

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

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Arkansas Memories Project

John Brummett

Interviewed by Scott Lunsford and Gerald Jordan

October 18, 2018

Fayetteville, Arkansas

Objective

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

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

Transcript Methodology

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

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

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

- Brackets enclose
 - italicized annotations of nonverbal sounds, such as laughter, and audible sounds, such as a doorbell ringing;
 - annotations for clarification and identification; and
- Commas are used in a conventional manner where possible to aid in readability.

Citation Information

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John Brummett was interviewed by Scott Lunsford and Gerald Jordan on October 18, 2018, in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

[00:00:00]

Scott Lunsford: John Brummett, welcome to the Pryor Center.

John Brummett: Good to be here.

SL: You're—you're our current victim [*JB laughs*] in the memory vault. Um . . .

JB: Glad to be.

SL: Let's see, now what is today's date? Is this the . . .

JB: Eighteenth of October, 2018.

SL: Is it the eighteenth or nineteenth?

JB: I believe it's the eighteenth.

SL: Eighteenth.

JB: It's what I just signed on the documents.

SL: Okay. Uh—thanks.

JB: That authorized you to do whatever you're doing.

SL: This is October 18—uh—2018 at the Pryor Center in Fayetteville, Arkansas, downtown Square in Fayetteville. I'm with John. I'm Scott Lunsford. This is John Brummett. And John, do you have a middle name?

JB: Actually, my name is Johnny Ray Brummett.

SL: Johnny Ray.

JB: But in the fifth grade, my s—my teacher—uh—whose name was Judy Hankins, who is the mother of Craig O'Neill.

SL: [*Laughs*] Okay.

JB: She d—she just told me, "You're gonna be John from now on." And—uh—changed my name. And I wa—my parents didn't appreciate it much, but . . .

SL: It's . . .

JB: . . . John Brummett. And I go by John R. sometimes, but . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

JB: . . . the name's Johnny Ray.

SL: So—uh . . .

JB: If you must know. That's my name.

[00:01:00] SL: Do any of your childhood friends still call you Johnny Ray?

JB: In fact, they do. Uh—but my tennis—my contemporary tennis buddies in the old man's doubles league . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

JB: . . . have taken to calling me Johnny Ray. And—uh—uh—that's just—and I've embraced it. I spent so many years tryin' to hide the fact that my name was Johnny Ray. And now I embrace it. I—I'm proud to say it's just—that's who I am. That's who m . . .

SL: That's right.

JB: That's who my folks named me. Uh—my mother, bless her heart—uh—wanted—I shouldn't tell this on her—uh—the—uh—of—the—uh—delivery doctor asked her to—uh—not spell my name *I-E*. He said, "That's a feminine spelling." She was gonna name me forever Johnnie, *I-E*, Ray Brummett. Thank goodness he stepped in and at least put a *Y* on it. [*SL laughs*] So—uh . . .

[00:01:53] SL: What was that date?

JB: December 4, 1953.

SL: You're younger than me.

JB: Really?

SL: Yeah.

JB: I don't look it, do I?

SL: [*Laughs*] No, you [*JB laughs*] look—you do look younger than me.

JB: Yeah. I'm . . .

SL: Um . . .

JB: . . . I'm—uh—at this date, today, I am about six weeks away from going on Medicare. So a big—big moment for me, you know.

SL: Big moment.

JB: Yeah.

SL: I—I—uh—went ahead and—uh—got Social Security this year.

JB: You gonna take the money?

SL: I'm takin' the money.

JB: Whe—uh—well, I'm not gonna ask how old you are. It's not your life we're talkin' about today.

SL: Oh, no, I—I'm sixty-six.

JB: Oh. So you can take full at sixty-six.

SL: Yeah.

JB: So you gonna—you're gonna rack up.

SL: I hope so.

JB: You're gonna have . . .

SL: I hope I . . .

JB: I'm thinkin' about that next year.

SL: . . . live long enough to rack up.

JB: Yeah. Yeah. That's the key.

SL: Yeah.

JB: That's the key.

SL: Yeah. Um—so—uh—speaking of your mother.

JB: Yeah.

[00:02:40] SL: Uh—your mother's name, maiden name?

JB: My mother's maiden name—Bearden. Fannie Ozella Bearden.

SL: Wow.

JB: Yes. That was her—that's her name. She still lives. She

suffers—uh—uh—at this stage from—uh—late stage Alzheimer's.
She's been in a nursing home for . . .

SL: Mmm.

JB: . . . uh—several years. Uh—she's—uh—the Beardens were a—
uh—a tenant-farming family from North Howard County, which is
Nashville, Arkansas.

SL: Uh-huh.

JB: But she's actually from—from a—north part of the county,
there's a town called Umpire, north even of Dieirks. The pine
woods. Very poor. Uh—Depression era. She's born 1930. Uh—
tenant-farming family. Uh—five children. She's the second
oldest. Uh—and yeah, she was named for her Aunt Fannie, and
where . . .

SL: Ozella?

JB: . . . her mother got Ozella, I don't know. I don't know. But
that's—and she's been—she's—through her life, she was
generally known as Ozella. But her name is Fannie Ozella.
Names are something in our family. You already—you're already
picking up that we're kind of a weird clan.

[00:03:46] SL: We—yu—our family has kind of a history of naming—
using names out of the tree, out of the family tree.

JB: Right, well, sure. That's what a lot of people do.

SL: Uh-huh.

JB: Yeah. Yeah. It . . .

SL: Um—we're part of that Turner clan down in—uh—Mulberry and Ozark and . . .

JB: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . Cass and all that, so there's—we have a [*laughs*] lot of names to . . .

JB: Right.

SL: . . . choose from.

JB: Right.

[00:04:10] SL: Um—so—um—did she—uh—does she ever give you any stories about her childhood? I'm always lookin' for the oldest story.

JB: About her childhood?

SL: Uh-huh.

JB: Uh—well [*laughs*], actually, she lives in her childhood now.

SL: Uh-huh.

JB: With her—with her disease.

SL: Uh-huh.

JB: Uh—she doesn't know me anymore, she just knows I look familiar, and sometimes I'm her brother. And I spend a lot of time talking about—uh—her childhood with her. And a few years

ago, she wanted to go back and try to find the old family cemetery at a little town called Burg, which is north—[laughs] I said, "Mom, it's called Burg? That's like calling it Town," you know, but it . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

JB: . . . that was the—the community, Burg, Arkansas, and we found the Bearden cemetery, and she said, "I wish—I wish that one-room school and church house we went to was still here." And I looked up, and I said, "You mean that right there?" And the old, nearly falling-down, one-room—uh—schoolhouse, also a community church, where she got eight years of education, which was standard in that time to spend eight years of—eighth grade, basically. And—and it was a great day because we got to see her ancestor's run-down cemetery and also walk up a way and see . . .

SL: Where she schooled.

JB: . . . and see where she went to school, yeah. [00:05:32] So s—and she had to cross a creek, walk to school. You know the old stories. The ol . . .

SL: Pioneer stock.

JB: Sure. Sure. This was a hardscrabble, poor, salt-of-the-earth existence. I—it—I—I—I try to put it in this perspective. They

were among the poorest people. They were—they didn't own anything. They were tenant farmers. They were—they were the poorest people, among the poorest people in one of the state's poorest counties in one of the nation's poorest states. And she was born in 1930, a child of the Depression. So she is simply a child of poverty. That's—that's the essence of her life and my dad's, too, 'cause [*laughs*] he came from some woods right nearby. Uh—just poor folks. Poor—poor but good, rural, Church of Christ folks. Uh—and—uh—that's her story.

SL: So . . .

JB: And that's where I come from.

[00:06:36] SL: Did you ever know any of her parents, either one of her parents or her . . .

JB: My grandparents?

SL: Yeah.

JB: Yeah, I knew 'em well. Uh—s—Archie and Stacy. Yeah. Great folks, great folks. Uh—lived—they lived in a—just a shanty back in a—on a Weyerhaeuser—first Dierk's Lumber Company, but then a Weyerhaeuser—uh—gravel road between—uh—Center Point and Dierks. Uh—when—tha—this—that was their place when—when my mother was married and livin' in Little Rock. And the greatest times of my childhood were goin'—I thought I

was goin' to someplace special, to this little wood cabin back in the woods with holes in the floor—uh—to see my granny and granddaddy. That was—uh—that was just—uh—a highlight of my life. Uh—and I was just—I was going from a—from an urban, sort of, Little Rock existence, which is all I really knew, to abject poverty, but it was—there was just a great time. And my cousins—when all the fam—all the kids would come, and all the cousins were together. Great times. Great times.

[00:07:51] SL: So—uh—your grandparents were actually living there when you were a child.

JB: Right.

SL: And so it was a special place.

JB: Oh yeah. Yeah.

SL: So I'm assuming—uh—was—did it even have electricity?

JB: It did by the time I came along. But it had been very recent.

SL: Uh-huh.

JB: And it was—the wires were recently strung back through those trees. Yeah. It didn't have television. I member when they got a little nineteen-inch portable television. Uh—but yeah, they had—from—from what I can remember from mid- to late-[19]50s, they had just—uh—they had just gotten—uh—electricity. Wood . . .

SL: No running water.

JB: . . . stove—woodstove.

SL: Woodstove.

[00:08:31] JB: I member Christmas mornings with my—uh—granddad—uh—the s—waking me up to the sound of the clanging iron and throwing wood into that woodstove to build a fire. It's—uh—rich memories. Rich, but extremely poor. And you have no perspective as a kid. You just think this—I'm—I could've been at Disneyworld. I mean, as far as I was concerned, this was a great place to be. Sleepin' three and four to a bed if a lot of cousins are there, you know.

SL: Right.

JB: Let's just [*laughs*]*—there're not that many beds, and there pallets in the floor. We just—legs were tangled with cousins, and you just—uh—wake up at night and try to figure out where you are. It ju—but—but a great childhood and great memories.*

[00:09:12] SL: They had a well?

JB: Oh yeah. They did.

SL: No running water, of course.

JB: No.

SL: Um . . .

JB: Took a bath at the spring.

SL: Ah. They had a nice spring.

JB: Yeah. I member my mother taking me down to a—for a bath at the spring. And—uh—I was embarrassed to have my clothes removed out in—outside [*SL laughs*], although we were far away from everyone. And a horsefly came up and bit me on the rear end.

SL: Oh! [*Laughs*]

JB: While I was having my [*laughs*—while I was being bathed—uh—by my mother. And it made me so mad. But what really made me mad and humiliated me is she couldn't wait to get back to the house to tell cousins and—about twenty, twenty-five people about—about a horsefly biting my—uh—just, you know, silly things you remember from—from growin' up.

[00:10:01] SL: That's somethin' else. So—um—what about—uh—stories by your grandparents? Did they have any . . .

JB: No. No, I'm sure they did—uh—um—my grandfather died when I was in high school, my grandmother when I was a young adult. And I was close to both of them in many respects, loved 'em both, and—and—and they loved me, and I spent time with 'em, but I don't remember any of the family lore from them.

[00:10:33] What I do know, and this is—this is an incredible tragedy, my mother was—wa—would talk, from time to time,

about the family as it moved from Virginia to Arkansas.

SL: Okay.

