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Arkansas State Police Project

Interview with

Les Braunns
8 July 2004

Interviewer: Michael Lindsey

Michael Lindsey: What was your motivation to join the State Police?

Les Braunns: I got out of the Air Force in 1977 and had intended to test to become an air traffic controller. I took a temporary job at the Ozark Police Department. There was a trooper stationed in Franklin County by the name of Bill Couch. Bill and I became very good friends, and in my off-duty time I started riding with him. During this time, I decided I wanted to become an Arkansas State Trooper.

ML: Was anybody in your family a member of law enforcement?

LB: No. There was one other incident. I grew up in Ohio. I went into the service in 1973 and left Ohio. My dad—early on in the 1950s—had tested to become an Ohio State Trooper. I really didn't think much about it when I went into the service. I had a different career path I was going to take, but after being around Bill Couch for a while I decided that this was what I was going to do.

ML: When did you apply?

LB: I think it was in September of 1977, and my hire date was September 9, 1979.

ML: During that time in the 1970s, the State Police was really trying to hire minorities and females. Do you think that was one of the reasons it took two years to get hired?

LB: I knew that it would be a lengthy process. Obviously, there were some discrepancies in hiring practices at that time, and the department was trying to diversify a little bit. I was patient and felt there was an opportunity for everyone to get hired. It took some longer than others. As long as I knew it was going to happen, I was okay with it.

ML: When you started, did they send you to a training academy immediately?

LB: They sent me immediately.

ML: Did anything stick out about that training academy?

LB: We stayed down there the first three weeks straight. You went to Camden and reported on a Sunday afternoon. You stayed through two full weekends and came home on the third weekend. It was absolute hell. I remember it very vividly.

ML: Was it a military-style basic training?

LB: Yes. I would lie in bed all night and think that I had already been through this once in basic training. The difference was that I really wanted to be here and I didn't want to fail. They told you right off the bat that they don't know how you got into this academy, but [that] they weren't going to pamper you or take care of you. I remember the speech that [said] if you wash out, [don't] call your local senator or representative or governor because they did their job of getting you in there. Some people had political help. I didn't but I think Bill Couch helped, and I think Deloin Causey, the captain at Fort Smith, helped a little bit. They just kind

of floated my name around and I got the opportunity to go down and test.

ML: How long was the training academy?

LB: At that time, it was twelve weeks. A driving school was supposed to be in the thirteenth week, but they canceled it. I don't know if it was lack of money or what, but we never went to driving school.

ML: What was your first posting?

LB: I was assigned to Madison County. I graduated in November or 1979 and reported to Troop L. Captain Fletcher was the troop commander. I was assigned to Huntsville, Madison County.

ML: What would be a typical day in Madison County?

LB: It was a little different back then. When I got there, Dale Best was the trooper assigned to train me, and I FTOed [he was my field training officer] with him for five days and then he went into narcotics. Then I was the only trooper in Huntsville for about ten months. My days off were Wednesday and Thursday. [My days off] started at 4:00 a.m. on Wednesday and ended at midnight on Thursday. I was on call twenty-four hours a day.

ML: You didn't have anybody to cover your shift on your days off?

LB: No. I was the only guy. You know, it is funny. My wife and I were talking about that the other day, and I don't know how I did it. You could figure that Friday was pretty slow. Highway 16 was a pretty major highway for college kids. I would get in the car and get called out about noon to work my first wreck. I would get home around 4:00 a.m. on Saturday and sleep until about 10:00 a.m. Saturday and start working wrecks again. This went on until Sunday night about

9:00. Sometimes I would get a late call on Sunday. It was usually pretty quiet on Monday and Tuesday and then you got into your days off. They would call you on your days off, too. I got really smart about answering my phone on Wednesday and Thursday.

ML: What was your relationship with the sheriff in Madison County? Wasn't Ralph Baker the sheriff?

LB: He was the sheriff. I have not read the book [*When Money Grew on Trees: The True Tale of a Marijuana Moonshiner and the Outlaw Sheriff of Madison County, Arkansas*, by David Mac]. I was gone during the period of time that book talks about. I stayed in Madison County from November 1979 until September of 1980. then I went to Fort Smith because they were calling in anyone that wanted to transfer and make an emergency lateral to Fort Smith due to the Cuban situation [reference to Cuban refugees detained at Fort Chaffee]. I stayed in Fort Smith from September 1980 until February of 1983 and then I came back to Huntsville. I enjoyed the work, but I didn't like living in the town. Fort Smith was a different type of work. In a rural county, you will find at that period of time people were very possessive of their State Policeman. You were their trooper. People called you if there was a problem or with anything related to drivers' license, wreckers, used vehicles or criminal cases. One thing about Fort Smith was I loved working the interstate. There are all kinds of things to get into. I got involved in the Cuban refugee thing. I remember I was on Highway 23 south of Huntsville on a Sunday afternoon and Joe Simms was the radio operator. He called all units in Troop L to "10-19" ["Return to Office"] to Fort Smith. I re-

member him saying, “And don’t spare the horses.” We got down there after the initial surge on the fence. I remember pulling up and looking at the guys—Phil Straub, Bob Gibson—I think Rocky Baker came down there on Highway 71. You could hear those old cars’ motors popping and pinging because we had been running so fast. I was running about 120 [miles per hour] when I left Ozark. It was a pretty interesting deal. I picked up [then-Governor] Bill Clinton. I was assigned to that detail along with Katherine Crowley. She is now the agent in charge of the Secret Service in Little Rock. She and I hauled the governor. I am trying to remember—but at one point I went to the airport and I had Bill Clinton, Dale Bumpers and John Paul Hammerschmidt in the back of the car. I can’t remember if it was Dale Bumpers or David Pryor. It’s odd when you think of the power of Arkansas sitting in the back seat.

