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## **Arkansas State Police Project**

Interview with

Elton Brown  
25 September 2003

Interviewer: Michael Lindsey

Michael Lindsey: What year did you join the State Police?

Elton Brown: I went to work in August 1957. I worked Pulaski County about a year and then I transferred to Ozark, Franklin County. On Christmas Eve night in 1959, I was shot through the stomach. The bullet lodged in my hip. I almost died. It was on a Saturday night. The personnel at the hospital in Ozark had to find an anesthesiologist at a party and get her up there. They operated on my stomach and sewed up several holes in my intestines. After I got over that I had to go to Little Rock and have the bullet removed. I was off for about six months before I went back to work. I was at Ozark for eight years. There were several incidents. I stopped a car one night, and the man was drunk. I got suspicious because the license plates used to be numbered by county—Pulaski County was number one, and so on. They numbered them by population. This particular license number was from White County. This made me suspicious. I stopped the man. Back then we didn't put handcuffs on them—kind of stupid, but that is the way

we were. I put him in my police car and took him to the jail. We walked up on the jail porch and started to unlock the door. He grabbed for my gun. I popped my hand down and got a hold of it about the same time. We got it out of the holster and I finally slung him loose. I lost it for a second. I was squeezing the trigger to shoot that man between the shoulders. At the last split second, I dropped [the pistol] down and shot him in the inside of his leg. Anyway, he was driving a stolen car and was wanted in California on burglary charges. Later, he made the statement that if he had got the gun he would have killed me. Most of it is routine. You worked traffic [and] caught speeders. I remember Ken McFerran—who later joined the State Police—was a schoolteacher in Ozark at the time, and he was interested in police work. He wanted to ride with me, so I went out and picked him up. We went out west of Ozark and backed into a side road to observe traffic. This car went by with two young people in it and it had an Oklahoma license. I pulled out and stopped it. It turned out the car was stolen. Ken asked me how in the hell I knew that it was a stolen car. It was just a gut feeling. I got a chance to transfer back home to Clarksville in 1966. I helped set up the motor vehicle inspection when the legislature passed the law. I was one of the ones appointed to write the rules and regulations. I knew it would never work properly, but we did our best. I worked in that for several years. I had six counties. I would go set up the inspection stations and visit them and take them supplies every so often. I got back in highway patrol until I retired in April of 1980

to run for sheriff. I was elected and stayed for three terms. I enjoyed the first four years, but the last two burned me out and I didn't run for reelection. I did run for Justice of the Peace and served three terms on the Quorum Court.

ML: You said you were hired in August of 1957. That was the first really big hire, when they hired 100 troopers. It was also right before the segregation deal [reference to the crisis at Little Rock Central High School]. Do you remember anything about that first academy? Does anything stick out as being memorable?

EB: It was semi-military. You got up and did your exercises and marches. You then went to class. I was slow on the typewriter, so I was up until 11:00 or 12:00 every night typing up my notes. Just before it was over they were having all of the problems at [Little Rock Central High School]. They called all of the trainees that had police experience, such as deputy sheriffs or city policemen, and took them over to Central High. That slowed the school.

ML: Did you have police experience before you joined?

EB: No.

ML: In 1957, they let you in the academy. In 1958 the problems started again at Central.

EB: Governor [Orval] Faubus had to finally back down. They sent the [National Guard] troops in, so he finally just dropped it.

ML: Did they give you any sort of specialized training on how to deal with crowds?

EB: Yes, they trained us on crowds and how to handle the stick that they gave us. All kinds of training like riot control and how to drive an automobile. I have never

been a fast driver. I was beginning to think I was going to have to quit because I didn't like to drive at high speed. I was never involved in a serious accident at high speed. I have had a lot of close calls. I have read that the average driver will be involved in an accident every ten years. Well, when I first went to work I was going down Broadway Street and at the Fifth Avenue intersection I ran a red light and a city bus hit me. I don't know why I ran it, I just did. I wasn't in a hurry. I called someone to investigate it and I told them that I ran the red light. They cancelled my days off. I wasn't involved in another [accident] until after I got in the sheriff's office. I had stopped to make a left turn and this lady hit me in the back. I could see her coming. It wasn't real bad. The next time a man turned left in front of me. I locked [my brakes] up trying to avoid hitting him and ended up turning it over. I added it up, and over thirty years I had three wrecks—right on the average.

ML: You drove a lot more miles than the average person, though.

EB: I would average about 1,200 or 1,500 miles a week. For several years after I went to work, we worked six days a week, ten hours a day. Then they could call you out on your days off. When I went to Ozark I was the only trooper there until I got shot. All you did was work and sleep. Later on, Congress passed a law that mandated comp time or overtime. I never paid any attention to that. I think that now, from what I hear, these new troopers are a different breed. They aren't as dedicated. We were loyal to each other and dedicated.

ML: In the early 1960s, how did the commanders gauge how well you were doing your job?

EB: They looked at the tickets and warnings that you wrote [and] looked at the complaints that came in on you. How you treated people. I have had good letters written about me. I don't remember any complaints written in. There are two things that I enjoyed: [helping] people, and the catch at the end of the chase. It was a thrill, sort of like a game. I tried to treat people like I wanted to be treated. I was courteous as long as they would let me [be]. I have stopped people I intended to give a warning to, and if they got mouthy or smart, then I would change it to a ticket. Generally, you had your mind made up when you stopped the car, but you could change.