JB: The wagon train. And the journal kept by somebody on that trip. Our ancestors. And the—I mean, they're dying of illnesses. It's just an incredible story. And I remember we're—big family reunion, everybody's down at my grandparents, and only my mother, of which there—she had four siblings. She was the only one who said, "Let's get that out, and let's read it to these kids. Let's do that tonight." And everybody said, "Nah, we don't"—but she insisted. And she read from it as everybody gathered around. But I was too young to really appreciate it, and nobody else in the family appreciated it . . .

SL: Hmm.

JB: . . . or seemed to, and now I don't know where that is, what happened to it, if that journal still exists. And my mother's in no condition now to—to say where it might be, and I don't think she knows anyway. [00:11:50] And that—I—I wish I had it right now just to read about—about that. Because that was—these are brave people, you know, startin' out across country. And—uh—lookin' for some rocky land to be good to put some—put in some potatoes. You know, I think that's basically what they're looking for. And that was the—the—uh—the—we had one

evening when, at my mother's insistence, when I was about five or six, when that thing was read from. And—uh—I'd like to have that moment back.

SL: Golly. I'm so sorry.

JB: Wouldn't that be something?

SL: Yeah, it would be.

JB: Yeah.

[00:12:24] SL: I guess—I'm assuming you guys went through everything when you—when she—uh . . .

JB: Yeah.

SL: . . . was admitted to the nursing home . . .

JB: Yeah, we . . .

SL: . . . so . . .

JB: We have, and—and—she never had it. It was with my grandparents, but what happened I—we just don't know. Don't have it. And there's nobody left to say. Most of her siblings are gone, and she's—and she's not able to—she wouldn't know anyway where it is. So it's lost.

SL: Oh, I—you gotta believe that it's somewhere.

JB: Well, [*laughs*], why don't you guys go down and . . .

SL: [*Laughs*] And look at . . .

JB: . . . scour Howard County and find it for me.

SL: Yeah.

JB: It would be great.

SL: It—yeah, well, I would think that there would be cousins or . . .

JB: You would think.

SL: . . . great cousins that . . .

JB: You would think.

SL: But no?

JB: But I'm not optimistic that . . .

SL: Oh, that's . . .

JB: . . . it's anywhere.

SL: . . . too bad.

[00:13:10] JB: Things are easily—particularly—no—because how easy it is for people, for families that have dissipated or grown apart . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

JB: . . . to not—to lose those things and not appreciate 'em. And I also remember from an early age of this great throng of people, only my mother seemed to give a damn, you know, so that's just—that's how I remember it. So I don't think—I think it was lost to a trash heap many years ago. So it goes. So it goes.

[00:13:37] SL: What about your—um—uh—father's side?

JB: Same story. Poor, tenant-farmer family. Not northern Howard

County, but western—no, eastern Sevier County at a community—near a community called Gillham.

SL: Uh-huh.

JB: And—uh—he—similar deal. Poor—uh—tenant-farming family livin' back in the woods in a—and—uh—dirt-poor, Depression-era existence. Uh—the family not as—uh—Church of Christ religious, not as devout as my mother's—uh—but of that same culture. And—uh—uh—when my dad was—uh—I'm skipping ahead. You . . .

SL: That's fine.

JB: . . . don't want me to do that.

SL: We—I'll get back. We'll—I'll get us back.

JB: You remember where you are.

SL: Uh-huh.

JB: But—uh—one thing about the family is that my grandmother, Grandma Brummett, apparently had a little trouble gettin' along with a couple of her daughters.

SL: Mh-hmm.

JB: And—uh—my dad was the oldest boy, but he was the third. He had two older sisters. One of his daughters, as a late teen—one of her daughters, one of my aunts, as a late teen ran away from home and came to Little Rock, where she—uh—fell into a

romance with a man named Bob Bevis of the Bevises of Scott—
uh . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

JB: . . . the farming family . . .

SL: Right.

JB: . . . up there. Uh—and ended up marrying him. Meantime, my
dad, at eighteen, gets drafted in 1943, [19]44 into the marines.
[00:15:09] You know, at the end of the war, you could be
drafted into the marines. That's how desperate it was. And he
was—uh—three-year stint in the marines, and he was on
Okinawa.

SL: Wow.

JB: Uh—as a—uh—rifleman, front-line private. Uh—how he's not
dead like so many others is just pure luck. Uh—tells stories
about being—Okinawa was an April battle. April 1945.

SL: Mh-hmm.

JB: Just before the end of the war, before we—the atomic bomb.
And he never would talk about it, like a lot of those guys, the
old-breed guys, but he would tell a few things. And one of which
is it rained sort of just—sounds like monsoon season while they
were havin' all this—this—this killing and this—and this horror.
And you'd have a foxhole, and the foxhole fills up with water,

and you live in a foxhole, a wet foxhole. 'Cause you don't move. You don't move. And when he finally took his shoes off, his flesh came off.

SL: Oh my gosh.

JB: Uh—so that was the . . .

SL: That's a long time in that water.

[00:16:17] JB: [*Laughs*] Yeah. Uh—I member askin' him once—I was getting—my parents could never understand where I came by my liberal politics, and they'd [*SL laughs*] read it in the paper, and they'd wonder—"We're not exactly against it. It makes some sense to 'em, but where did he get this way?" Anyway, I was—I was defending—uh—the free expression of flag burning. And I—uh—and I was getting—I got—I got this letter from this guy who said, "You know, you're obviously never been in the service. You've never served your country in combat because the only thing that keeps you going out there is—is that flag." And I [*laughs*]*—it was July fourth. My dad came over, was cookin' out at my house, and I said, "I got this letter, and this guy said the only thing that keeps you going up there's that flag." And he said, "Are you blanking me? Seriously?" He said, "If you raised a flag where I was, you'd get your ass shot off." He said, "You know, you don't—the flag had nothing to do with*

it. What you're trying to do is survive the moment and not move. That's all you're tryin' to do." I don't think he said it quite the way I say it, but that's what he—he meant. Anyway. That aside. He comes back in 1946 to—back to his ho—his home down in Gillham. And two things have happened. His older sister, to whom he was very close, Stella, had moved to Little Rock and taken up with the Bevis gentleman. And the one thing that he had in his life that he asked them to take care of, his horse—family had needed money. They'd sold it. So he bolted from home, too.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:17:56] JB: Told 'em to go to hell and came to stay with Stella in Little Rock, which is how my life happens to be based in Little Rock rather than, you know, rural [*laughs*]*—*rural pine woods of Southwest Arkansas because—'cause Stella bolted from home, and then they sold Daddy's—uh—uh—horse, and he came. And so that's—that's how—that's what puts me born 1953 at the old St. Vincent's Hospital on what was then High Street, now Martin Luther King in Little Rock. Just—most of my cousins, at least on my mother's side and on my father's side too, still down there. That's—that's where they live. And they work at the mill or they do whatever—they live that completely rural culture. And we're

the sort of the weird ones in the family.

[00:18:48] SL: Yeah. So I would assume that would—uh—dampen any enthusiasm to go back and visit the family.

JB: Not—it—it—it did for a long time. And this is all, I guess, a matter of the passages of our lives, but . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

JB: . . . my life became—not only was my life different because I'm in Little Rock, but the next thing you know, I'm in the paper with my picture . . .

SL: Right.

JB: . . . from Little Rock, which is like—I don't—I don't mean this in any judge—pejorative way, but to some of these folks from my family, Little Rock may as well be New York City as far away as it is. Because they don't—it—it's just not—it's just not—uh—uh—accessible to them or something that they think that—that they're connected to in any way. Might get to Hot Springs, might get to Arkadelphia. If they go to college, they might go to Henderson. But—but it's remote. But the culture isn't so different. And—uh—but then they started seeing me on—uh—in the paper. And then I started doin' this thing on Channel 7 for years as a college—called Live at 5 commentary segments, and they were—they were gatherin' around lookin' at this long-lost

cousin who's—who—born in the city that they don't really know who's talkin' on television. And I was just con—entirely separated from them. It was—we were from different planets. And—and I just didn't have any interest in going back. And when I would go back from some—say, a funeral, everybody's sort of leery of me like, "Does he think he's better than we are?"
Some . . .

SL: Right.

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:20:26] JB: Maybe something like that. But lately in the last few years, I've actually looked at property down there. I know basically the home place at what was my mother called Burg, which is still—there's still a Burg Church of Christ there. That's all that's there. I know generally where that home place was that—their tenant farm. That's—an older second cousin of hers said it was—the Bearden place was right up there. And I've actually thought about just building a place there. And just spending time there. 'Cause I feel a need to reconnect with that.

SL: I understand.

JB: I doubt that I'll do it 'cause it's not a quick getaway for the weekend. It's a two, two-hour-and-fifteen-minute drive. But it's

interesting because I'm now—I'm drawn back to the place that I've been so disconnected from as an adult.

SL: Yeah, that's kind of unexplainable. I think—I'm not sure that everybody doesn't . . .

JB: Have that . . .

SL: . . . feel that tug.

JB: Yeah.

SL: At the—as they mature and—yeah, kinda return . . .

JB: Yeah.

SL: . . . to where you—your blood is.

JB: Right. But it's interesting that you feel that even though for three, four decades felt it not at all. In fact, the opposite. I'm not of that, they're not of me, we're not connected. And suddenly, yeah, we are. Yeah, we are.

[00:21:57] SL: So have you ever heard any story about how your mom and dad met?

JB: Yeah. Yeah. They knew each other vaguely because the [laughs]—they're not that far apart where they grew up. And he's five years older. And I don't—but I mean, so he—but—I guess when he was eighteen and went away to the war, she was thirteen, so she was just a little girl across the way, but they knew each other from childhood. I will say this not bragging,

but it's just a fact, and you can see from the pictures. My mother is widely regarded the best lookin' woman in that part of the state. Just a—they—just—and she—my grandmother had to get a shotgun after guys comin' around. [*Laughter*] But my dad came back from the war, and he was twenty-one, and she was—or twenty-two, and she was seventeen, and she was looking a little different, and he was—though he moved to Little Rock, he would still go back, and he worked up the nerve to make a little attempted romantic move on her. And she had three or four other suitors at the time. And my grandmother Bearden says that JT—that was his name. That's his name. The names in our family are weird. It's not John Thomas, it's JT. There are no periods after the J and the T. He's just JT. The marines said, by the way, "Nah, you gotta have a name," and he named himself John Thomas when he went into the armed forces. But [*SL laughs*] where was I? I was at—I'd be . . .

[00:23:44] SL: Well, we're talking about how they met.

JB: Yeah. Yeah. Well, then, that's how they met. They knew each other generally, but she sort of grew up, and he was still comin' back, and he—maybe he'd been a little worldly. He's been away to Okinawa. That might make you worldly in a way. And he worked up the nerve, and they dated several years. But the

thing I was gettin' ready to tell. My grand—Granny Bearden, she came to love JT, my daddy. But she said he was the single most shy person that she had ever seen because he would come spend a Sunday afternoon with the family so he could be with Ozella, and she said he would sit there all day and not say a word. And my dad spent his life very shy, reserved, insecure, introverted, just the way he was. [00:24:36] So that's how they met, and they married when he was twenty-seven, and she was twenty-two, so they courted a long time. I mean, that—the stories of what you do is get in a car on a Saturday night and drive to the Oklahoma state line. That's what you would do. I mean, I think you could probably drink or party or do something over there. Not that my mother ever touched a thing, but she would go along. But they married when he was twenty-seven, she was twenty-two. He had gotten . . .

SL: Five years.