ML: Do you remember what the conversation was in the back seat?

LB: Well, some of that needs to remain privileged. That is another thing about a trooper: what was said, I won’t repeat. And that is part of the job. They discussed the situation, and if I remember right, President [Jimmy] Carter had sent a message to Governor Clinton. They were discussing the message and how we were handling the situation and whether federal troops needed to be called in.

ML: When you got to the gate, there were still problems going on inside the fort, right? But they didn’t come out of the fort again?

LB: After that surge, they set a lot of the barracks on fire. I stayed up that whole night—Kathy and I did. I don’t think the governor slept that night, either. The head of the National Guard met with Clinton several times. Colonel Harp was

there, as was Captain Causey. Captain Causey is an excellent man, and he handled that situation perfectly. I can only hope I would have the forethought, patience and the overview that he had to handle something of that magnitude. The guys loved him, and he was a great leader. I think we took Clinton into the compound on the Saturday morning. I was wondering how smart this was. It was still on fire, but the governor wanted to go down. So Katherine—we called her KC—drove in there with some other dignitaries and [they] looked it over. I left on Wednesday because I had to take care of Madison County. We had been without troopers up here for a while. Then I was transferred down there [Fort Smith]. One other time we mobilized down there, but we had the border patrol then and they had enough troops to handle it.

ML: You mentioned that you transferred to Fort Smith and you liked working [the] interstate. Were there any other differences that come to mind about working Fort Smith versus Madison County?

LB: When you think of the interstate, what do you think of? You think of the highway patrol trooper with the campaign hat and no backup. The sheer volume of things like stolen cars, DWI [driving while intoxicated]s [and] drugs—you just get into all kinds of stuff. At that time, pursuits were fun. They aren't fun anymore. There is an incident I will tell you about later that really hammered that home in my mind. Other than that, there wasn't that much difference. It seemed we had a lot of stolen cars coming through at that time. I don't know if car thieves have gotten smarter, or there aren't as many anymore. We used to kid that in Fort Smith during that time we would go park near Grand Avenue on Saturday nights

and wait for someone to knock off a convenience store. They would run up to get on the interstate, and we would catch them. That was pretty funny. The difference was you did a lot of traffic work. In Madison County you did a lot of everything. You backed the county up, and you backed Game and Fish up. To get back to your questions about Ralph, I came to Madison County in 1983 and stayed there until I made lieutenant in 2000. I think I was the longest serving trooper in Madison County. We may have a guy th[ere now] who will end up beating me. We have a guy stationed there who is planning on staying there the next twenty years. Jim Cottrell was the first trooper assigned to Madison County. I am related to him by marriage and have a picture of him here. It was taken in 1965 up on Governor's Hill [Orval Faubus's House in Springdale]. Jim Cottrell is my great uncle's brother. We had come down here to visit on vacation.

ML: How did you come to join the SRT [Special Response Team]?

LB: That was back when they had independent teams for each troop. I don't know. At that time I wanted to do everything. If there was a fight going on, I wanted to be involved. It seemed the thing to do. We went to Jacksonville [Arkansas?] and trained with the air force security team called the [Violent? Violet?] Scorpions. We were there for seven days, and we received some training from the Oklahoma Highway Patrol for two days. It was nothing like the training they have today. We didn't have the equipment or the training. It was pretty primitive and backward. We had the honor guard back then, and I was one of the first ones on that. I think we brought in twenty-five guys. We went to Little Rock, and they selected us. We went to a lot of funerals. Have you seen the honor guard? They have a

Marine Corps style blouse with a closed collar and [they] carry sabers. It is pretty impressive. What they are used for is the governor's conventions, graduations, funerals, dignitary visits and things like that. They have even done openings at football games.

ML: Being in the honor guard—it seems like a hassle to try to rearrange the troopers' schedule and make sure someone is covering for them.

LB: It is labor-intensive, but I will tell you what, when you become a trooper it changes your lifestyle. Friends you once had aren't friends anymore. Family members may disown you, especially in this day and time when being a policeman is not a popular thing. I wonder, since I have been doing this for so long, how we are actually perceived by the public. One thing I don't like is how we are portrayed on television. It is a wonder how I can drive home at night, considering we are portrayed as being so stupid. Once you make that lifestyle change, you are part of a family that has been going on since 1935—and a little bit before that, if you consider the road patrol. When a guy dies, I will allow a trooper to train and participate because that was a fellow member of this department. That is important to me and to the guys that [have] retired and to the families.

ML: What was the selection process to join the SRT?

LB: The troop commander picked them. I remember Captain Fletcher had us out a 4:30 a.m. running around a track. You had to run, I think, two miles and beat eighteen minutes or something. We took some firearms courses. There wasn't much of a selection process. I am not sure what the requirements are today. I think they have to shoot eighty-nine percent on their annual firearms exam and do

so many push ups, run a mile in a certain time, tread water for a period and do so many pull ups. I think they actually do a psychological profile, too, but you would need to verify that.

ML: You guys were put under fire, or at least the threat of it, pretty quickly with the CSA [Covenant, Sword and Arm of the Lord, a radical organization formed in 1971 in northern Arkansas] deal [standoff].

