sick, and he was under hospice care. And, we were visiting, and he knew that I had a health challenge, and I knew he had a health challenge. And during the course of that conversation, he made the comment—he said, "Now, I don't know how this is all gonna play out for you or me, but," he said "I know we're both gonna be at the same place." And he said, "I hope I'm there first."

SL: [*Laughs*] Yeah.

Franklin Evarts [Camera Operator]: Scott, could you—can I get

you to pull your tie over, sir?

SL: Oh.

FE: Just a little bit there. There you go. Thank you.

[00:26:44] SL: [Long pause] What about your mom? Have you—do you 'member a time that you spent with your mom that you hold onto as a defining moment for you?

TM: Yeah [*clears throat*]. Probably right before I went to—into the military. Prob—that was—that would have been the summer that I came home from school when my dad and I had that very historic talk and—relative to my commitment to my education. And so during that summer, before I'd actually went into the military, I did stay there in—at home there in El Dorado and I worked and spent a lot of time, you know, with my family—especially with my mother. And she was sick at the time, but had some real quality time together. And, you know, I guess I'll always remember that because that was the, you know, last time I saw her 'cause [because] I left and went to the military and then she passed away while I was gone.

SL: Do you remember what it was that she said to you, or was it just . . .

TM: Well . . .

SL: . . . that time together?

TM: [*Laughs*] I remember—you know, I told you earlier that she never wanted you to be a quitter. And, you know, she—I remember her saying, "Now, you are where you are. Make the best of this." And, you know, she was obviously not excited that I was goin' to Vietnam, but she was just an encouraging person.

[00:28:38] SL: Okay, let's go to the grandparents now. Did you know both sets of grandparents?

TM: I did—very well.

SL: And were they from around El Dorado or . . .

TM: No. [*SL coughs*] You don't know where Bodcaw and Roston, Arkansas, is, but I will tell you that both towns are about five miles apart. They are about twenty miles from Hope, Arkansas. And everybody now knows where Hope, Arkansas, is because of President [Bill] Clinton, and Governor [Mike] Huckabee, I guess, is, I think, from Hope, also.

SL: He is.

TM: But both of those towns are about twenty miles from Hope and about five miles apart and about another twenty miles from Prescott, where I was born. My dad's mom and dad, my grandparent—the Mays—lived in Bodcaw. And then my mother's parents lived in Roston, Arkansas. I can't even tell you the population of both, but I would guess maybe two hundred to two

hundred and fifty in each one of those towns.

[00:29:53] SL: Well, did your all—did those families know each other?

TM: You know, [*SL coughs*] they knew each other but not well. Probably each one of 'em came from a different background. My dad's mom and father, they had some cattle. They raised cattle, and then 'course they harvested hay and all the things that went with that. And they were, you know, very involved in their church and so forth there in Bodcaw, Arkansas. In fact, my grandfather was the mayor of Bodcaw for a while. As he said, it was because nobody else would do it. [*SL laughs*] In fact, there's one red light in Bodcaw, and it was right in front of his house.

SL: Oh. [*Laughs*]



[00:30:46] TM: But, it's that small of a community. My mother's mother and father—if you could just imagine the *American Gothic* [painting by Grant Wood, 1930] with the gentleman standing there with his hair parted in the middle and the lady with the braided hair. That was my grandmother and grandfather Waters. They [*TM clears throat*] lived in a older home with the breezeway through the middle of it, the dogtrot. And they had the tin roof. They were—they basically grew their

own food. And what they didn't eat, they would peddle. They would sell to neighbors in a, you know, ten–fifteen-mile radius. He'd also sell to stores there in Hope. It was lots of fun to go both places, but I particularly enjoyed going there because when he would go out to pick the tomatoes or the peas or the corn or whatever, he would allow us to go out there, and he would pay us to help. Now, you know, my grandmother would be out there doing the same thing, [*SL laughs*] and she would pick the tomatoes and the corn and the peas, and she would put it in our buckets so we could get paid for it. So it was always a . . .

SL: That's good.

TM: . . . great time. I remember—I don't know if you've ever been in one of these houses, but you would go through the area that you would call the sitting room where they had a bed—that's where their bed was, actually. And then we'd go back into another area that was the kitchen, and it would have another bed in it. And then you'd go out onto the sleeping porch, which was a screened-in area, and it would have two or three beds with tons of quilts and feathered pillows on it. And back there would be a—an old well that was their drinking water that they would actually draw the water. And so it was a great experience. It's one of those things that I wish my children could have, you

know, have seen and enjoyed.

[00:33:18] SL: So do y'all still have that property or did it . . .

TM: No.

SL: . . . leave the family?

TM: Some of the property that my grandfather had, my—on the—on my father's side, was some timberland that he left to his daughters and to my father, and the daughters ultimately sold their property to my father. So my father does—or did still own some of that timberland. But as far as my other grandparents, where you had the—their house with the tin roof, the house is gone. The—somebody . . .

SL: Yeah.

TM: . . . has rebuilt there and—but I—when I was on the University [of Arkansas] Board [of Trustees], I would—when we'd go to Hope for graduation, some of the trustees would fly over there, but I'd always drive.

SL: Yeah.

TM: And I would drive there so I could go by the old home place. And I would drive up in it and just remember sorta how it was and then I would drive on to Hope for the graduation.

[00:34:22] SL: Is there any particular memory or fond event or outing that you had when you were visiting your grandparents?

Is there something that . . .

TM: Oh . . .

SL: . . . you—what did you learn there, I guess?



TM: Well, you know, first, you know, I learned that material wealth does not necessarily equate to happiness. They were as happy as they could be, and they had nothing. But they enjoyed every day, and they loved to have their family there. And I think, probably, I really learned the importance and the value of family, of tryin' to stay together, even though I don't think we do. I know in my family we have not stayed together like you would hope. So I think I learned a lot of those things, and I also learned what it meant to work for a living. My grandfather, again, you know, he would have to raise the—he would raise crops that they were going to eat, or what they didn't eat they would sell. But, you know, it didn't just happen. You know, he didn't have the tractors that they have today. Or he didn't have people to work there for him. He had to do it himself, so he had a mule. And he would get behind that mule and he would plow the ground that he was going to plant. I would sit out there on the front porch and watch him do that. And then later I would, you know, benefit 'cause I'd go out and help pick the crops that he'd pay us to help him, just to be nice.

And then I can remember him goin' out and pickin' a watermelon and bringin' it back and puttin' it on the front porch and us eatin' it right there. Some great times.

SL: Yeah. Yeah, it's great that—or it's—there's something about raising your own food. There's something about preparing your own food.

TM: Yeah.

SL: There's something about making do with what you've got that really is a strengthening thing, a character-building thing. [Long pause] [00:36:40] How 'bout [about] your brothers—your brother and sister? Did they—were they always there with you at the grandparents', too? I guess your sister was later . . .

TM: No. Yeah. You know, my sister, again—nine years younger than . . .

SL: Right.

TM: . . . than me. And so we might have been there at the same time, but it was—you know, she was very young, and then my brother's four years older. So we were there and we were a part of all that together, and we enjoyed it, but probably enjoyed it from a, you know, a different perspective, my brother being older and me being at the age where I could really get into the hunting and everything that went on with it.

SL: Were there lots of cousins, aunts, and . . .

TM: Oh, yes.

SL: . . . uncles around?

TM: Mh-hmm. Yeah. All lived in that area. You know, my mother had—she had a brother and a sister. And, 'course, each one of them had several children. And then my father had three sisters, and they had several children. So most of 'em lived right there in that area, so we did, you know, quite a few things together.

[00:37:57] SL: Thanksgivings were big?

TM: Oh, yeah. All the holidays were.

SL: Twenty, thirty folks.

TM: Yeah, and always at the grandparents'.

SL: Yeah.

TM: Yeah. Not at our house. Not at the aunt's house or the uncle's house but always there.

SL: That's good, strong stuff.

TM: Yeah.

[00:38:13] SL: Okay so, you left school after a couple years, and you did the military. And is this marine—army . . .

TM: [United States] Marine Corps.

SL: Marine corps. And you find yourself in Vietnam. I guess you

trained at Pendleton [in California] or . . .

TM: I did. San Diego [California] first and then to Camp Pendleton. [Marine Corps Recruit Depot] San Diego boot camp and then I went to Camp Pendleton for ITR, which was Infantry Training [Regiment].

SL: Well, first, let me say, I know folks that also went to Vietnam, and you seem to have come out of it just fine.

[00:38:54] TM: Well, I did. I think there's a lot of reasons for it. I think that—first of all, I was very fortunate. When I went into the marine corps, I had, again, two years of college, and so—and I went in as an enlisted man. I had enlisted for three years. And so my MO [modus operandi] at the time was that I was gonna be a clerk typist. Now I thought that was pretty good. I was sort of excited about that. I didn't know what it meant, but I later realized that when you got out of boot camp and you went to ITR, that—and we all went to Vietnam, all that went away. You know, you—we were all going to be the same thing over there. When I got to Vietnam, like the military, they said, "Line up. Lines one, two, and three. And everybody in line one's gonna do this, and line two's gonna do this, and line three's gonna do this." Well, I was blessed. I ended up goin' into what is known as the 1st Marine Division, right outside of Da



Nang. And I ended up going into the G-5 area, which doesn't mean anything to most people, but what it is either the civil affairs side of it, or more importantly, in the side that I ended up in is the area that would deal with prisoners and trying to find out information, not just the intelligence side, but also the propaganda side.

SL: Hmm. Well, that sounds a lo . . .

TM: It's called psychological operations and—psy-ops. And you didn't hear a lot about it until Iraq.

SL: Right.

TM: And you know, it's—I've got a little plaque at home, and it says, "Winning the hearts and minds of the enemy." So I was getting really some good technical training there. I was located at the headquarters of the 1st Marine Division there, so, you know, I was—considering the fact that I was in Vietnam, I had fairly good duty at that time.

[00:41:25] SL: Still though, that—you were dealing with the enemy, I guess.

TM: Oh, absolutely.

SL: On a very personal basis.

TM: Absolutely.

SL: I mean it wasn't someone across the field from you. You were in

the same room with them and trying to get what you could out of them . . .

TM: Going through interrogation.

SL: Yeah. Boy. I gotta [got to] believe that was kind of tough, too.



TM: Well, probably the toughest thing about Vietnam was the fact that for the first time in my life, you know, I was somewhere that I didn't know. Nobody that I re—at the time that—did you know, or not many people did you know that was there with you, not your friends, not your family. And I think probably on top of that, certainly, amount of fear factor, until you got comfortable and after you'd been there. And certainly, nobody in Vietnam wanted to be there, but most of the people that were there, you know, felt like that they were doing something that they ought to be doing. The government told 'em to do it, so . . .

SL: Yeah.

TM: . . . so they did it. And they did it to the best of their ability.

SL: How long were you there?

TM: I was there thirteen months.

SL: Well, that's good. I mean, that's . . .

TM: I went in January of 1968 and came back in February of [19]69 . . .

SL: Sixty-nine. Mh-hmm.

TM: . . . I was there through what they call two Tet Offensives, and so I was glad I did it and glad I got to come home.

[00:43:08] SL: Did you develop any lasting relationships in your military life?

