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

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Arkansas Memories Project

Steve Womack

Interviewed by Scott Lunsford and Robyn Ledbetter

February 20, 2020

Fayetteville, 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 and video files, and photographs are made available on the Pryor Center Web site at https://pryorcenter.uark.edu/. The Pryor Center recommends that researchers utilize the video recordings 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 17th 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; and
  - annotations for clarification and identification.
- Commas are used in a conventional manner where possible to aid in readability.

Citation Information

See the Citation Guide at http://pryorcenter.uark.edu/about.php.

Steve Womack was interviewed by Scott Lunsford and Robyn Ledbetter on February 20, 2020.

[00:00:00]

Scott Lunsford: Congressman Womack, it is a great honor to have you [*laughs*] sitting across from me here at the Pryor Center. I—I can't thank you enough for this time. I'm a—and I know our time is very short today. And please feel free to do this again with us.

Steve Womack: Sure.

SL: These—our—my interviews usually take five hours . . .

SW: Mm-hmm.

SL: . . . and a lunch break, and so I feel like we're just gonna kind of skim over some stuff today. Um—but . . .

SW: Well, we'll come back.

SL: Good, thank you.

SW: How's that?

SL: Thank you. I love that news.

SW: Yeah, unless we get it all covered . . .

SL: [*Laughs*] It ain't going to happen.

SW: . . . here in the—in the—in the first ten minutes.

SL: It's not gonna happen. All right, so formally this is the sec—uh—February 20, 2020. We're at the Pryor Center in Fayetteville,

Arkansas. I'm Scott Lunsford, you're Congressman Steve Womack, and we're gonna do a Pryor Center—start a Pryor Center interview today. Uh—my part of today's effort is Arkansas Memories.

SW: Mm-hmm.

SL: Uh—there will be another person come in—Robyn'll come in, and we'll—we'll do the—uh—blue wave . . .

SW: Yeah.

SL: . . . uh—things and . . .

SW: Talk more about politics.

SL: Yeah, yeah. So I'll try to spare you that.

SW: Sure.

[00:01:12] SL: [*Laughs*] For this. Um—so—um—you were born in—uh—1959.

SW: [Nineteen] fifty-seven.

SL: [Nineteen] fifty-seven.

SW: Mm-hmm.

SL: In Russellville.

SW: Russellville.

SL: But then shortly after . . .

SW: Hospital's still there, by the way.

SL: Is that right?

SW: The hosp—hall—the hospital I was born in, still there. Um—1957, February 18.

SL: What—and the name of the hospital is?

SW: St. Mary's.

SL: St. Mary's.

SW: Mm-hmm.

SL: That's good. I was born in . . .

SW: West Main—West Main Street.

SL: I was born . . .

[00:01:44] SW: Born there . . .

SL: Oh, go ahead.

SW: . . . but—um—Scott, didn't live there very long. My dad graduated in 1957 . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

SW: . . . right after I was born, and—uh—immediately took a job up in Missouri. So as an infant, as a baby . . .

SL: Mm-hmm.

SW: . . . our family moved from Russellville to Missouri. We moved to a place called Higginsville.

SL: Mm-hmm.

SW: [*Clears throat*] And that's in—kind of west, northwest central Missouri.

SL: Mm-hmm.

SW: And there my dad was a radio broadcaster for KLEX radio in Lexington, right outside of Higginsville. And we lived in Higginsville five years.

SL: Mm-hmm.

SW: And—uh—so I—I was there from [19]57 to [19]62, have almost zero memories . . .

SL: Hmm.

SW: . . . uh—of living in that area. But we moved in 1962 to Moberly.

SL: Okay.

[00:02:50] SW: And I have a lot of memories there. When you go K–10 in a town of about 12,000 people, Moberly, you—you have a lot of memories. As I tell people, that's where you get your nose bloodied, that's where you have your first love, you know, those kinds of things.

SL: Absolutely.

SW: So—uh—grew up there. Vivid memories of—uh—the homes we lived in. Um—can—and it's kind of funny how your mind is, but I can remember some detail—uh—about things. I—um—I can remember my phone number . . .

SL: Yeah. [*Laughs*]

SW: . . . there.

SL: Uh-huh.

SW: 816-263-4826. I don't know why and how. I can't remember a phone number I had as an adult—uh—in Rogers, but I can remember my phone number. We lived for a few years in a place—uh—on Concannon Street in Moberly. Uh—1007 Concannon. Uh—not very far from the—uh—school and the church where we attended. And then—uh—I can't remember when we moved, but my dad got an opportunity to buy what I thought was this beautiful home, not quite a mansion . . .

SL: Mm-hmm.

SW: . . . but just—nice place at 323 Farror Street, *F-A-R-R-O-R* Street, at the corner of Porter and Farror on the other side of town in Moberly and—and that's where we lived until we left in 1973. [00:04:42] I—kind of funny how your mind works but I—I have a vivid memory of a guy turning the corner one night. My dad parked his car—about a 1967 Chevy Impala . . .

SL: Okay.

SW: . . . I think is what it was. Parked on the side of the road on Porter Street, there at the corner where we lived. Guy turned the corner and hit our car and caved in the left rear of it. That car, I remember the license plate number. [*SL laughs*] *Z-L-O-*

2-7-1. It—how and why? I have no idea. Just a vivid memory of a significant event when I was a kid and the license plate number of that car, but anyway. Lived there—uh—went to East Park Elementary School. Uh—and one of my vivid memories of elementary school—um—of which I have many, was in the classroom, typical classroom, our chalkboards were also attached on—um—kind of a pole structure that you could literally open like a door. And there were a series of them, and when you opened them—they opened and that—there was a closet there. So where you would hang your coat was behind the chalkboard.

SL: Wow. [*Laughs*]

[00:06:19] SW: And I—I have a vivid memory of that setup in the—in the classroom. Many years later, in 2016—uh—my dad and I—uh—were invited back to Moberly for the fiftieth anniversary of their—um—third junior college national championship team, and my dad was the sports broadcaster, so we were invited back for that. And one of the things we did while we were there was we went to visit my old elementary school, which is no longer a school, but it's owned by the schools, and it's kind of a place—it's—they've turned it into offices and those kinds of things.

SL: Uh-huh. Administrative.

SW: But the doggone blackboards, those blackboards that turn and open, still there.

SL: Wow.

SW: Still in the classrooms.

SL: Wow. [*Laughs*]

SW: And the stage where we would have our assemblies—I j—I just remember with—with great memories—uh—the—uh—you know, the—the facilities where I w—as a kid that I would go to school. And—um—anyway, it was a—that was—that was a pretty remarkable time in my life, you know. I—you just remember some . . .

SL: Yeah.

SW: . . . things of your childhood like that that—that you just cherish forever.

[00:07:44] SL: Le—let's go back to—um—um—some of your earliest memories and—uh—do you—can—what is your earliest memory of your mother?

SW: Oh, boy. Um—be—because my dad and mom had four kids back to back to back to back . . .

SL: Mm-hmm.

SW: . . . one year after another, beginning in nineteen s—uh—in 1955 my brother was born, [19]56, my sister Kathy, then me,

then my sister Susie in [19]58, my—my earliest memories of my mom were basically—uh—as a toddler—her hand washing cotton diapers in the commodes, in the toilets . . .

SL: Yep.

SW: . . . of our home. And that's—that was—that precedes all the disposables you have . . .

SL: Yeah. Absolutely.

SW: . . . today. And—uh—vivid memories of that, vivid memories of my—uh—mom just kind of cartin' us around, you know, the four of us kids. You know, Susie is an infant, I'm not far from that.

SL: Right.

SW: Kathy and Jim, toddlers now, but—uh—that's—I—I—I suppose that would be the earliest memory. That would probably even be post Higginsville.

SL: Mm-hmm.

[00:09:11] SW: I don't—I don't have a lot of memory of living in Higginsville with one exception. And that—maybe two. One exception was there was—um—a killer on the loose in the general vicinity where we lived, kind of out the country in Higginsville. And I remember the police coming to our home, and it was a scary time because it was a killer, and he was loose, and . . .

SL: Right.

SW: . . . and they thought they had sighted this individual very close to our home. And so I remember that, not much, but I remember that. [00:09:52] And then I also remember going with my dad downtown to a café where he did a live radio broadcaster—remote broadcast fr—and he would know the name of the café. I don't. Uh—I remember a family there that we—we associated with at church named Vahrenberg but—uh—I remember going to that restaurant. My brother was with me, and dad would take us there probably because they didn't have any other daycare or something like that. My mom was busy maybe with the two sisters but—um—but those would be the earliest memories I have. Uh—and obviously as a newborn baby, no recollection of being born and . . .

SL: Right, right.

SW: . . . and leaving town. Although I have great memories of leaving Russellville—uh—you know, when I moved to Rogers back many years later . . .

SL: Right.

SW: . . . in 1979.

SL: Right.

SW: Most of my childhood memories are from Moberly.

[00:10:54] SL: So—um—your father was—uh—a radio broadcaster . . .

SW: Mm-hmm.

SL: . . . is that right? This is a—you know, s—uh—most of the folks I've interviewed are older, and I always ask about technology, what technology was in the house growing up. And some can remember the first radio and obviously the first TV, but you were—y—you were already indoctrinated in to—uh—radio technology.

SW: Mm-hmm.

SL: So I'm assuming you had great ray . . .

SW: Wasn't much technology but . . .

SL: Well—um—I mean . . .

SW: But I—I was exposed to . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

SW: . . . reel-to-reel tape.

SL: There you go.

SW: I was exposed to 33 1/3 rpm . . .

SL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

SW: . . . records and 45s.

SL: Right.

SW: Um—and of course I was in radio later in life. So very familiar

with . . .

SL: Right.

SW: . . . with those. Um—and—and I think even when—when w—when Dad first started that this preceded what we call now the—well, what we called back in the day the cart machine.

SL: Mm-hmm.

SW: Kind of the four-track . . .

SL: Yes.

SW: . . . cart machine that you would erase and then reuse.

SL: Mm-hmm.

SW: Uh—but it was basically reel-to-reel tape and live. Live radio. That's why dad did this—uh—program in Higginsville for this restaurant. Uh—and I think it—I think it was called *Higginsville Today* or something like that.

SL: Right.