JB: . . . a job workin' for my Uncle Bob Bevis in Little Rock at Bevis Recreation Center, which, not to go into great detail, was a—in the 200—100 block of Main, downtown Little Rock. It was a burger place, it was a beer place, and my Uncle Bob also made book. It was a book-making place. That's just—that was—my dad was flippin' hamburgers, workin' the front counter, and he

said there was an occasion when he started rippin' up pages out of a notebook and eating them or flushing them because it was—would be . . .

SL: Evidence.

JB: Evidence, and the police knew, but there would be occasions when [*laughs*]*—*that the deal was off, and they were gonna come do a raid. So there's that. Anyway, my mother—I get distracted. There's so much for me to tell. But . . .

SL: I know.

[00:26:00] JB: They married when he was twenty-seven, she was twenty—he was working in Little Rock. He worked—I believe at that very time, he was not working for my Uncle Bob Bevis, he was working at what he called the flying red horse, which is the Mobil station across from Central High School.

SL: Wow.

JB: That famous Mobil station. He pumped . . .

SL: I've been in that station.

JB: He pumped—which is now a museum.

SL: Yeah.

JB: He pumped gas there. That was his job. So they married, and he brought this meek, sweet, country girl from the backwoods of Burg, Umpire, to Little Rock. Where he had been spending time

with not just his older sister, Stella, but her somewhat more sophisticated husband, Bob Bevis, in the Little Rock culture. And so he brought my mom here, and I—took my mother to our first home when I was brought home from the hospital, which was in Uncle Bob's—Bevis—apartment building. We got an apartment in that building, on East Capitol Avenue approximately where Interstate 30 would come through in a few years.

SL: Oh yeah.

[00:27:13] JB: And we—I took her down there one Sunday afternoon a few years ago, and I said, "Okay now, where do you think it was?" You know, it's hard for her to say. And we figure it was, by the address, it's either on the service road or right in the middle of the interstate is . . .

SL: Right.

JB: . . . where it was. And I said, "Well, what was around here?" and she said, "I was scared to get out. I just stay—*[laughs]* I just"—this, you know, twenty-two year-old country girl in the big city. And she said, "I really don't remember 'cause I—not only do I not remember, I just stayed in the house." With her firstborn boy, Johnny Ray. So that's how they met. That's how they came to Little Rock, and that was the early, early existence.

[00:28:04] LS: So if you think of something else about . . .

JB: I mean . . .

SL: . . . that time . . .

JB: . . . all this . . .

SL: . . . period, then we'll . . .

JB: . . . just flashes, and I . . .

SL: Yeah.

JB: . . . know I ramble and . . .

SL: No, that's good.

JB: Yeah.

[00:28:13] SL: So let's talk about the household that you grew up
in.

JB: Yes.

SL: Your first memories of where . . .

JB: Okay.

SL: . . . you called home.

JB: Right.

SL: So was that in the apartment?

JB: That was the apartment and—that to which I was just referring.

And my mother's brother, younger brother named Burley,
meantime, went to mechanic school and became an ABF truck
mechanic and got a job in Little Rock or North Little Rock, and he
and his wife moved into another apartment in this building. And

there are pictures, and—well, may be some that I've brought with me that show a kinda run-down, needing-painting, white structure, which had a few apartments in it belonging to my dad's older sister's husband. And that's where we lived from [19]50—I was born in December 1953, and somewhat notably, we moved 1958. So I would have—notably because of what was goin' on in Little Rock and . . .

SL: Right.

JB: . . . and the nature of that move. But we lived there. And there was a fire station next door. And I don't remember it well, but my mother used to remember well that the firemen and I as a young toddler were just best chums, and I spent a lot of time with 'em. And it's strange 'cause I have a pretty good memory of—I can recall things from those days, but I don't have strong memories of that. I—but she likes to tell that we did. It was a good existence—you know, I had my—and then my uncle who lived in the other—my mother's brother, who lived in the apartment, he had children. [00:30:00] Cousin about two years younger than I. And so I had . . .

SL: You had playmates.

JB: . . . extended family.

SL: Yeah.

BJ: Right there. We were—so it was fine. It was a good life. But I guess I wanna make the point that it was also a very sheltered life. I was raised by a mother who was afraid to go outside.

[Laughs] You know, that's just . . .

SL: Yeah.

JB: . . . just a country girl who was in Little Rock and . . .

SL: Well, a beautiful . . .

JB: Well, yeah.

SL: . . . country girl.

JB: Right.

SL: Yeah.

[00:30:28] JB: Yeah. Yes. But my early years were very, very sheltered. Except for the family. I've always been very clannish. I always have a strong sense of home. I really don't like to be away from home. Just these two or three days up in Fayetteville, I start to get a little separation anxiety. I'm just—I'm drawn to the comfort of the familiarity of the home. And it—I think it goes back to that.

SL: Absolutely.

JB: But not only—but while it was guarded and reserved and reclusive to some extent, it also was clannish because I had my cousin on one side, and then my daddy's—a couple of my dad—

one of my dad's younger sisters all—then fled Gillham or Dierks and came up here, too, and got an apartment. So I had—my mother says that my two aunts on my daddy's side would just come into the apartment, walk in, when I was a toddler, and pick me up and take me to their apartment. And she—which she didn't appreciate. But I was raised both very—in a very closed, frightened, reserved environment, but also with a strong sense of . . .

SL: Family.

JB: . . . people around me. And I don't know—there are reasons I have turned out the way I did, but a lot of that has to have something to do with it. So that was our—you go ahead, but I—when we left there in [19]58 is a sort of a seminal moment, but if—that apartment when I was four years old.

[00:32:13] SL: Well, we can talk about [19]58.

JB: Yeah.

SL: So you've had the crisis at Central High, but you're only four years old . . .

JB: Yeah, I'm four.

SL: . . . at that point.

JB: Yeah.

SL: Do you remember anything about that?

JB: I have a memory. I assert that I have a memory that my mother, reserved, frightened, closed, but working—my dad worked across—a few blocks away at a Nabisco company warehouse, a night-shift warehouseman loading cookies. My mother, at the time, worked west of there a few blocks at the 7UP bottling company. There was a 7UP bottling company in downtown Little Rock in the mid-[19]50s, and she worked there. She did venture out to walk. All this was walking. And I remember her—it's strange, but I remember her saying, "We need to get away from all that mess out there." Now, I didn't record a date. I didn't say this—"Mom afraid of Central High trouble." But you know, if it's 1957 and I have a memory of her saying that, I'm th—and in fact, I asked her later, and she said yeah, that's what she was talking about. And not directly let's get away from where they're gonna integrate the schools—let's get away from all this trouble. I mean, she's a few years removed from this rural, backward existence, and suddenly she's in a town, walkin' several blocks to work, where she's inter—it's international news for violence. She wants to get away from "all that mess out there." I remember that from age four.

[00:33:58] I also remember that my dad desperately wanted to get to, as he called it, the country. Th—"I wanna move to the

country," because he wanted to do farmin' and raisin' some pigs and some chickens and those sorts of things. And as it also turns out f—1958—as I told you, this apartment building was right where Interstate 30 now is—I now surmise that they were gonna have to leave anyway because the right of way, the freeway's coming through. So we moved—in those days you could move from downtown Little Rock out what—a state highway that's called Arch Street Pike. You could move seven, eight, nine miles south, and you were in the country, on a busy state highway, but you were in the country. And we got a rent house out Arch Street Pike near Baseline Road, and couple things. [00:34:59] On this rent property, my dad raised chickens, he raised hogs, had a massive garden, and ran—worked at night at National Biscuit Company loading trucks, and during the day ran the rural garbage route for the unincorporated—he was a garbage man for the rural unincorporated area outside the city limits, which ended a few miles north of where our house was. So what's now the Baseline Road-Southwest Little Rock area—he ran a five-day-a-week garbage route in a rickety, old, GMC pickup with side panels, goin' around—workin' all night, getting up the next morning, and gettin' people's garbage, and haulin' it to the dump. And I went

with him. I rode shotgun sometimes and thought, "This is the coolest thing in the world."

SL: It probably was.

JB: Yeah. He did that for three or four years, and as—he died in 1990 from lung cancer. Cigarettes. But he often—he always said—he said, "The best time in my life was when I was runnin' that garbage route." [*Laughs*] 'Cause he had more—he doubled his money, you know. And he was—had his own enterprise. But he could—a man can't work all night and then work all day, even a leathery, old, old-breed marine from Okinawa can't do that. But those were good days for him as long as he could do it. Good days for the family. Made enough money to buy a small house further into Southwest Little Rock. [00:36:43] The point being, I was in the Pulaski County Special School District, and I spent my life in the—what remained a segregated school district nearly my entire twelve years. Went to McClellan High, Baseline Elementary, Cloverdale Junior High, McClellan High in the days when Southwest Little Rock was kind of thriving. But it was the first white-flight region and the first place that was sort of middle class fleeing the city in the way West Little Rock would later become. It—in those days. And we were part of that. [00:37:19] I re—well. I'm working on a memoir. I've got a lot

of it written, but I jumped—it's hard work. But the title of it is—the working title is *Garbage Man's Boy [laughs]: The Life and Times of an Unlikely Arkansas Pundit*. And I don't know if the book's worth a damn, but the title is good. I mean . . .

SL: It is. [*Laughs*]

JB: . . . it's a . . .

SL: It's a great title.

JB: You want to read it, don't you?

SL: Yeah, I do.

JB: But I think that's my story. [*SL laughs*] And as I'm unlikely an arkan—standing up here last night speaking to your group, holding forth as some political knower.

SL: Yeah. [*Laughs*]

JB: It's the same guy who—same person who, sixty years ago, is with his dad carryin' people's garbage to the dump in Little Rock. It's just a remarkable thing that's happened.

[00:38:14] SL: So I wanna get back to the household.

JB: Okay.

SL: And I'm assuming that this first move, and certainly later on when the small house was built, these are the ti—this is the time period where you're startin' to have a memory of what day-to-day life was. And we'll talk about the crisis stuff here in a little

bit but . . .

JB: Maybe, but that—okay.

SL: But . . .

JB: Whatever you want.

SL: But the—well, let me just say. Did you ever sense any kind of racial concerns from your dad or your mom? Was there ever any—I mean, do you think it was—I get the impression it wasn't on purpose that it was white flight to . . .

JB: No, they . . .

SL: . . . the segregated school . . .

JB: . . . they fled for a variety of reasons, and it can't be dismissed as that. And even if they were fleeing, I think they were fleeing for my mother's general fear more than race. Nonetheless—and we'll get back to the household.

SL: Yeah.

JB: Remind you to get back to that.

SL: Yeah.

[00:39:20] JB: But this is—so much to tell that's so relevant, but this is—I m—let me just tell it as quickly as I can because race is a big, big part of my life.

SL: Kay.

JB: Both my folks were from backwoods, white, poor existences. My

mother tells me she never saw a Black person until somebody from a nearby—one of the other kids from a nearby farm ran over and said, "There's a" . . .

SL: Yeah.

JB: . . . "blank—there's an N over at Center Point." And they all went to see the Black person.

SL: A Black man.

JB: A Black person.

SL: Yeah.

[00:40:09] JB: So there's that. My mother, a devout Church of Christ—I don't think she has a—hate in her, but she's from a culture where Black people are odd, okay. The house we eventua—the small house we eventually bought at the end of a gravel lane off Stanton Road near where the—a place called Windamere now is. In those days, there was a house down in the country. I—down in the country. There was a house you could see through the woods, an old tin-roof house. A Black man lived there. The nomenclature in our house was "that *N* man who lives down there." That's the way it was referred to.

