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Arkansas State Police Project

Interview with

W. D. Davidson
Forrest City, Arkansas
9 January 2004

Interviewer: Michael Lindsey

W. D. Davidson: In 1957 the [Governor Orval] Faubus Administration just about doubled us [state police]. They had two recruit classes. The first was made up of recruits, and the second, which I was in and [Burren] Jackson and a good many others, [was for those who] had been working from a few months to a couple of years. I went on patrol on October 1, 1955. I went to recruit school in October of 1957.

Michael Lindsey: What did you do before you joined the state police?

WD: I got out of the [U.S.] Navy and I did odd jobs until I could go to work for the state police. I came home in March of 1952 and knew I wanted to go to work for the state police. I can't tell you why, but I decided while I was in the service that I wanted to be a state policeman. In those days you had to be sponsored by someone to get hired. My home county was Independence County. I told my dad what I wanted and he found me a sponsor. I went to Little Rock and took the test and

was interviewed. I had not had my twenty-second birthday at that time, but they didn't mention there age requirements at the time of the interview. I waited four or five months and never heard anything, so I went back to my sponsor and told him. He called them and made arrangements for another trip. I went down and met with the director, Herman Lindsey, and his assistant, Lieutenant Ben Kent. They interviewed me and told me I was too young to be a trooper. I had to be twenty-five. They told me that they had an opening in the radio room if I wanted it. They told me they didn't want an answer that day and that I should go back home and talk with my sponsor so he knows about it. I knew I wanted it and I took it and went to work August 15, 1952 as a radio operator. I turned twenty-five on August 31, 1955. On October 1, I was transferred to patrol and became a commissioned officer.

ML: If there was a trooper in Dumas, would they try to contact their headquarters in Warren or would they try to reach Little Rock?

WD: When I went to work, Arkansas was in the process of buying and converting to the FM radio system. We still had the AM system at that time. It used to be the only band for commercial and police radio. On cloudy or stormy days, there is a lot of static, and you just can't cut the squelch out of it. It was very unreliable. When I went to work, Little Rock had an FM transmitter. At that time, there was a district in Newport, Warren, Hope, and Harrison, in addition to Little Rock. All of those stations only had AM transmitters, but they had FM receivers. So a lot of the tie we could send messages to them, but not understand what they were telling us. The cars tried to work through their districts, but the system was so inefficient

that you would talk with anyone you could get. My first assignment in patrol was in Malvern. If I was south of Malvern, I couldn't talk to Little Rock, but I could talk to Hope. If I was north of Malvern, I could talk to Little Rock. This was the case all over the state, especially in the hills.

ML: Your first posting in highway patrol was Malvern?

WD: I was broken in at Little Rock. I rode with another trooper for a couple of weeks and then they assigned me to Malvern by myself.

ML: What was your impression of Malvern?

WD: It was a very good place to live and work, but it was a highly political area and it was hard for a state policeman to get along down there.

ML: Is Malvern in Garland County?

WD: No, [it's in] Hot Springs County. Of course, Garland County was running wide open gambling at that time. My first year or so in Malvern I had no problems because the sheriff was the type of guy you could get along with. He got beat and his opponent was one who felt that he should and could dictate what the state police would do in his county. That just doesn't work with me. As a result, I had conflict with this guy. I finally got disgusted and asked for a transfer. One of the ex-deputies would come and ride with me on occasion. I would run into him at the coffee shop or whatever and he would ride with me an hour or two. The sheriff came to me and told me he didn't want him riding with me because he might hear something on the radio. I said, "Wait a minute, Sheriff, he is a friend of mine. If you are afraid he will hear about some secrets that are going on in your office, I would advise you to not put it on the air." I told him he wasn't signing

my checks, and as long as he wasn't, this guy was welcome to ride with me. That was kind of the way it was in the early days. Still, I loved my job and believed in it.

ML: Where did you go after Malvern?

WD: I went to Walnut Ridge and they put me in the car with another trooper who went to work in 1957. I wasn't happy because I was used to working by myself. They sent me to Clarendon and then I went into CID [Criminal Investigations Division] and went to Forrest City.