[00:12:20] SW: But—uh—those were the old days. A lot of it was live copy—uh—lot of things on reel-to-reel. So—um—and then as, you know, time marched on, that technology changed. I—and honestly, I couldn't walk in to a radio booth today and—I could learn, but I wouldn't know the first thing to do to try to engineer. . .

SL: Produce something. Yeah.

SW: . . . engineer or produce something.

SL: Right. Right. Um—so . . .

SW: But I would be really good with a reel-to-reel machine.

SL: [*Laughs*] Me, too.

SW: And I . . .

SL: That's where I cut my teeth.

SW: . . . I had a—there was a guy that I worked with later in life named Ken White who was—he—he taught me how to splice reel-to-reel tape.

SL: Mm-hmm.

SW: And you needed to do that. That was your—that was the way you edited back in the day.

SL: That's right, there was no electronic editing.

[00:13:05] SW: And he was really good at editing reel-to-reel tape, and I became really good at it. And all I really needed was good, clear Scotch tape and a—and a pretty—uh—precise—uh—razor or e—X-acto tool kinda . . .

SL: Right.

SW: . . . deal, and you just put it on the table, tape it down where you wanna splice, and then cut the two sides, and make sure there's no sticky piece exposed, and—and I could do the—**Ken White** taught me how to do that. I could do that very well but—

uh—no, those were the—that was how you did it back in those days.

SL: Yeah. I grew up with that. I—I mean, I had a recording studio, and so everything you've described, I'm very familiar with. The editing block . . .

SW: Mm-hmm.

SL: In fact, we still—I still have an editing block in my edit suite.

SW: See, I didn't need the editing block. I could do it.

SL: You could just do it on the table.

SW: I could do it right there on a—as long as the table's clean, I could do it.

SL: Yeah. Yeah.

SW: As long as I could get Scotch tape to stick to it, I could do it.

SL: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I've done that.

[00:14:05] SW: By the way, I still have reel-to-reel tapes of my high school football games . . .

SL: Ah.

SW: . . . some of my football games that my dad broadcast, and I have those on reel-to-reel tape.

SL: We're about to have our fifty-year class reunion here in Fayetteville, and—um—I've got the—uh—all of the football game films that I'm about to digitize. So . . .

SW: I'll tell you another—uh—tape I have. And I probably oughta give it to you guys.

SL: Okay.

SW: Uh—I b—I believe I have this one. I have two reel-to-reel tapes of the program put on by Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Little Rock . . .

SL: Okay.

SW: . . . where I went—um—as a broadcaster and recorded for playback. The—the—they used to do an annual Toast & Roast.

SL: Okay.

[00:15:02] SW: And I believe I have the Toast & Roast—I—I could be—I know I have the one they did of Lou Holtz.

SL: Good.

SW: And I believe I have the one they did of David Pryor.

SL: Excellent. Those will be worth preserving.

SW: Uh—I'm gonna dig—I'm gonna dig in my—uh—my home archives because that tape probably belongs here at the Pryor Center, I would think.

SL: I—I would love that.

SW: Yeah.

SL: Yeah. We would love that.

SW: I'm gonna—I—I will make it a point to look for that.

[00:15:32] SL: Thank you. Thank you. So—um—we haven't talked anything about your grandparents. And first of all, your mother's name was . . .

SW: Elisabeth with an *S*.

SL: Uh-huh.

SW: Not a *Z*.

SL: I've read—I've read that.

SW: Elisabeth.

SL: Uh-huh.

SW: Elisabeth Fry Canerday, then Womack. [00:15:55] Um—her mom and dad were Lonus and Hester. Lonus was a heavy equipment operator—uh—masterful with a back hoe or—um—probab—mainly a bulldozer and liked to fish, had a boat—uh—that we spent a lot of time out on Lake Dardanelle . . .

SL: Mm-hmm.

SW: . . . during the summers, tubing and skiing and things like that. Hester—uh—I d—I don't recall her working as a child, as a grandchild, but I'm sure she did. I—I know she was a bowler. And—and I . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

SW: . . . and I think my mom tells me about her days playing the piano, and they—they were very social people, Lonus and

Hester. Lonus died—um—and I can't remember the year, but he was up there in years, but nothing compared to his widow, who lived to 104. Hester died at the age of 104 at a nursing home down at Russellville.

SL: Mm-hmm.

[00:17:15] SW: And—uh—not too long ago. But I—I—very vivid memories of my grandparents. Probably notably, was the fact that they lived in a house trailer . . .

SL: Hmm.

SW: . . . and that was normal to me, you know, just . . .

SL: Right.

SW: . . . we'd go see Grandpa and Grandma Canerday, and they lived in a house trailer, and—um—and I was always—uh—you know, just kinda—uh—impressed by the fact that when you walked in, the kitchen was to your right, the living was right there, and then you go down this narrow corridor, and a bedroom, b—bath, and bedroom.

SL: Right.

SW: And—uh—but as a k—as a child I never thought anything of it today. Um—but that was on my mom's side. My dad's side, they were older . . .

SL: Mm-hmm.

SW: . . . and they lived on a farm outside of Danville in a place called Ranger . . .

SL: Okay.

SW: . . . off of Highway 27—um—at the—uh—Ranger Free Will Baptist Church on Highway 27. You would turn back, I guess, to the east and exactly a—one mile down a dirt road would be their house. Earliest memories of visiting Grandpa and Grandma Womack, two things. One, they drew their water from a well. That was—I remember that.

[00:18:59] SL: Not a pump but dropped a bucket?

SW: T—they—uh—actually it—it did have a—a—some kind of a pump. He would drop a cylinder . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

SW: . . . down and then—and then bring it up. Maybe it was on a pulley, I—I—I—I don't really have a vivid memory of how it was done, I just remember . . .

SL: Mm-hmm.

SW: . . . my grandfather drawing water—uh—in the outhouse.

SL: Yeah.

SW: No indoor plumbing initially. Later, yes . . .

SL: Mm-hmm.

SW: . . . but not initially. And—um—and where the outhouse set.

And—um—you know, when I speak of that to my kids and my grandkids, they—there's no connectivity there. They—they can't imagine something like that.

SL: They can't imagine that. Right.

SW: But I remember that. I think it was sometime really early in my childhood that they actually got electrification there.

SL: Uh-huh.

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:20:04] SW: But anyway, lived on that farm. And it was an old frame house with a smokehouse behind it. And then up on the hill, a barn. And they ran cattle both on the home side of the dirt road, and then on the other side, there was several acres out there, and I remember some big pine trees, and he'd run cattle down there. He had a couple of horses, and we were kinda fascinated with the horses.

SL: Sure.

SW: But we lived in town in Missouri.

SL: Right.

SW: So we come visit. This was our first and only real experience with . . .

SL: Farmland.

SW: . . . rural living.

SL: Right.

SW: When we would—and because my grandparents were older than my mom's side, and because my cousins on my dad's side were hardly ever there at the same time with us and didn't live in the area—they were in Little Rock and North Little Rock—I hardly saw them. Every once in a while, we'd be there together maybe for a day, for a dinner, or for a night, and then everybody would depart. But because on my mom's side, my cousins, who were a little older than us but not too far away, lived in that area, so naturally, where did the kids wanna spend the night? My mom and dad would often stay at Grandpa Womack's house.

SL: Right.

[00:21:31] SW: And then the kids—they'd get rid of us, and we'd go to our cousin's house, the Baggetts, up on Highway 7, north of Russellville on that little white house that sits there today, and right next to a place we affectionately knew as the strip pits.

SL: [*Laughs*] The strip pits.

SW: Which was just kind of an excavated area right there by Lake Dardanelle, and that's where we would go swimming. And it was about quarter of a mile, maybe, south of the house, and we just—barefoot and go down there and no concerns at all, no lifeguard, none of that . . .

SL: Right. Right.

SW: . . . just, you know, that's where we went swimming. So but that was—that's what we would do as kids. That's what we wanted to do because we had—we were close enough in age, and the fact that they were a little older than we were, you know . . .

SL: Yeah.

SW: . . . you know how that goes.

SL: You got to . . .

[00:22:28] SW: We got to do some . . .

SL: Neat stuff [*laughs*].

SW: . . . neat stuff, you know, which you couldn't do over at Ranger because you're not in town, you're out on a farm . . .

SL: Right.

SW: . . . you're isolated. My brother Jim enjoyed staying out on the Ranger farm more so than I did. He was more connected, I guess, to my grandfather than I was. He was two years older than I was. But we, you know, we had a remarkable childhood. But listen, we were living Missouri. We were almost 400 miles away.

SL: It's a big trip.

SW: And one of my great childhood memories is—because my dad

couldn't join us on all vacations. My dad was in the National Guard, so naturally when he would do his two-week summer camp before all of the federal protections that you have now, he would have to take his vacation to go do National Guard, and my mom would load up the kids. We had one of those station wagons like Chevy Chase, you know, we had the wood panel side on it . . .

SL: Sure.

SW: . . . the crank-down back window.

SL: Absolutely.

[00:23:41] SW: And we'd load up, and mom would take us six, then seven kids 'cause Chris came later, and we'd drive that 400 miles, and we were excited because we were gonna drive right through Lake of the Ozarks.

SL: Yeah.

SW: And back in those days, they had arcades, and they had touristy kind of stuff.

SL: Right.

SW: And f—you know, like weird things you'd see, and they'd have billboards promoting it, and we, "Yeah, let's go there. Let's go there." And we'd stop and see the cow with five legs and six feet [*SL laughs*] and the house, the old rickety house, where the

water ran . . .

SL: Ran upward.

SW: . . . uphill . . .

SL: Yeah.

SW: . . . and those kinds of things. And we would always spend at least a few hours there at the Bagnell Dam and in that area, and then we would come on down into Arkansas. Drive Highway 7 from Harrison through Pelsor, go by Dogpatch, all that . . .

SL: One of the greatest drives.

SW: . . . and come down. And Marble Falls, see all that. [00:24:58] And then we came through Dover, we knew that we were almost there. That here in a few minutes, there on the right, we were gonna pull into that house, that little bitty frame house, and we were gonna be with Mike, Pat, Sharon, and Jeff, our four cousins. And we were gonna go have a lot of fun. Remember that. And then when we would take that same station wagon over to visit Grandpa Womack—remember, we have to come—go through Dardanelle, come down Highway 27. When we get to the Ranger Free Will Baptist Church, we'd have to stop. Why? 'Cause remember, there's all of us kids, some of us are in that third row seat facing . . .