SL: Sure. And that was not uncommon.

JB: Th—I me—that's just . . .

SL: The way it was.

JB: . . . that's just what it was said.

SL: Yeah.

JB: That's how he was—that's—so there's that background.

[00:41:06] But here's the—I told this story in an oral history at the—for the Butler Center in Little Rock, and Clarke Tucker, the grands—now runnin' for congress, the grandson of Everett Tucker, leading industrialist and school board moderate in 1957 in Little Rock, heard it and called and said, "That brings you and me together in ways I can't—it's just remarkable." We went to—after we moved out to Arch Street, my dad didn't go to church. He was—he would join the church later, and it would become a big part of his life. But he would take my mother and my sister and me from Arch Street to the Eastside Church of Christ where my mother had started going as a young woman. And we would drive every day, every Sunday morning into town. And there was—in those days, the—Little Rock's industrial district, we would pass this billboard that said, "The Little Rock Industrial District," and then it would have the members of the industrial—the local industrial development board. The chairman was Everett Tucker, moderate school board member who passed for a moderate in those days because he urged agreeing with the federal court and integrating Little Rock schools. And I will

never forget. We're drivin'. My dad's drivin'. And I know he said it because somebody—he'd heard somebody say it, I know, but he said it anyway. He passed that billboard, and he said, "Everett Tucker, blank lover."

SL: Yeah.

JB: Okay, this is my dad.

SL: Yeah.

JB: And I'm right behind him in the car.

SL: Yeah.

JB: But this is—this happened.

SL: Yeah.

JB: And I go, "Hmm. Okay." I'm like six or seven. And I guess there's somethin' wrong with Everett Tucker. But even that I remember that to this day. It's like, "That's a little jarring." So that happened. [00:43:03] We would—I told previously he's taking everybody—he's taking trash five days a week to the city dump. This is gonna get a little graphic. But poor, Black people would scour the city dump in the late [19]50s for nourishment.

SL: You bet.

JB: And he would see that every day. And rather than compassion, I think it was this standard hierarchy of our—of the time, which is that a poor white person, poor white guy, he may be haulin'

garbage for a living, but he's not eatin' it, and it gives him somebody to look down on. I think that's what the—well, you know this. You studied the Southern system of power. You've gotta be better than somebody else.

SL: Right.

JB: So all of that was part of what was goin' on. But then when I was about ten years old, my dad got religion. He finally relented to my mother's pleading, started going to church, made friends with the preacher at this Eastside Church of Christ, and got into it big time. He used to sit in the living room with a big, red-bound Bible and just pore over the New Testament just as hard as he could. And he would call the preacher during the day and say, "I'm looking at this scripture. What does it mean?"

[00:44:23] Got baptized. And within a couple of years was an elder of the church, which is the governing person. And about age—I'm about sixteen. And I said to my dad one day—and I give myself some credit on this, but I give him more. "Dad, we talk in the Church of Christ about Acts 2:38. 'Go ye into all the world and teach the gospel to every creature, baptizing them in the name of blah blah.'" I said, "Maybe that's the Black people livin' right next door to the church. Maybe they should—maybe you don't have to pay just for a missionary across the world.

Maybe you go to the ne—to the people in the neighborhood, and you say, 'You wanna come to church with us?'" And my dad was one of three elders of the Eastside Church of Christ. And he thought about that, and he decided I was right and pressed it on the other two elders, leading to—wanna guess? The total . . .

SL: Integration.

JB: . . . dissolution of the church. They broke . . .

SL: The whole what?

JB: The dissolution of the church. It broke up.

SL: Really.

[00:45:30] JB: Yeah. Yeah. I ha—the oldest elder of the church—I'm sittin'—we always were early for services, and I'm sittin' in the back by myself during this time, and the oldest elder walked up and sidled in beside me, and he said, "I know you're doin' this." Meaning getting my dad to take the position that he was taking. And I said, "Well, I'm just, you know, tellin' my dad what I think if he asks." "Well, you need to understand God made bluebirds. God made redbirds. He did not mean for them to get together and make purple birds." This is the theological end—leadership of my life. People wonder where I started to turn liberal and rejected the fundamentalism of my youth. Right there, basically. Even though it seems to have happened before

with my general attitude. So race is just—so that's—that church broke apart. I remember my dad getting up on a Sunday night, and there were like forty people left there in what had been maybe two hundred before. And tryin' to lead a prayer and broke down. Wept. Sobbed. Couldn't get through the prayer because this was—he had made a major life's investment, and he had assumed this position of leadership, and it had crumbled. Why? The issue of our time in Arkansas. It's race. That's—it's just—that's the issue. [00:47:08] So they formed another church out in Southwest Little Rock or near the Saline County line. And get back to—whatever—remember what you were gonna ask before, but I le—while I'm on the roll, let me tell this. I go on to my life. And I become a young cu—a reporter for the *Arkansas Gazette*, and in 1980 [*laughs*] to—just to think about how—what a strong clan we had as a family at one time, I'm now growing apart from all of it, and the *Arkansas Gazette* has hired me, and I'm covering the state capitol. And Frank White one Sunday—no, Frank White passes—signs without reading—'cause that was my story. I did it—the creation science bill. Gonna teach creation—gonna teach Genesis in the . . .

SL: Gotta have equal time.

JB: And that Sunday, I had an article in which I asked the sponsor of

the bill, a man named Jim Holdsted, if his religion influenced his sponsoring of the bill. And he said, "Of course. That's what it's all about." Well, it's a good story because he's just said what's gonna be the reason for a lawsuit that's gonna get this thing overturned. It was on the front page, my byline. That—on a Sunday morning years after my folks have started this church that I've never been to out in South Pulaski county, my dad comes over on a Sunday afternoon, and he said, "You got attacked from the pulpit this morning." I said, "I did?" "Yeah." He said what happened was right in the middle of this sermon, this guy, their preacher, began talking about what a great week it had been for the Lord that—here in Arkansas. Brave Christian Governor Frank White has signed the creationist science bill. And then had said, "However, there are those who would do the devil's handiwork. Why, just this morning, in the *Arkansas Gazette*, a writer named John Brummett, no relation, of course, to our fine family of Brummetts here." [Laughter]

SL: Oops.

[00:49:19] JB: "Wrote this article." And [laughs] it was—it's—and I said, "What's his phone number?" And I got on the phone and called that preacher. And chewed him out. And my dad sat there and cheered me on. I mean, thank—that's—that family tie

was that strong. But I dare say not many people can say they have been attacked from the pulpit of their parent's church by a minister who can't imagine that he is in any way related to the fine family sitting there in the church. Anyway. That reminded me. I jumped forward. I—but where do you wanna go now?

[00:50:06] SL: Well, this is a great thread. I'm just wondering—I mean, it sounds like is—this was devastating to your father in the first church.

JB: Yes.

SL: And so they joined—does he start or they join another . . .

JB: They—no, they—they were the founders. They and the three or four other families who had moved out to that area. It just so happened that the race ex—race-based dissolution of their church downtown caused them to need a—to go somewhere else. And he was one of four or five men who built the church and started it in the early [19]70s.

SL: So what great faith on his part to do that.

JB: To start another church?

SL: To start another church rather than write it off as, you know, me and my family are right on this stand, the church is wrong on this stand—you know, it's a different—so he starts up another one, and then this thing comes back to haunt him again.

JB: Yes.

SL: And but he's . . .

JB: And . . .

SL: . . . there with you, supporting your effort.

[00:51:14] JB: Furthermore, just as an aside to this—this is a very fundamentalist Church of Christ religion, and it's governed by elders chosen from the membership, and there's a scripture in one of Paul's letters to the Corinthians about the qualifications for elders, and the phrase in King James is "believing children." And my dad was removed as an elder because I'd gone bad, and he only had my sister. He only had a believing child, not believing children. That's how literal . . .

SL: Unbelievable.

[00:51:43] JB: So things, bad things, were happening to him, you're right. He'd made this strong conversion, strong conversion. And yeah, I mean, a series of things that tested his faith to the extent that for the last fifteen years of his life, he just went to church. He lost the fervor. He did. I mean, he remained a good man. I think he remained a believer in . . .

SL: Right.

JB: . . . whatever the general principles are he believed in. But he kept his—he lived a more remote existence from—'cause he was

absorbed in it. And that ended. And I think it had to do with those things. And you know, I'm in—meantime, I'm writin' five columns a week in the *Arkansas Gazette* attacking religious conservatives, and he's readin' 'em. Not real thoughtful about issues and maybe not understood. Never a word from him about it. So never quite understood his politics. He could be for Faubus one day and Clinton the next. You know. He . . .

SL: Right.

JB: It—which is a sort of an Arkansas story.

SL: It's an Arkansas story. Yeah.

JB: And but, yeah, I think eventually he—religion was so important to our family, so important to my mother, so important to my sister, and he had made such an investment in it. He never re-abandoned it, but he was—it was not the same. You're right. It wasn't. And it couldn't be.

SL: Ah . . .

JB: After those things had happened to him.

[00:53:27] SL: One more question about this role in your upbringing. Is the church that he helped build still standing?

JB: Yes. Yes, and my mother and sister—he intended there—attended there until his death from lung cancer in 1990 at age sixty-four. My mother and sister continued going there for—

until, really, my mother's disease. And when my mother became unable to go, and now that she's in a nursing home, my sister, being alone there in what was an aging church—she's found another church that's got more people.

SL: Younger congregation.

JB: A younger, and more single people, and maybe less sadness . . .

SL: Acrimony.

JB: . . . for her.

SL: Yeah.

JB: Maybe.

SL: Yeah.

JB: So we're not directly affiliated with it anymore, but yeah, it's still there.

[00:54:26] SL: So as a child in your home growing up—I wanna take us to the dinner table.

JB: All right.

SL: Breakfast, lunch, dinner.

JB: All right.

SL: So we're—as you were growing up, were you expected to be at that table at a certain time?

JB: Yes, sir.

SL: Was there a regimen . . .

JB: Yes, sir.

SL: . . . as far as the meals go?

JB: Yes, sir.

SL: And was your mother always the one cooking and preparing the meal? Did she have help with it, or it was just . . .

JB: Who would help her?

SL: Well, I'm [*JB laughs*]*—sisters or . . .*

[00:55:00] JB: Well, no, okay. I get what you're saying. To the extent you need to remember my dad, for much of my life, worked nights, so he wasn't there for dinner. But on weekends when he was there, and then later when he was retired on a worker's comp disability and began to paint houses for a living and was there, the family ate supper, as we called it, early. Five, five thirty, and it was the four of us in our standard places around the table. And I had to say the blessing.

[00:55:36] SL: Always, or'd you took turns.

JB: No. No, no, no, no. I could get weird on this if you want.

SL: Yeah.

JB: Briefly.

SL: Sure.

JB: But I had to say it because by Church of Christ dogma as we practiced it, women couldn't lead prayers, couldn't lead. My

mother and sister could not lead a blessing because they're a m—the men are supposed to be in charge, okay.

SL: Right.