ML: What made you transfer to CID?

WD: I had an interest in the work and I had worked around the edges of it as a trooper. I worked with CID and with police departments on minor investigations and I just had an interest in that field. I had an opportunity and I took it. Captain Paul McDonald was head of the CID at that time. I was in Little Rock one day and told him if he ever had an opening I would like to be considered. This opening in Forrest City came along, and he gave me the chance. I stayed there for fifteen years, which was too long. I would not recommend anyone to stay in CID that long. Some people forget where they come from and see themselves as investigators and not state policemen. I got promoted to lieutenant and came to Jonesboro when they first formed the CID companies. I was the first [CID] company commander at Jonesboro. I was then promoted to captain in patrol and went to Forrest City.

ML: What year did they form the CID companies?

WD: In January of 1976. The idea behind it was to have more direct supervision of

your investigators. I am not opposed to the idea, but I like to think that if you are a responsible investigator, you will do your job regardless. I think most of the guys are responsible. The company commander gives you someone to turn to when you need assistance.

ML: In the late-1960s it seemed Forrest City was the center of a lot of racial problems.

WD: Yes, it was. It started probably in the mid-1960s. I went into CID in November of 1963. The schools in Forrest City had not integrated yet. It was probably another year or two before they started. They then phased it in and that is when the tensions started building. Neither blacks nor whites liked it. The peak of all of that was in the late 1970s. Lee Senior High [School] in Marianna had a revolt in 1971, and that more or less brought it to a head. I was involved in that and took care of the investigative end of it while patrol helped the local agencies provide security. That was a trying time in eastern Arkansas.

ML: Do you have any memories about what sparked this situation?

WD: It started at Forrest City around 1965 or 1966. Some black agitators from Memphis, like Sweet Willie Wine, were the instigators. [Editor's note: Sweet Willie Wine organized a march from Memphis to Little Rock.] They started a boycott in Forrest City and this was when things really started getting rocky in St. Francis County. From that boycott, Lee County and Phillips County went into the same activity. I supposed in 1970 or 1971, the blacks got their boycott working in Lee County and they had their enforcers. If a black couple went to Marianna to buy a washing machine or something similar, the enforcer group would set their house on fire that night. They would then lay out there with a rifle and shoot at them

when they left the burning house. It was just a constant thing. I nearly worked myself to death on this thing. I worked seven days a week. Then it kept building. The black students at Lee High went on a rampage one morning. I think they started tearing things up and causing damage inside the school before classes. Then it spilled outside. I was working on one of those shooting incidents at the time and was living in Clarendon. I was on my way to Marianna that morning, and I heard the sheriff's office talking about the problem at the school. When I got there, they had two or three city police and three or four deputies with about 300 black kids. We finally got some troopers in there and got things under control. It was a spillover from the agitators and boycotts that had started years prior to this.

ML: It was around this time that Sweet Willie Wine did his walk from Memphis to Little Rock.

WD: Yes, and he was met in Hazen with all of these combines. [Laughs] I wasn't over there, but I was telling somebody recently that I heard the mayor at Hazen recruited some of his farmer friends to bring these combines up. This was before the interstate was finished. Willie's group was walking Highway 70. When they came by, these combines were turned on and they had their sickle bars spinning. Willie's crowd left. I don't blame them. It would have scared me.

ML: You mentioned that the mayor of Hazen exhibited a backlash against this civil rights movement by the blacks. Did you see any other instances of backlashes develop?