SL: Facing backwards.

SW: . . . outside . . .

SL: Yeah.

SW: . . . and the window was down because it's summer. And we'd have . . .

SL: Dirt road.

SW: . . . to stop and roll that window up because if you didn't, as soon as you hit that dirt road, all that dust kicked up would come—be sucked right in the back of there 'cause—so you—the last mile, you'd have to roll up the window.

SL: I've had similar experiences myself. We had a station wagon like that, and we always went on Sunday drives. And mom and dad met in Cass, Arkansas. So all of our cousins . . .

SW: You've been there. You know what I'm talking about.

[00:26:20] SL: Been there, yeah. I know exactly what you're talking about, and we loved it, too, as kid—as children. We had a great time in that station wagon. Even as late as junior high school when I started in rock-and-roll bands, my mom—we would load up that station wagon with our band equipment and she would . . .

SW: Yeah.

SL: . . . take us everywhere. It was a great childhood. So you mentioned your siblings. Say—can you give us—tell us a little

something about your siblings, too.

[00:26:52] SW: Yeah. There were—well, I had six brothers—I have six brothers and sisters. Jim was the oldest, then Kathy, then me, then Susie, that was the four in a row. [*SL laughs*] That happened, you know, early in my parent's marriage. Then there was a gap of four years, and then Linda was born, ironically enough, on my birthday.

SL: Wow.

SW: And then I think it was a couple of years later, then Margaret, and that was probably it. At—you know, and I guess in the minds of my family, you know, it was gonna be Mom and Dad and six kids. And then a few years later, surprise.

SL: [*Laughs*]. That happens.

SW: Here comes number seven, and Chris was born. I don't have the memories, as it were, of Chris in our f—i—you know, in our family situation because by the time Chris was born, I'm a teenager.

SL: You're on to the social life, yeah.

SW: And you know, he's a kid.

SL: Right.

SW: And let my younger siblings deal with that. And I was more into athletics and band and doing those kinds of things and,

eventually, obviously, after college, moved away. So I don't have the same level of memory I—with Chris as I do with Margaret, Linda, and the rest of them. But no, we kinda looked out for each other, we hung out with each other. There were four girls and eventually three boys, but I spent most of my younger days, my Moberly days, there on sandlot playing baseball in the summer time or football in the fall. And I mean, we just li—we lived to be outdoors. And back then you didn't have a lot of air conditioning.

SL: Right.

[00:28:56] SW: We had an old window unit in our house. In that really nice home on Farror Street, we had a window air conditioner, and I know in the real hot period of times, particularly at night when you're trying to sleep, and kids' bedrooms were upstairs, we would come down and just kinda make a pallet near that air conditioner . . .

SL: Absolutely.

SW: . . . and sleep there. But most of my childhood memories were Moberly related and East Park School related or West Park Methodist Church related or, you know, related to just outdoor activities, Boy Scouts, Cub Scouts and the things—swimming lessons, Red Cross swimming lessons . . .

SL: Yeah.

SW: . . . and those kinds—I mean, those are just the things that my mom had us doing while Dad's doing his radio business and working all the time.

[00:29:47] SL: So your mom—were you all given any kind of responsibilities around the house? I mean . . .

SW: Oh, a few chores. Carry out the trash, you know, make your bed . . .

SL: Good . . .

SW: . . . which . . .

SL: . . . you made your own bed.

SW: . . . we—well . . .

SL: Kind of. [*Laughs*]

SW: . . . you're supposed to.

SL: Yeah.

SW: Yeah, we had household chores. It was a . . .

SL: Help with the dishes?

SW: That was the girl's job.

SL: There you go. I mean . . .

SW: You know what I mean?

SL: Yeah.

SW: Nah, I didn't do dishes. I don't recall doing dishes.

SL: We did.

SW: Yeah.

SL: We were—I was part of a fall crop.

SW: When you got four sisters . . .

SL: Yeah.

SW: . . . and two brothers, you can divvy that work up.

SL: Yeah.

[00:30:36] SW: But no, I don't—my brother, when he was like in junior high, he had a lawn mower and clippers. No weed eaters. I'm talking hand clippers.

SL: Yeah.

SW: And he'd make some extra money cutting some yards, and I always kind of envied that, thinking, "Boy, I wish I could do that. He's making a little pocket change." I don't recall if we were on allowances, but I will say this, my mom was a very generous person.

SL: Okay.

SW: Is a very—she—I mean, she's still with us today. Very generous person. She wanted the kids to have what the kids wanted and—to a fault. And it did cause for some problems in our family growing up, you know, some—money was tight.

SL: Sure.

SW: Dad was working. Mom did a l—Mom did work some but not consistently and forever, but she wanted us to have things. So at Christmas it was tough to—for her to give a Christmas to seven kids that she wanted us to have. We couldn't afford that, but somehow she tried, and we—you know, like I say, it did cause a few dustups in our house, you know, over money, financial things.

SL: Sure.

[00:32:08] SW: I don't think it's terribly different than maybe it is today for families that are stressed on income trying to meet the needs of their kids. A lot easier back then than it is today. W—I don't—we—back then we couldn't survive the cost of everything and what kids want and really need, I guess, today, in terms of electronics and those kinds of things.

SL: Right.

SW: The things that my mom was trying to do for us were basic. You know, it was clothes, it was decent jeans and shirts and shoes and bicycles and ball gloves and those kinds of things. And while expensive, nothing like you see today. But because of the numbers involved . . .

SL: Yeah.

SW: How do you do that?

SL: Well, I can't imagine the meals.

SW: Yeah.

SL: Just like feeding seven kids.

SW: Oh yeah. Yeah, feeding. So and my mom was a great cook, and she always had great food for us. We just—I don't know how she did it, but she was—boy, when we served pork chops on Sunday, there's a bunch of them. And then compounding some of that problem was the fact that my dad was a sports broadcaster for the local junior college and the radio station.

SL: Right.

[00:33:28] SW: And my dad actively recruited for the coach back then, who was the late Cotton Fitzsimmons who went on . . .

SL: I know that name.

SW: . . . to coach in the NBA. My dad and Cotton were dear friends, close friends. Dad broadcast his ball games, recruited for him, and then on Friday nights in high school, Cotton was his color man for high school football. But my dad would recruit these players from Savannah, Georgia, and Charleston, South Carolina, where we had—he had a brother living down there and knew about some of these prospects. And unlike—ter—totally different than recruiting today. But back then, you know, they became like family members to us. And—these players from

Moberly. And now think about this, this is the only thing in town, the junior college and a nationally competitive basketball team. And every one of us kids, all of us, my bro—my sis—my friends, my brothers, my sisters, everybody worshiped the Moberly Greyhounds. We thought that was the cat's meow. And these players would come over to our house and eat of our food, you know, from time to time. So but, yeah, my mom was, oh, remarkable.

[00:34:57] SL: So your fa—did your father travel to do the recruiting?

SW: No. He did it over the phone basically with his contacts. And he would travel when there were games.

SL: That was I—yeah, I was going to . . .

SW: So . . .

SL: . . . roll around to that.

SW: Yeah, so—and so the Moberly . . .

SL: So—you remote broadcast . . .

SW: . . . the Moberly team would travel in basically automobiles. They would load up in four or five . . .

SL: Wow.

SW: . . . Cadillac cars and then be kind of a caravan to the games. I remember the team physician, Doc McCormick, and his wife,

Mabel—they had a black Cadillac, always had a black Cadillac. And they'd load three or four of those players in there, and off we'd go. And my dad would take the radio station car, the red Rover, and we would get in those caravans and go with him. And dad would take Jim, my brother, and me to kind of give my mom a break. We would—and we wanted to go.

SL: Sure.

SW: I mean, going to a Moberly basketball game was special. And when you traveled like we did, you always got out of school early.

SL: Yeah. There's that. Yeah. [*Laughs*]

[00:36:06] SW: So my dad would show up at school and check my brother and I out. And my friends would say, "Oh, you lucky thing. You're gonna get to go to the ball game tonight in Burlington, Iowa. Unbelievable." And then they would listen to the games, and then my brother or me would give—keep the score during the game. And my dad would let us get on the radio and give the scoring summary at halftime. So all my friends are listening at home.

SL: That's so great.

SW: I wa—look, I was a big deal to a lot of my buddies.

SL: Oh, man, absolutely.

SW: So my brother did it sooner than I did because he was older, but no, we did that. We traveled all over. Highland, Illinois; Burlington, Iowa; Ottumwa, Iowa—just, you know, all around Missouri, you know, State Fair College at Sedalia and Mineral area, down in St. Louis area, we'd just travel, travel, travel. And then we'd—every March we ended up at the National Junior College tournament in Hutchinson, Kansas. And that was a big deal 'cause we were out of school a whole week and go with the team. So that was—probably of my childhood memories, some of my most fondest memories were with my dad following the Moberly Greyhounds. I loved that.

[00:37:40] SL: That sounds great. So how'd that—did that impact your schoolwork?

SW: We would get our assignments. Our teachers worked with us. Look, our teachers are going to be listening that night.

SL: [*Laughs*] Yeah.

SW: Everybody was a Moberly fan.

SL: Right, right.

SW: But no, they would work with us on that. Give us our assignments, and we'd take our books and study. And when you—I mean, if you just go on a day, that's one thing. But when you go to the national tournament . . .

SL: Right.

SW: . . . and you're gone for the better part of an entire week, you know, that was a little more difficult. But yeah, we had time that we would study.

[00:38:22] SL: So were either of your parents helpful with your studies? Did you—I mean, did you get help with math or history?

SW: I don't really have recollections of needing a lot of assistance with my studies. My brother was two years older. My sister was a year older. I think most of my help came from . . .

SL: From your siblings.

SW: . . . my siblings . . .

SL: Yeah. That's handy.

SW: . . . because they were knowledgeable. My brother is a really smart guy. I wasn't that smart. [*SL laughs*] My brother was brilliant. He went to West Point. So . . .

SL: Oh, that's . . .