JB: And my dad thought it good that I—maybe he sensed me slippin' away. So he wu—it was always understood I would say the blessing. And I had this rote thing, and I would say it, and then we would eat. Breakfast, get up to go to school. My mother was always up. My dad wasn't because he worked nights, and he's sleeping in, and we're catching the bus, or somebody's takin' us to s—or we're walkin', sometimes. [00:56:29] But my mother was always up before dawn, and we had KLRA, Herbie Byrd on the radio. That's a Little Rock institution . . .

SL: Right.

JB: . . . of the time. And that's just the sound of my life. And she'd scramble some eggs or pour us a bowl of cereal or, on a rare morning, make pancakes. And that's—and the preparation of meals—my mother [*laughs*]*—this is my mother's life as I witnessed it. Cleanin' house and standin' over a stove or a sink. That's just what she did. And she liked it. It was who she was, and it was important. And somebody asked her once what did—what were—she—I forget the question, but the—but she said, essentially, the purpose of my life is to be a good mother for*

these two kids.

SL: There you go.

[00:57:29] JB: That was the purpose of his life—of her life. And she seldom worked. Sometimes she'd take little jobs, but she would then—my dad didn't want her working because he's a big tough man, and he'll provide. You know . . .

SL: You bet.

JB: . . . that if he has to work two jobs. And I just see my mother takin' potatoes. And in one—and with—in one hand and with a sharp knife in the other, peeling and cutting these potatoes up to—you know what I'm talking about?

SL: Yes. Absolutely. I have the same . . .

JB: I believe that's a . . .

SL: . . . same images.

JB: I believe that's an Arkansas iconic image. Fried potatoes.

SL: Yep.

JB: Pinto beans. Corn bread.

SL: Yep.

JB: That's what we ate.

SL: Yep.

[00:58:12] JB: And that's what she cooked. And then cleaning? My dad would always say, "You're turning these kids into just lazy

bums," [*SL laughs*] because we—she just—she'll clean it up. "I'll take care of it." My sister and I never had to lift a finger. Even in this poor existence, we're always privileged in that way. She just did everything. [00:58:35] And then a few years [*laughs*] ago, the first year she went in a nursing home, she still had a little bit of cognizance about her. And one day the administrator of the nursing home came over to me and said, "I'd like to ask you to—for something. We have a nursing home beauty pageant every year, and I'd like to enter your mother."

SL: Oh!

JB: I—he s—she said, "I think she'd probably win. And [*SL laughs*] your wife and your sister could come in and fix her up for the occasion, you could be her escort, and it's just a little thing we do." I've heard from other people who are familiar with aging issues—they think that's a horrible practice that you make somebody lose a contest in a nursing home. It turned out everybody had a great time. But they had a panel of judges. [00:59:30] And my mother and my wife Shalah and my sister, Judy, fixed my mother up. Oh, she's gorgeous. And I escort her in. And as I escort her in, as I seat her, the panel asks her a question like it's a Miss America pageant.

SL: Right.

JB: And [*laughs*] "Miss Brummett, what do you—what would you say is your favorite thing to do?" And she said, "Well, I guess it's keepin' a clean house." That's her favorite—not only was that her favorite thing to do, it—anything that required her to be retrospective about her adult life, that was the centerpiece of it. And that was her source of pride. I've heard her say, "I always kept a clean house." You know, that's just who and what she was. [01:00:20] And by the way, just so you know, she got robbed. She was first runner-up.

SL: Oh! [*Laughs*]

JB: And it was one of the greatest injustices I've ever seen.

SL: Oh gosh. [*Laughter*]

JB: And on the way—when I got back to her room, I said, "Mom, you were robbed. You should've won that." And she said, "I think so, too! [*SL laughs*] Why didn't I?" You know, said to— anyway. That's the . . .

SL: That's fun.

JB: . . . that's the image of my mother. And I think it's the potato peelin'. I bet—I wonder how she didn't cut her hand wide open but . . .

SL: I . . .

JB: . . . but it's—and fry—did you have any country-fried potatoes

at—I mean that's . . .

SL: Absolutely. Onion.

JB: Yes.

SL: Absolutely.

JB: Fried in lard.

SL: Yes.

JB: And a big pot of beans . . .

SL: Or Crisco. [*SL laughs*]

JB: . . . with some—yeah. With some fat meat in it.

SL: Yep. Yep.

JB: Yeah.

SL: Yeah.

JB: And we were just happy as could be.

SL: Yeah.

[01:01:14] JB: You ever crumble the corn bread and then put the
beans and the juice on the crumbled corn bread?

SL: Absolutely.

JB: Okay. Okay.

SL: Yeah.

JB: Now we know. All right. [*SL laughs*] We—this is Arkansas talk
right here.

SL: It is.

JB: Yeah.

[01:01:24] SL: It is. You know, I—my dad could do the same thing.

JB: Yeah.

SL: He'd peel an apple or quarter an apple with just one hand and a knife.

JB: Oh yeah.

SL: Yeah. I just never could do . . .

JB: I don't even wanna try it.

SL: Yeah.

JB: It wasn't gonna be safe if I tried that.

SL: [*Laughs*] Right, right. Well, so I guess you didn't even make your own bed.

JB: No. No.

[01:01:47] SL: And you talk about the garden that your father did.

JB: I never worked in it.

SL: You never worked in it. So it was like . . .

JB: I didn't know a cucumber from eggplant and didn't care. My detachment from what was goin' on—I lived in my own world. This is probably a big part of why I'm a writer.

SL: Right.

JB: But I just lived in sort of a self-created world. We lived at the end of a lane. We had one car. He was usually gone, off and

working. The mantra of my youth was, "John, are you gonna be in the Cub Scouts?" "No. I don't have a way." That's what I always said. "I don't have a way." That's what I said to everything. "You gonna come to the such-and-such? Gonna go over to So-and-so's house?" "I don't have a way." "You gonna play Little League baseball?" "I don't have a way." But—'cause I didn't have transportation. That was just the way I expressed it. But what I did was get a football or a baseball and a glove and get out in the yard and create entire experiences. I would be the announcers of the game, I'd be the players of the game, I'd be the—I'd do the roar of the crowd when I—I would throw the ball—I would hit the ball in the air, put on the glove, and go catch it. And that's how I—all just an imagined experience.

[01:03:06] And I had nothing, really, to do with what was going on in the family. Even then. The church thing we all shared, and I bought into that before I was old enough to realize I didn't need to. But the garden I had nothing to do with, the house cleaning. Didn't have chores. I got no allowance because we didn't have any money for an allowance. So it was kind of—kinda strange in that way. Years later, my cousin—tie it all in, but you may have forgotten the early part that my mother's brother, who lived in the—who came to Little Rock and was an

aut—a big truck mechanic. He had a son not quite two years younger than me, and we were almost like brothers as young children. Remain close to this day, even though he is a Church of Christ preacher. But one of the world's great oxymorons, he's a liberal Church of Christ preacher. He is. I mean, I don't know how he turned out. [01:04:07] But I was visiting him in St. Louis one year, and he cooked on his gas grill for us. And then he said, "Gonna clean it up." And he goes under the cabinet under the gas grill, and he pulls out this scraping device. And he says, "You know what this is, don't you?" And I said, "Looks like a scraper to me." He said, "No, you know what this is, don't you?"

SL: Oh, no.

JB: And I said, "Uh-uh. No. I mean, I don't know what you're talkin' about." He said, "This was JT, Uncle JT, my d—this was the tool of his existence as a house painter and after he retired fr—retired on disability and painted people's houses and did maintenance work." He said, "He taught me how to use this for everything. Didn't he teach you?" And I said, "I never worked a day with him." He said—his dad, my uncle, made him, my cousin David, work two summers with my dad workin' on houses, painting houses. I don't remember that he did that.

And I never offered or was never asked to do that. I was always different. I mean, I just was in my own world, and there was this relationship, almost a sort of a sweet relationship between my male cousin and my own father that I had no real sense of.

SL: Wow.

[01:05:33] JB: Because I—and it's—we were close. I mean, my dad loved me tremendously. He carried around my articles, laminated copies of my articles, and he would just show them to unsuspectin' people. [*SL laughs*] "Look what my boy wrote." And they're goin', "I don't care what your boy wrote." But I think always my father understood that I didn't have any interest in the things he did, that I was different. But—and he—any interest in his work. And I could have learned a lot, and I'd probably be a better person if I'd learned some of those lessons. If I'd had to get up in the summer instead of goin' out in the yard and throwing a ball around and inventing a universe, gone to help him, but I wonder if I would've—it just wasn't me. But it was my cousin. So I don't know what made me think of that but . . .

[01:06:27] SL: So what do you remember reading first?

JB: [*Laughs*] Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. We had not a book in our house. Nursery rhymes. I mean, the children's literature. I

hear all these people, writers, who talk about their mothers reading to them going, "What are you talkin' about?" Here's what I read. We got, in 1960, a World Atlas.

SL: Oh yeah.

JB: And it's about the only book in the house, and why we had it, I don't know. Maybe I said, "I'd like an atlas," and they got me one. And atlases—not only are there maps of everywhere in the world, but the data. Population of counties across the country, population of cities. This is gonna—I spent hours—if I wasn't outside inventing ball games, I was inside memorizing places, memorizing their populations. I could tell you Cincinnati's population in the 1960 census. I could tell you Cleveland's. I could tell you Columbus's. Get down to Arkansas I definitely knew. [01:07:52] I remember that from 1950 to 1960, the only city in the country that I could find that lost population was what? My own, Little Rock. Why? Because of 1957. I devoured that atlas. The other thing I read was the afternoon *Arkansas Democrat*. We didn't take the *Gazette* because of . . .

SL: Too liberal.

JB: [*Laughs*] Yes. And we weren't—my dad wasn't active liberal, it was just, "Well that's that paper that's different from us," which I think is a big part of the Arkansas political—it's not an active

though, it's just, "Well, we're not *Gazette* type people." [SL laughs] You know, is—I guess. And I would end up working there and getting attacked from the pulpit of his church for something I wrote there. But the afternoon *Democrat* would be thrown in our driveway about four o'clock right after I got home from school, or in summer I'd wait all day for it. Honest to God, I would. And I would ru—I would say to my mother, "Paper come yet? Paper come yet?" "Not yet." When this guy in his car would pull up our driveway and throw that paper, boom, I'm out the door, I get it, I unfold it, I get down in the middle of the floor, I put my elbows on the print and get—my mother says I spent my life with ink stains on my elbows—to read the sports page, to find out about the ball games the night before.

Whichever . . .

[01:09:17] SL: Is this like [19]60, 1960?

JB: [Nineteen] sixty, [19]60—[19]60 to [19]65.

SL: Kay.

JB: Golden era of baseball, by the way. Yankees, Mickey Mantle, Detroit Tigers . . .

SL: You bet.

JB: . . . the Red Sox. I could give you every—and you're collecting baseball cards on these people, you're getting your mother and

dad to buy a certain cereal that you don't really want because you need that card on behi—that time—and I—so I was data oriented. I knew all the box scores, I studied them. I knew that starting lineup. I can name to this day the Detroit Tigers 1967 starting lineup. I can. [SL laughs] Or [19]68 as it was, [19]67 the Red Sox were in the World Series against the Cardinals. [Nineteen] sixty-eight it was the Tigers. And so I was—that's what I read. But I devoured them. I longed for them. I could spend hours with 'em. And I read them because they were the only thing to read. I m—we didn't have literature in the house. We—I don't think we had a set of encyclopedias. So that's what I read.

[01:10:26] SL: So did you ever venture off the sports section?