TM: You know, I did. There were two or three friends that were very close friends. One of 'em did not come back. A couple of 'em did. We've lost touch with each other over the many years. But, for a while it was very strong.

[00:43:41] SL: So, did you, you know, get out and about at all in the city or were you pretty much . . .

TM: No. I was . . .

SL: . . . on the base and . . .

TM: No, I was located nine miles north of Da Nang on the side of a hill, and we stayed there.

SL: Yeah.

TM: Now, we occasionally left there for a specific purpose. If we were . . .

SL: Right . . .

TM: . . . going out to interview a group of people that had been captured or people that had surrendered, we would go off the base, but it would be a group of us that would go. And we'd be there and do our job and then we'd go back. Just for security

purposes, you did not want to, you know, to go too far. That didn't mean there weren't a lot of people that—where you could go into Da Nang or Saigon or wherever they may be, but I did not.

[00:44:34] SL: Mh-hmm. So you get back from the military and what's the first thing you do?

TM: Well, when I came back—first of all, I had been there for a period of seven months. And when I came back from—my mother died and I came back on emergency leave, and we had planned—my first wife and I had planned to be married in January, but I'd come back in August for that, so thinking that I was not going back to Vietnam, we went ahead and got married.

SL: In August.

TM: In August. And then I got orders to go back to Vietnam. So—went back. Well, when I returned—one great thing about the marine corps and about having gone to Vietnam, if you had any time left on your duty, they gave you good duty station, and I was sent to Kansas City [Missouri]. So my wife and I moved to Kansas City and lived there for a year until I got out, and I came back to college at the university.

[00:45:51] SL: So, what did you end up picking up at the school?

An M.B.A [Master's of Business Administration] or . . .

TM: I got a undergraduate degree . . .

SL: An undergraduate in business . . .

TM: . . . and an M.B.A.

SL: Yeah. And . . .

TM: And Uncle Sam paid for it.

SL: Yeah. Well, that's still good, I guess.

TM: Yeah. The GI Bill [of Rights].

SL: Yeah, 'course, Dale Bumpers credits that GI Bill . . .

TM: Yeah.

SL: . . . for his whole career.

TM: Well, I do, too.

SL: Yeah.



TM: I mean, I think it's—I think it was very val—I think the military experience, again, was a turning point—the defining moment in my life.

SL: Do you think that—you got that in boot camp or . . .

TM: You know, I think a combination of boot camp and Vietnam and just the maturing process. I think I came out—I was more mature, I understood what was important and what was not important. I was much more disciplined than I had ever been before, so I was—quite honestly, for the first time, I was prepared to get an education and, you know, to do the things

that a person that has a fa—that was going to have a family would need to do.

[00:47:07] SL: Well, how soon was it after you got back that you started havin' a family?

TM: Well, actually, after I finished my undergraduate and graduate degree at the University of Arkansas. When I finished there, I took my first job. And it was after that that I started my family.



I will tell you that when I got my degree and I started seeking a job, I didn't know what I wanted to do, other than I wanted to work. And during that summer I got my undergraduate—I mean, my graduate degree during the summer. And during that period, three groups came to campus to interview.

SL: Yeah.

TM: One was a ladies apparel group out of Houston [Texas] . . .

SL: Yep.

[00:48:01] TM: . . . looking for a training program—people for a training program. Another was Kroger's out of Memphis [Tennessee] for a training program, and the other just happened to be First National Bank of Commerce out of New Orleans [Louisiana]. The only reason that they came to our campus was that the chief executive officer of that bank, who was Jimmie Jones from Alpena Pass, Arkansas, told them that he wanted

somebody from Arkansas. So it was only a coincidence that they were there. They came. They interviewed two people: me and another guy. He also was former military. They took him down there, wined him, and dined him. They told me to come by if I was ever in their area. [SL laughs] He turned the job down that they offered him, and if they were going to do what the CEO said—"Hire somebody from Arkansas"—I was the only one left. [SL laughs] Now, that sounds like an exaggerated story, but it's fact.

SL: Yeah.

TM: And that was the way that I got into my first job. And I was proud to have that job, too. But then we moved to New Orleans and stayed there about five years, and both of my children were born in New Orleans.

SL: What a great town.

TM: It was, and it has been a tragedy to watch what has happened over the last couple of years with the hurricane [Katrina, 2005] and all the terrible things that have gone on, and you just . . .

SL: How . . .

TM: . . . hope that it builds back.

[00:49:36] SL: How long were you in New Orleans?

TM: Five years. I was with the bank there the entire five years, and

then I decided that I really wanted to raise them somewhere other than in New Orleans—raise my kids there.

SL: So what did you do? You moved back to . . .

TM: El Dorado.

SL: El Dorado.

TM: Actually, sort of by coincidence, you know. I had no plans to go back to my hometown. It just so happened there was a bank there that was looking for somebody, and somebody heard that I wanted to come back. And, I'd looked at different places, and they talked to me, so I came back to El Dorado and went to work there at Exchange Bank for the Hurley family.

SL: Well, that's good news.

TM: Yeah, I was real proud.

SL: You finally got to start.

TM: That's right.

SL: [*Laughs*] No longer the second string.

TM: [*Laughs*] That's exactly right. No longer second string.

SL: [*Laughs*] And you probably proved yourself very well.

[00:50:27] TM: Well, it was very good. I became president of the bank in, oh, I—let's see, I went there in 1976—in about 1979.



And I recall a good friend of mine who I went to high school with and played football with, he was actually, at the time, coaching

for [University of] Alabama. His name's Al Miller.

SL: Okay.

TM: He called home one time, and his mother said, "Al, do you know who has moved back to El Dorado?" And he said, "No." And she said, "Tommy May." And he said, "Really?" And she said, "Yeah, he is now president of Exchange Bank." And he said, "Mother, you've got to be kidding me. [*SL laughs*] He might be in jail for robbing a bank, [*SL laughs*] but he can't be president of a bank."

[00:51:29] SL: That's funny. That's funny. I know when I had kids, my life changed, a lot, you know, for the better, I think, and—well of course, for the better. But there's something about havin' kids. What happened with you when you started havin' kids? Did you—did it change your life at all?

TM: Well, I think it did. You know, I think, certainly I—as I said, I matured a lot when I was in the military, and prior to that I was very immature. And I think when I had my children, one of the things that I first thought is that I want them to benefit from the things that I matured from, and I don't want them [*laughs*] to have to go through some of the things that I put my family through, and—so I think I st—because of their, you know, their birth and, you know, I think I started early trying to do all that I

could to help them be as good as they could be. Now I didn't always do it, but I think I started that. And I probably all of a sudden learned to relax again. You know, when I was a kid, I wa—a teenager—I was too relaxed. Then I was probably a little bit too stiff after the military, and I just probably learned to start enjoying my children and life again.

SL: Yeah, they have a way of teaching you what's important, don't they?

TM: They do. Very much so.

[00:53:00] SL: Do you ever catch—in your raisin' them, did you ever catch yourself thinking or seeing your dad in yourself?

TM: Mh-hmm.

SL: When you were raisin' them—did . . .

TM: You know, I think when—when I was raising them—again, I thought back to probably some of the headaches that I caused my, you know, my dad—probably more than anything else, and thought, "Well you know, what goes around may come around." And so, again, tried to—I tried to be there, you know, for them. I was then and I am now a workaholic, and, you know, I knew at the time that, you know, I was. And so I tried to balance that out to just make sure that I did not sacrifice the time that I would have with them—that I was gonna be at their ball games

and all those things. And I did, and I—even today I look back and feel pretty good about that.

[00:54:07] SL: So, what was—how was the life in New Orleans in your house, were your—mother of your kids was a housewife again or . . .

TM: She was.

SL: And . . .

TM: Well, actually, she worked some early on.

SL: She did?

TM: Yeah. I think we needed, based on my starting salary at my job, we needed two incomes to make ends meet, and we started out in an apartment there in New Orleans. And, again, when we moved there she was pregnant with our first child. And so, you know, yeah, we both worked. You know, it was not inexpensive living in New Orleans even at that time, and the starting salaries at that time were significantly different than what they are now for—in banking. But then we moved from an apartment to a rented house and actually went through a hurricane there. I don't remember which one it was. It was a small one when we lived in that rented house, which was out fairly close to the lake. And we decided we wanted to move away from there and then bought a house there in Metairie, which is right outside of New

Orleans.

[00:55:28] SL: New Orleans is such a great town. There's so much culture there. Did the—any of that invade the household? Did you start to have music at the house or . . .

TM: Well, probably—you know, I'm not sure how much culture we picked up at that young age. But we certainly got to see a different side of the big-city environment versus a smaller town. We learned to love the New Orleans Saints [of the National Football League], and at the time, the [New Orleans] Jazz [of the National Basketball Association from 1974 to 1979]. We frequented the French Quarter quite a bit, probably either entertaining customers or entertaining family, and certainly that got to the point that that was more of a job than [*SL laughs*] something that you would enjoy. But there was so much to do and so much to see there, probably—and being young and a new family, we really enjoyed our four or five years there. And my wife now and I, with some friends, go back to New Orleans frequently just to spend a weekend down there and enjoy ourselves and to eat.

SL: Well, yeah.

TM: Yeah. Great cuisine.

SL: Yeah it's great food. Great food. Okay. So, you leave New

Orleans and you're back in Arkansas.

Joy Endicott [Audio Operator]: Scott . . .

TM: Right.

SL: Yes.

JE: . . . let's stop and change . . .

[Tape stopped]

[00:56:58] SL: Tommy, I do kinda wanna go back to the Vietnam thing because that was such a big, huge period in history, a dynamic period in history for the United States and what it did to all of America—all across. And there are so many aspects of that war that affected everyone, not only the veterans that went there and survived it, but the family losses. And it affected small communities all across America. And, I thought that your—that the work that you did over there sounded very, very, very interesting. And I just wonder if there was anything that you brought from Vietnam that was a lesson learned, or was there something that you gained from your experiences in Vietnam?