SW: . . . he, yeah, he was he was a brilliant guy. Still is today. But Jim, yeah, if—I don't have a lot of recollection of it. Plus in my schooling because—our peer groups studied a lot together, you know, there at school. In fact at Moberly High School my freshman and sophomore years, before I moved back to

Arkansas, we were on a modular system. And I don't know of a school that does it this way before or after. And I don't think Moberly does it anymore, but back then, we were on what we called a six-day schedule.

SL: Okay.

[00:39:42] SW: Even though we went Monday through Friday, it was a six-day schedule. And on days one, three, and five, you would set up your class schedule a certain way. And then on days two, four, and six, you'd set it up a certain way. But on each of the days, if you were in athletics, that was a protected timeframe. And if you were in band, and I was, that was also—that met at one time. So you were at—in those classes at the same time every day, but everything else, you just kind of plugged in the classes you wanted at the time. And then you could set your schedule up where you could be pretty heavy academically on days one, three . . .

SL: Monday, Wednesday.

SW: . . . and five.

SL: Right.

SW: And then on days, two, four, and six have kind of lighter schedules and build in study halls. So we naturally got a lot of our work done in study hall.

SL: In stud—sure.

SW: And then it was also set up so as to better accommodate kids that needed to go to the orthodontist or the doctor or whatever because you could use your free mods. Mods were twenty minutes long, so a three-mod class was a one-hour class. So let's say you had a three-mod break in the middle of the day. Your parents could pick you up, take you to your doctor's appointment, get you back, you didn't miss anything. It was a—I loved that schedule. That modular system kind of was like college.

SL: Yeah. I think Fayetteville used that for a brief time when I was in junior high school.

SW: All you needed to know was not what day of the week it was, but what is the day? Is it day one, three . . .

SL: Three or five.

SW: . . . or five? Or is it day two, four, or six?

SL: Four—yeah.

SW: 'Cause obviously day six could be on a Monday if you went to school the week before,

[00:41:39] SL: So you were in the school band?

SW: I was. Played trombone. My brother played the—in his band he played the saxophone, but I played the trombone. I was a

decent trombonist. I even went to band camp one year up at Northeast Missouri State in Kirksville, now Truman University. Played in a jazz band. I loved playing the trombone. And it was always—a guy named Tommy Fannon and I—classmates, good friends—competed for first chair. We were both pretty good, and he'd get it sometimes, I'd get it sometimes, but we were—and we were both athletes, so we played sports. But in Moberly, you did that.

SL: You did both?

[00:42:28] SW: You did both. Which when I moved from Moberly back to . . .

SL: Russellville.

SW: . . . Russellville in 1973, I just automatically assumed I'd do both. Little did I know, 'cause I was terribly unfamiliar with the school, is that you did one or the other. But I mean, there wasn't a prohibition, so when I signed up for school—I moved in the summer, so in August when I signed up for school, I signed up for band and athletics. And so I was in the marching band, but I was given exemption from marching because I was . . .

SL: A player.

SW: A player.

SL: Athletic player.

SW: So in—at Moberly, I would play football, and then at halftime, when the team went into the locker room, I'd take my helmet off, grab my trombone, and I'd march on the field.

SL: And you liked that.

SW: Oh, I loved it.

SL: Yeah.

SW: It was fun. It was what you did. And it—I wasn't the only one. But when I moved to Russellville, I found out I was the only one doing that. [00:43:44] So when did I leave band? It was my junior year. It was about the third game of the year. We were playing Sylvan Hills.

SL: Okay. Little Rock team.

SW: North Little Rock.

SL: Yeah.

SW: We are up 16–0. I remember a defensive back on the Sylvan Hills team named Randy McReynolds. Randy was a year ahead of me, and his brother, younger brother, ended up playing Razorbacks baseball and went on to the major leagues. Kevin McReynolds.

SL: Yeah.

SW: Randy was a defensive back. Anyway, we had taken a 16–0 lead, it's late in the first half. So what's the band doing?

SL: They're getting at the end z—lining up in the end zone.

SW: They're in the end zone. They're lining up getting . . .

SL: Yep.

SW: . . . ready to do the halftime show.

SL: Sure.

SW: And we recover a fumble midfield, and I'm a split end, I'm a wide receiver. We ran a wishbone formation, and basically we use the wide receivers to shuttle the plays in and out. So Mike Baker, Steve Womack—we're, you know, taking each other's place.

SL: Right.

SW: And our job was basically couriers.

SL: Right.

SW: Carry the play in. [*SL laughs*] So we recover this fumble, there's only a few seconds left in the half. Lewis Ray, our offensive coordinator, and Lewis McCollum, Poochy McCollum, our head coach huddle real quickly and say, "Let's go get another one." And Lewis Ray grabs me by the jersey, pulls me up, and says, "Split right, three thirteen, down, out, and down on one," and shoves me in the game.

SL: Okay.

SW: So I'm carrying this play in. As I take about two steps onto the

field, it hits me. We're about to throw. And we're about to throw to me. [*SL laughs*] Because I'm the split end, and I'm the guy that's gonna go down, out, and down.

SL: Right.

[00:45:54] SW: So my job is to go down, give a head—you know, like an out pattern . . .

SL: Right.

SW: . . . give a little head fake, hopefully Randy McReynolds bites on it, and then I pass him, and Larry Anderson, our quarterback throws this perfect spiral, Joe Montana style, and I catch it, go in the end zone. That's how it's designed to work. That's not really what happened. I go run my route, and Randy does bite, and I'm way behind him, and Larry Anderson throws a dyin' duck. I mean, it's just like—throws it up there. [*SL laughs*] And right in the area where Randy McReynolds has moved to.

SL: Oh no.

SW: And Randy goes up to intercept the ball, and it hits his shoulder pad, flies up in the air, and I'm behind him five yards, and it just lands in my hands at about the ten-yard line. So what do I do? I turn around and run into the end zone for a touchdown. And I run right through . . .

SL: The band.

SW: . . . the band. [*SL laughs*] We take a 23–0 lead.

SL: Right.

SW: Sylvan Hills comes back in the second half, scores two touchdowns, I think has another one called back, and we ended up winning the game 23–16. Monday morning above the band room, big banner, "The Russellville Cyclones got a victory thanks to a band student."

SL: [*Laughs*] Oh God.

SW: Something to that effect.

SL: All right. Yeah. Yeah.

SW: And my football teammates gave me no end of heck over that.

SL: [*Laughs*] I can imagine.

SW: And that's when I quit band. True story.

[00:47:53] SL: Yeah. I've never known anyone that did both.

SW: Yeah.

SL: Yeah.

SW: Well, it was routine in a small school in Missouri.

SL: Yeah.

SW: We did it. My brother did it, I did it. My sister did it. My sister was also in the band. So but we just liked band. I had braces in my—when I first got into band the—Mr. Schrader, this band equipment salesman, heavyset guy, told my parents that

because I was going to have braces, I couldn't really play the trombone, that I needed to play the flute. [*SL laughs*] Try that one on.

SL: That's a big difference.

SW: I played the trombone.

[00:48:34] SL: Yeah. Yeah. Well, I love the idea that you were in a jazz band.

SW: Oh, I loved jazz band. Woody Herman's "Woodchopper's Ball," those kinds of songs.

SL: Yeah.

SW: We loved that. We had a really, really good jazz band. We had re—pretty good musicians for a small school like that. We always competed—well, you know, I went to state contest every year and would, you know, do a solo or something and earn a medal. Yeah, we did—and our—you know, the kids that I hung out with, we were all in band. You know, Doug Stansberry?

SW: Yeah.

SL: He was a trumpet player. Mike Parrish, one of my best friends, lived in my neighborhood, was—he played clarinet. Carrie Smith played trombone, Tommy Fannon, trombone. These are all kids that—we played in the band, we played basketball, we played football, and ran track. I mean, it's just what you did. And

there were others

SW: You had a great, great childhood.

SL: There were others.

SL: Great growin' up.

Sarah Moore: Excuse me, you guys. We're at ten minutes until ten o'clock.

SL: Okay. All right.

SW: Well, I'm just—I'm tearing it up. Right?

[00:49:49] SL: You're doing great. Doin' great. Listen, what about—did your house, growing up, have a piano in it?

SW: Did not.

SL: Did not.

SW: Did not. Church did, West Park Methodist. My mom was a pianist. And so—and my dad liked to sing. I think there was just some ar—some natural performing artistic talent in our family. You can't tell by me, but I—we just liked that. We enjoyed doing it.

SL: So in your home then, it was just the trombone?

SW: Yeah. We—that and, you'll appreciate this, the radio back then.

SL: Yes. Console?

SW: Big, tall piece of, I don't know, mahogany or cherry . . .

SL: Right.

SW: . . . with the dial on it and the speakers down here.

SL: Great. Great woofers.

SW: Big one.

SL: Yeah.

SW: Big, big one. Sat on—I mean, it was—we had a TV, but the radio was a huge piece of furniture that was a radio. We'd sit around there and listen to songs, listen to Razorback games when it would skip off the ionosphere out of, you know, KAAY Little Rock—bout, you know, I guess—what, 1090 or whatever the frequency was.

SL: Right.

[00:51:17] SW: We could get Razorback games. Listen to Bud Campbell, some of those games.

SL: They were great.

SW: Yeah.

SL: It was great stuff. My dad and I used to map those games. We would chart each play . . .

SW: Yeah. Wow.

SL: . . . you know. It, yeah, it was a way of life for us anytime the Razorbacks were on radio.

SW: Yeah. Well, we didn't have any—I do—you know, I say we didn't have a piano. Seem to me like we did have a piano once upon a

time, but I can't remember if we had it in Moberly or not. I just don't remember if we had. Now that you've piqued my curiosity, I'll call mom today, and I'll ask her, and she'll set me straight.

SL: [*Laughs*] Well, you know, pianos—in earlier times they served as a social function, too, within the home.

SW: Sure.

SL: I mean, usually it was gathering around, and the mom would—or a older sibling would play hymns, and there would be kind of a family gathering and just—you know, and then friends and neighbors would come in, and the church pastor . . .

SW: Yeah. Yeah.

SL: . . . might come in for lunch on Sundays or something. And so there was a real unifying thing based around music and making it yourself.

SW: Yeah.

SL: So . . .