JB: Not much. Except [laughs] so—my dad was, during the Nabisco days when he worked loading trucks, he was a Teamster. And he would get the state AFL-CIO bulletin, and I distinctly remember in my mid- to late-teens when I'm—something's beginning to happen to me. "Here's this. Here's something to read. Here's the"—and I was gettn' this pro-labor . . .

SL: Propaganda.

JB: I started to say propaganda. [SL laughs] It was. It was.

SL: Yeah.

JB: I was gettin' that. And that was formulating some of my political thinking.

SL: Sure.

JB: So I had three things to read. I had an atlas, I had the afternoon paper, and I had the occasional AFL-CIO labor bulletin. And that's—and I read them all, and they all had influence on me. And then when I was si—when I—one day after my sixteenth birthday, this is getting into my journalism career we're gonna do later, I got a—I went to work for the *Arkansas Democrat* sports department, which [*laughs*] is a story in itself if you want me to . . .

SL: Sure.

JB: . . . tell it quickly.

LS: Yeah. We'll set this up for the—sure.

[01:11:45] JB: In school, it's become clear to me over the years that I'm real good at anything that has to do with writing. I'm real good at anything that has to do with social studies. I'm okay in math. I'm lucky to get through science. I'm passing it, basically. But writing was my deal. And in the tenth grade, my English teacher assigned some essays. And she asked me stay after class. The class was writing essays. And she said, "This is—the—I been teaching English for a long time. These are the

best essays I've ever read." Do—as—tenth grade English teacher. "Wh—do you wanna do something with this?" And I said, "I don't know what you mean." "Well, you maybe write for the school paper." And I said, "Yeah. Yeah, that'd be good. Okay. You think I could? Could I be on the school paper staff?" Tenth grade, McClelland High, big school in those days. "I think you probably could." And so I joined the school newspaper staff, and I become sports editor. Then one night, I'm listening to the radio on a Friday night, and there is—they're having this Friday night high-school-football scoreboard on the radio show. And the announcer said, whoever's reading the scores, said, "Oh, here's a score. This'll be the score of the Hall High game," and there's a little rustling in the background, and he gives the score of the Hall High football game. And then he says, "Thank you, Bud," and then he says to somebody else, "Who is that kid?" And they said, "That's Rod Lorenzen from Hall High School." [01:13:29] And I go, "What? I been readin' Rod Lorenzen's byline in the *Democrat* every afternoon. He's my age? He's a kid workin' for the paper?" I thought he might be some—it was a big celebrity figure to me. Rod Lorenzen. I just heard on the radio that he's a kid who just ran in with the score. And I checked around, and it turned out the *Democrat* was a near-

dead afternoon paper.

SL: Right.

[01:13:58] JB: And they did a lot of their local sports coverage was done by kids from their high schools working on a part-time basis for a buck sixty an hour. There was a guy named Michael Bayer from Central. There was John Bloom from Parkview, who later became—you member the drive-in movie critic Joe Bob Briggs?

SL: Yeah.

JB: That's John Bloom of Parkview High School. [SL laughs] And Rod Lorenzen of Hall. And I told my mother, "I'm going to write Mr. Jack Keady a letter and see if I can become a sports writer down at the *Democrat*. I'm gonna write for this thing that has been my life in the middle of the floor most of my childhood." And she said, "Well, you go ahead, but the paper's not gonna hire you, a boy, to do this." I said, "I'm gonna send a letter."
[01:14:45] I think a couple days later, I come home from school, and she said, "Mr. Keady called, and they want you down there at six o'clock in the morning." [Laughter] It turned out as an afternoon paper, they produced the pages from six until eight or nine.

SL: Right.

JB: Not only did these kids go out at night and cover the games . . .

SL: Yeah.

JB: . . . but they were part of the production staff sizing pictures and writing headlines and other things that morning from six to eight before school. And she said, "We gotta figure out how to get you down there." [*Laughs*] And my dad goes down to—all these things tie together. Bob Bevis, Bevis Recreational. He then—by that time he had Bevis Dodge.

SL: Okay.

[01:15:33] JB: He had a car dealership at 9th and Spring. We go down there, and Dad says, "Bob, this boy's gonna need the car. The newspaper is gonna put him to work, and we gotta let him go. And I've gotta have something else." And Bob made him a literal . . .

SL: Family deal.

JB: . . . brother-in-law deal.

SL: Yeah, brother-in-law deal, yeah.

JB: On a late-model Chevy, and I took the push-button automatic Dodge Dart. Push-button meaning you punch—slant-6 engine, all those things. And it became my car, and that next morning before daylight—'cause it was December a few days before my sixteenth birthday. I barely had my license. I get out—I wake

up with an alarm like at 5:15, stagger out in the dark to that Dodge Dart, drive from Southwest Little Rock to the *Arkansas Democrat* and walk in and begin a journalism career.

[01:16:29] Wanna know the first thing they had me do? I'm gonna tell you. [SL laughs] This was the afternoon *Arkansas Democrat*. I got there early 'cause this big for me. I'm starting a journalism career, and there's nobody—[laughs] the door's open. And I—somebod—I asked a janitor or somebody where's the sports department? Up on the second floor of this old, run-down place. It'd been a Boys Club and the—and I think, "This is"—these Underwoods and this copy paper that looks like toilet paper rolling out in the—or paper towels running through these things. And nobody's there 'cause it's like a quarter of six. But on about 6:10, everybody starts comin' in. And these other kids from high school. [01:17:10] And I tell 'em I'm John Brummett from McClelland. They tell me I work here. Cool. Great. Okay. And then this guy named Arlin Fields, who's a little older—I look over, and he's got the *Gazette* sports department, and he's cutting—scissors. He's cutting articles out of the *Gazette*. Local basketball game reports from the night before. And he gets a stack of 'em about this big, and he said, "There you go. Here's your job." I said, "What?" He said, "Rewrite 'em."

SL: Wow.

[01:17:44] JB: [Laughs] My first job as a professional journalist was to rewrite something from the competition. Because the *Gazette* was a real newspaper. It had to get it real-time and put it in the morning edition. But the *Democrat-Gazette*, they got a bunch of kids gotta get out a sports section by eight o'clock and get it to the union back shop by the rules, and, "Here. Would you rewrite these?" And I said—he said, "Yeah. Rewrite 'em. It's what we do here."

SL: Wow.

[01:18:17] JB: So that was my first job. But then from that I've been continuously employed by newspapers since that day. Forty-eight years. And it began there. And in three years—I stayed to go—I stayed at the paper while I was going to UALR. But I loved the newspaper work so much—I never finished college. I just—the newspaper—I was absorbed in that. And in three years, I was about the senior member down there, and I was the preps editor, and I was the slot man, laying out the—the guy sitting in the middle laying out the pages and passing out the copy for headlines and doin' the final edit. That was me within . . .

SL: How old were you then?

JB: Nineteen.

SL: [*Laughs*] Golly.

[01:19:10] JB: Wally Hall writes the famous story. He's back from the airport—air force. He's twenty-three. Unbeknownst to me, he had been hired as a sports writer, but nobody told me. But I'm comin' in every morning at six, getting in what's called the slot and getting out the dummy sheets, and I'm producing these pages. I've advanced to, you know, \$1.85 an hour.

SL: Right.

JB: And I'm runnin' the whole damn thing. And this guy walks in and said, "You John Brummett?" "Yeah." "I'm Wally Hall." I said, "Okay." [*Laughter*] "I—good. Fine." He's—"Well, I work here now. I thought they would've told you." I said, "I don't"—he said, "I covered the Hall/Central basket—the Hall/Central High basketball game last night, here's my story." He handed me his copy, which he'd apparently stayed up all night working on.

SL: Sure.

JB: And his story is that was his first sports article, and that I looked at it and said, "This is blank," and wadded it up and threw it away.

SL: [*Laughs*] Oh my gosh.

JB: I don't remember it quite that way. I remember, first of all, it was like a tome. It was like 1,000 words.

SL: Right.

JB: And I need about eight column inches on that basketball game. That's all I need. I can't run all of this. And by the way, I've read two or three sentences here, and this is horrible. And I think probably said, "This is horrible." And I may even have thrown it away. But anyway, that's—and that newspaper would have—it would have died within a couple of years had not Walter Hussman bought it and then switched it to morning and made the investment in the newspaper war, the morning edition.

SL: Okay. But let's get back.

JB: Okay.

SL: To childhood stuff.

JB: All right.

SL: We're gonna save this for Gerald.

[01:21:05] JB: I know. But I had to close that out.

SL: That's good. That's good. And we can bring him up to date as to how . . .

JB: Yeah. I've already had—yeah, that's right, I've already told my first day as a journalist.

SL: Right.

JB: Sorry about that.

SL: That's all right.

JB: Sorry, Gerald. Sorry.

SL: That's okay.

JB: Yeah.

SL: It—I'm honored to have gotten it. [01:21:23] So do you
member the name of your hi—of your school English teacher
that got . . .

JB: Beverly Billingsley.

SL: Beverly Billingsley.

JB: Yes.

SL: Was she, like, your favorite teacher?

JB: Next to Craig O'Neill's mother, Judy, my fifth-grade teacher who
named me John, who's probably the greatest influence of my
life. Just . . .

SL: Well . . .

JB: . . . to—but . . .

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

JB: But yeah, Beverly Billingsley, who steered me into journalism
was an adult friend of mine. Died three or four years—five or six
years ago. Go to—we'd go to dinner three or four times a year.
And stayed in touch. Yeah. She very important to me.

[01:22:05] But yeah, the most—the formative teacher would be Judy Hankins, fifth grade.

SL: And this is at what school?

JB: Baseline Elementary School.

SL: Okay. And so this is after you've moved where the interstate is now.

JB: Right. We've moved—and by fifth grade, we'd moved out to Arch Street and—to that rent house, and then we'd moved on this new, flat-top, 700-square-foot or 800-square-foot home that was my main childhood home at the end of this lane. That's where we were by then.

SL: All right, so talk to me about the classroom and this fifth-grade teacher.

[01:22:40] JB: Judy Hankins. Craig O'Neill calls me his brother by another mother because I just—influenced by her so much. And she talked about me, apparently, at their home. He was—he's a few years older than I am. I was a standout student to the extent that you have standout students in elementary school. And she just—fifth grade. She just—I guess the phrase would be she took a shine to me. She just thought just—she liked me. And I was teacher's pet. I simply was. And she decided that Johnny was not who I should be. John is who I should be. She

also was a strange woman. She was an artist. She also led some sort of spiritual group that I'd found out about later because people said she was—are they called séances when you connect . . .

SL: Sure.

JB: . . . with the other spirits?

SL: Yeah.

[01:23:38] JB: She did some of that, I found out later. And she was very mercurial. So you never quite knew what you were gonna get from her. She could walk in, and she—one ti—she just walked in after lunch, and she said, "I'm a bona fide artist, and I do not have to do this." And we're all going, "Okay. Good for you. What did we do to deserve that?" But that was just—that was what happened that day. And she had strange moments with me, especially. Even though I was favored. Once we're discussing the meaning of words and take a word and relate it to some sort of human activity. "Let's take the word," she says, "satisfying. Relate that to something." And we're all struggling with satisfying. How do we relate that to something? And she says, "Going to the bathroom. Isn't that satisfying?" That's what she said. And I'm a fifth-grader, and I start laughing.

[Laughter]

SL: Well.