WD: There was at Forrest City. The [Ku Klux] Klan, to my knowledge, didn't exist in

St. Francis County prior to this. I went undercover with another guy to a Klan rally south of Little Rock. I think that was in 1970. When we got in there, there were several hundred people there and we took off in different directions. They had a flatbed truck with an electric cross burning on the back. These Klan people were up there making speeches and ranting and raving. I could feel someone looking at me. I cut my eyes to the left in the crowd and there was a group from Forrest City. There were fifteen or twenty people that I knew and who knew I was a state policeman. I stood there and thought just a minute and the only way I knew to handle it was to play along. I went over there and started shaking hands. We talked about the weather and everything else. I saw one of these Klansmen peeping at me from behind a truck, so I knew they had passed the word about me. When the speaker was finishing up his speech he invited everyone back and said, "You carpetbaggers, too," [referring to me]. I wasn't sure what would happen. Anyway, that was the way the Klan started in St. Francis County. Coolidge Conley was sheriff there and he was the secretary-treasurer of the local chapter. The Klan can't stand daylight, and when the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] got their roster, it broke up.

ML: Were there any other events that you worked in Forrest City that were particularly memorable?

WD: Yes. This was during the Sweet Willie boycott, and they had been there that day, probably in 1968. They were boycotting a store in Forrest City and harassing people as they came down the street. Later that day, the whites were on one side and the blacks [were] on the other, with the state and local police in the middle. It

was very explosive. That night—I don't remember what triggered it—we started making arrests. We housed them out at the community swimming pool, which had a big fence. We arrested probably forty people. Nothing ended up happening, but it could have.

ML: What year were you promoted to captain?

WD: In November of 1978, and I went back to Forrest City.

ML: What prompted the return to highway patrol?

WD: First was the opportunity for promotion. The second thing was that it got me out of the CID. I had been there for fifteen years, and I don't think it is good policy to stay there that long. I think it makes a better policeman of you when you move around.

ML: What year did you retire?

WD: May of 1983.

ML: Is there anything during that time that sticks out as being memorable? I have had people tell me that the Forrest City stretch of I-40 was a hot spot for drug traffic.

WD: That is [truer] today than it was then. In the late-1970s and early 1980s, we were catching some dope, but I think more travels now than then. They would get maybe forty or fifty pounds of marijuana. Interstate 40 is a main artery from the southwest and Mexican border heading northeast, so it is naturally a route for drugs. Also, while I was in Forrest city, I-40 had the highest truck county of any highway in the nation. That is from the I-30 split in Little Rock to Memphis. This segment carried more traffic than any other in the nation.

ML: What do you see the duties of the captain being?

WD: First of all, you have to make sure they do their job. A captain has to take care of his people. They have to handle frivolous complaints. It has a lot of responsibilities.

ML: Does the captain in the highway patrol differ from a lieutenant in the CID?

WD: No, not really. It is still supervision. I had more people in highway patrol. There were about forty people there and a CID company only had seven or eight. The difference is that I had nineteen counties [when I was in CID] initially, which meant I was dealing with nineteen sheriffs and all of the city police departments and city prosecutors. You were dealing with more people outside of the state police in CID than in patrol. You were more or less the buffer, politically. That is also true in patrol.

WD: I got along with almost everybody. We only had one problem that I can recall. We had an ice storm and it was bad slick. We had a receiver in the state police headquarters that received the county's radio. I heard Sheriff Coolidge get on the radio that morning at 8:00 or 9:00 and he told his cars to come to the courthouse because it was too slick, and to let the state police handle it. I called Coolidge and reminded him that he had responsibility for the county roads and that we would work the state and federal roads and help him on the county roads. If it was too slick for his people, it was too slick for mine. As a consequence, he sent his cars back out.

ML: What types of cases would they call you in on while you were in CID?

WD: If you let them, they would call you in on everything, including so-called "coke box" burglaries. That was a problem I had when I first went to CID. I didn't

know how to handle those people. When they called me, I thought I had to go, but I learned they would work you to death if you didn't say no on occasion. I tried to limit my calls to the heavier stuff like homicides and robberies. Of course, you would still work the smaller cases for PR [public relations] reasons and as time permitted.

ML: Did the state police give you training in investigation when you moved from highway patrol to CID?

WD: I attended a number of schools. I went to the FBI academy and schools on crime scene search and others. I took advantage of every opportunity and went to every school that I could.

ML: Were there any commanders that stick out as being particularly memorable over your career?