[00:58:00] TM: Well, let me just say from my particular responsibility over there, I think there were some things that I learned, and then, secondarily, I think, you know, I have some opinions after that, and I'll try to share both of 'em. But my job



of quote "winning the hearts and minds of the enemy" was simply a, you know, a process of two or three or four people interrogating people who had surrendered. And then trying to help those people understand that there was a better life for them, number one, and number two, see what they could do to help us to get some of their other companions to surrender. And just the process that that went through, you know, I had a lot of peaks and valleys. I mean, I c—you know, I could feel real good about something and then feel real bad about something when you'd find yourself talking to a thirteen-year-old NVA [North Vietnamese Army] hardcore corporal that, you know, obviously had left his family or lost his family and so forth. And then I could feel real good about one of those individuals, you know, standing up and doing a video to some of his fellow soldiers and telling them that, you know, for real, you know, they oughta give it up. They ought to, you know, come over and try to transition to this other life. So I felt like there was certainly some importance of what we're doing, realizing that we're there for a purpose, and that was to try to protect the South Vietnamese from the invasion of the North Vietnamese. I think, you know, secondarily, when—in leaving there—obviously, there are a lot of different opinions about Vietnam. [01:00:15] And if



you look at Iraq today, obviously, there are a lot of opinions. Some people think we should be there. Lots of people think we should not be there. But there is a unified support for the military. In Vietnam, it was not necessarily that way—that—there was not a unified support for the military. When I came home from Vietnam, I did everything my country asked me to do. And I was bothered by the fact that there were a lot of people that, you know, felt like that you should not have done that. You know, and I say a lot. I don't know if there really was a lot, but there was not the support, I guess, for the military back then as there is now. I don't know if it's right or wrong. I just know that I recall that. [01:01:13] I think another thing that I—my takeaway from Vietnam is that, you know, that these are a lot of really young people that we send over to a foreign country, whether it's Vietnam or Iraq, to do a job. And they've got a family that they left behind. And we oughta do everything that we can do to support them and their family. There's no time in the life of that family that is any more stressful than the time that their child is away trying to defend their rights but at risk every single day. And it does not matter if you're in a support role like I was when I was in Vietnam, or if you're out on the line. Something could happen. And so, you know, I think

when I come back—when I came back, or as a result of my coming back, when I'm in the airport today, and I see a soldier that might be home from Iraq or somewhere, I don't hesitate to say thank you. I don't even hesitate to do that because I do value, you know, their sacrifice. And so I guess my takeaway is a—more of a—an appreciation for the sacrifice. Now, that's not just Americans. That would be anybody. So, that would probably be my takeaway.

[01:02:50] SL: Well you know, and I bet that means everything to those kids whenever you do see them and you come up to them.

TM: Oh, I think they do.

SL: And it is a sad chapter that when the Vietnam veterans came home, they didn't get the ticker tape parade.

TM: Right.

SL: They didn't get—there wa—the country was so divided. And also they didn't—they—I—and I—and this may be true today, I'm not sure, but it's hard be—coming home after being in a war, and all that—all the support that—really should have after you get home, sometimes it ain't there.

TM: No. Not anywhere like it probably should be, and nobody knows, you know, what's that—what that is like, or nobody understands what kind of support those folks need. They probably

understand it better today than they did then. But do they get all that they need? Do their families get all that they need? Probably not. I don't know. But, the most important thing to me is for us to appreciate each and every one of 'em for the sacrifice they do, 'cause that's what they're doin'. They're doin' what they're told.

[01:04:10] SL: Okay. Well, I feel a little bit better that we paid a little more attention to your . . .

TM: Good.

SL: . . . because I for one appreciate that you went over there and that you served your country. And I just f—kind of felt like we kind of left that.



TM: Well, I'll tell you this, I'm proud I did it.

SL: Yeah.

TM: I was proud when I did it back then. Not whether it was right or wrong. But I was proud that I did what my—what I was told to do, and I did it to the best of my ability and, I was not proud the way it ended. But I'm certainly proud that I had the opportunity to do somethin'.

[01:04:52] SL: Do you want to say anything about how well you did when you got back out of that experience—is there . . .

TM: Well, I can tell you I had some—I—probably—some challenges

like everybody else did. But, like I said, I was in a support role, so I can't say that there were, you know, any significant events that caused those. But, like everybody that goes away and comes back, there's probably a period of time that you've got to adjust. And it probably took me a while. If somebody asked me today, "Would you like to go back and visit it a—again to see where you were?" my answer absolutely, emphatically, "No." You know, I don't. But today I don't sit around and think about it like, you know, I might have at one time. I am definitely a better person, not just for the military, but I'm definitely a better person for having had that experience.

SL: Well, you're a survivor.

TM: That's right.

[01:06:04] SL: And you got on with it once you got back home. So, you survive Vietnam, you come back, you get back in school on the G.I. Bill, you finish up your business degree. You're back into the community again. You're living in . . .

TM: El Dorado at the time.

SL: . . . El Dorado then. But you end up going to New Orleans?

TM: No, I went to New Orleans . . .

SL: Oh, be . . .

TM: . . . first.

SL: . . . first. That's right.

TM: That's where I first started my banking career . . .

SL: Right.

TM: . . . and after five years, then [*clock chimes*] I got this opportunity in El Dorado.

SL: Okay. Well let's talk about that.

TM: Okay.

FE: Scott, one second.

SL: Oh we got a clock happening?

[Tape stopped]

[01:06:44] SL: All right. So you're back in El Dorado. New opportunities.



TM: New opportunities. I'll tell you a quick story. When I made the decision to move from El Dorado to—I'm sorry, from New Orleans to El Dorado, I went up and had a visit. And my dad knew that I was thinking about this. And my dad was—never remarried at the time. He lived alone for thirty-two years, and he did subsequently remarry. But anyway, I was—he and I went out that day and had lunch. And I said, "Dad, I've made the decision that I'm going to, you know, take this job and come back home." And 'course, you know, he was excited because two grandchildren were gonna be there and so forth. And my

dad was very stoic and, like I said, ultraconservative. And he looked at me, and he said, "Well you know, I'm really proud of you, and I'm really glad that you're comin' home. But I want you to know that I'm not going to move my banking account." [SL laughs] He said, "I've been banking where I've been banking for forty years with the same person." And I said, "Dad, I love that kind of loyalty."

SL: [Laughs] That's good.

[01:08:12] TM: So when I came back to El Dorado, again, I took a position within Exchange Bank, which was actually owned by the Hurley family—Mr. Louis Hurley and Ed Hurley, which were, you know, just great citizens there in El Dorado, and that bank had been under their leadership for many years. Mr. Hurley was sorta preparing to transition to retirement, and another person had left there, so I was given this opportunity. And I was young. I mean I was—this was in 1976, so I was thirty years old, and sorta given oversight as the number two officer in the bank. And so I stayed there for eleven years. And in 1979, three years after I got there, Mr. Hurley retired, his son became chairman, and I became president of the bank. And at that time I would've been about thirty-three years old—thirty-four years old, which was very young, probably too young, at the time. I

was not near as good as I thought I might be, and I learned lots of lessons in the process but had a great, great mentor, great team. And so I wa—I was just blessed. It's the right place at the right time, and there in El Dorado my—sort of my, you know, my hometown, my dad there. So I had eleven really, really good years that helped me to learn a lot about banking, and I could do it and let my kids be with their grandparents. Which both sets were there at the time.

[01:10:14] SL: Was it during that time that you started to get active civically . . .

TM: Good point.

SL: . . . in the community?

TM: I started in New Orleans in a small way with Boy Scouts [of America] and maybe a couple of other things. But it was really when I got into El Dorado and the community-banking environment that I began to understand and appreciate, you know, the commitment that you needed to make in getting involved in the community. And yes, it was there, probably, that I started the process of being more involved in the community and doing things that, you know, you felt like were very important.

SL: Do you 'member which civic opportunities you were most fond of

or maybe your—what you got engaged [*FE sneezes*] in the most or excited you the most?

TM: Probably one of 'em was the Rotary Club, just because Mr. Louis Hurley was very involved in that, and he wanted me to be involved. And then, I think, of course, the Chamber of the Commerce, the United Way, and probably the United Way because it had so many agencies that touched so many different people and then, lastly, the Boys Club. You know, I absolutely, you know, felt like that that was something that was not a responsibility or an obligation; it was a payback, if you will. It was—they did something for me and I needed to, in turn, give something back, not just to the community but to kids.

SL: I was gonna say, I bet that struck a place in your heart . . .

TM: Yeah.

SL: . . . 'cause of the times that you spent as a child . . .

TM: Right.

SL: . . . with Boys Club.

[01:12:11] TM: Lots of time there—more time than anywhere else.

SL: [*Laughs*] I remember in Fayetteville the Kiwanis was—always had a football thing that they ran through the Boys Club. I mean, this is first grade.

TM: Yeah.

SL: Dressing out in pads and helmets. [*Laughs*]

TM: Oh yeah. Big deal.

SL: Big deal. Big deal.

TM: Yeah.

SL: Yeah.

TM: But those were the ones that I think I probably—I know I was into several fund-raising issues or events in different civic clubs.

[01:12:45] SL: Well, you said that you may have been a little bit young for the position that you had at the bank, but I suspect that you probably did just fine. That . . .

TM: Well, I hope so. I'm—I was mature beyond my age—again, going back to the military and some of the experiences that I had—that I had had. Probably, the biggest adjustment was that, you know, I went back as a business person, and so many of the people there remembered me as a teenager that was—generally speaking, if there was trouble to be found, [*SL laughs*] he was probably in the midst of the trouble. And now, today, they're—he's talking about president of the bank, you know.

SL: They . . .

TM: Does that instill the confidence in you that you want? [*SL laughs*] Fortunately, there it—it's—there was a pretty good movement of new people in the community, so everybody did

not know me. But . . .

SL: Those that . . .

TM: . . . it also was a positive.

SL: Those that did know you could have just as easily expected you to be in jail or . . .

TM: That's exactly right. [*SL laughs*] That's right.

SL: . . . [*laughs*] in some kind of camp somewhere.

TM: Instead of running—instead of running the bank.

SL: Instead [*laughs*] of running the bank.

TM: Yeah.

SL: Yeah.

TM: But my dad was very proud. There's—like I said, a lot of people, you know, could see the progress that was made, and so that was good.

[01:14:10] SL: Well now, what were your brother and sister doing about this time?

TM: My sister actually lived there. She was a housewife and she had two children and she lived in a little community called Parkers Chapel there. Her name is Nancy Goodwin. And then my brother, at the time, my brother was a—or is a lawyer, and he was in—I believe he was living in De Queen, Arkansas, maybe at the time, or Ashdown or—ultimately he moved to Fayetteville,

but he was there then.

SL: Now, is he in Fayetteville now?

TM: Mh-hmm. Yeah.

SL: He is?

TM: Mh-hmm.

SL: Well, that's good.

TM: Yeah.

[01:14:56] SL: Well, did you coming back to Arkansas—did it kind of bring the family—did y'all go back to spending your Thanksgivings together, or by then, everyone had their own families and . . .

TM: Yeah.

SL: . . . their own commitments?

TM: Yeah.

SL: That kinda happens that way.

TM: Yeah. I think probably that there were very few quote "family reunions," [SL coughs] very few times that we had the opportunity to get together because everybody was going their own way. I will say my boys though, you know, they got to see more of my dad then. Every Saturday morning we would go out there. And so, you know, they got to see more of their grandparents then than certainly any other time, because they

were right there in the community. Everybody grows up, and again, goes their own way.

[01:15:48] SL: Well, you know, I asked you what you—and you put it your takeaway from Vietnam. What was your takeaway from the—your first bank job in El Dorado?

TM: Well, I think when I was in New Orleans I was learning. When I was in El Dorado, I was put in a position to, you know, to be—become a real banker. And I was, you know, with a mentor that helped me become a real banker. In other words, I used the, I guess the learning and the teaching and the—all the things that went with working for a really large bank, 'cause First NBC [National Bank of Commerce] New Orleans was the largest in Louisiana. And then I went to a much smaller bank, community bank in El Dorado, so I was using, you know, the things that I learned, but I was actually putting them to use. I was really working with customers. I was making loans. I could see the fruits of my labor, you know, when they were right or when they were wrong. So I guess my, you know, my takeaway from my experience in El Dorado is I began to mature as a banker. I was a long way away from being a good banker, and I'm still probably a long way from that. [SL laughs] But I will tell you that I started to mature in that process. And I understa—I

began to understand adversity. I began to understand, you know, how to deal with that. And so those are the—and I had the pleasure of learning all that in my hometown and, you know, so that was good.