JB: And she walks up to my desk, and she said, "How dare you laugh at God." Okay. I'm sorry I did that. I'm sorry I did that. [01:25:00] Another time I made some quip about conscience. I said, "Oh, I don't have any conscience." 'Cause I was just smarting off. She said, "Then you, John Brummett, are the devil." Hmm. Okay. So there were those weirdnesses, but generally she was just a spectacular teacher. [01:25:18] And the most memorable, poignant story is this one. November 1963. Fifth grade. She gets called out of the office shortly after lunch. She's gone a long time. When she finally comes back, eyes puffy. She's been crying. And she calls on me. "John, come and—go to the blackboard. What—which of the Ten Commandments is the worst to break? If you had to write one down, what's the worst one to break? Write it." I wrote, "thou shalt not kill." She said, "Okay. That's gonna stay up there for the rest of this year the way it's written right there. We're gonna look at that every day. Now let's get back to our studies." At three thirty when my—when I get home, my parents say John F. Kennedy had been shot.

SL: Oh.

JB: That's how she handled that. [*Laughs*] And I just think that's

incredibly powerful and poignant way . . .

SL: It is.

JB: . . . to handle it for fifth grade. And that stayed on the blackboard for the rest of the fifth grade. I wrote about that years later. And she sent me a letter saying, "What I remember about that class is your bright eyes when you learned something." And she said, "That's what a teacher lives for, and therefore I'm gonna give you a gold star." And on the letter she posted [*SL laughs*]*—she put a little gold star. But the fact that she changed my name . . .*

SL: Oh.

JB: . . . the fact that she introduced me to such poignance, the fact that she was so emotional but also a good teacher, the fact that we had a connection—like, she was seein' my bright eyes, and that was encouraging her teaching. And the fact, also, that she was just so weird. [*SL laughs*] I mean, I've got second-, third-grade teachers I can barely remember. But Judy Hankins was a life force, I tell you. [01:27:27] And as you can—you know, Craig O'Neill . . .

SL: Sure.

JB: . . . the TV and . . .

SL: Yeah.

JB: . . . radio . . .

SL: Yeah. Yeah. Sure.

JB: . . . personality.

SL: I've done some stuff . . .

JB: I mean he's . . .

SL: . . . with him.

JB: . . . he's a chip off the Judy Hankins block.

SL: [*Laughs*] Yes.

JB: I mean, tha—it's—you see a lot of that strong personality. So that was how that relationship—I think I learned more and became more confident in the fifth grade than at any time in my life just because of the relationship that I had with her. And I hope—everybody should have a teacher like that, you know. Not everybody does. She didn't pick out thirty in the class, she picked out one, sadly. She probably means nothing to many of the other twenty-nine. But she means a lot to me.

[01:28:22] SL: So back in the home, we've established—once your dad had his conversion or his epiphany toward the church, was there always a Bible in the home?

JB: We were quite devout. There always was a Bible in the home. There was always—we were—I began to develop resentments at the church because we were so absorbed in it as a family. Not

only did we go Sunday morning and Sunday night and Wednesday night, but there was Tuesday ladies Bible class, there was Saturday when our family would clean the church building to ready it for Sunday services. We were the first there on Sunday morning 'cause we had to unlock it, and my dad prepared the communion. The Church of Christ has communion passed out among the aisles every Sunday. And you have your little Welch's in the little . . .

SL: Yeah.

JB: . . . grape things and your unleavened crackers. And he and my mother did that. And along the way, I just started thinkin', "Man. It's just too much church, you know. There's gotta be more to life." But they're thinking that they have really arrived at the meaning of their lives and at the goodness of their lives and at the way—and the proper way to raise their kids is to absorb them in this church. So that's—that was our culture. And Bible readings every day, prayers before every meal, prayers at night, and, I think, scars of a fundamentalist teaching on some of us. And even me today, I think. Sort of overly restrictive, judgmentally, judgement-oriented theology where everybody else is going to hell . . .

SL: Right.

JB: . . . and you may, too, if you mess up. What a way to raise a child.

SL: Yeah.

[01:30:46] JB: If you do something on—if you say a bad word on the playground at school, and who doesn't? Or if you get mad at somebody, or if you misbehave, you really—you're not saved, you're just safe for a while until you do something bad. My—I hesitate to bring it, but my younger sister, who's still a believer, she went through a period of walking the aisle of church every Sunday to confess sin. She thought something had happened at school, and if she didn't walk the aisle and seek the forgiveness and prayers of the church, she was going . . .

SL: She was condemned.

JB: Yeah. And it got to the point that we just knew she was goin' down. And the preacher was apologizing and telling her, "Judy, you don't have to do this every Sunday." But she wasn't sure.

[01:31:45] There is a phrase in the Bible about an unpardonable sin, which to me is the antithesis of religion.

"There's this one thing if you do this, God" . . .

SL: You're saved.

JB: . . . "doesn't love you. You're done."

SL: Right.

JB: "You're—if you do this." I remember at night my sister, soon as the lights are out—my dad's working. It's me and my mother and Judy. I remember her, and it was like clockwork, after about three minutes with the lights out, "Mom. What's the unpardonable sin? Do you think maybe I've done it?" This was—that's the torment of that kind of religion. And I came—and all of that contributed to my utter resentment. By the time I'm seventeen or eighteen, I cannot wait . . .

SL: To get out.

JB: . . . till I can get away from this thing. My sister's fine, you know, she's over that, but she went through this period. And what a way to . . .

SL: Spend your childhood.

JB: Yes. What a wa—it oughta be your happy, innocent time.

[01:32:55] SL: So was there any—you—I know you had a radio . . .

JB: Yeah.

SL: . . . growing up.

JB: Transistor. Kept . . .

SL: Transistor.

JB: . . . right here under my ear.

SL: So the house didn't—you didn't gather around a radio . . .

JB: We were a litt . . .

SL: Before radio?

JB: No, that was a little—the gathering around—we had TV. But it was broken most of the time. Couldn't afford to fix it. I member kids at school talkin' about *Batman*, and I'm thinking, "Well." I would even go along, you know. "Kaboom, yeah." I'm goin' along with what they're sayin'. The sounds of *Batman* last night, even though I had no idea what they were talkin' about . . .

SL: Right.

JB: . . . 'cause we didn't have—that sounds pitiful, but that's another part of the existence. We didn't have family communal time around the radio. As a young person, my dad especially—my mom also, but my dad especially loved country music.

SL: Okay.

[01:33:51] JB: And the radio was on all the time to the local country station. Just an old, standard radio . . .

SL: That . . .

JB: . . . on the . . .

SL: . . . tabletop . . .

JB: . . . counter.

SL: On the counter, yeah.

JB: And it's on the country station. And I grew up hearing, listening to, and not disliking Marty Robbins and Hank Snow, and Merle

came a little later, Johnny Cash, Patsy Cline. I member the day Patsy Cline died, it was like a—we had like a wake at our house, or it was just a—my dad was just—killed in a plane crash. It was just like the worst thing. I have a great music appreciation, and I think I get it from him. So we listened to country music.

[01:34:32] In fact, family story is when I was like five years old, at Sunday school when they—all the Sunday school classes would gather before we'd disperse into their age-group classes. They would have singing, and they asked—the teacher asked me if I would like to lead a song, and I said I would. And they thought it was gonna be "Jesus Loves Me" or "Shine the Light" or something like that. I started singing, "I Never Felt More Like Singing the Blues," [*SL laughs*] which was a country hit at the time because that's such a powerful part of what I was hearing. And I thought, "This is good song." Can you imagine a five-year-old kid singin', "I never felt more like—'cause I never thought that I'd ever lose your love, dear. You got me feelin' this way." Me—you don't remember the song. Anyway.

SL: No, I don't.

JB: I think it's . . .

SL: But I re . . .

JB: . . . Marty Robbins. I think . . .

SL: That sounds . . .

JB: . . . it was Marty Robbins. It's—so but then I s—everybody had transistor—all the kids had transistor radios, and I finally got a transistor radio for Christmas my—I don't know, seventh grade? Yeah, seventh grade. And little hand-held transistor. And I discovered radio station KAAY, the Mighty 1090 in Little Rock. Fifty thousand watts of power.

SL: Right.

[01:35:48] JB: And it was pop, it was top-forty, pop radio. And I just—I listened to it constantly. But my dad's—couldn't stand that racket, couldn't stand that long-haired . . .

SL: Hippie stuff.

JB: . . . loud, thump, thump music. And he just—so I had to get in the bedroom, and I had—you can't have some of these songs unless they're loud. But I'd get 'em as close to my ear as I could and listen to the songs of the day. The early Beatles, the early Rolling Stones. You know, when the—the formative time for the music of our lives. So. But that was a—like a lot of the things I did, it was an experience of solitude. It was just something I did alone, really.

SL: Well, it took you away.

JB: Yeah. Yeah. Exactly. Did you—have I exhausted you?

[01:36:50] SL: No, no. No, no. No. I could go all day.

JB: [*Laughter*] Okay. I'm feelin' bad about gettin into the afternoon stuff . . .

SL: No, no, no, no.

JB: But it just followed.

SL: That's okay.

JB: It just followed.

SL: That's okay. We get some of this.

JB: Yeah.

[01:37:02] SL: So what about girls growing up in this environment?

What about—I mean, you're in a public school. You're in a pretty fundamentalist . . .

JB: Yes.

SL: . . . Christian upbringing, so how did girls—or did you even have girlfriends growing up?

JB: [*Laughs*] I always had a girlfriend.

SL: Really?

JB: I just did. And [*laughs*] in the third and fourth grade—I don't know if it was—I think it was a universal culture, but it was—the boys all talked about how the girls had cooties. Do you remember that?

SL: [*Laughs*] Cooties.

JB: And you had to stay away from the girls. [*SL laughs*] And [*laughs*] the girls that—you just—they're horrible. And the boys played together, and they don't get near the girls 'cause the girls have cooties. I knew deep inside me that there's no such thing as a cootie [*SL laughs*], and what they got is not bad, it's good. And I announced one day. And it was a scandal at Baseline Elementary. During recess, I announced, "They don't have cooties, and I like"—and I called her name. I don't—I won't wanna embarrass her for history. But I called her name. "I like her." She liked me. We were openly, to the extent that you are as a third or fourth grader, boyfriend and girlfriend in this culture where we weren't—where ever—that wasn't supposed to happen. [01:38:41] Neighbor up the street in fourth grade, she was my girlfriend. Her mother would ride us to school, and we would go to school together, and it just—other guys didn't have girlfriends. I don't know what was goin' on with me, but I did. Vacation Bible School. People from other—you'd—we'd get kids from—that didn't normally go to our church who would come. I member one week of Vacation Bible School when I'm about the sixth grade, I absolutely fell in love with a young, blonde girl, and we just—inseparable for that week. I just—[*laughs*] yes. Among the many contradictions of my existence is that I was a

self-styled, fancy ladies' man as a boy. I always had a girlfriend. Went down to my cousin's to be a candle lighter for a wedding, saw a girl at the wedding—I'm like seven or eight, and suddenly she's my girlfriend. I just made girlfriends. I just did.

SL: Well, they liked you.

JB: They seemed to, and I certainly liked them. [*SL laughs*] And I didn't really see what was wrong with it. In fact, it was kind of exciting.

[01:39:55] SL: Well, so how did that fit into homecoming dances?