WD: There were a lot. I was very close and very impressed with Paul McDonald. I worked in the firearms lab for a couple of years with him. I worked and thought a lot of Bob Ward who was the commander over here in Newport. We had a director named Lindsey Hatchett, who was a prince of a man, when I was radio operator. I can just keep naming them: Carl Miller, W. A. Tudor, and lots of people.

ML: There aren't many people who knew Lindsey Hatchett. Do you have any stories that stick out?

WD: We had an AM transmitter with a boom mic[rophone]. The FM transmitter was on a pedestal mic. If you were working two stations, one with an FM and one with an AM, you had to work two mics. I was trying to copy something from Springfield, Missouri, and it was a rainy night. I could just hear them, but I

couldn't hear Harrison some of the time. I was talking to Harrison on the FM and Springfield on the AM. Harrison would try to relay to me what Springfield was saying. I had worked those two mics for several minutes trying to get the message. One problem with the microphones was that the FM mic had a toggle switch instead of a push button. We had a desk sergeant working in the adjoining room. I failed to turn the toggle switch off and I turned to the trooper and cussed real big and said something to the effect that I couldn't get the message—except I was using cuss words. I no sooner said this than the Hot Springs Police Department started calling me. When I turned to answer it, I noticed the light was on and I had left the toggle switch on. You have to have a license to operate a radio, and I knew that it was a violation of FCC [Federal Communications Commission] regulations and that I could lose my license and my job. This was the 4:00 [p.m.] to midnight shift. I would usually get up at 8:00 or 9:00 in the morning. As soon as I got up, I called Chief Hatchett about what had happened the night before in anticipation that someone would call and complain about what had happened. He reassured me that everything would be all right and to not do it again. That is the only personal story I remember, but he was a nice man.

ML: Do you have any memories about Colonel Lindsey?

WD: He was a good friend. I tried to get along with everybody. During those days, there were two factions: the one that sided with Herman Lindsey and the one that sided with Carl Miller, who was the assistant director, and each faction would try to pull you to their side. Over the years that I worked, I managed to stay on the center line and never got involved in the factions. I always prided myself in that.

ML: Did you sense during your time that the state police became a part of the community?

WD: Sure.

ML: Do you think that it changed during your career?

WD: This is opinion. I think that in the first half of my career the standing of the state police in the eyes of the public was much higher than it is today. I don't think the troopers today have the same respect that we had.

ML: Did you get sent over to investigate the gambling in Hot Springs?

WD: When I was stationed at Malvern, Hot Springs was wide open. It didn't matter who the governor was; this was just the way things worked, and at this time in 1956 Faubus was the governor. Every few months, the prosecuting attorney, circuit judge, and governor would start getting complaints and they would make a gesture of enforcement before moving the equipment back and going right back into operation. That was just a way of life in Arkansas. In 1956, the state police went into Hot Springs. I didn't go in on the raids because I was too close to the situation in Malvern. They went in and raided all of the bigger clubs over there, probably about three or five. They seized their tables, slot machines, and equipment and they stored it in the basement of a private house out on Lake Hamilton. There was one trooper, Glen Minton, stationed in Hot Springs at that time. They assigned Glen and me to guard this gambling equipment. They had rented tractor-trailer rigs to transport this equipment. This is speculation, but there were probably negotiations going on while we guarded that equipment for three nights. They relieved us and the same trucks that brought it out there came and picked it up and

took it back to the clubs. I was involved at different times during the 1967 and 1968 efforts to shut it down. I worked undercover at different times. Hot Springs had grown to like that [the gambling], and they would like to have it today. It was big business. I have heard people say that there was no organized crime attached to gambling in Garland County, but there were organized crime figures involved. Bill Clinton's Uncle Raymond ran the Buick dealership in Hot Springs. He was somewhere on the fringes of this operation. He got on the outs somehow and someone bombed a car in his driveway. The state police sent several investigators—and I was one of them—to work that case. We weren't getting anywhere. We would go and call on these thugs. We went to talk with one of them at his house on Lake Hamilton. He was drunk. He looked us in the eye and he stuck his hands out and said, "If you have got the wood, put the cuffs on me. Otherwise, get out of my house." We didn't have the wood, so we had to leave. We went to the circuit judge and told him what had happened. He issued a forthwith subpoena for this guy, and we went back and got him. That was the way we started handling those guys—with forthwith subpoenas. It was a nasty operation, but we eventually got it shut down, although we never did solve the car bombing.