LB: Yes. I remember my wife was pregnant with my youngest son, [Jeffrey?]. They brought us [the SRT] in here [troop headquarters] one afternoon. Bill Burnett was a comedian. We walked into where the DL [drivers' license] room used to be, and they had three boxes of .357 [Magnum] ammunition, five boxes of rifled slug ammunition for the shotgun and, I want to say, 200 rounds of M-16 ammunition sitting out for each of us. We all slid into chairs, and just before the captain started to speak, Burnett looked at me and said, "Looks pretty serious, doesn't it?" [Laughs] They told us to get ready because we were on call. We were on stand-by. We had a pretty good idea where we were going. I remember that I was working the afternoon shift. During the day I was out waxing my car under a shade tree when Jimmy Lenniger of the Missouri Highway Patrol got shot north of the state line and Alan Hinds got wounded. We assumed that the proximity of that event and the compound in Marion County—those two things were tied together. It was about a day [later] when they called us and said, "Everybody 10-19 to Mountain Home." We sat around the Holiday Inn for a few days, waiting to be deployed. We got deployed and went on twelve-hour shifts. We had the 8:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. shift. It rained, and it was cold. It could have been quite a deal.

I think if it had occurred a year earlier, it would have been quite an engagement. That place had deteriorated over time, and when the ATF [Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms] and FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] got in there, it didn't look [as] it once had. There was a lot of religious material and white supremacist-type material. The armored car they had didn't have wheels on it. But I think in their heyday we might have had a real struggle with them. We might have made Waco look like a walk in the park. [Editor's note: The FBI ended a fifty-one day siege on the Branch Dravidian religious sect's compound at Waco, Texas, on April 19, 1993. Fire engulfed the compound, killing seventy-nine people.] It worked out well and everything negotiated well.

ML: What was the reaction from the people in the surrounding communities?

LB: We didn't have much interaction with them. I remember everyone being friendly. If we can bounce back to the riot at Chaffee, it was one of our proudest moments. We had maybe 100 troopers repelling 2,000 or 3,000 Cubans. To the people in Barling, we were heroes. They loved the State Police. Of course, they loved law enforcement of all types because we helped take care of something that really could have gotten out of hand. You would go into a coffee shop, and someone would pay your way out before you even got up to the counter. It was their way of saying thank you. It is something we have lacked for several years, due to the growing population. This leads to a loss of the personal aspect of the job. The other thing is that in a patrol car, you have a window and you are going seventy miles per hour and you can't interact with people. I don't know how you bring that back. You have an opportunity for maybe five minutes on a traffic stop, so it

is critical that we do our job well and leave a good impression.

ML: It seems that the 1970s and 1980s were tumultuous times [for] the State of Arkansas and the State Police, who got called out a lot.

LB: Then we had the time Frankie Parker took over the Rogers Police Department. Keith Ferguson would be a good one to talk to about that. I believe Frankie Parker went in there and shot a police officer and took the PD [police department] over after he killed his ex-mother- and father-in-law. He took his ex-wife in there and took over the PD. Our SRT was called and Ferguson and I were at the door fixing to open it up when Charlie Brooks shot through the door and shot Parker in the rear end. I think he was trying to run away from the door. Charlie was our best sniper, and he shot. You saw two guys down there in the alley, one trying to get under a dumpster and the other trying to get into a trash can. We were at the door, I think, when he shot his wife. I think Keith got a valor award out of that because he actually went in [and] dragged a police officer out of harm's way.

ML: Do you remember what year that was?

LB: 1986 or 1987, I think. They executed Parker a few years ago. [Editor's note: In 1984, Frankie Parker shot and killed his ex-in-laws and wounded his ex-wife and a police officer. He was executed by the State of Arkansas on August 8, 1996.]

ML: One of the things that occurred during your time in Madison County was the marijuana eradication program. Did you go on any of those?

LB: No, I didn't. At that time, we were so short of manpower I normally didn't do a lot [of things] like that. They brought people in to do that. I went and flew one time, but generally I went and covered the county. [Trooper] Richard Hester and

I were in that county together when I came back in 1983. He left in 1988 and went to Fort Smith. I was the only trooper there until 1988 when G. B. Harp came in. G. B. and I served together and had a great time. We worked well together and had a lot of fun. I think we played more practical jokes on each other than anything else. We worked together until 1995 when he got promoted to sergeant at Fort Smith. Then Ken Whillock came in with me. I got promoted to sergeant in 1996 and took over that post. It was Ken, Janet Cordes, and me. There were just three of us, and we covered Madison and Carroll counties. I got promoted to lieutenant in 2000 and to captain in 2003. I am back in Troop L and this is exactly where I want to be. If everything goes okay, I will be here another ten years and turn it over to someone else. I have a lot of things I want to do. The pursuit story is about this boy, and there isn't a week that goes by that I don't think about him. We got a call of a reckless driver on Highway 412 west of Huntsville. This had been going on for two or three days. This boy on a motorcycle would run from us, and we couldn't catch him. On my day off, I went out toward Hindsville and set up because it happened about the same time every day. Sure enough, I met him, and he was doing sixty-eight [miles per hour]. I turned around on the shoulder and turned my blue lights on. He pulled over onto the shoulder [as if] he were going to stop. I pulled in behind him. When I did, he shot the gas to the motorcycle and took off. We rounded the corner at Highway 45. I was driving a 1985 Ford, and there was not way I was going to keep up with that motorcycle. I was losing sight of him and broke off the pursuit. When I topped the next hill, [I saw that] the boy had hit the back end of a truck at about