[01:17:40] SL: Here's another thread that I suspect started early in your life and that has to do with Razorback sports.

TM: Mh-hmm.

SL: Particularly football, of course . . .

TM: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . in those days—early days. Were you—and I assume, even as a kid, you followed the Razorbacks.

TM: Absolutely.

SL: And now you're back in the state and you're in El Dorado. Were you—did you make the treks to Little Rock and to Fayetteville for the games? What—how involved were you in your support or I guess—as a fan, how involved were you with the school?

TM: Well, when I came back from [*SL coughs*] the military, I was starved for sports. And in New Orleans, you know, I filled some of that with the professional side of it, which I was not—you know, I loved the Saints, but I was not overly enthralled with the professional side. And to go to the Arkansas games from New Orleans was a long way away, but I did. I got to go to some

games. I saw Arkansas beat USC [University of Southern California] back in—I don't remember what year it was, I'd say probably in [19]74 or so. And turned around the next week and went to see Oklahoma State [University] beat Arkansas. And so I went to several games down there. But when I moved back to Arkansas, I didn't miss many games, whether it was Little Rock or Fayetteville. I was still starved for sports in general, but Arkansas in particular. And I just, you know, I'm one of those fans that lived and died with the Razorbacks. And so by being in El Dorado—the proximity—I—you know, I could be more involved in it.

SL: What about the—your kids? Did they—let's see now—they only would've—did they go through high school here? They didn't go through high school in El Dorado.

TM: They went through—no, no. They were [*SL coughs*]*—when they came to El Dorado, they would have been about three and one. And so when they left and they—we left El Dorado after eleven years. But, you know, from, you know, from the time that they came to El Dorado to the time that we left El Dorado, they still, you know, started attending ball games and started getting interested. They became much more interested later on, but during that period of time—'cause see, they were—they would've*

been fourteen and twelve or fourteen and eleven when they left El Dorado to come to Pine Bluff.

[01:20:35] SL: Let's go back to Mr. Hurley. You mentioned that he was your mentor . . .

TM: Mmm.

SL: . . . that he taught you how to be the banker that you've eventually become.

TM: Mh-hmm.

SL: Is—was there any one—can you point to any conversation or conversations that you had with him or a moment that you had with him that . . .

TM: Yeah.

SL: . . . you still carry with you today?

TM: Yeah. I've had several, I guess, good mentors along the way: one in New Orleans, and Mr. Hurley and Ed Hurley in El Dorado, and then Mr. Louis Ramsay and W. E. Ayres in Pine Bluff. But Mr. Hurley was a gentleman in every respect. He was smart; he was caring; he wa—well respected. And I, you know, I just recall that when I was with him out at a civic organization, I always felt good. And the reason I felt good is that, you know, he is so well respected, and you just, you know, I had some pride in that. As far as conversations and learning, you know,



I can remember in—on several occasions with Mr. Hurley that, you know, it was—his comment was, you know, "You got to work hard, but you got to—you got to enjoy life. And you got to always, you know, value what other people do." And that was just the kind of person that he was. So, I think what he did for me more than teaching me about banking was teaching me about the "do right rule." And that's something—what we call the [former University of Arkansas Razorback football coach] "Lou Holtz Do Right Rule" that I have carried with me, and I've tried to teach my children, and I've tried to carry in our organization and probably something that I am most proud of. So I think that's probably what I got from him.

[01:22:55] SL: That's good. What about—has involvement with the church taken hold . . .

TM: Oh yeah.

SL: . . . yet more—in a more substantial way?

TM: Yeah. I think, certainly, when we were in El Dorado—while I was involved in my church before and she was involved in her church before [*doorbell rings*] we were married and then we got involved in the same church, and our children went to that church. When we got to El Dorado, we began to truly understand, you know, the importance of our faith, and we

began to truly understand that, you know, that our family needed to, you know, to be in church. And our kids began to get more involved, and we actually began to get more involved there.

SL: How—I'm assuming Kris got that?

JE: No. [*Knocking on door*] Let's pause for a second.

SL: No, let's pause that.

[Tape stopped]

[01:23:56] SL: I think I left off talking about embracing the church activities . . .

TM: Right.

SL: . . . when you got to El Dorado, and it becoming more of a factor in your life. Did the—was there any particular aspect of the church that you found particularly rewarding? Did you—how—and did the kids come along with this good and everyone was comfortable with it or . . .

TM: Oh, yeah. I think so. I was involved in the teaching of RAs and—there at our church—Royal Ambassadors. And again, the kids were still, you know, still pretty young, but they were involved in their Sunday school classes. And like all kids, you know, you'd get 'em up and they didn't wanna go, [*SL laughs*] but they'd get there and they'd have a, you know, a . . .

SL: Great time.

TM: . . . good time. So we matured in our church during that eleven-year period there [unclear word or words].

[01:24:55] SL: Was there a—what was the most—was there a time when you were working with the RAs that was particularly rewarding for you? Did—wa . . .

TM: Yeah.

SL: . . . do you have a story to tell? Is there something . . .

TM: Well, probably the s—you know, I got involved in RAs because of—I had been involved in it in New Orleans. And probably the greatest story I had to tell was when I first got started in RAs there with our church in New Orleans, and that is we had a relatively large group of boys, but we did not have a good place for them to play basketball and do things on after we had done the studies and so forth. So that was my first effort at fundraising, in order to do that. And we were trying to raise x number of dollars, and I failed. And, you know, it just blew my mind how and why people wouldn't give the dollars for something that was so important, to help get kids to come to the church, be involved, and so forth. And so that was a negative experience that turned positive because I was not going to give up. And I realized what teamwork was all about and then got

together with some other people. And then we were successful in the process because we broadened our scope, got more involved. And so I guess, you know, it was a little bit of learning from a business perspective but also [*SL coughs*] learning how important it was because the kids—trying to make a difference in their lives so—and I stayed involved in that for a period of time, probably five or six years there in El Dorado.

SL: That kind of has echoes of your mom.

TM: Yeah.

SL: You know?

TM: Don't give up.

SL: Don't give up. Was there—when you were working with the kids, were you ever one-on-one with them? Was there ever—did you ever spend any time with them?

TM: Not one-on-one as much as you know, a group of volunteers working with a group of kids, whether it would be in the, you know, the teachings or whether it would be in outings or what. But, I learned to—I learned to appreciate what we did. I learned to understand that you can do somethin' just for doing it, or you can do somethin' to make a difference. And like I said, you could see the fruits of your labor. You know, if you were doing it right, you could sometimes see the results, and you could also

see the disappointments when you didn't—either when you didn't do it right or it didn't take.

[01:27:52] SL: Just didn't take. Yeah. That's good. Alright, so kinda jumpin' back over to El Dorado, is there anything, before we leave this eleven-year period, is there anything in that eleven-year period you think that I'm—we haven't visited that we should visit?

TM: Well, [*SL coughs*] I would tell you that when I was in El Dorado there were two things that happened that were, I think, very significant. One of 'em is that I always took pretty good care of myself. I mean, I exercise, you know, regularly, but you know, nothing real big. But I always, you know, I eat right and so forth. But I decided then that I was gonna start joggin'. And one of my good friends at the time was a gentleman named Bob Shepherd. Now, Bob Shepherd, at the time, was a lawyer—new lawyer there in El Dorado—'bout 1976—[19]77—new lawyer there in El Dorado, and he was actually doing some work for our bank. Well, Bob and I started joggin' at the same time. And we started running some races. I mean, we weren't just jogging. We decided that we was gonna run some 5Ks and some 10K runs. And we were really gonna get into it. And the very first race that we ran, we had gotten near the end of the three-mile

run, and our sons were over here on the side, and they were yelling, "Run! Run faster! You can't let these people beat you!" Well, these people that they were talking about was a bo—a brother and a sister that was, at the time, twelve years old. And both of 'em beat us in [*SL laughs*] the race. But that was the beginning of my running and my jogging, and ultimately, I ran a marathon. And Bob Shepherd is now Judge Shepherd, who ultimately—well, just last year—was appointed by President [George W.] Bush as a member of the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals, so he's a federal judge here in Arkansas. I can still outrun him, but . . .

SL: I'll have to ask him about that.

TM: . . . but I—you'll probably have that opportunity. [*SL laughs*] He'll probably debate that.

SL: [*Laughs*] Well, you know, I feel responsible to get both sides of the coin.

TM: That's right. Good journalism. [*Laughter*]

SL: Well, just tryin' to get the truth. [*Laughs*]

TM: That's right.

[01:30:52] SL: Well, okay then. So what happens next in your life?

TM: Well, after [*SL coughs*] eleven great years there in El Dorado and—there was a gentleman that I had met—actually, back in

[19]78, when I moved from New Orleans to El Dorado—and his name was Louis Ramsay. And Mr. Ramsay, at the—back in 1978, was—had—was actually the CEO or was with Simmons First. He also had been the head of the law firm there, the Ramsay Bridgeforth Law Firm, or what is now known as the Ramsay Bridgeforth Law Firm. But Mr. Ramsay—back in 1978, we met each other at some banking meetings and so forth, and you know, he was the first to, you know, call and welcome me back to Arkansas. We just got to know each other and he sorta took me under his wings. And when I was still in El Dorado in 1980, he got me involved, for example, on the Board [of Directors] of Blue Cross/Blue Shield [of Arkansas]. And he was on that board, and he asked them to consider bringing me on, and they did. And so, in 1986, Hal Davis, who was the—at the time, the chairman and CEO of Simmons First, and he passed away. And W. E. Ayres, who became another one of my mentors, became chairman and CEO of the corporation, and president of Simmons First National Bank. And they brought me in. Mr. Ramsay actually talked to me about coming there. And he was on the board—he was chairman of the executive committee of the board. He talked to me about coming there. I went up and interviewed, and lo and behold, they offered me the

job. [01:33:09] So in February of 1987, I became president of the corporation and president of the bank there. And it was a— an emotional thing for me to tell my family that we were going to leave El Dorado and move to Pine Bluff, and my children's grandparents were there in El Dorado, and so it was a—it was kind of a tough time. I can remember Mr. Ramsay—we were at a board meeting in Little Rock, and we were comin' out of the meeting, and Dr. George Mitchell, who was president of Blue Cross/Blue Shield, walked out with us, and Mr. Ramsay put his arm around my shoulder, and we had told Dr. Mitchell that I was going to become part of Simmons. And Mr. Ramsay said, "Tombo," he said, "I know that you think this is gonna be tough when you tell your kids. And I know in your imagination, you think it's goin' to just be one of the toughest things you've ever done. But I'm gonna tell you that it's not gonna be near as bad as you think." Well that night I went home, and I told my kids that we were going to be moving to Pine Bluff, and one of 'em fell on the floor, started kickin' around, and said, "You're ruinin' our family. You're takin' us away from our grandparents." And I called Mr. Ramsay back, and I told him—[*SL laughs*—I said, "Mr. Ramsay, you're the smartest person I ever know, but you were wrong here." [*SL laughs*] So that was the first transition

from Pine Bluff to—I mean from El Dorado to Pine Bluff. And kids adjusted very well just like he thought they would.