[End of Interview]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]

Captain Davidson's Recollections of Central High' Integration

The following is my recollection of the Arkansas State Police's involvement at Central High School at Little Rock on the day that it was integrated by the nine [African-American] students. The exact date is unclear to me, but I put it at or near the middle of

September 1957. [Editor's note: The following situation described by W. D. Davidson occurred on September 23, 1957. Little Rock Central High School was successfully integrated on September 25, 1957 when the 101st Airborne provided security.] Central High School's football field was enclosed by a high solid fence, shielding all inside from people driving by on 15th Street. I was a young trooper stationed at Malvern, Arkansas, at the time. Little Rock Headquarters notified me, as well as others—I would estimate sixty or seventy troopers—to report to Little Rock Headquarters before daylight on the particular morning. We did report, and were taken into the football field at Central High, supposedly concealed from the general public, and were told that the Little Rock Police Department personnel would handle the crowd situation up at the school, and that we would only become involved if and when the Little Rock PD requested our assistance. After the school day started, and after a crowd estimated at 2,000 to 3,000 people had gathered on Battery Street, primarily near the corner of 15th Street, and disturbances had broken out, we were ordered to report to that location. We had previously been briefed, told that if we were called, that we would be lined up on the sidewalk, facing Battery, and were to allow no one to leave the street and come onto the sidewalk. And that we were not to leave the sidewalk and go into the street, and into the crowd. After arriving at the location, we were placed along the street, in alternation, of one Little Rock police officer, one state police officer, et cetera. Remember that the weeks and months prior to this date the news media had kept the integration/segregation issue before the public, resulting in a very divided citizenry. The mayor of Little Rock, Woodrow Mann, had been an outspoken advocate of the integration of Central High School. And Orval Faubus, as governor, had called out the National Guard in order to prevent violence during the opening of the

schools. The end result, in the eyes of the public, was the Little Rock police were identified as integrationists and the state police were identified as segregationists. This assumption was incorrect; however, it prevailed. After we were placed on the sidewalk, and preventing the crowd from advancing toward the school, much, much verbal abuse was directed at the city police. Even though the state police were assisting them in keeping the people from the school, doing the very same job. I, as a state policeman, felt very sorry for my city brethren. At some point, the crowd became aware that the [African-American] students were, in fact, inside the school, and the disturbances, shouting, cursing, et cetera, increased. A pickup truck, driven by an [African-American] man, drove west on 15th Street, and a redneck from the crowd jumped onto the rear bumper and “speared” a shovel through the rear glass, and then ran back into the crowd. Trooper Floyd Weaver broke from the ranks and ran into the crowd and caught the man. A struggle was occurring and another trooper, whose identity I’ve forgotten, and I ran into the crowd to help Weaver. Weaver had one arm [of the man], the unidentified trooper had the other arm, and I was pushing ahead opening a path back to the sidewalk. By this time, other officer had come to our assistance. Some guy in the crowd who was blocking our path told me, “If you hit that man, you’re dead!” I shoved him to the side and all hell broke loose. It felt as if I didn’t touch the ground for several feet as the crowd surged forward. We continued to make our way to the sidewalk, and the man was arrested and carried away by the Little Rock Police. I can’t recall any other exciting moments during the remainder of that day. After the [African-American] students left the school, the crowd dissipated. And we were released to return to State Police Headquarters for further assignments for that night. The night was a very intense and exciting night. The

next day, President [Dwight] Eisenhower ordered the [U.S.] Army 101st [Airborne] paratroopers into Little Rock, and we were released and returned to our respective assignments.

W. D. Davidson

24 January 2004