110 miles per hour. J. L. Parker was driving the truck. When I got up to the boy, I cut his helmet off and opened his shirt. He was laid open from his shoulder to his abdomen. You could see his internal organs. At that time, I decided pursuits weren't such a great thing. You can say that it isn't your fault, and that the boy chose to run, which he did. He was out of sight, and I had terminated the pursuit, but in the back of my mind I always felt responsible for something like that. That was when I realized that pursuits are a necessary tool, but if there is any way to get out of them, you need to use it. I got in another [pursuit] just before I made sergeant, and I had a brand new Chevrolet. During the case I actually thought they were shooting at us. I left headquarters one morning at 4:15 and was south-bound on I-40. I got to the scales and I noticed a guy drove off into the median. That piqued my interest because I thought he was drunk. I got in behind him and he pulled across three lanes of traffic. He went across the scales, which were closed, at about seventy miles per hour. I called Springdale and told them I was going to stop him. I ran the tag, and the vehicle [a Chevrolet Suburban] was stolen out of Nebraska. It came back that the driver was armed and dangerous. Mark Meadows, who I had just had coffee with, said he would be right there. As soon as I turned the blue lights on, this guy turned onto Highway 71 and away we went. I had a 1995 Chevrolet, and I was kind of playing with the Suburban. I would run up on it and back off. Those cars would run 130 miles an hour. I was just waiting for Mark to get there, when all of a sudden I saw all of these sparks flying off the road and something hitting my car. Mark made it to me and he asked me what that was. I told him I thought they were shooting at us. We

backed off and we followed this guy. He went northbound the wrong way on the interstate and then we came through the intersection at Sunset and I-540 at about ninety miles an hour. The good thing was that it was Sunday morning, and the traffic was light. We ran him down Gregg Street and into Fayetteville toward Wedington. We went over that railroad track and I saw him get airborne. We got him stopped on Wedington Drive outside of town in a new housing addition, and it turned out to be a fifteen-year-old and a fourteen-year-old from Nebraska. I didn't catch the driver, but I caught the passenger. We got a dog in from the Fayetteville [Police Department] and found the driver. If you could have seen the look on our faces—we were taking the pursuit very easy and very professionally and then things started hitting our car [laughs]. When we stopped them, we found out they weren't shooting at us; they were throwing tools. There was a tool chest in the Suburban, and they were throwing wrenches and things at us. The next day, Dennis Johnston was driving down [Highway] 71 looking for tools [laughs].

ML: While you were in Madison County another deal was the methamphetamine deal. Did you get involved in that?

LB: No. It was a CID [Criminal Investigation Division] deal. I was there during Billie Phillips' murder, and I was there when Ralph [Baker] died. [Editor's note: Billie Jean Phillips was murdered September 2, 1994 in Huntsville, Arkansas. The crime was linked to the Madison County drug trade.] I wasn't there when Faubus was there. Dale Best was. I think there was an incident where he had to arrest Mrs. Alta Faubus for speeding or DWI. There is a funny story behind that. On the methamphetamines—I know the county is eaten up with it. It wasn't as

prevalent then. Used to, I would pull up on the First National Bank parking lot and tell the kids to pour their beer out and the worst I would take to jail with me. Now you are pulling syringes off of them. It is a bad deal. Old “Mad County” [Madison] has a problem over there. It is because it is an isolated county. They don’t have a lot of law enforcement and can’t keep a grip on it. This is also a close-knit society. The good thing is that people will talk to a trooper and give tips. We went on a few raids with the sheriff’s office, but I pretty well did my thing and they did their thing. Every once in a while, they called and needed help. If I called, they came right out. I had a good relationship with Ralph.

ML: One of the things that I talk with retired troop commanders about, especially those who worked in the 1960s and 1970s, is how independent they were. They ran their troops the way they wanted to, and a lot of times what they wanted in Little Rock stayed in Little Rock. You are a troop commander now. How independent are troop commanders now compared to when you were coming up?

LB: Coming up, troop commanders were God. There was none of this “I will go over his head or go around him.” If the troop commander told you to do something or not to do something, you had better do that. If he told you something was going to happen, it would happen. I am probably not a good measuring stick because July 1, 2003 was when I started, and we have just changed directors. I had the opportunity to visit with him [the new State Police director] just the other day and he turned to me and G. B. Harp and said that troop commanders will once again run their troops. Since he took over, all of the decisions I have made have been on this level. I have not been a commander long enough to give you a good

measure, but one thing I am finding out it that Little Rock will probably not tell us what to do. They may recommend highly something and let us entertain the idea, but I think you are going to see the commanders running the troops. You can't micromanage an organization this size. Now, you don't want twelve separate departments, either. You want a cohesive unit with everybody doing the same thing. Hopefully, we will find the mix that makes this thing work. I am just tickled to death. I am so pleased with what Governor [Mike] Huckabee has done. The department needs to heal a little bit, and we need to get some people hired and some promotions made.

ML: Do you find that the troopers you hire today are different than the group that you hired on with in the 1970s?