SL: Well you know, that speaks well of your work that you did in El Dorado.

TM: Well, thank you.

SL: That Mr. Ramsay would have the interest in you and—now, so you're still—you're pretty young still to be . . .

TM: Forty years old.

SL: . . . to be taking on that deal now. I guess—is it—was it a much bigger organization?

TM: Oh, yeah.

SL: Yeah.

[01:35:22] TM: The bank in El Dorado was about a hundred and fifty million dollars in assets, maybe a hundred and thirty million, and at the time, Simmons First was about six hundred million dollars in assets.

SL: So that's a pretty big jump.

TM: So it was a big jump. It was a leap in faith for them, though, to take someone that was forty years old and been the president of a hundred and thirty million dollar bank and to bring them up. You know, while I was making a career move, they were certainly making a leap in faith here. But I had a great mentor

to make everything okay—was—which was W. E. Ayres. And he, too, had a mentor in Louis Ramsay that was still involved from the board's standpoint.

SL: I know . . .

TM: And that would've been 1987. Yeah.

SL: I know Louis Ramsay's revered at—up in Fayetteville.

TM: Right.

SL: I've seen video of them—may—they may have been dedicating an auditorium or something.

TM: Actually, they did there at the school of business [Sam M. Walton College of Business at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville].

[01:36:34] SL: Mh-hmm, mh-hmm. So, gosh, now you're in Pine Bluff. And what's the deal with the house? What's goin' on with the family? What's . . .

TM: Well . . .

SL: . . . where are you now?

TM: We bought a house there right on what we call Country Club Lane. It's a—it was a forty-year-old house. It was much bigger than what we had lived in before. It was what I would call old town Pine Bluff—well recognized and really—just really a nice home. And this would've been in 1987. The kids adjusted very

well to the move there. And then, I guess probably it was in— they—one of 'em would've been, like I said, eleven years old, one would've been fourteen, so—maybe it was twelve years old and fourteen—but one was started in the junior high there and one started in the middle school. And they both ended up goin' through the public school there. And my first wife and I divorced in probably about 1990, I believe. And she stayed there in town, and so the children transitioned like you would want children to do. And we certainly both stayed involved with them like we should do. And we were proud of the way that that happened.

[01:38:22] SL: Well, so how 'bout your work? How comfortable did you feel steppin' in, I mean . . .

TM: Well, I would say from the standpoint of work, again I said once before, I—you know, I was a workaholic back in New Orleans, and I continued that process in El Dorado, and I continued it into Pine Bluff. And I just love what I do. I mean, I, you know, I—I've always loved banking, and I don't know why, but I just always did. I've only been with three organizations in my life, three banks, and I—and Simmons was special. And so I, you know, I went there with the attitude that, you know, I really had the opportunity to be with a company that was well-known with some people that had the highest integrity, and I just had, you

know, the world in front of me. So I wanted to work hard. I wanted to prove that I could be successful at a higher level, and so, it was a easy transition for me. Now, once again, I probab—like I was in El Dorado, I thought I knew a whole lot more than I did. But thanks to W. E. Ayres and Mr. Ramsay, they were very patient with me over a period of several years, and I, over that several years, I continued this maturing as a banker. So the job part was always easy for me because I just love what I do.

[01:40:10] SL: Well tell me a Mr. Ayres story.

TM: Well, W. E. Ayres—both of my mentors—all three of those mentors—have passed away. And Mr. Ayres passed away this last year, and Mr. Ramsay two years ago. But Mr. Ayres was what we called a southern gentleman. I mean, he, you know, he just—ever—he was so calm, very soft-spoken, very analytical, committed to community service, committed to—he had the highest ethical standards. [01:40:51] And I could say that he learned every bit of that from his mentor, Mr. Louis Ramsay. And both of 'em took me aside when I came to Pine Bluff, and they said, "You know, we'll do a lot of things right. We'll do a lot of things wrong. But the most important thing that we do is, again, always make sure that we are gr—guided by our core values." And, certainly, the "do right rule" is a part of that that I

talked about before. The other is to get involved, that "We have an obligation to get involved in every community where we have a presence. But"—and this is the thing that I remember—"if you're gonna get involved, get involved to make a difference." That's what they said. That's what they lived. And there was not one point in time durin' my service with them that they ever compromised any of that. Highest integrity. And really, really meant that we had an obligation to try to make a difference, both with our service, our money, and so forth. Now, that sounds like, you know, motherhood, apple pie, and Chevrolet, but it's fact. That's what they believed. And that's why the culture was so good. That's why I felt so good about being a part of that organization.

SL: Well, when you hold to those values, it's easy to see why you love your work.

TM: Oh, yeah.

SL: 'Cause you—just like watching your children grow—you can see the fruits of your labor.

TM: Right.

[01:42:36] SL: Well, what about the differences between the town of El Dorado and the town of Pine Bluff?

TM: Oh, just night and day.

SL: Yeah.

TM: One of 'em had a population of 25,000; the other population was about 60,000. You know, one was built around Murphy Corporation; another was built around a lot of manufacturing, service, agri-related—just both of 'em's night-and-day difference relative to the communities. But, you know, the—while they were different, the fact is they were still Arkansans. And I can tell you there's—there—while there's a difference in the size of the community and the industry and so forth, you know, if you're from Arkansas, the people are the same. Whereas coming from New Orleans to El Dorado, the transition was much different—totally different lifestyle.

[01:43:46] SL: Were you—let's get s—maybe—can you give me a story or a conversation that you had with Mr. Ramsay?

TM: Well, I can. You know, like I said, Mr. Ramsay is the person who brought me there. Mr. Ramsay is the person that—it was not the money—the compensation package. It was not the title that made me decide to go to Pine Bluff. It was the reputation, the knowledge, the appreciation for a man of the stature and integrity of Mr. Louis Ramsay. That is fact. I mean, that is what drove me there because I knew that if he believed in it, that there was a great opportunity for me. I mean, he had shown

that when he—when, you know, he didn't even know me that well—he had just kind of taken me under his wings, and I felt like this was a continuation of that process. You know, I told you about the one conversation—the advice and counsel he said when I was telling my children . . .

SL: Right.

[01:45:02] TM: And I think that's the only time he was wrong on anything he told me. I can—when I first got there, I said, "Mr. Ramsay," I said, "I think that I do a pretty good job in the area of credit and lending, and I'm very, I think, technically qualified to do the job. I'm very involved in the communities. But," I said, "I don't know that I am very good on the political arena. And I don't know that I like that." And by the political arena, I'm not necessarily talking about political offices. I'm just talking about being involved and doing the things behind the scenes to try to help things happen or to, you know, get people all . . .

SL: Right.

[01:45:59] TM: . . . all on the same page. I said, "I think I can do it in the bank, but I don't know how good I am outside that." And he said, "Well, lemme [let me] tell you," he said, "from this point forward," he said, "your visibility is gonna be significantly higher [SL laughs] than it ever has been" . . .

SL: Yeah.

TM: . . . "number one. And number two is that you can do that, and you will do that because the bank needs you do to that, but more importantly, the community needs you to do that." And so, you know, I remember early on he was givin' me wise counsel, and he did, you know, throughout that. Mr. Ramsay and Mr. Ayres were both mentors, and Mr. Ramsay was—had been like a father to me. He actually got me involved with the university, also.

SL: Well, now, how'd he do that?

TM: Well, he did that [*SL coughs*] back in 1980—82. And 'course, by [19]82, I had—I'm sorry—yeah, nineteen—what'd I say—[19]82?

SL: Mh-hmm.

TM: Yeah. It was in 1978 that I moved to—1976—I moved to El Dorado and 1987 that I moved to Pine Bluff. So it was probably in 1982 that Mr. Ramsay said, "You know, you love the university so much. You're an alumni. You love athletics. You know all the people. You know, we ought to see if you could be involved on the [University of Arkansas] Board of Trustees or some other way." Well as you know, that's an appointed position by the governor.

SL: Governor. Mh-hmm.

TM: So, Mr. Ramsay was sort of always workin' behind the scenes, you know. That's that political side. And shortly after 1982 [Editor's Note: 1992], Jim Guy Tucker [governor of Arkansas, 1992–1996] appointed me to the Board of Trustees. And, you know, while I loved that opportunity, there was a lot goin' on in my life. Not only was our company growing significantly, but, you know, I—there was a lot of things that was changin' in my life. [01:48:30] And I had met a—my wife now in about 1992, and we dated for five years. [SL laughs] And I was about to wear out my welcome, I think . . .

SL: I'm s . . .

TM: . . . but we dated for five years. And then now we've been married for ten years. But so there was a lot going on in my life, but Mr. Ramsay knew that a natural extension of what I was doing and my love for the university was to try to get me involved. And he did, and that's how I actually ended up on the Board of Trustees.

SL: That's fun.

FE: [*Blows nose*] Excuse me.

SL: What—I ca—was—I guess he must've been a board member.

TM: He had. He had been a board member and had been

chairman . . .

SL: Chairman. Mh-hmm.

TM: . . . of the board for—back several years before that.

SL: Mh-hmm. Well, did you en—enjoy your time being on the board?

TM: Oh, I did. I mean, it was a—it was probably one of the more significant things that I've done, and I've been involved in a lot of different things. But, you know, some things you do because you probably are expected to do it. Some things you need to do for your community, for your company. And then some things, you know, you do because you really want to do it. And that was one of 'em, you know. I just love the university, and I felt like I could make a difference.

[01:50:11] SL: What was the—what were some of the things that the board was engaged in during your tenure there that—some—maybe some of the more . . .

TM: Yeah.

SL: . . . proud things that y'all got done?

TM: Well, in 1993 is when I went on the board. And again, in 1993, from the standpoint of athletics, things were pretty exciting. I mean, you know, the football program was doin' pretty well. And the basketball program was doin' exceptionally well. And,

you know, I've always been a believer that a good athletic program will complement a good academic program. And I think the two can work real well together. Sometimes you can get the priorities out of sequence, but you don't have to do that. And I just felt like that that's one thing that would be a very positive for the University of Arkansas. So during that period, from 1993 when I actually went on, there's a lot of good things going on in athletics, and [Chancellor] Dan Ferritor was doing a lot of good things relative to the University of Arkansas in academics.

[01:51:35] But remember, when I went on the board in 1993, like today, the board was the system board that had not only the University of Arkansas, but had the two law schools [Fayetteville and Little Rock campuses] and had UAMS [University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences] and had UAPB [University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff] and UAM [University of Arkansas at Monticello] and UALR [University of Arkansas at Little Rock], and we've added, you know, several two-year community colleges during that period of time. So during that ten-year period, a lot of things happened. Obviously, one of the things that was sort of controversial on the athletic side had to do with the moving of football games between Little Rock and Fayetteville. [01:52:24] Another had to do with the basketball—the change in the

basketball coach [from Nolan Richardson to Stan Heath]. All of that was during my period. In fact, some of it was during the period in which I was chairman of the board. But I can tell you, with all the things that happened that might have been a challenge, the good things far outweigh that. And my family really enjoyed that ten-year period. Not only my two children by my first marriage, but my wife, Kathryn, and I got to go to all events, travel, be involved, you know, [SL laughs] get to know all the leadership of all the campuses. And then, now my two two stepchildren also have gotten to feel that same touch, that same loyalty, that same love for the Razorbacks, and both of them are now students at the University of Arkansas. So, that ten-year period was really a good period in my life, and I will say that, at the back end of that, several things have happened.