[00:52:46] SW: Most of our musical stuff, you know, church choir, things like that, were over at West Park Methodist church where we went to—West Park was really close to the 1007 Concannon address where we lived briefly, and it was across town, but we stayed at that church. And so Mom sang in the choir. My brother and I and sisters, we all had parts in church choirs. And

we were in choir in school. And so whenever there was a Christmas concert, those kind of—we, you know, we were typically there. They did high school musicals at the school. I remember I was in high school musicals. I tried out for *Fiddler on the Roof*.

SL: Yeah.

SW: I was gonna try out for Motel the tailor. I think it was my sophomore year. Could have been freshmen. And Jonean Ratliff the—I did my tryout, you know, and Jonean cast me as Nachum the beggar. [*SL laughs*] And I thought, "Well, I don't want to be Nachum the beggar."

SL: Right.

[00:53:53] SW: "Well, that's what you're gonna be." And I memorize my lines on the very first day. You know, "Alms for the poor. Alms for the poor." Then Tevye gives you a coin, and you say, "Oh, one kopek? Last week you gave me two kopeks." Tevye says, "It was a tough week." "You had a bad week. Why should I suffer?" That was my—those were my lines. So I told Miss Ratliff, "Thanks, but no, thanks. I'm gonna take a position on the trombone in the orchestra." And I did, and I played in the orchestra.

SL: You were so busy in school.

SW: Pretty busy.

SL: I mean you had . . .

SW: Yeah.

SL: You were a . . .

SW: My brother . . .

SL: . . . band member, a athlete.

SW: My brother was Perchik on *Fiddler on the Roof*. So he had an acting role.

SL: Right.

SW: But I just played in the orchestra. I just couldn't see myself being . . .

SL: It—a lot of time. That would take up a lot of your time for those few lines. Yeah.

SW: Anyway. But I was still there because I played in the orchestra. But anyway, it was a fun time.

[00:54:52] SL: So I know we have just a few minutes, but we've broached the subject of church and your involvement with that. So I'm assuming it was a Baptist church that . . .

SW: No, it was a Methodist.

SL: . . . or Methodist . . .

SW: Methodist.

SL: . . . church.

SW: Yeah. Methodist church.

SL: I'm Methodist myself.

SW: I was a Methodist for forever. And then my wife and I got married in [19]84. She was kind of Baptist. And so I kind of started going to the Baptist church. I was okay with that.

SL: Yeah.

SW: They were dunkers, and I was a sprinkler. [*SL laughs*] You know?

SL: Yeah, yeah.

[00:55:29] SW: But anyway, I was married in a Methodist church. Terry and I got married in the Methodist church in Rogers, downtown. And but, no, a lot of growing up—we were active in Vacation Bible School every year.

SL: MYF?

SW: Yes, sure were. It was just what you did.

SL: Yeah.

SW: It was close by. You were walking distance from the church.

SL: Did the church sponsor the local Boy Scout troop?

SW: I don't recall. My brother was really active in Boy Scouts, later became an Eagle Scout. I wasn't. I—he went—his track—because he was very intellectual, self-motivated, all those kinds of things. I was more hang out with my buddies, and that's why

Jim ended up going to West Point, and I went up to ROTC, you know.

SL: Right.

SW: I wanted to be in a fraternity and do all those kinds of things. So we were just different in personality. But he did things his way, and I did things my way, and they worked for both of us. And but I looked up to Jim. He was two years older. I was probably the better athlete, although he was a race walk champion in AAU competition. But I was, you know, starting football player and basketball player, things like that. Jim was much more academically capable than I was. A brilliant guy, great writer and—even to this day. And we communicate a l—he lives in Carolina. We communicate a lot, almost daily, just about. [00:57:11] And we're both big Cardinal fans . . .

SL: Okay.

SW: . . . we're St. Louis Cardinal fans . . .

SL: I was gonna . . .

SW: We were both in the stands in 1968, right field, when Mickey Lolich beat Bob Gibson, game seven, [19]68 series.

SL: Wow.

SW: Detroit won. We both cried all the way home. [*SL laughs*] But we—no, we grew up Cardinal fans. You'd take your transistor

radio, that little bitty transistor . . .

SL: Yep.

SW: . . . and that earpiece. And we had desks that you'd lift up, and your books would be in there, and you'd pull it down, and that was your writing surface.

SL: Right.

[00:57:41] SW: We'd stick our radios in there and have the earpiece, thinking we were fooling the teacher.

SL: Right.

SW: You never fooled the teacher. And we'd listen to—those games were always in the daytime . . .

SL: Yeah.

SW: . . . back then, 1960s. And we were just huge Cardinal fans. And my dad got us seats in the right-field bleachers in [19]68 and went to the game, he and I. And, oh, memory, great memory. And follow them to this day. Just a—those—some of the things you do. And then, course, once you move to Arkansas, you then naturally become a Razorback fan. And even though I kinda grew up near Columbia and was an MU fan . . .

SL: Right.

SW: . . . Big 8 fan, those kinds of things, Southwest Conference. So I was able to make that transition. And it was kind of a pride

thing for me too because all of my buddies up in Missouri were Big 8 people.

SL: Right.

SW: And now I can be different. I'm a Southwest Conference guy.

SL: Right.

SW: And we're better than you guys, you know.

SL: [*Laughs*] I know that very well. Well . . .

SM: Okay, you guys. We're right at an hour.

SL: Okay. All right. We'll cut it off here.

SW: Can't . . .

SL: I so much want to get back with you whenever we can.

SW: Well, we'll do that.

SL: Okay.

SW: I'll be more than happy to. We can pick it up from here, maybe carry it through, you know, go on through college.

SL: Yeah, I'll take . . .

SW: Because there's a lot of things that have influenced my life that are part and parcel to who I am today that were—in those years between the time—it was a tough breakup in [19]73 when my dad told us we were moving to Arkansas.

SL: Yeah.

SW: That was hard. And but those two years of high school, four

years of college at Russellville, and then the transition to Rogers were some of the most important times of my life. And then later, when we talk politics, we'll be able to delve into some of the what-fors and whys . . .

SL: Yeah.

SW: . . . all of that that led us to where we are today. But my childhood was pretty important to me in the . . .

SL: Oh, I think that's where the paths are set, really.

[00:59:56] SW: Yeah. And I will say this, kind of a wrap-up to this segment. My mom was the aspirin of my life. My dad was the discipline . . .

SL: Okay.

SW: . . . of my life. And I needed both. I really needed both. I wouldn't have turned out worth a hoot if my dad hadn't—had disciplined me and my brother. He cut our hair. He—we were different than our buddies.

SL: Yeah.

SW: We had sh—back in those days . . .

SL: Yeah.

SW: . . . long hair. We had short hair.

SL: Yep.

SW: My dad cut our hair. My dad reigned over that family with kind

of an iron fist. And he didn't spare the rod, okay?

SL: Yeah, I hear that.

[01:00:57] SW: My mom was always that source of comfort. When you got your butt blistered for good reason . . .

SL: Right.

SW: . . . and you needed to find somebody with a sympathetic ear, and my mom was that person. That's why—I've often wondered, you know, "How would I characterize them?" And that's the best I can do. My dad was my discipline in my life, and my mom was the aspirin in my life, so . . .

SL: That's a good way of putting it.

SW: And to this day, still the same way. And they're both still going. So. Thank you.

SL: Thank you.

SW: You bet.

SL: We'll get back together. Let's take a little break.

SW: Yep.

[Recording stopped]

[01:01:37] Robyn Ledbetter: Congressman Womack, thank you so much for joining us to se . . .

SW: Honored to be here.

RL: . . . today. And my name is Robyn Ledbetter. I'm the Director

of Student Media and a part of the faculty in the School of Journalism and Strategic Media.

SW: Good for you.

RL: So it's a pleasure to be here to talk and to explore the history of our great state of Arkansas and the evolution of it from blue to red. And so if you would, let's start with your background a little bit and how you—would you define yourself as a member of the Republican Party, and what type of member are you? Are you conservative, more moderate? And how does that define, do you think, your perspective of our state?

[01:02:13] SW: Oh, series of great questions. As I was growing up, I was not terribly politically involved. You know, no College Republicans, you know, Teen Republicans. None of that kind of stuff existed back in the day. The closest I got to politics was the fact that my father was a broadcaster, and is today. And in Missouri where I grew up, my dad would carry my brother and me around to different events where he would be covering politics. Back then it was Governor Warren Hearnes and Senator Tom Eagleton and those kinds of people. Then when we moved to Arkansas, my father still being in the radio business, I was consumed with school athletics. Later in college working at a radio station covering things that involved politics—but fraternity

president and those kinds of things. I was more engaged in my world than I was in the political world. And I had believed all along that I would follow in my dad's footsteps, that I would get into broadcasting, and I did. And my father and I established a radio station in Northwest Arkansas in 1979, and I operated that station, managed it, sold ads for it, broadcast on it till 1990. And in that eleven years, we covered city council meetings, school board meetings, quorum court meetings. You know, I was engaged in politics, but from the reporter's perspective, which you totally get . . .

RL: Absolutely.

SW: . . . since that's what you do.

RL: Yes.

[01:04:14] SW: And when you do it as much and as often as I did as a reporter, you can't help but every once in a while sit back and think, "Man, I can do that. I can do that political work better than those bozos." You know what I mean?

RL: Yes. [*Laughs*] Yes.

SW: Yeah, you can't help but come home and write a story and say—you know, I'm doing my story thinking, "Man, we got some real lulus out here that are serving in public office.'" It . . .

RL: Or, "Gosh, I wish I could coach them and they could take my

class."

SW: Sure.