LB: Yes. You took me out of troop school along with twenty-eight or thirty others in my class. I would have died before anyone disgraced the State Police. You would have had to kill me to overpower me. We would work all of the hours you asked us to work and never complain because that was the way a trooper acted. Of course, we recruit out of society, and society has changed. Dedication levels have changed. If you asked a guy to do what I did back then today, it wouldn't happen. He would be whining. Do we want to go back to those times? No. I don't want to see a guy going through that again. Was it fair? Well, if you wanted the job, you did it. I will never put guys on call the way I was put on call. It is a good thing I had a good post sergeant when Bill Couch took over. Bill finally told me that when enough becomes enough, unplug my phone. He didn't expect me to keep up with the demand. Up until Couch, I was under a different

sergeant and— my goodness, if he could get a hold of you on your day off, you would work twenty-four hours a day seven days a week. I can remember he called me out one snowy Sunday night. I left the house that night at 8:15 and finally got home on Tuesday morning at 1:00. With that said, there are good people in the Huntsville community. I would go to a house and they would feed me breakfast. They would put Cokes in the mailbox for me and ask me to check on them. They were just excellent people, and I developed a lot of relationships with people over there that continue to this day. They would take care of my family when I went on special assignment. People would check on them. It wasn't just other policemen; it was people in the community. We have gone full circle to the book [*When Money Grew on Trees: The True Tale of a Marijuana Moonshiner and the Outlaw Sheriff of Madison County, Arkansas*, by David Mac]. I am not going to read it. The years I knew Ralph, we weren't close personal friends. We were friends. If I needed something, I would call him. If he needed something, he would call me. I would like to think that I was a sharp enough policeman—as long as I spent over there, if he were doing some of the stuff that he was accused of doing, I might have picked up on it. I don't believe a lot of it. I know he made some good investments in real estate, but I don't [believe] his selling marijuana one bit.

ML: Are there any special enforcement tactics that the State Police have used that proved particularly effective at arresting DWIs or enforcing traffic [laws]?

LB: When we get back up to speed here, I have some ideas. One of the things we did for the first time this past year was a “Super Bowl” saturation. We never had a

“Super Bowl” saturation [before]. We joined forces with Fayetteville, and we worked what is called a “round robin.” We drove down [Highway] 71 Business, down I-540 and got off on Sixth Street and went back and forth. We got twenty-eight DWIs in a six-hour period during the Super Bowl! That is something we are going to do again this year. Another thing we need to do is get a handle on road rage. We have a stealth unit that we are working on, but right now I don’t have the manpower with working construction, too. We have gotten really aggressive with working construction zones. As a matter of fact, I got an e-mail from [one of the group] I call my “pen pals.” It was addressed to “the idiot in charge of the Northwest Arkansas Traffic Highway Patrol.” He [the writer] was very upset. He didn’t get a ticket, but to quote him, “it just pisses me off” to see troopers out there smiling and waving and writing tickets and having a good time. He told me that we were the problem, not the construction zone. He said that if we would just pull out of there, the wrecks would stop. Well, I wrote him back and told him we tried that the first night when they opened it back up, and we had eight wrecks in the first fifteen minutes. We put people in the zone and spaced them out in the median. That worked for about three days, and people decided we weren’t going to write tickets, so they started passing in that right lane again. Then we really got proactive and started writing tickets. People are merging early now, but the problem we are having is that it backs up so quickly we have to keep moving back. When it stops, you will have a marked unit with lights going. This guy was thinking that the unit with its lights on causes people to slam on their brakes, but if they didn’t, they would be slamming into the car in front of them. I want to get inter-

diction up and running so badly. This was part of my two-year plan when I first came up here. I want to have a metro interdiction unit. That would be four guys assigned solely to work I-540 for the purpose of looking for drugs, criminal violations and road rage. We have some equipment coming. We have those thin-line scopes coming. You can look under carpets and inside gas tanks without being intrusive and tearing it up. All of the guys have video cameras in their cars. We sent them to three interdiction schools. We have a K-9 coming. The problem is we can't keep up with the mission of working the accidents and dedicate the men to interdiction. We also want to get aircraft up here and work some traffic, but with the lack of manpower, I can't do it. There are so many tools we have and so many ways we could go with it. You can be just as creative as you want to, but we don't have the manpower to do it. I have six drivers' license examiners now, and we are required to take care of that. If one of them gets sick, I have to call in a trooper to take care of that service. We just hired a radio operator, and I hope to have seven on staff and two on duty at a time. We are giving as many DL tests as Little Rock. Our wrecks don't compare to the number they have, but I would guess that if we had the highways they have, we would be working the same amount of wrecks. What is happening is these wrecks are occurring in the cities and if there were a four-lane or six-lane interstate through there, we would be working those wrecks. It is not a clear picture of what is happening up here because we are so bottlenecked on the infrastructure. Every time I go down to Little Rock, I say "Look out, Troop A, because the Big L is coming" [laughs]. It is exciting because I have seen it grow from 1979 when I went to work in Madison

County. You could drive into Springdale and Fayetteville and there were specific breaks in the towns. You would drive past the mall and have a distance before you got into Springdale, and Lowell was out there by itself. Now we have a great big metro area. I am excited because we are going to make some promotions and get some guys in here and build it from the ground up and get ready for the next ten or fifteen years.

ML: Speaking on the next ten or fifteen years, what is the mission of the State Police?

LB: I have been preaching this all along, and Little Rock may disagree, but we are going to have to change the philosophy on what we are doing, especially in Northwest Arkansas. Bear with me on this. Our criminal division is an excellent division and has a place. In Northwest Arkansas you have some of the premier police departments. Springdale has a detective and narcotics division. Fayetteville is the same way as is Rogers, Bentonville, the Washington County Sheriff's Office and the Benton County Sheriff's Office. My goodness, the Benton County Sheriff's Office has something like 160 deputies! With that said, we are going to have to focus on what we are here for: highway patrol. That is what we are here for. I think what needs to happen is build up the manpower in patrol and be a highway patrol organization and have CID back the patrolmen. Then we could get out here and do the metro interdiction squad I was talking about and turn it over to the CID with the arresting officer—the trooper who made the stop. That gives the guys the desire to get out and work and see the cases go from beginning to end, and it also puts us out there with the focus on highway patrol. I also think every trooper should [focus on] reconstruction. That is our number one function:

accident investigation. We do it well now, but we need to do it better. When you call a trooper, you should have the best person available. We should have all of the tools to do it. We have some high-dollar computer diagramming equipment coming in and it goes on the on-board TRAX [scanning] system. TRAX is an on-board computer in the car that troopers can relay information into. They can use the barcode scanner to swipe your driver' license and get all of your information. In the future, we will be able to swipe that driver's license and automatically print a ticket. The other thing we are trying to do is buy a TOTAL system. They cost \$8,500 a piece. With them it will get all of the diagramming information. You can plug in the formulas, and it will draw it up just like it is on the highway. Then we have some other reconstruction programs that you can plug the variables into and automatically get the speed of the vehicle. We also have to update our drug factor equipment. We are using the old tire drag equipment, and there are a gazillion things wrong with that, but it will get you in the ballpark. Now in Madison and Carroll County they still need troopers to assist in the criminal investigation capacities. But I look at it [as if] we need to do one thing great instead of two thing just okay. When I took over Troop L, my number-one concern was that you shouldn't have to wait forty-five minutes for a trooper to [respond to a call]. If you are broken down, I want somebody there immediately. Number two [was] service orientation for drivers' licenses. I am about to pull my hair out on that thing. I closed the Bentonville station and brought them all down to Springdale. We just don't have the people due to the increase of demand. The Revenue Department is the same way. We will always have to work within a budget, but we

need to streamline. It can be done, but we may have to cut some services. You have heard some of the bantering back and forth that the highway police were going to take over the highway patrol, or the highway patrol was going to take over the highway police—and we are the highway patrol. My son came in here the other day and said he saw a highway patrolman and I told him that he saw a highway policeman. He told me that the car door said, “Highway Patrol,” but I told him it didn’t because we are the highway patrol. Those are good guys [the highway police]. We split back in the 1960s, and the two probably need to be put back together.

ML: I would be surprised if that happened. The Highway Department is pretty separate from the rest of the state.

LB: It is a unique situation in Arkansas. If you get the right governor, [it might happen]. I think we came very close while Clinton was governor.

ML: How would you gauge your troopers’ activity? How do you tell if they are doing the job they need to be doing?

LB: We do it a little different around here. When I took over, it was kind of like getting a brand new toy, and what I did with it was how I would be graded. The good thing was I had been a trooper in this troop for seventeen or eighteen years. There was no learning curve. The guys all knew me, and the guys in other agencies knew me, too. As a matter of fact, that was on my interview for captain. There is no test for captain. They had me come in and gave me three questions and I had to write a couple of paragraphs on each and then orally explain what those paragraphs said. Part of what I said was that I would be instantly credible in

that area and I wouldn't have a learning curve because I [had known] Tim Helder [Washington County Sheriff] since he was at the Fayetteville PD. Keith Ferguson [Benton County Sheriff] and I served together as sergeants. The other patrolmen in Springdale are now captains, and Sid [Reiff] is the [police] chief. We all know each other personally, and we can talk together. When I came back into the troop, I asked the guys how they gauge what a trooper is doing in a manner that is fair to him, fair to the public and fair to the troop, as far as accountability. I may tell a guy that during rush hour traffic there is no way to get out there and work traffic because you can't get in a lane, but if you go out there and sit in a median and put yourself in a position that you can be seen, you are doing something for the State Police. There is no way to document that on your activity reports. So what we came up with is to show it as a special assignment. I told them that at least two hours of every shift I want them on post patrol and I want them watching. I figure if a guy sits there long enough, he will see something that will piss him off. But I have never been a big bean-counter. Obviously, if I am looking at a stat[istics] sheet on a guy who hasn't done anything, then I might call him in and talk to him. If we have them sitting on the median and in construction, you can't gauge that on a form. What I look at is hours per OVC [officer violator contact] or miles per OVC. Generally, if a guy is doing something every hour, then he is okay. [Referring to an officer's activity sheet] Here is a guy who is doing something every thirty minutes, which is outstanding. You figure that in, and take away their special assignments, and you have a good idea what they are doing. If a guy isn't doing anything in two hours, that means he is going out of his way [to do noth-

ing]. I was not a big activity guy. When I was working, I would generally average about 160 hours a month and have 150 [OVCs]. So that is about one an hour. There are reasons you can't do that, [such as] weather, or [if] you are inundated with reports or court time. Realistically, as an administrator you have to look at the whole picture and understand what they are doing. If a warning will work just as well, write the warning. We don't receive revenue from these things. If a guy needs a ticket, write him a ticket. But if you can do the same thing and get your point across, just write a warning. Drunks are a different deal. When I was on the road, I was a big DWI guy. I won't say you ever have a pleasurable experience from doing it, but I got what I called my "rat killing" out of the way in the first few hours of my shift. That means I would go ahead and get a few tickets and then start looking for drunks. That might mean stopping twenty or thirty cars for taillights or weaving. In Madison County, everybody weaved because their trucks' front ends were out of line [laughs]. What it did, though, was let you talk to them about weaving. It might be a friend you haven't seen in a while, and you have a chance to check on them. You can apologize for stopping them and send them on their way. That is enough of a violation [weaving] and you can get in the car and take a look at them. I don't think people resent that. Video cameras have enhanced this, and we make better stops today because we are better policemen.

ML: The interdiction deal was something the State Police first tried with the CAP [Criminal Apprehension Program] in the mid-1980s and [was] something they did again at various times. Do you think the video camera is the tool that makes that above reproach?