[01:53:49] More significant was John White becoming chancellor of the University of Arkansas. And as we transitioned that, you know, John White has been a significant player in defining the future of that university. When he first came there and he said that we're gonna do some things different, he and I did not necessarily agree on those. Like the standards. When he talked about changin' the standards, I was very concerned about that. I said, "If I had those standards to meet when I was

in high school, I wouldn't be here today" . . .

SL: Yep.

TM: . . . "talkin' about it." 'Cause I could not have done it. But it was the right thing to do at the right time for that university. I was wrong and John White was right. And when you look back at it today, it's just amazing the success that we have achieved and the progress that we have gotten under his leadership. In that period of time, I made some of the best friends that I've ever had. Individuals that I've served with on the board.

[01:55:09] And met one of the greatest leaders that our state has had. And that we'll never fully appreciate all that he has done, not only for the system, but for Arkansas—and that's Dr. B. Alan Sugg [president of the University of Arkansas system].

SL: Yeah.

TM: Working with him has just been a tremendous pleasure.

FE: Tape change.

JE: Let's stop.

[Tape stopped]

[01:55:35] SL: So, yeah, John White. What a remarkable—what remarkable things have happened under his tenure. Not all of 'em easy.

TM: No. No.

SL: He's—will be the first to admit that there were some rough times . . .

TM: Sure.

SL: . . . when it sp—when he first started up, but you can't really find fault with his vision.

TM: No.

[01:56:01] SL: And, of course, probably, and well deserved, the Campaign for the Twenty-First Century got lots of positive play around the country and even internationally.

TM: Right.

SL: We—so—and you were a part of that.

TM: I was. I had an opportun . . .

SL: So, let's talk about—a little bit about that campaign and . . .

TM: Okay.

SL: . . . and you know, I was involved with that, too.

TM: Right.

SL: And I could see the camaraderie and the friendships developing as that campaign went on.

TM: Right.

SL: And so . . .

TM: Well, I will tell you that first of all, as you've already said and that I mentioned earlier, is that John White is a visionary, and he

didn't come to the University of Arkansas to maintain status quo. He really, truly believed that there was a special place for the University of Arkansas and that he had a purpose for being here. And that could be an agent for change, and change is not easy, and any time you have change, you know, there's some bad that goes with the good. But he had a vision, he had a strategic plan, and he put it in place. And a big part of that—you know, when you have a strategic plan and you're making a significant change, you're gonna stump your toe a couple of times. And even if don't stump your toe, some people are going to tell you that you [*SL laughs*] did. Well, he had the patience to persevere, and he had the support of an outstanding leader like Dr. Sugg. And part of that strategic plan was funding, and he came up with the, you know, the Campaign for the Twenty-First Century. And, you know, things don't just happen. Gifts don't just show up one day. [01:58:13] It's because somebody like John White and Dr. Dave Gearhart [vice chancellor for university advancement] and others are out there with a story, and they're able to tell their story in a way to where they're developing partners who are investing in the future. And honest to goodness, that's exactly what happened. You know, it wasn't the hundred or so people that were on the steering committee—

even though they were a big part because they, too, were giving—it was because there was a great plan, a great purpose, and everybody saw that these dollars really, truly was an investment in the future. And the University of Arkansas today, whether it be the Arkansas—I mean the Walton school of business and its ranking nationwide versus where it was, or the University of Arkansas and its ranking, or the six-year graduation rate, or the retention rate, whatever—every one of those benchmarks they have set out to measure their success, we're better on, number one. And number two, they're not easy benchmarks. They're not giveaways. So John not only had a vision, a strategy, but he developed a way to fund all of this. They were able to measure that, and you really, again, can see the fruits of the labor. And I'm just glad to have been a part of it and watch it and see it unfold. Not many universities throughout the United States will have a one billion dollar capital campaign like we have. John's vision is for real.

[01:59:49] SL: Well, an especially small school.

TM: Right.

SL: Relatively small school. You look at those other schools that have raised that kind of money, and they're—they've—they're either well established or much bigger . . .

TM: Right.

SL: . . . than the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville was.

TM: And the great thing about all that—we talked about the balance between athletics and academics. This is all making a huge dimer—difference on the academic side. And that's, you know, at the end of that day, that's what we're all about. You know, we're to bring our talent, our students, and bring 'em in, get 'em educated, give 'em the opportunity, open that door for them, and hopefully they're not only gonna go out and be better citizens and create income that are gonna pay taxes, but a lot of 'em are gonna do it here in Arkansas. And those that don't do it here in Arkansas are gonna be alumni and reinvest back. So it's a significant deal, and it's fun to watch that have unfolded over this ten-year period, and so we've enjoyed that.

[02:00:57] SL: Well, Tommy, did you gain new friendships . . .

TM: Oh, yeah.

SL: . . . with this—with your involvement with the university?

[02:01:05] TM: I did. I—'course, on the—on and off the board. You know, just with the Campaign for the Twenty-First Century, I've met people that are outside of Arkansas, that love Ark—the University of Arkansas just like I do, that will be, you know, lifetime friendships. And then on the Board of Trustees, you

know, one of my best friends is [William E.] Bill Clark. Well Bill and I, while we knew of each other, we did not know each other very well until we both got onto the Board of Trustees. And then for ten years, we worked real hard together to try to make a difference, you know. And we didn't always agree with each other, but what we did know is we had a common bond and that was the University of Arkansas and for Arkansas. [02:02:01] And so that's a friendship that developed totally on the board there. Together we had some ideas that, you know, hopefully might've—helped, might—might've made a difference. But that has been very, very special to me. And certainly not just with Bill, with, you know, all the trustees that I had the opportunity to serve with. And Dr. Sugg. Dr. Sugg, I have the greatest admiration for. I think he is the best system president in the United States of America. And I really, truly do. He—has—he gets the talent. He helps guide the talent, and he gives them the—freedoms that they need to do what they need to do. And when they need help, they have—all they have to do is call on him. He's very behind the scenes. He gives everybody else credit, but he's always got, again, a direction. [02:03:06] He always knows where we need to be going, so we will know when we've arrived. And when he and Jeannie came to Arkansas, we

got two for one. [*SL laughs*] She's just—she's spectacular in her involvement and how well she greets and meets and entertains, you know, people that are associated with the university. But she's always, you know, very positive and just a wonderful, wonderful lady. Those are two friendships that, you know, that will never, never go away. So there are lots of 'em. And I —you know, I value those.

SL: You know, my dad used to call my mom his better half.

TM: Mh-hmm.

[02:03:57] SL: You wanna talk about your better half at all?

TM: Well, I do.

SL: Well, I think we better. [*Laughs*]

TM: I think that's a good idea. [*SL laughs*] We dated for five years. I said we got married in 1996. She forgot it one day—the exact year—one anniversary, I would add, but, you know, it's usually the man that forgets the number of years. But anyway, we dated for four and a half or five years. I actually met her in church. And—a quick story—I had been single for maybe, I guess two, two and a half years maybe—no, I'm sorry—maybe, yeah, two and a half—maybe, two and a half years—maybe three years. And, you know, I was kind of shy and everything. And you know, we went to Sunday school, and I was coming out

of my Sunday school class, and she was coming out of hers, and we went into a general session together. And I had noticed her, and, you know, and I thought, "Well, boy, wouldn't it be nice if I introduce myself?" And so she's sitting there with a group of other people, and there's a chair sitting right next to her, and then there's a group of people sitting behind her. So I thought, "Well, I'll just go over and say hello." So I went over, and I sat down, and I said hello, and [SL laughs] she said hello back, and then I didn't know what to do there. And they started the session. Well, I must tell you that at that time I was a jogger. And that morning I had been jogging, and it was the midst of the summer, and I had showered and got dressed and went to school. Well, when that—when you jog and it's hot, you still perspire a little bit. Well I'm sitting next to her, and all a sudden—I'm nervous anyway—and all a sudden, I noticed that I started perspiring [SL laughs] on my forehead. And then I could feel it runnin' down the back of my neck. And then I heard some people behind us start to talk and laugh a little bit. And I know that they're talkin' about me, how nervous I am sitting next to her. [02:06:17] So, anyway, that was [SL laughs] the way we first met. And from there we—like I said, we dated for a long time, and finally she brought—brought into the process that I was

an okay guy. And oh, I guess in the summer of [19]96, I played golf with my boys, and I told 'em. I said, "I want y'all to know that I'm gonna ask Kathryn to marry me." And they said, "Oh, that's a great idea." So, you know, we planned how this was going to happen. And I don't remember exactly when it was, but we were gonna all come together for a dinner. And Kathryn was gonna come over and bring her kids, and my two boys were gonna be there, and their girlfriends who are now their wives were gonna be there. And so they did, and just before I was going to propose, I told her children—Mary Kate, who is now a twenty-two-year-old senior at the University of Arkansas, and John Daniel, who is a nineteen-year-old freshman at the University of Arkansas. At the time, they would've been six and four or so. I said, "Y'all come back to the back. I wanna tell you something." So they came back there, and I said, "I want y'all to know that tonight I'm gonna ask your mother to marry me." [SL laughs] John Daniel says, "Okay." And Mary Kate starts crying. It was a tough, you know, a tough thing for her. And so we went in there, and just before I went in to propose, my oldest son tells me he wants me to come outside and talk to me. And I'm thinking, "My gosh, what's going on?" So I go out there, and he says, "Dad, don't mess this up. [SL laughs] If

you're going to do it, you've got to do it right." And I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "You've got to get on your knee and propose." And I said, "Chris, that's just not me." [*SL laughs*] And he said, "You've got to do it." So we go in there. We all gather in the den, and I got on my knees, and I proposed, and thank goodness she said yes, [*SL laughs*] and from that point forward, everybody has . . .

SL: Well, did the . . .

TM: . . . been excited about it.

SL: . . . did the little girl like seein' that—you on the knees?

TM: I think—oh, yeah . . .

SL: It probably softened it a little bit.

TM: I think it did. And I—you know, Mary Kate has been a wonderful daughter, and John Daniel a wonderful son.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[02:09:11] TM: You know, I've had two great families, and they're just like my children. I treat 'em the same way, you know. When they don't do right, I don't mind lettin' 'em know that, and they—you know, they know that. I said they've got a great father, [*SL laughs*] and they do. And I'm, you know, I'm not gonna try to be their father, because they have a great father. But I am gonna do all I can do to, you know, to treat them like

my own, number one. And number two is where they need a little bit of guidance, I'm gonna give 'em the guidance, and I always have. And I think they generally appreciate it.

SL: Well, I—I'd—I'm just gonna have to take this story on—as it is. I'm not gonna be able to verify any of these things. But it sounds like a great, great thing for everybody.

TM: Well, it . . .

SL: Sounds like it was a good night and . . .

TM: . . . it has been.

SL: . . . all of that.

TM: And she's been a wonderful friend and a wonderful wife during that ten-year period that, again, there were—you know, I've got tough work ethics.