ML: You mentioned the motor vehicle inspection program. Do you have any insight on why the legislature felt that was an important duty?

EB: The Congress told the states to pass a motor vehicle inspection law or they would withhold federal money. The legislature passed a law and turned it over to the state police.

ML: Do you think that this duty was something the state police should have been doing, or should it have been a highway department responsibility?

ML: The state police is where it should have been. You can't take a fourth-grade [educated] service station attendant and make a good inspector out of him. He will help his friends. I would catch them, and some of the stations would get closed down. There were stations where I thought they were good and honest people, and later I would find out that they had done some not so good things. I would go and talk to them, and if they persisted, I would take away their license. The only way the state could have properly done it was if they created their own stations

and ran [the stations] themselves.

ML: While you were in motor vehicle inspection, did they require you to work a partial shift in highway patrol, or were you dedicated to inspection?

EB: No. Inspection was my job. I had six counties, and I visited every station every three weeks to a month. I carried the supplies with me. I didn't do any highway patrol. If I ran into a drunk driver, I would either take him in or call someone to come get him.

ML: How was your relationship with the sheriff's departments?

EB: I always got along with them. I had a wonderful sheriff the whole time I was at Ozark. He had been a state trooper. I think he worked about ten years before he ran for sheriff. He stayed in office about eighteen years. When he got beat, I decided I would transfer. The trooper in Clarksville had gotten crossways with the sheriff there, so he and I switched places.

ML: What was the hiring process in 1957?

EB: I turned in my application when I got out of the service in 1956. I didn't hear anything for a year. They send me a letter to come to Little Rock and take the test. I barely made it. I was in Colorado when I got the letter. I was working in timber. The letter was forwarded to me and I got it on a Saturday. I was supposed to be in Little Rock on Monday. I got another fellow to come with me to help me to drive. He dropped off at Morrilton. I was sleepy, so I went to a motel and got a room. I asked them if they could wake me. They told me they couldn't, so they gave me an alarm clock. It didn't work, and I woke up at 6:30 or 7:00 a.m. I jerked my clothes on, and I don't think I even shaved. I made it to Little Rock

just in time to take the test. They started us in the academy shortly after that.

ML: What were your impressions of Colonel Lindsey?

EB: He was fine. I liked them all.

ML: Did it seem to matter to you, as a trooper, who the director was?

EB: No. Ralph Scott was a nut. We didn't like him. I didn't have any feeling about Lynn Davis. He didn't stay very long.

ML: Were you called over to any of the racial disturbances after Martin Luther King [Jr.] was killed? [Editor's note: Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 4, 1968.]

EB: I didn't have to go to that, but after [Winthrop] Rockefeller became governor [in 1966], he changed the system down at the penitentiary. Up until that time, they had prisoners for the guards. Rockefeller changed it and hired guards. I went, but the trouble that they were expecting didn't occur. We stayed down there a day or two. Another time they had trouble down there and the state police had to go in and bump a few heads to get it straightened out. I was not part of that though.

ML: Over your career, was there any new equipment that was developed that changed how you did your job?

EB: We got radar. Now they have a lot better equipment. They have radios they can carry on their belt. They went to the high band frequency radio. They have a lot better communication. When I was working, there were areas where the Clarksville station couldn't copy me on. [Editor's note: A reference to areas where there was no radio communications coverage.] Now they have got computers. If we sent a message to California on someone we picked up, or a stolen car, the station

out here [sent] it to Oklahoma. Oklahoma sent it to New Mexico. New Mexico sent it to Arizona and Arizona sent it to California. The message had to come back the same way. Now all they have to do is type in the name and date of birth and they are caught.

ML: Do you remember when they first gave you radar?

EB: Probably around 1966.

ML: Did they give you special training?

EB: Yes, you had to be certified so it would stand up in court.

ML: In the 1970s they changed a lot of cosmetic things like color of the cars and the uniforms. Did you have any feelings on them changing from a blue car to a white car?

EB: No. In fact, it is better. A white car is not as hot as a blue car. They went to four doors. The 1958 Chevrolet had 140 on the speedometer. I got it up close to that one time just to see if it could, and it nearly did. I didn't want to drive that fast, though.

ML: Out of all the cars, is there a special model that you liked?

EB: When I first went to work, they gave me a 1955 Chevrolet. It was a standard transmission with an overdrive. It would run 100 miles per hour in second gear. That [and] the 1958 Chevrolet were probably my favorite cars.

ML: What year did you get air-conditioning in your car?

EB: It was on in the 1960s. What I did—and others too—was if we were in good relations with a wrecker service, we would get an air-conditioner out of a wrecked car and put it in our car. It wasn't as good as a factory [installed air-conditioner]. For

all of the years that Colonel Lindsey was director, he believed in long sleeves and ties. We had no air-conditioning. They finally let us wear a summer hat made of straw. The whole time I worked I didn't get to wear short sleeve shirts. After I retired, they didn't have to wear long sleeves and ties. One time in August, there was a man working on a tracked front-end loader out here in the strip pits west of town. That thing turned over and rolled several times. He was ground up in that track. The coroner and I got there first. They had a crane there and it would lift one end and I would block up under it. Then it would lift the other end and I would block up under that end. Then we could turn the track enough to get the body out. Working down in the dirt and heat—I had to go take a shower. That was really something.

[End of Interview]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]

[JD]