LB: I think what you are going to see is that all cars are video-equipped now, and when you get a complaint that a trooper has violated someone's rights, you tell them, "Fine," [and] you will pull the video tape and take a look at it. They get really quiet on the phone and ask what I mean by "tape." I tell them that there is a video and an audio, too. Then they tell me they don't want to make a big production out of it, and to never mind. I will pull the tape and look at it and see that there is nothing to it. I think when you get into the Criminal Apprehension Program, people will see the probable cause for making a stop. Used to, we had to put credibility into what people were saying. I have been in on complaint investigations where the person was one hundred percent wrong but I have to write memorandums trying to explain why I did what I did. The video fixes this. The officer has to talk to the video camera and articulate the stop. The courts around here are law-enforcement friendly, and as long as the officer can explain what he is doing, he is probably doing the right thing. When he can't articulate what he is doing, it is probably wrong. That is what we tell them in training. I taught in six recruit schools. "Don't force a bad position. If you made a bad stop, apologize and don't try to write a ticket to get out of it." That is a good thing about the academy. We try to weed out the people who don't need to be there. After going through it and getting to be a drill instructor, you start seeing what you need to tell them. But they are kids sometimes, and they do it just to see what will happen.

ML: Are there any other technological advances besides the video camera that stick out as being particularly important?

LB: The 800 [Megahertz] radio. There would be times in Madison County when I

wouldn't talk to headquarters for a week or two. I had to drive to the west side of the county to talk to them. Another cool thing—remember we had those whip antennas? Well, everybody wanted two whips. I would drive up on top of Governor's Hill to talk to Springdale. On that old low band, I could talk to a trooper in Louisville, Kentucky, due to the skip [radio frequency signal bouncing off the ionosphere, thus extending effective transmission range]. These younger guys complain about the 800 [MHz] because we are in an instant gratification society. [Then] we could not hear each other across the troop. We had to relay through the dispatcher. With this new technology, I will probably be able to talk from Little Rock to Springdale by staying on the frequency and hitting the towers. We now have those TRAX computers that are wireless, and [troopers] can pull up to headquarters and download their reports. Whoever would have thought that? When I started, we had the typewriter and had to use three carbons in-between accident reports; now it is all computer-generated. There are things lost, too. There used to be a closeness that isn't there anymore. It isn't anything that the department has done. It just has gotten bigger. We don't seem to interact as much with the other [law enforcement] agencies, either. They are better trained and well-staffed, and there isn't that need anymore. That goes back to my thinking that if we go back to highway patrol, we would be better served. [Some] of the valuable things about CID are guys like Steve Coppinger, who is probably the premier white-collar criminal investigator in the state and Northwest Arkansas. If we want someone looked at, Steve starts running the leads for us. I think there is a bigger need for following our own leads than in assisting Fayetteville and Spring-

dale.

ML: When you look back over your career, are there any other memorable traffic stops or instances that come to mind?

LB: Yes. There are many other funny things. Of course, you always try to make light of a bad situation. I got a commendation one time. A fifteen- or sixteen-year-old foster kid had kidnapped his foster parents in rural Madison County. It happened on an icy winter night, and it was actually over at Dry Fork. We were all sitting at the sheriff's office and had been working wrecks all day. It hadn't snowed, but it came about two inches of ice. We got everybody settled and sent home, and I went by the Highway Department to check on those guys. I went to the sheriff's office, and we were playing cards. A lady called in to the dispatch [center]—this was before 9-1-1—and said her husband had been kidnapped at gunpoint and that [he and his kidnapper] were heading toward Highway 412 from Kingston. We all jumped and ran out our cars. You couldn't stand up, and we were driving about five miles per hour trying to beat this kid to 412. I had a reserve deputy named Gerald James, who worked for the gas company, with me. I had just put in a new cassette player. They had just started letting us put scanners in the car and let us take out the AM radio and replace it with an FM-AM-cassette player. We were listening to Conway Twitty, which will come to light later on. We got out there and set up behind this old church by a county road. Sure enough, we hadn't been there ten minutes and we saw the station wagon coming toward us. It was them. You aren't worried about danger at that point. You are thinking, "I have got him. He is mine." I told Gerald to stay in the car and get on the radio. I couldn't talk

to Springdale because we were still on the low band, so I was talking to Clarksville. Clarksville would then relay it to Springdale. They had units coming out of Harrison and Springdale, and Sheriff Baker was trying to get up from St. Paul. Chuck Medford, the trooper in Carroll County and now the sheriff there, was trying to get down to me on Highway 23. Nobody could get there because they were all off in the ditch. So it was just Gerald and me. I told him to stay on the radio, and I would go capture this guy. I grabbed my shotgun and got out of the car. The first thing that happened was my hat blew off. When I hit the road, I fell, and my shotgun flew out of my hands. This kid was in the car and he had let the father go into the Dry Fork store to get them to open up so they could get gas. That is why they were there, to get gas. He was sitting there and I could see that he was getting a little edgy. I got the shotgun gathered up and hurried across the road and got behind a parked car. I figured that I was about twenty feet away from the car. When he got out of the car, I would holler at him and take him down. Once again, my feet went out from under me. I slid under the car, and a dog attacked me [laughs]. I had the shotgun, but I was trying to get the dog quieted down, and I hadn't seen my hat in twenty minutes. I sat there and watched him. He opened the door and started toward the store. They were hiding in there with the door locked. I said, "Son, I need you to put your hands up where I can see them." For one instant, he reached his hands toward his back, and I said, "Don't do it. You aren't that fast." He put his hands up and got down on his knees. I walked up to him, and I reached around and there was a .45 in the back of his pants. Mike Atwell, the deputy, got to us by that time, but Mike couldn't

stop. I was telling this kid to lie down, but he was saying, “He is going to run over me!” I got him handcuffed and into the ditch and Mike slid in and hit a parked car. I got a commendation for that. There is the official report and the one that the colonel had that Gerald wrote. I remember the colonel coming up to me and slapping me on the back and saying, “You know, Les, I saw the report, and you did a good job. I want to know two things: what are you doing trying to arrest a guy with Conway Twitty singing, “Hello Darlin’,” and why are you cutting donuts when you were waiting on him?” We had done all of that. We had been doing donuts in the highway. That was a lot of fun, and it worked out well.