RL: "Learn how to talk in front of a camera." [*Laughs*]

[01:04:51] SW: So anyway, as time evolved—and then I left the broadcast business in [19]90 and took a job at the University of Arkansas in the ROTC program there and was there six years. And that's what gave me the separation from radio business, reporter, newsman, those kinds of things to now a private citizen. And I guess I had been bitten somewhere along the line with the political bug and became interested in serving some politics and got elected to a city council member—as a city council member and all that. [01:05:26] But to answer your question, I never really considered myself something, Democrat, Republican. This may surprise a lot of my Democrat friends, but you know, Arkansas was a Democrat state in my growing-up years. I remember working on the campaign of Jim Guy Tucker in the late [19]70s when he ran for the Senate and—ultimately defeated by David Pryor. I—but I didn't consider myself—whether it be considered a liberal or a conservative or a moderate. I just considered myself what everybody else was, and that's pretty much a—probably a conservative Democrat. And but I was never really deeply involved in any partisan kind

of activity. And that probably weighed pretty heavily on me when I got el—ultimately got elected in 1998 as a mayor. I didn't run as a Republican mayor. I didn't run as a Democrat mayor. I ran as—I ran for the job of mayor in a non-partisan, municipal race. And for those twelve years, which are arguably the most important twelve years of my political career and upbringing because that was my political upbringing. That was my real first taste in politics. [*Laughs*] It wasn't about Republican and Democrat. It wasn't about conservative or liberal. It was about doing the work of the people that elected me. [01:07:24] And now, as I look back on that time, I was driven by conservative principles. So from that standpoint, it was easy for me to finally label myself as a conservative because I believed in smaller government, I believed in lower taxes, I believed in less regulation. And I believed in personal freedom, that people probably under some management and some structure can kinda police themselves, and we don't need Big Brother doing it. Now that was at a municipal level. And you don't get involved in a whole lot of partisan talk at the local level of politics. You didn't then, and you still don't, even today. So for those twelve years, from 1998 through 2010 and all the time before then, I really didn't—I didn't really label myself.

[01:08:30] RL: Well, let's go back to the [19]90s in Arkansas.

SW: Okay.

RL: And sort of diving into Arkansas history, do you remember what the partisan landscape in Northwest Arkansas looked like then, and then for the rest of the state, after that. But particularly focusing on the [19]90s.

SW: Well, on the [19]90s, it was clearly trending republ—well, in—where I live . . .

RL: Right.

SW: . . . it was very Republican. Now in the rest of the state, it was still pretty heavily Democrat. If you recall, up until 2010, there was only one Republican, really, in the House and in the Senate. In fact there wasn't a Republican in the Senate. John Boozman was the Republican in the House. And then in 2010 when that election unfolded, there was this major change that had taken place. And we can come back to that era. So in the [19]90s, it was still a very Democrat oriented state. I think—and I don't know when this trend started changing, but I think it was some time in that timeframe when the national party, national Democrat party, began to move further and quicker to the left. And I think it left a lot of very conservative Democrats kind of struggling with their i—political identity. It really came home in

2010. So in that first decade of the new millennium, that trend really accelerated, and I think it culminated with a sea change in in the federal elected body of politics. And we saw it at the state level probably as a harbinger, that it wasn't so much that people were changing their stripes, their deeply held beliefs. It was the fact that the national party that they identified with was moving in a direction that they weren't comfortable with, for the most part. Now there were some exceptions to that, and still are, too, to this day. But I think it was some time in that late [19]90s, first part of the new millennium that that national party began to take a much more liberal view of things, and people started i—thinking, "You know, I'm not real sure that I'm one of them anymore. The party's leaving me. I'm not leaving the party." [01:11:18] And I think it culminated in 2010 with that massive election where I got elected to Congress. I wasn't looking to run for Congress. I—John Boozman starts running for the Senate. I remember very well having a conversation in the Rogers post office one day [*RL laughs*] with John Boozman in the fall of [20]09, and asked him, you know, "Are you gonna challenge?" because Blanche was gonna be up in [20]10. I said, "You gonna challenge?" "Oh, you know, it's—you ought to think about it." You know, he's telling me I ought to think about it. And then

after the Obamacare passed and after Scott wa—or Scott Brown got elected to the US Senate, that changed everything. And so his seat opens, and I'm a mayor. I'm pretty successful mayor. We've done a lot of good stuff. We've got a lot of momentum going on in town. And the fact is, Rogers was the biggest city in the most Republican county in the state of Arkansas, and I had a lot of people just say, "Hey, you know, you've done a great job as mayor. I don't want to lose you, but really you ought to take a look at this race." And so we jumped in. And it was in that 2010 race that I think we saw the manifestation of this sea change in the body politic in Arkansas, where all of a sudden we go from one Democrat representative or one Republican representative in the federal elected positions in our—of the six to one—basically two Democrats. One in the Senate, one in the House: Mike Ross, Mark Pryor. And then, of course, that changed and then changed again. So now it's all Republican. [01:13:04] But I think it was that lead-up to that Tea Party craze in 2010 that you actually saw the values of the national party on the Democrat side move away from the conservative nature of the people of the great state of Arkansas, and they started then identifying as Republicans. And now when you look at it, clearly the rural areas, which were traditionally Democrat,

are solidly Republican today.

RL: Right. Right. Right.

SW: And if there are any vulnerabilities in these federal elected positions, clearly, the Second District in Arkansas, which is always gonna be contested because of Pulaski County. And then the Third District of Arkansas people believe is kinda changing its color just a little bit because of the Walmart phenomenon, supplier community, and those kinds of things. But still pretty heavily Republican. But that's kinda how I look at that time sequence.

RL: Sure.

SW: And if you saw a time lapse, I think you could start seeing some red hues coming across in the [19]90s and then in the early 2000s and then all of a sudden, bam, 2010, it really, really made itself—and I think Obamacare had a lot to do with that because that was the culminating event that led to that sea change in the 2010 election and beyond.

[01:14:30] RL: We—you mentioned several key people, and that's the next question. You mentioned Boozman and him being a key figure as a Republican in Arkansas at that time. Who were the prominent key players in both the Republican and Democratic Party in Arkansas at that time? Aside from

?Newmidge? and Boozman, who else do you see as being prominent figures during that . . .

SW: Well, let's not forget Fay Boozman.

RL: Yes.

SW: Let's—we have to remember Fay. He, you know, passed away in 2005 from an accident. But Fay was an early trailblazer. Of course, Mike Huckabee was an early trailblazer.

RL: Sure.

SW: He ran for statewide office and didn't do so well. [01:15:13] But there were others. Win Rockefeller clearly was one of our trailblazers. And in the local area where I live, you know, it was guys like Beck Scott and Rex Spivey. You know, they were Republican long before Republican was cool. June Pelphrey and some of those folks. I'll miss some when you start naming names. But these were all people that had very strong, deeply held conservative beliefs and were the Republican stalwarts long before the Republican Party had any relevance. You know, you can put Asa Hutchinson in that mix, too, because Asa tried a few times running for public office and not getting anywhere. And I remember, even as a broadcaster back in the [19]80s, that up until about 1982-ish, early [19]80s, that if you ran for countywide office in Benton County, Arkansas, under any

designation other than Democrat, you weren't gonna win.

RL: Really?

[01:16:22] SW: I remem—in fa—you can check me on this, but I believe that the last person to run countywide in Benton County, Arkansas, successfully as a Democrat was either Sid McCollum, who ran for judge, and I think it was a partisan deal back in those days, or possibly David Clinger as the prosecuting attorney in the Nineteenth Judicial District. [*RL laughs*] And then of course, Clinger eventually switches to the Republican Party and becomes a circuit judge. And since that time, since the early [19]80s, Benton County has been solidly Republican, but there are a lot of people that believe it's always been that way. Even though John Paul Hammerschmidt . . .

RL: Yes.

SW: . . . was elected in the mid-[19]60s. But the Republican strength back in those days was certainly not in Benton County, Arkansas, as it would be today. It was, you know, the strength of a Boone County and Sebastian County and some of those kind of places. So but there were a lot of people that were involved in the structure of the Republican Party and tried and tried and tried, even without success, for all those years. And then finally got some traction and have—but I always consider them the real

pioneers of the party back in those days.

[01:17:53] RL: You also mentioned how voters changed in rural counties in Arkansas and what Northwest Arkansas looked like and how that shaped. What do you believe—particularly during that time and even the evolution of moving into the 2000s—who were the core voters?

SW: Well, you know, you had—not unlike most places, you had pockets of liberal ideas in the more populated areas, you know, the metropolitan areas, if we really had any of those.

RL: [*Laughs*] Right.

[01:18:33] SW: I mean, Little Rock's about—there's some people that consider Little Rock, you know, a small town, you know, comparatively. And but the rural voter out there was—you know, it was kinda like it was their duty to vote like their daddies and their granddaddies voted. And their daddies and their granddaddies were all Democrats. They were all conservative Democrats, but they were Democrats. And for the most part, the people getting elected to public office, statewide and otherwise, were not terribly liberal. A couple of exceptions. But back in those days, I mean, in the days of, you know—in my adult life, you know, it was Bumpers, Pryor, those kind of folks. Even before then, you know, the McClellans and the Wilbur

Millses and the longstanding political leaders of our state. I don't know that you could accurately describe them as full-blown liberals. Probably the closest it would come would be Vic Snyder who ra—who had the Second District. But I wouldn't necessarily classify, you know, some of the other representatives that served the Democrat Party as crazy, liberal-minded people.

RL: [*Laughs*] Right. Right.

[01:19:54] SW: They represented Arkansas in a way that their daddies and granddaddies had represented. I'll give you an example. So the Congressional Prayer Room in Washington, DC, at the Capitol right off the Speaker's office was created by a joint resolution of Congress that was written by Brooks Hays. Brooks was a representative in the 1950s and was a very conservative Democrat and felt like there oughta be a place of worship or expressions of faith in the Capitol permanently, and he drafted this resolution that was signed into law. And I go in there frequently. Well, Brooks Hays was a native of Pope County, Arkansas, from Russellville. [*RL laughs*] Represented the Fifth District of Arkansas back when we had five. One time we had seven. And Brooks Hays was one of the few lay citizens ever elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

RL: Hmm.

SW: And which oughta tell you a little bit about his politics. He was a Democrat.

RL: A conservative Democrat.

SW: A very conservative Democrat. And there was an entire litany going back decades in Arkansas of very conservative Democrats that served our country, and if were alive today and if were seeking public office today because of what they believed, matters of life, matters of Second Amendment, matters of governance, of personal responsibility, accountability, the rule of law, go through the entire litany of things that you probably have an opinion about, they'd be Republicans today.

RL: Mm-hmm.

[01:21:47] SW: No question. So that's why I say I don't think s— that the change of the party was so much a reflection of people leaving a party. I think it was more a reflection of the party leaving the people. And then one day when they write about 2020, which is where we are today . . .