SL: Yep.

TM: It means I work long hours, and she's very tolerant in that process. And then when I was on the university, I traveled a lot, and I still travel a lot. She's very tolerant in that process. But it's been really good for me. She's younger than I am, I might add, thirteen years younger than I am. But she's much wiser than I am when it comes to [*SL laughs*] many decisions. And she's been there thick and thin through, you know, some of the medical challenges that I have. But she's been wonderful for me.

[02:11:00] SL: Well, I know Harry [Ryburn]—you say that she's tolerant and supportive . . .

TM: Right.

SL: . . . and he says she's tolerant and supportive of [*TM laughs*] of the work hours that you put in . . .

TM: Yeah.

SL: . . . 'cause you're a workaholic.

TM: Yeah.

SL: But I do—I did get the impression there is a point . . .

TM: Yeah.

SL: . . . where she kind of puts her foot down. You want to talk about that a little bit?

[02:11:21] TM: Well, she very seldom ever complains about the time I get home, and sometimes it's seven-thirty at night or so. But occasionally, occasionally, she'll pick up the telephone, and she will call, and she will simply say, "It's time." And when she does, then I get ready and I come home. [*SL laughs*] And—but anyway, the "It's time" is that "We're going to eat. We're gonna eat together," or "We're goin' somewhere, and we're goin' together." You know, she—our family will go on a trip once a year. We'll go to Florida. I am not much on the beach. I just don't—I don't care much for that, but everybody else does. So

we all go to the beach, all the children, the grandchildren, everybody. And she says, "I only ask one thing: that you leave when we leave and you come back when we come back seven days later. Now, everything in between, you can do what you wanna to do. If that's work, if that's be on the phone, that's fine. But we want you there with us," and—which I think is pretty positive.

SL: Yeah. That's great.

TM: That's the way she does.

[02:12:50] SL: That's great. Well, is there anything else that you wanna say about your family? I mean, I think you've painted a really good picture.

TM: Well, like I said, I've told you about my daughter and younger son, John Daniel. They're both in school there. My other two sons—I've got Chris, who is my oldest son. He is a tax lawyer with Kutack Rock in Fayetteville. And if you think I'm an avid Razorback, he's pretty close to where I am. He keeps up with everything. And he has my youngest grandson, whose name is Thomas—Christopher Thomas May, and he goes by Thomas.

SL: That's good.

TM: And he is almost three years old. And my first grandson is by my youngest son and his wife. So Chris has my second

grandson, Thomas. His wife's name is Amy. And Chris and Amy are getting ready to have my third grandson, and the due date is today as . . .

SL: Wow.

TM: . . . as we speak. And that's why I have my phone right here beside me. So, they have two of my grandchildren, and his name is going to be Ross—Ross May. Now, my second son, Chad May, is a vice president in commercial real estate with Regions Bank in Little Rock—one of my competitors.

[*SL laughs*] And he's been there for seven years. And his wife, Joye—they are the proud parents of my first grandson, whose name is Jackson Thomas May. And I love my grandkids. I mean, you said earlier, when my kids were born, what that did to me. Somebody asked me when they see me around my grandkids, they say, "Weren't you the same way around your children?" And I said, "Either no, or I don't remember."

SL: Yeah.

[02:15:09] TM: But I'm gonna tell you, the grandkids are the light in my life. I just absolutely love being around 'em. So I'm gonna have three grandchildren, all boys, and now I need a cheerleader.

SL: [*Laughs*] Well, yeah—I bet you'll get one.

TM: I hope so.

SL: I bet you will, and, you know, you kinda have a license and a expectation to spoil those kids.

TM: That's right.

SL: So that's probably the difference 'tween [between]  
[*SL sneezes*] . . .

TM: I'm doing—and I'm doing that very well.

SL: . . . [*laughs*] doing—that's good.

TM: Yeah.

SL: That's really good. Before we go on—this—to your civic stuff that's—you've adorned yourself with, I wanna get back to John White and Alan Sugg because you spoke so highly of them.

TM: Mh-hmm.

[02:16:03] SL: And—is there—can you tell me any time that you have had with Alan Sugg or an instance or a conversation that you've had with him that kind of has stuck with you in particular?

TM: Well, you know, Alan, amongst his many attributes, and there are many, but one of 'em is his sensitivity to others. You know, when, you know, whether it's—Alan wor—I don't know how many hours a day he really works. It's got to be way beyond what most people do, because when he's not working there at

the office, he is traveling somewhere like to the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff at some event that they would have or at a football game they will have. And when he's there, he's down speaking to people, and he's down talking to students, and he's down talking to the band, you know, because he loves, you know, these spirit groups and the things that they do.

[02:17:13] He is so involved, and it doesn't matter whether it's at UAPB or UAM or UALR or UAMS or Fayetteville or wherever it may be. He is one of those people that seems to—he's an "A" personality, and he's always going, but he always has time for the students. And that's the one thing that probably sticks out more to me. How can you have the level of responsibility that Alan Sugg has yet always have time for the students? There have been many, many occasions that I know about or I have seen or I have heard where Alan has gotten involved to try to help a student that needs help in a particular situation. Whether that be—whether that has to do with education or whether that has to do with a crisis or what—whether that has to do with something else. How you can do all the things that he has to do and balance all the balls that he has to balance with the board, the politics of the legislature, with the number of leaders that he has running the numerous organizations, or

with just the general public? How you can do all that and keep everybody happy, but always have time for the students. That's what will always stand out to me—it's 'cause it's in the heart.

*[TM thumps his chest with his fist]*

[02:18:56] SL: That's good. That's good. What about John White?

I mean . . .

TM: As I told you, when John first came here, John and I didn't agree on everything.

SL: I know.

TM: And I let John know what I thought, and *[laughter]* John let me know what he thought. And I was reminded—I reminded myself—and Lewis Epley, who was chairman, you know, when I—he and I visited, and he helped me remember. He said, *[SL laughs]* "Look, when we make a decision, you know, to hire somebody, you know, what we've gotta do is give them a chance to succeed." And I agree with that. And John, again, had a vision. He had a passion, and it wasn't about John. It wasn't about résumé. You know? He made a significant commitment 'cause this is where he was gonna retire. It was all about what he felt like that he should do and that he could do. And at the end of the day, as I said, he was right and I was wrong on a couple of issues. And he and I have partnered over a period of

time to try to do things together to make a difference, and John is the same way. You know, when—just think in terms of his visibility. I told John when he came here, I said, "John, you're gonna be in top-five visibility of people here in Arkansas. And you're not gonna make everybody happy. You've just gotta be yourself." Well, he—that's what he's been.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[02:20:25] TM: He's been himself. He's—he has not tried to please everybody. He has simply tried to do what he was brought here to do, and he does it better than anybody could have. And all, you know, the results speak for themselves. It's not easy. I've seen him—we talk about, you know, John and, you know, lofty expectations of him. Well, sometimes he does the things that are not very, you know, very popular. He may have to, you know, support a decision that was made that—that's not very popular. He's willing to do that if it's the right decision. If it's not, he's willing to make a change. He's also the same guy that will go to the NCAA tournament and be the cheerleader down there gettin' everybody excited and motivated and into it. And I've been to many of those games with him. And so, you know, he loves what he does, and I just think he and Alan and the whole group make a good partnership because it's all about

team. And John has put together an unbelievable team at the University of Arkansas.

SL: Yeah.

[02:21:36] TM: Not a lot—it's not about John. It's about "are we doing what we're supposed to be doing?" And when we're not, he admits it. Like I said, he puts these benchmarks out here that are not easy to achieve, and when they don't achieve it, whether it—whatever it is, whether it's retention, graduation rate, diversity, whatever it is, he steps up to the bar and says, "Hey, we're doing it here. We're not doing it here. Now, let's—this is what we're going to do about it." He's accountable for it. That's the kind of leadership that you want.

SL: Yep. Let's talk about—thank you . . .

TM: Mmm.

SL: . . . by the way, for revisiting those. [02:22:16] Let's talk about some of your favorite activities that you like to do for the community.

TM: Well, you know, earlier I said some things you do because you need to do them, whether it be for the bank or the community. There're expectations that you do those. And we all have those things that we need to be involved in, and I've, you know, I have been involved in those. And then there're some things you do

for yourself. Now, I go back to a conversation that I had with Mr. Ramsay and Mr. Ayres, and they were talking about the culture of our company. And they said, "We're only as good as the communities we serve, and that we do, in fact, have a responsibility to get involved in those communities. But if we're gonna get involved," he said, "you've got to make sure that we get involved to make a difference, not for show, but truly to make a difference—that you don't have to see your name in press. You don't have to be on TV, you know, for it to be successful. You don't have to commercialize it. That sometimes you do it because it's the right thing to do." Now, these folks believed that, and they convinced me of that. Now I think I believed it before, but they convinced me of that. And so over the years, that's what we've done with our money and with our associates. [02:23:57] This last year—well, just last week we got the Arkansas Business and the Arkansas Community Foundation philanthropic award [2006 Outstanding Philanthropic Corporation Award, in the large business category, presented by the Arkansas Community Foundation] because of our associates getting in—involved. It's because of the leadership that came way before me. Now, that means me, too. That doesn't mean everybody else. That means me, too. It's the "lead by example"

theory. I've been involved in the chamber and the United Ways and all the things that are important. And I certainly believe the United Way, because of the number of agencies it has and the number of people it supports, is huge. And I've been involved in that in every position that you can. Because, again, you can see the fruits of your labor and you can really make a difference.

[02:24:52] But one thing that I did for myself was Habitat for Humanity. That—I had the opportunity to get involved in the banker's house in Little Rock and to actually help. And I know nothing about building. I'm as—I am—I'm so not mechanical. [SL laughs] But I got involved, and I got to see the family that was going to have the American dream of having their first house, and their children having that, and the sweat equity that they put into it. [02:25:35] And I got enthralled with it. And I actually worked on the first house—or the second house with my son who was doin' it for Regions Bank. And, so over the years, I have been involved in about four of those houses, plus our organization has now built a house in Pine Bluff and in Hot Springs, and we're buildin' one in El Dorado. We call it the Simmons House. And we'll be buildin' a house in every community where we have one of our eight banks.

[02:26:11] SL: Now, when you say, "We'll be building a house,"

what is it that you're sayin' there?

TM: Well, what I'm saying is, first of all, [*SL laughs*] we contribute the total dollars to build the house—not just make a contribution—we contribute the total dollars to do that. In our case, we allow our local bank to do half of it, and our corporation does half of it. Then what we bring in is workers from all over the state that are Simmons employees, and they participate in building the house. Now they participate with the local Habitat organization, who will involve other volunteers. But we will have, you know, probably three or four Simmons days where just our people are involved in it. And we may have anywhere from twenty to twenty-five people from different areas all over the state of Arkansas. Most of 'em know what they're doin'—not all of 'em—and I'm one of the ones that don't. But when I go home, I'm tired, but I feel as good as just about anything when I do that. [02:27:23] The second one that I got involved with for me is Special Olympics. You know, I've—I consider myself a decent athlete, and I've loved to compete. You know, as I said, I've done that, you know, from a running standpoint. But you know, when I got involved in special athlete—I mean Special Olympics, that one day is as important to those kids as everything that I do on my own. It is the one day that they look

for because they're all winners. It matters not if they cross the finish line in a wheelchair or if they're barely walking or if they're very fast but they have other challenges. [02:28:17] The fact is that one day everybody's standin' up recognizing them and applaud—applauding them. So I got involved in that several years ago quite by accident, and I've only missed one or two in all the years, and I've raised money for it and so forth, but, you know, it's not I, it's we. I'm only one of many people volunteering out there. I mean, you've got as many volunteers sometimes as you do participants, and they're there because it is very special. So those are the two things that I've done. Now, I think everything that I've been involved with is important, and I don't want to lessen the significance of that. But to me those two things are what make Tommy May go to sleep at night and feel like that I've done something to really make a difference.