ML: Are there any memorable state troopers that you worked with?

LB: I think Bill Couch. Winford Phillips was captain here and was one of my favorite captains. G. B. Harp was my captain in Harrison, and a good one. Winford was the kind of guy who—no matter what I did right or wrong—he never got angry. It was like dealing with your grandpa. He never lost his cool. If you did something that was incorrect, he would look at you and say, “You might want to try it a different way next time.” He had the patience of Job. Keith Ferguson—he was my sergeant for a while and then we worked together as sergeants. I would go anywhere with him. If he told me we were going to walk in and arrest fifty people, I knew he could do it. Bill Couch cared more for his men than anyone I ever worked with. He was the fixer. Ferguson was the one you wanted to go crashing into a house with, and Bill was the one you wanted when something was bad and you wanted to make it better. Bill Carver was my lieutenant for many years, and I served as a lieutenant under him for a brief time. When he retired, I

was promoted to replace him. Rocky Baker and I worked midnights together. I really believe Rocky is one of the poster boys of the State Police. His personal life is spotless, and he hasn't had a complaint filed [against] him in the twenty-eight years he has been with the State Police. If Rocky tells you it is going to happen, then it is going to happen. He never lies, and he is good to the people. There are so many of them over the years. Deloin Causey I remember during the Cuban situation. Personally, I think Colonel Goodwin was one of the best colonels we ever had, and I think it is becoming clear now just how good he was. I think Steve Dozier has all of the tools to be even better. Dozier is a guy who has come up through the ranks, and he has a lot of personality traits of Winford Phillips. You want to excel for him, and you don't want to let him down. I spent a lot of time with Frank White. He came to Fort Smith quite a bit as governor. I was fortunate enough to haul him. We had a bomb threat on him one night, and Richard Hoffman and I caught the guy who made the threat. We were assigned to watch his hotel room. We were sitting out in the Holiday Inn parking lot at 3:00 a.m., and one of the hotel employees came by and left something on a tray. We grabbed him. We didn't know it at the time, but he turned out to be the guy making phone threats against the governor. I remember that morning—we had sat there all night and Hoffman had his campaign hat over his eyes, and I was leaned back, [and] there was a pecking on the window. It was Gaye White, the governor's wife, and she had brought us coffee and donuts. She said, "Guys, I just want to thank you for looking after Frank and [me]." I love Frank White to death. The troopers loved him. He was good to us. His wife and family made quite an

impression on us. I remember standing out in the heat at a fair. I would see the governor come out with his wife, and they would come get us. He told me that when he ate, we ate, and when he went in, we went in. I haven't been around Huckabee enough to know if he is that way, but I hear good things about him. I didn't have bad relations with Clinton. Actually, another guy I really liked—and it is unfortunate how it turned out—was Jim Guy Tucker. I hauled him on three or four occasions in Fayetteville. He was always very cordial. He never left us standing and never treated us [like] second-class [citizens]. It was mentioned one time about merging with the highway police, and he said that he didn't want to give up his State Police to anybody. Frank was an exception, though. We will never forget him. We had a chance to see Mrs. White a while back, and I know she doesn't remember our names because there were too many of us, but she always pretends she does. The young guys don't have an opportunity to see that. It has been a good run. I never dreamed when I came out here from Ohio that I would end up here. The pay hasn't always been the best, but it has supported three kids and sent two to college. I can look at myself every morning in the mirror. I have always been honest. That is something I told my staff when I took over: I would always be honest, and sometimes that can hurt. Honesty isn't always positive. The funny thing is, I tried to go work for the Ohio Highway Patrol.

ML: Looks like you made the right choice.

LB: I made the right choice. Twenty-five years later, I wouldn't have changed a thing. Who could have thought that growing up you would have gotten to meet George

[H. W. Bush] Sr. and George [W. Bush] Jr.? I met Gregory Peck. I met Paula Abdul a little while back. The great thing about going to work is that there is no telling what is going to happen each day. The unfortunate thing is you see a lot of death. That is one thing Rose, my wife, asked me [about] a little while back. She never inquired much about the job, but she asked me how I was able to work a fatality at 11:00 at night and still come home at 4:00 [a.m.] and go to sleep. Some bother you worse than others, but you have to understand it is a job. Also, you can't get involved in these people's lives. I traveled with the Huntsville football team, and three of [the players] got killed in an accident. John Richardson gave me a great opportunity when he was coach. When I transferred back over there, I used to work out in their weight room. He asked me to go to the ball games with them. I talked to Bill Couch, and he gave me Thursdays and Fridays off. I did that for eight years. When Ken Harriman took over as coach, I traveled with them wherever they went. I am as proud of that plaque from the football players in Huntsville as I am of anything I've ever gotten. When I dealt with those kids on the highway, it showed me in a different light. I have guys that stop in, and you see them at Wal-Mart, and they see you in a different light. Would that work today? I don't think so. But it has been a good run!

[End of Interview]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]

[JD]