RL: Boy, is it ever pivotal. Sure.

SW: . . . they might be talking about 2020 in such a way that that's when the party, the Democrat Party, really took a turn, even a harder turn, to the left. But I, you know, I don't know. I kinda live in the moment, and I just happened to be coming around at

a time as a mayor in a non-partisan situation where a lot of the things that I believed matched up with the party that I identified with . . .

RL: Right.

SW: . . . and that happened to have kind of a stronghold on the seat that I occupy here today.

[01:22:52] RL: So what elections or people—even issues that you recall being super pivotal during that time, too, during your time—and it can even move you—re—mention the early 2000s. But what are the elections and people that you see being extremely instrumental in that change for Arkansas?

SW: I don't have a vivid recollection of the issues that dominated the political landscape in all of those years. I'd have to probably go back and reminisce on some of the things that I covered as a newsman and as a reporter. I have real strong, you know, recollections of the culminating events that have kinda led to where we are today, namely Obamacare in 2009. I'm reminded often, and I'd like to remind people often, that most everything that our country did over time, whether it was welfare reform or, you know, the creation of the social safety net programs in the [19]30s and the [19]60s, even going back to the creation of, you know, the Internal Revenue Service and the Revenue Act of

[19]13 that when you look at the history of key issues over time, if you put 'em all up on a timeline, you'll notice that every single one of them had bipartisan support. And that was a hallmark of our country. And I think it was kinda what the founders had in mind . . .

RL: Of course.

SW: . . . that we were gonna have these viewpoints, and we were gonna have to try to merge 'em somehow, which meant we gonna have to compromise. [01:24:33] And we didn't—we haven't done such a very good job of that lately. [*RL laughs*] But back then, we did a pretty good job of it, and that's how we got some of these landmark things through. And then 2009, you know, it was a one-sided redo of the healthcare, and then even later, on the Republican side, a one-sided revisit of the tax code. And so recently—I say recently. In the last decade or so, we've seen we've seen landmark legislation passed with one chamber, with one political perspective. And I'm not real sure that serves our country very well that we're not any better today as we used to be at sitting down at a table and hammering things out. There's a lot of reasons for that, not the least of which is social media. [*RL laughs*] But totally different era. And I think that the political experts, the political historians need to remind

themselves from time to time that the things that drove political decisions, aside from your familial relationships to parties—my daddy voted this way, so that's how I am. That thing—that all bets are off today because of the ability to get information at the—you know, at your fingertips. Even when you're not looking for it, it's there. And now on the advent of AI, artificial intelligence, and a whole lot of other things that are now infiltrating the decision-making process and the political processes, that we're in a much different era today. And I think that's part of what's dividing us as a country, but that's totally different subject. I just—I don't recall the major issues of the day. I think they were more personality in nature. In other words, it was the VIP status or the celebrity status of the individuals that were seeking those offices. And . . .

[01:26:56] RL: Who were those people that you see—you think are—particularly Arkansas?

SW: Well, in my adult life, you know, it's the Bumpers, Pryor, then younger Pryor. Boozman even before him. 'Cause I—look, I have strong memories of John Paul Hammerschmidt serving . . .

RL: Yes.

SW: . . . in the Congress. I didn't know many of the—I guess I had shaken hands with and causally knew some of the other

members, whether it was a Vic Snyder or whether it was, you know, some of the other representatives, Republican and Democrat, on other parts of our state 'cause I was confined to the Northwest quadrant.

RL: Right, right.

SW: And that's who I interacted with for the most part. And clearly Bill Clinton. I mean, you can't overlook the Clinton time he was governor. The time he got beat by Frank White and then recaptured the governor's office and then, as we all know, went on to became president. So that was—it was just hard to overcome the celebrity status of people like that who represented a party, and everybody else wanted to be like that individual, so they were part of that party. I'm not real sure it was so much, "I feel this strongly about this issue, and so therefore that makes me a Democrat or makes me a Republican." I think it was more following in the footsteps of the celebrity politician that happened to be that person that you looked up to in your state.

[01:28:37] RL: Who would you say that was that for you? Who—you mentioned Hammerschmidt, among others, but who was that person for you? If you think back through your time that—as a young politician or the mayor of Rogers, what was that like

for you?

SW: Well, look, I always admired John Paul. Man, I interviewed him so many times. He was a gracious man, and I knew how he took care of his constituants. It was a big part of John Paul's legacy, and that's const

ituent service, and I try to do that as close to how he did it as anybody. Look, I admired Bill Clinton. I interviewed Bill Clinton a number of times, been with him many times. Dale Bumpers and David Pryor, you know, all of the who's who of the Democrat party, you know, at the time that I was a broadcaster and at the time I was a mayor. I mean, those were people that I was dealing with. And of course, at the time I got elected mayor, Mike Huckabee gets elected governor of the state. So naturally I had a really good relationship . . .

RL: Right.

[01:29:44] SW: . . . with Mike Huckabee and admired his work and how they—I guess what I admired most about 'em was that they never strayed from their beliefs. Asa, Dick Barclay, Tim Hutchinson. These were guys that were state leaders, later in some cases became elected federal representatives, but I admired how they were committed to their beliefs. And they never strayed, even against the great odds of not being able to

get elected. But as time marched on, it appeared that their beliefs better matched the representative views of the people that they represented than they originally did. And that's why I often say that I don't think it was so much of a matter of people changing, I think the change happened at the national party, and a lot of folks were left behind and thinking, you know, "I'm—my beliefs match up more with this platform than the previous platform." And that's how I think that change happened. It culminated, obviously, at a time, but I think it was in the making as the National Democrat Party continued to be pulled a little bit to its extreme left.

[01:31:08] RL: So do you see that in the Republican party too? In a—you say extreme left . . .

SW: I worry about it.

RL: Is it the extreme right?

SW: I worry about it. And I've had lot of conversations. I'm more of a subject matter expert on it now . . .

RL: Sure, sure.

SW: . . . because I happen to be there. In—and I, you know, I came in on the Tea Party wave, and I've been part of the House of Representatives when—early on when it was Tuesday Group Republicans and Republican Study Committee. Those would've

been the two kind of branches of the House Republicans. And of course, I've been there when that third head on the monster was introduced, and that is the Freedom Caucus. So you've got a Tuesday Group Republican group of moderates, and then you've got a Republican Study Committee that used to be the ex—the strong conservative wing in the party, and because it wasn't conservative enough, you had forty or so people branch out, create their own, and now you got Freedom Caucus. That's why I call it the three-headed monster.

[01:32:11] RL: Sure. Is that three headed monster in our state?

SW: Oh, little bit. Little bit. You've got people—because you're—because we're all Republicans and—you know, the entire delegation's Republican. You're gonna have members that represent a more—I'm not even gonna say purple, but you're gonna have . . .

RL: Sure.

SW: . . . you're gonna have an area that's lighter red than some of the others. And then you're gonna have your rural areas right now are just a . . .

RL: Deep red. [*Laughs*]

SW: . . . deep, dark red. And you can afford as a member to take some of those really hard right-wing positions and get reelected,

never have to worry about your reelection. So yeah, we have a little bit of that, not much. And it's all on the right. And that's why members typically are more worried about a primary battle than they are a general election battle. I, look, I try not to spend too much time thinking about that because I have only one test for my vote, and that is if my vote prevails, can I go back and explain it to the people in the Third district . . .

RL: Right, right.

SW: . . . as to why I voted that way? So I get pushed back on votes on appropriations, but I believe it's fundamental that the government operate. It's designed to operate. And I'm not a big believer in government shutdowns. I was a mayor once upon a time. [*RL laughs*] And the thought of shutting the government down is just kinda weird to me. Why would you do that? And I also understand that, while I have my strongly held beliefs, I respect the fact that there are other people out there that have strongly held beliefs that are different than mine.

RL: And you respect that.

[01:34:08] SW: And I have to represent them. And so what I try to do is I try to find—even though it's a terrible word anymore, I try to find the compromise. Where can I reach out to them, they reach out to me, and we can give a little ground and not just

forfeit all of our beliefs? Where can we find the common ground and actually get something done? Because I believe that that's part of the genius of our country is that we have always been able to find bipartisan solutions or maybe nonpartisan solutions to some of these challenges. But here's the sad truth and the inconvenient truth right now is that we've got some serious challenges facing our country and our state. I mean, we got deep-seated challenges. And we're gonna have to work out solutions for these challenges because at the federal level, deficits and debt are so bad that if you can't begin the process of starting to find some solutions and some reforms to address some of these challenges they—you're gonna lose your ability to get anything done, and then what do you have? So I'm—I worry about some of those kinds of things. [01:35:27] But I would say the rural areas are now the darkest red. Central Arkansas, Second district's always gonna be you know, a—one of those 52, 53 . . .

RL: Sure.

SW: . . . 46, 47 kinda deals, and the Third district of Arkansas I'm sure is going to, depending on how you draw the lines, is probably gonna get a little bit more moderate in its views just by demographics. The way things are changing in the Northwest

Arkansas area.

RL: What a unique wave, too, that's certainly applicable to today of—from the blue to red and how that changes in Northwest Arkansas.

SW: Yeah.

[01:36:01] RL: Absolutely. So we've talked a lot about change, and you talked a lot about the people. What would—in your opinion, what is the—was the strategy for the change? And would you say that that was going back to the roots of the voters and how—you know, we all use—and I've certainly said this many times too, that we are products of who—of our childhoods and our family roots. I grew up in rural Arkansas so I certainly—that resonates a lot with me. So what would you say was the strategy of those people that were a part of that change and change in the state?

SW: On the Republican side, I would say is you stay true to your values. You are—we—you—we are big believers in limited government. We are big believers in Second Amendment and—because we're a rural state and we kinda like our guns. We're in the Bible Belt.

RL: Sure.

SW: And we believe in matters of faith. We're not afraid to, you

know, to say under God in the Pledge of Allegiance. We're not afraid to pray in schools even though you can't. And we—and so stay true to your beliefs because that's how conservatives truly believe. And for some of those trailblazers, it came at a big price. They didn't get elected. They lost. But they stayed true to their beliefs. And as time marched on, as I said, the party began to leave some of those Democrats-because-her-daddy-was-a-Democrat.

RL: Right.