[02:29:23] SL: I bet your associates that are buildin' those houses are feeling the same kind of satisfaction and reward . . .

TM: They do.

SL: . . . when they go home, too. And that's a beautiful, beautiful thing for that—for your company to be doin'. That's really—that's taking the "do right" thing to the street.

TM: Right.

SL: You know it?

TM: It is. And, you know, the other thing is when you do it, other people wanna do it. And once they've done it, they get that same good feel, and they do it. And it becomes contagious. And that's, you know, that's—honestly, you know, nowhere but America, and I don't want to overdo this or overplay this, but it's what I feel. Nowhere in America do people have the opportunity to have the support and the love of the fellow citizens like they do in America. That doesn't mean there's a lotta—that does not mean that there aren't a lotta people that are deprived, and a lotta people that are suffering, a lotta people that don't get support; there are. But no place in Ameri—no place like America in people stepping up and trying to give their dollars and give their support, their service to help others help themselves. And I think that.

SL: Well, I'm right there with you. I—there is no place like America. Any other thing you wanna say about any of the civic stuff that you're doin'?

[02:31:05] TM: Well you know, I—like I said, I think all the things that I've been involved in were because there was a good reason—but it all goes back to Mr. Ramsay and Mr. Ayres—and that is to get involved to make a difference, but I'm one of just

numerous—and I don't mean just with our organization—with so many people that do that. But it is the right thing to do, and it's not because we have to do it. It's because we should do it. And we try to make that point with our people.

[02:31:41] SL: Tommy, let's talk about your current health situation.

TM: Okay.

SL: You got some bad news . . .

TM: Well, I . . .

SL: . . . and you've faced up to it, and you're movin' on. But let me just hear you talk about it a little while.

TM: Okay. Well, in December—well, actually, in September of [20]05, I started noticing that I, you know, I could not go the same distance in the same time relative to my exercise program, and I knew something was changing. There was a problem there—didn't know what it was. So I went through—went to my doctor, and we talked about it, and I went through about ninety days of testing. And then in December of 2005, at UAMS, my doctor diagnosed me with motor neuron disease and referred me to a specialist there, Dr. Rudnicki. And over the next ninety days, I went through a lot of other tests. And in March of 2006, I was diagnosed with ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), which



is Lou Gehrig['s] Disease. And it's very rare. There's not a lot of people that have the disease, and there—throughout the United States—and there is no cure. But, you know, the rest is statistics. Different people react in different ways for a, you know, for a different period of time. [02:33:46] So, you know, when I first got that news, I was—like anybody else, I was devastated with it. You know, to have an illness that has no cure for it, and certainly has statistics that show that you would not live for an extended period of time. And, you know, I just couldn't imagine how I could deal with the process. Well, I'm gonna tell you, that wife that I dated for five years and [*SL laughs*] been married for ten years, who's thirteen years younger than me and must be much smarter than I am—she, too, was devastated. But you know, I said we were in the valley, and she crawled out before I did, and she sorta pulled me out by my hair. And we began to realize that, you know, nobody's guaranteed anything and that we're gonna deal with this. And I started with my pastor, Gordon Topping, and Gordon is a wonderful friend and a wonderful pastor. And you know, he reminded me that we're—we have no guarantees. You know, we go to sleep tonight; we don't know we're gonna wake up. We go to the store; we don't know that somethin's not going to happen,

so we just take advantage of the time we have, and we never give up. And my faith—our faith—is very, very strong. And I believe—I truly do believe that God's got a purpose for me. And I believe that—I don't know exactly what it is, but I believe that He's gonna help me understand that. [02:35:31] And, you know, I'm gonna believe in a miracle—whether it be a mirac—a medical miracle or God's miracle—I'm gonna believe in it. But at the same time, I'm not going to let myself feel sorry for myself or st—you know, stop doin' the things that I think I can do, that I want to do, that I should do. Because I really do believe there's a purpose here, and I'm gonna do everything I can as long as I can to be with my family, to do what I love, and that's my job, and then to make a difference. And if that means in the volunteer things that I do or if that means in helping young bankers become better bankers, that's what I'm gonna do. And I'm proud I got a really good doctor. And I'm proud I've got a really good pastor and a wonderful wife to help me kinda keep all of this in perspective. But I say it not for show. I say it because I believe it. You know, my faith helps me believe it. And so at the of the day with all this, I've got one guarantee, and that guarantee is that, you know, at the end I know where I'm gonna be, and between now and then, I'm gonna do

everything I can to make a difference with my family, my job, and my community. Again, I know that sounds like a—apple pie, Chevrolet, and motherhood, but it's what I believe. It's what I trust. And that's what I live every day.

SL: That was great. That was great.

TM: Thank you.

SL: Thanks for talking about that.

TM: Yes sir.

SL: Not everybody could do that. You did a really good job with it.

Okay. Is there—gosh, there's so much that we have talked about, and I nev—I always worry that I've shorted somebody an opportunity to talk about what they wanna talk about. So I want you just to take a few moments here, and I want you to think about all the stuff that we've talked about.

TM: Mh-hmm.

SL: And I know that there were some things that were important to you that Kris [Katrosh, director of the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History] is doing for us. I think we've talked about most everybody that we have photographs or that we felt were important to include.

TM: Mh-hmm.

[02:38:14] SL: Is there anything that we haven't talked about or

that we haven't touched upon that we ought to be talking about?

TM: Well, I guess there was two things that I would feel like I—that I wanted to say. I think one thing is that, you know, I told you that I've had these great mentors along the way, and they really have made a difference. They cared. They, you know, they took me under their wings because they saw something that they trusted in. And what I've always wanted to do is to make them proud. You know, never do anything that would not make them proud. And I told you that I believe that it all starts with the "do right rule." And again, I tell my children that, I tell my grandchildren that, I tell anybody that's willing to listen: you never compromise the "do right rule" for any kind of gain. All you do—if you know that it's something that doesn't feel good, you stop, you back up, you look at it again, and you reevaluate your decision. I believe that is sort of the thing that I needed to do because of the trust that other people set in me. The second thing is that I talked about these three or four mentors, and I told you that they weren't here any longer. [02:39:43] And that's been a, you know, a tough thing because all a sudden I find myself at the back end of my career. And all a sudden I've become a mentor for other people. And what is important to me, whether it's through the "do right rule" or whether it's

through, you know, certainly, my own actions or the things that I do, is to make sure that someday they can look back and say, "Hey, he made a difference in my life." Now, I still have one mentor, and that mentor you talked about—you talked to earlier—and that's Dr. Harry Ryburn. [02:40:22] He is the chairman of our executive committee, and he is our lead director. He has been passionate about not only serving our company, but more so, passionate about ALS and ALS research. And I cannot tell you how many hours that he has spent in trying to understand and trying to make a difference in that particular area. I can't tell you what all he has done to assist research in that area. That's goin' above and beyond. So he's not only there as a mentor for me as is—as a banker but he's also there as a mentor for me in dealing with this challenge that I have. And he and I both know that it's, you know, it's a challenge. And we just do all we can do to deal with it. So he picks me up when I might be down a little bit, but he also is doin' all these things to try to help other patients that have this—the disease to someday find a cure. He's not the only one, but I'm gonna tell you, I'll put him at the top as far as how hard he works to make a difference there. So those are the two things that I think I'd want to say. And I guess, lastly, when I was talkin' about my

family, you know, I've said a little bit about my brother and sister and my father and my mother, and I've said about my children and my stepchildren and my wife, but I think it's also important to say that I don't know how it happened, but both of my sons—if I had gone out to pick daughter-in-laws—and I mean this—I could not have picked daughter-in-laws any better than what they picked, number one. And number two is that they could not have picked in-laws any better than they had. [SL laughs] And I said, "So we have been blessed in that." And, so I love 'em all, and they're special.

[02:42:55] SL: Okay, Tommy. Let's talk about some descriptors of you by other folks. If people were to say, "Describe Tommy May," what would they be sayin'?

TM: Well, I think a lotta people would say that "he is ultraconservative." And they would probably add to that that "he is tight." Now I probably get that from my dad. That would be one thing. Also, that you can—when you think in terms of Tommy May, you can think in terms of a black suit, a white shirt, and either a red tie or a black and red tie. And I've had people say with that black and red tie, they'd say, "Is that the only tie you have?" And I say, "No, I've got five of 'em just like it." And so I'm, you know, I'm pretty—you can expect what you're gonna

see with me. I think the other thing that a lot of people would say is that "he is a white-knuckle flyer." Over the many years on the Board of Trustees, I've had the opportunity to fly in a lot of small planes. I did not, I do not, and I will not ever like flying. [SL laughs] I am not only a [clock chimes] white-knuckle flyer; I get a death grip on it. And, generally speaking, I don't take it off until we land. [SL laughs] I'll tell you one story. [02:44:33] When John White was being interviewed or after he had been interviewed and selected, they had an open house for him in Fayetteville—at the Bank of Fayetteville. All the trustees were there. We flew up—Bill Clark, myself, and Frances Cranford—flew up for it, and there was a thunderstorm while we were there—while we were in the party. We got ready to leave, and this thunderstorm was still around. We got to the airport; the pilot says, "Not a problem. It's north of us." I said, "Not a problem. I'm driving." [SL laughs] Bill Clark, Frances Cranford, and the pilot talked me into getting in that plane. We flew to Little Rock in a storm all the way with the plane sliding from one side to the other—rain beating in on the side. We landed in Little Rock. Well, before we landed in Little Rock, I had a death grip. Frances Cranford, who's a Presbyterian, was sitting there tellin' me, "It's gonna be okay. Don't worry about it." I told her

to stop talkin' about it. [*SL laughs*] We landed in Little Rock. I didn't say a word. They opened the door. I got my briefcase. I went and I got in my car, and I said nothin' to Bill Clark, Frances Cranford, [*SL laughs*] or the pilot because I was terribly upset with 'em. But those are the things that probably people would remember me for, and none of 'em are very good.

[02:46:09] SL: [*Laughs*] Okay, now what about your cars?

TM: Well, you know, I'm—for the last five years—actually, for the last five cars which would have been for the last fifteen years, I have had a black [Ford] Crown Victoria every time. And the only difference between the cars would be a little pinstripe down the side that would either be blue, white, or orange. And nobody ever knew that I had a new car because it was always the same.

SL: The same. [*Laughs*]

TM: And somebody said, "Why do you do that? Why don't you stretch out a little bit?" And I said, "Why change if you like it?"

SL: [*Laughs*] There you go. That's good.

[02:46:57 End of Interview]

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