[01:37:36] SW: And but they began to recognize that the party that best represents the beliefs I have was that Republican Party, and there's no shame in declaring that you're a Republican. It may have your grandad turning over in his grave, but that's how you identify. And then coupled with the ability to get information fast, you know, through your smart phone . . .

RL: Sure.

SW: . . . and those kinds of things, and the way information flows today. And then, you know, all the historians will write about the Trump phenomenon. I mean who saw that coming?

RL: Right? The Simpsons. [*Laughs*]

SW: And it is a phenomenon.

RL: Sure, sure.

SW: It is—it was a movement and remains a movement. And so, yeah, you asked a minute ago do I worry about the party going too far to its extreme? Look, I just think any party that drifts to an extreme point of view serves to alienate a lot of people who are not quite there in their views and may not ever get there in their views, but then feel either underrepresented or not represented, and I think that that body is growing sufficiently both on the left and right that if we're not careful, that we will see the emergence of another structure that would attract people more so than the traditional Republican and Democrat party. Now I'm not saying that's on the verge of happening anytime soon.

RL: Right.

[01:39:26] SW: Because it's not. But the fact is that if it continues in this way where the left continues to go further to the left, and if the right cannot find its way back a little bit toward the middle on some things, then you're gonna have, you know, a significant percentage of the public that will be—that will not have the representation it believes it needs to have, and that's what could cause the emergence of a third party. Now the Libertarians try that, but they're—but that's not the answer. It'll be a different structure. Much like what we've seen in the religious

community. You know, where you had for all those many years the traditional Baptists and the traditional Methodists and Presbyterians and how they view things, and now you see some really mega structures being born out of nondenominational processes where good, strong, Southern Baptists have said, "Well, I'm more nondenominational now." And others that are kinda joining those churches, and that's where I think you're seeing some of the mega churches emerge out of a result of a denomination not necessarily alienating people, but people finding that as time marches on, they find themselves more represented by a nondenominational group, and associations with their friends and their business associates and their school mates and those kinds of things that are coming up in some of these types of religious structures that heretofore would never have . . .

RL: Right, right.

SW: . . . never have gotten off the ground.

[01:41:15] RL: Sure. So let's talk about funding sources for a minute and how that's changed within each era. So the [19]90s and now in the 2000s. What do you believe the role of funding was during that time, those times? And where was that money coming from?

SW: Are you talking about funding campaigns?

RL: Yes.

SW: Or are you talking about funding government?

RL: I would say funding campaigns and that wave of the change of the types of politicians moving from blue to red.

SW: Well, the money's gonna follow the politics, and I think that in the day—although I don't have a lot of personal knowledge of it 'cause I was—I was nonpartisan till 1990. [*RL laughs*] Until 2010.

[01:41:57] RL: Sure.

SW: I, you know, I was a mayor. The money followed the winner. You know, the winning hand was probably gonna be in—every place else in Arkansas except Northwest Arkansas was gonna be a Democrat, and so that's naturally where that money was channeled. And if it was Northwest Arkansas, it was probably gonna go to a Republican because a Republican had that seat, and there was no sign that that was going to change ever if anytime—or anytime soon. So the money followed the celebrity the celebrity candidate. And there was—I think there was kind of a pecking order back in the day. You know, you're governor today. You're probably gonna be a US Senator. You wait your time, and eventually somebody's gonna move or die, and you're

gonna be there. And then I guess in that pecking order back in the day it was attorney general. Whoever the attorney general is is probably gonna be the next governor and then—and that's how that structure was built. And naturally, that attracted the money because people wanted to be associated with a winner. Now today it's a little different in that that money is more flowing to the Republican side of the political spectrum than it is the Democrat side. Although there is still quite a bit of money flowing to Democrats as they kind of hold on that hope that maybe there's gonna be another change. But that money now flows pretty significantly to the current office holder in those parties. So all you gotta do is really look at the FEC reports of the candidates running. You pick a time. You could pick today as an example, and clearly Rick Crawford and Bruce Westerman and Steve Womack and French Hill are going to have solid cash-on-hand numbers, and their Democrat challengers, except for in the First District where there's not even a Democratic challenger . . .

[01:44:01] RL: Right.

SW: . . . are going to have limited resources available to them because they are not perceived to be competitive. So I think a lot of the money is gonna—the money's gonna flow based on the

level of expected competitiveness that that particular office seeker is going to have. And right now, it heavily favors Republicans and Republican incumbents.

SM: Excuse me, we have ten minutes until eleven o'clock.

[01:44:32] RL: Okay, we'll wrap up here in a second. Moving into the media's role and the media strategy, what do you think that change has been? Have you seen it in our state since the [19]90s? Obviously social media and technology has changed everything. That certainly hits home for me as a journalism educator in teaching students and preparing them for the industry and seeing those changes. But what have you seen, particularly in the changes in Arkansas, and how has that changed the strategy for us? I know you've got a deeply rooted connection to talk radio. Who would've thought that podcasts and talk radio would be on the rise in popularity again? And it's been a really neat trend to see change. But how have you seen those strategies change?

SW: Well, first of all, clearly the potential demise of the newspaper has manifested itself pretty significantly. That was the source of information for most people for a long period of time. And some electronic media. You know, the five thirty and the six thirty news. Well, now it's 24/7. And it's seriously fragmented

between traditional broadcast TV and cable news, and you've mentioned podcast, social media, on and on and on. There are just so many ways and so many conflicting streams of information coming at the voter. The problem with the discerning electorate today is establishing the truth. What is the truth? I'm hearing everything. I've got all this information, and every bit of it, for the most part, is slanted toward a particular agenda or a particular point of view. And talking heads on TV, and we can name 'em here. And you know what I'm talking about.

RL: Yes.

[01:46:41] SW: They're—they are no longer reporting anything. They are sharing some view or some agenda with their discerning audience. And so finding the truth on matters is difficult today, and that confuses the voter and, in many cases, sends the voter to just basically the capital letter that lines up with their basic political belief. R and D in most cases. And so therefore instead of making a decision on an issue based on a certain set of facts—because these facts get so jumbled and so confusing and so conflicted that a lot of people just end up taking the viewpoint of their political affiliation. And in Arkansas, it's a big R. It's a red state, and a lot of people just default to

the R, which leads me back to the conversation we had a minute ago about as the political forces continue to pull the party to its extreme, for the good amount of people that just basically say, "Well I'm just gonna take the Republican point of view on this and vote Republican," then they are accepting the fact that as the party gets pulled, they're probably gonna be pulled that far. And now how far do they get pulled before they decide, "Whoa, wait a minute, I'm probably not quite that extreme in my view, and I need to kinda start doing a little bit more of my own homework and figuring out where we are," is up to each and every voter to decide for themselves. So that's why I say that part of our jobs now, and it didn't use to be this way, is that we gotta do a lot of explaining 'cause these are complicated issues. [01:48:41] And just because I voted for an appropriations bill does not mean that I am a tax and spender. It just simply means that I believe that government ought to function, and it's a better outcome than just shutting the government down, which some of the extreme people think is probably a good thing, just shut the government down. So you know, those are—times have changed, and these are inconvenient truths that we have to deal with on a daily basis. And it does make representing people somewhat complicated because we get

bombarded with so many different points of view, and there are so many different elements to a lot of these issues, and you gotta sort through them. But again, people today—I think the voter today is more inclined basically to subscribe to their party of affiliation, and in Arkansas today, it's R.

[01:49:38] RL: So one last question to kind of pick your brain. If you could describe to the viewer Arkansans what the blue-to-red change has meant to our state. And for the good, the bad, the change. How would you describe it? And what would you want viewers to know? That maybe you're just sort of not really sure how the change happened from all the deep pockets and things that we've discussed today, from the media change, funding, the key players—what would you want the Arkansans to know and understand about the change and the wave of change?

SW: Well, it's hard to answer that question without, you know, just basically establishing what my point of view is. And I think it's the point of view represented by most Arkansans today, is that they believe in a more limited government. They just believe that—particularly the federal level. It's probably not as acute at the state level and certainly not at the county and local level. But at my level. They don't trust Washington. They consider it a swamp, and they want the swamp drained. There are too

many examples out there of where Washington is trying to tell everyday Arkansans how they should be. You know, what they should use, how they should act. That Washington is wasteful. It takes their money, and it blows it on stuff we really don't need. There's just a lot of distrust in Washington. And so I think what the change from blue to red has done, it has put the reins of government, at the federal level, more back in the hands of people who they trust more to make some of these decisions. Because Republicans are typically going to be people that are gonna be careful in their spending. They're gonna be hesitant to want to raise taxes. They think taxes are already pretty high. They're gonna demand accountability. They're gonna demand the rule of law. No better example than the ongoing debate on immigration. That they're going to expect a very strong national security program and expect the Congress to fund national defense in such a way that we feel protected because safety and security of the American people is ultimately our, I think, our most important duty. [01:52:27] And that beyond everything, they believe that the Constitution speaks for itself, and that they expect that the federal judiciary is going to respect what the framers had in mind that has served our country for, you know, 240-plus years. And they're gonna want the judiciary to, instead

of being a group of activists that are trying to interpret the law in their own mind, that they expect that whatever—wherever they are that the judiciary's gonna look at the laws with respect to the Constitution. And so the benefit to Arkansas has been that the common, ordinary, everyday Arkansan believes and subscribes to those philosophies, and that the Republican party that is now—has power in our state and celebrity status in our state is easy to line up with because it best represents the views, and then seeing what we're going through today in terms of the run up to the Democratic Convention and the nomination for president to challenge Donald Trump is going so far to the left, I think it's galvanizing those Arkansas Republicans, and they're gonna get stronger and more in number as more people decide that, hey, I, you know, I've been a Democrat. My father, my grandfather was a Democrat, but I can no longer subscribe to that because that's not who they were, and it's not who I am. And I think that over time that this process has just basically solidified what we should've already known, and that is that Arkansans by their very nature are pretty conservative people for the most part.

[01:54:29] RL: Well, thank you, Congressman. It's been such a pleasure. I've learned a lot. I'm sure that our viewers did too,

and I appreciate the time that you've given me, and it's been a really great hour. So thank you so much.

SW: It's an honor to be with you. Thank you very much.

RL: Thank you.

[End of interview 01:54:55]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]