JB: [*Laughs*] You're gonna get into the difficult parts for me to talk about. Dancing was against our religion.

SL: Okay.

JB: And not only was dancing against our religion, even if you realize, as I did, "Well, that's nonsense. You know, that's nonsense," you have been conditioned all your life not to go to dances, and you have a cultural aversion to them, even though you know the reason that you have it is nonsense. So there were a couple of times like the junior high clover patch dance I had some young woman—"Would you come?" "I don't have a way." That was always my out.

SL: Right.

JB: Don't have transportation. And, too, kinda scares me. I've

never done that sort of thing. I've been taught all my life that's something that's bad. I know it's not, but I don't know how to act there.

SL: Right.

JB: What am I supposed to do there? So I never went. I didn't go to my high-school prom. I just wasn't comfortable with the—and with the whole cultural phenomenon of dances. I just—and if I don't know in advance how to act, I'm not comfortable with something. You know, if I can't envision how it's gonna be—and so—plus, I ne—I didn't know how to dance, you know. So that's just part of my existence.

[01:41:27] SL: You know, I kinda got the impression from the way that—the lengthy courtship that your mom and dad had spread out over five years . . .

JB: Yeah.

SL: That's a long, long time for a relationship.

JB: Yeah.

SL: So—without ever marrying. I mean, that's just a remarkable courtship. So how did you meet your wife?

JB: Well, the first one, the second one . . .

SL: Oh, you have . . .

JB: . . . or the third one?

SL: Oh, my gosh. [*Laughter*] What a can of worms I just opened up. We—I—you don't—whatever you're comfortable with. I . . .

JB: I'll tell the whole thing.

SL: We—I—well, I . . .

[01:42:03] JB: I'll tell the whole thing. First is high-school sweetheart.

SL: Okay.

JB: First serious romance. Now, I always had girlfriends, but they—senior year, the junior on the paper staff—name was Caroline Gray. Just—that was just a strong high-school romance, and we married when I was—she was—nineteen. Lasted three years. Too young. It's—she lives in Oregon today. Stay in touch with her on Facebook. It's all—you know . . .

SL: That's good. Friendship . . .

[01:42:44] JB: But . . .

SL: . . . continues.

JB: But—well, it's not a real active thing, but it's—she stays close in touch with my sister. So that lasted three years. And from a high-school friendship, and a good one. It was—she was . . .

SL: And she was close to your sister.

JB: Yeah. Remains close. And just a fine young woman, and a fine woman today. But it was just—I thi—I tell people I think of her

as a college roommate, sort of. [*Laughs*] I mean—but—not to be dismissive, but we had no business getting married.

[01:43:22] So then at age twenty-three, I'm hired at the *Arkansas Gazette*. I was—I won't get into the newspaper business, but this is about the marriage. I been—I'm divorced a couple years. The *Gazette* has hired me. I'm twenty-three. It's 1977. And the state editor, Jimmy Jones, comes over and says, "We're ready to make your hiring official." I had—they'd put me through a tryout 'cause I'd been—they weren't sure about me. I hadn't finished college, and John Ward at the *Log Cabin Democrat* had said that he's real good, but he's a mess right now. And I was. So but they tried me out, and they decided to hire me. We're walkin' up to the third floor, to the personnel office. And Jimmy Jones says, fatefully, "Try to maintain your composure [*SL laughs*] when you meet the personnel director. She's the best-lookin' woman you will have ever seen." So I'm prepared, conditioned to see what, indeed, was a remarkable, beautiful woman.

SL: [*Laughs*] So you turned into a puddle on the floor, is that . . .

JB: No.

SL: No?

JB: I got through . . .

SL: You kept your composure?

JB: No, here's the deal. [*SL laughs*] She liked me.

SL: Ah.

[01:44:52] JB: She's older, a few years. The next thing I know, I'm a young cub reporter at the *Gazette*. Ralph Patterson, son of Hugh Patterson, workin' on the staff would become a good friend of mine, comes over to me, and he says, "Hey. I'm having a party Saturday night, and Jackie, the personnel director"—he didn't say who it was, but he said, "There's a gorgeous woman who says she'll only come if I get you there, but she doesn't want me to tell you who you are." And I thought—well, this is just intriguing enough for me to come. So I go. I enter the party. I stand by the mantle in a crowded room at a party, and the personnel director comes over to me and engages me in conversation at the mantle of Ralph Patterson's home during this Saturday night party, and I'm saying to her, "Ralph says there's a woman here who wants to meet me, has got a crush on me. And I—I'm gonna have to—have any idea who it might be?" And she's sayin', "Do you think it's her? Do you think it's her? Do you think it's her?"—that's—it's the old schtick. It was her.

SL: Yeah.

[01:46:08] JB: It was her. In a year, we're married. Moved in

soon, in a year, we're married. I think a lot of my success at the *Gazette* has to do with the fact that some of these older guys who had been overheated about her thought, "Well, if he can get her to marry him, he must have a lot on the ball." [*SL laughs*] I really think—I think I became a columnist in part because of that. I—maybe not.

SL: It's more career fodder there.

JB: Right. Right. [*Laughter*] And that lasted a time—that lasted three years 'cause that was ill conceived. She was older. Age difference. She had been lookin' for something other than—I don't know what she was lookin' for. It was—that didn't last, either. So that was the second one. So by age twenty s—before . . .

SL: Six. Twenty-seven.

JB: . . . before thirty . . .

SL: Oh.

JB: . . . I'm—before thirty, I'm twice divorced. And at sea, really. I'm—I mean, fundamentalist upbringing, and I'm a flawed, permanently scarred—it's on my permanent record.

SL: Right.

JB: Twice marr—I'm beginning to look like Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton . . .

SL: Right. Right.

JB: . . . or something like that.

SL: Right.

[01:47:27] JB: And I'm just—and I spend two or three years at some institutions in Little Rock called Buster's and the End Zone and the Cabbert bars.

SL: Right.

JB: Just drinking and behaving in ways that were not good. But then I met my current wife, Shalah. And we have now been married—[19]87? Thirty-one years. Finally got it right. Third time was a charm. So that's the story of girls and marriages and how I met my wife.

SL: So you met her during your bar days or . . .

JB: No. Yeah, sort of.

SL: So that got you out of there.

JB: Yes. She saved my life. I don't—I mean, I was gonna—I wasn't—I couldn't continue living that way.

SL: Right.

JB: Maybe it didn't save my life. Maybe something else would've saved it, but yeah, that—I met her because she was a friend of my second wife, at a bar, at Buster's. I'm tryin' to get out of there 'cause I've just seen my second wife, and she sees me and

says, "Come over here."

SL: [*Laughs*] Oh gosh.

JB: And she introduces me to her friend, who is Shalah. And Shalah's story is that she—when I left, she said to Jackie, "How could you ever be married to him? He is the surliest person I've ever seen." [*SL laughs*] Because I didn't want to have to deal with her.

SL: Right.

[01:49:03] JB: But then I saw Shalah at the grocery store, and we struck up a conversation, and I thought—she decided I wasn't so surly. And I decided she was interesting. And thirty-one—thirty-some-odd years later—happily, blissfully married. No kids. She—for various reasons, one of which is she's also a little older, and we just decided not to do it. But a good—finally got it right.

SL: You know, sometimes you have to touch the stove a couple of times to learn . . .

JB: Sometimes, yeah, you do. You do. And also if you're just not real sophisticated about things, you just grew up. You just make—you don't have to get married every time you think you're in love, you know. You have—sometimes you have to wait a while and think it and see if it's for real and take more time. But everything has its [*laughs*] purpose, and they all

served to put me where I wound up.

SL: Sar . . .

JB: So I never had trouble meeting women. Let me just say that. I just—I always seemed to have an appreciation.

[01:50:30] SL: So is there anything about your mom or your dad or even your sister—now you had two sisters.

JB: No, just one.

SL: Just one.

JB: Younger. Nineteen months younger. Judy.

SL: Judy. Is there anything about that—about your upbringing in that household that you'd like to add to what we've talked about so far?

JB: You know, I don't know, it's so classic American nuclear family in many respects. It's the dad who works and is the provider, the mother, the pixie, young mother who's meek and spends her life in the kitchen. There's the oldest son, first-born male, and there are tons of advantages in being that.

SL: Right.

JB: And I reaped all of those. There's the fact that—I remember my parents, albeit seventh and eighth grade education, teaching me numbers and the ABCs when I was as young as four years old.

SL: There you have it.

[01:51:49] JB: There you have it. I member my dad braggin' on me all my life. He never would brag to my face. He would laminate my columns and show 'em to other people, or he would talk about me while I was there. And he would say, "You know, I never heard of a kid who walked as early and talked as early as Johnny Ray did." These are the kinds of things I would overhear. He didn't say, "I love you." Never said it. Never said, "You're such a bright young man." Never said that. I would hear him tell that to somebody else, you know. The f—being the favored oldest male in a conventional family structure in the [19]50s, that is a—gave me advantages I don't fully appreciate. My sister has a master's degree. She's very accomplished. Spent a lot of her—well, she would say that she struggled in my shadow in school. She would—she has said that. And maybe she did. But so there was that. And but she ended up outshining me in many ways, and that's all well now, even though she brings it up from time to time. [SL laughs] But it was the—this little—I got this image of us. We're in a [19]62, four-door, Dodge Dart sedan. It's been washed every week.

SL: There you go.

[01:53:31] JB: And the white walls have been scrubbed, usually by me 'cause that was my job.

SL: Okay, there's a chore.

JB: I did have that chore. That and mowing the grass. 'Cause that car—I member my Aunt Stella saying to my dad, "You care more about that car than you do your kids." And he said, "Well, it gives me a lot less trouble." And [*laughter*] you know the deal.

SL: Yeah.

JB: You know the man of that . . .

SL: Yeah.

JB: . . . time.

SL: Yeah. Yeah.

[01:53:56] JB: But I got this image of us, and we're in this spic-and-span white Dodge Dart, and we're goin' from Southwest Little Rock to Eastside Church of Christ about five times a week, and we're goin' down a brand-new spankin' interstate highway with sparkling whitewall tires and this perfectly kept Dodge Dart. And there's Dad up here, and precisely behind him in the back seat is the boy. And there's Mom in the front seat, and precisely behind her in the back seat is the girl. We were almost a prototype or even caricature of an American family goin' down the road, goin' to church. So while there were many weird influences, mostly from religion, some from the insecurities of poverty and the limitations of poverty, we also were just as classic Rockwell

family as . . .

SL: I was gonna say Norman Rockwell.

JB: . . . as you could find. Our—and our roles were precise, you know. Daddy provides. Daddy—when Daddy gets home—Daddy—I'm gonna tell him what you did. You know. She's not gonna get tough with me. But Daddy will. And then the oldest boy and the younger sister sort of playing out these conventional family roles. That's sort of how we were. The family is—remains more important to this day to my sister. She is—I member when my first ill-advised marriage when I left home—I'm worried about gettin' married, and I remember Judy spent those last two or three days of my life at home crying because I was leaving. And I never thought of us as close. I mean, we love each other, but we weren't—I was surprised that it means that much to her, but her home was being disturbed. It was being changed.

SL: It was broken. Yeah.

[01:56:09] JB: Yeah. And when you asked me today or you asked me last week to bring photographs of childhood. I don't have any. She [*laughs*—she has got books and books of them, and she is the one who assembled some of the photographs.

Moreover, you can go to her Facebook page, and she's scanned

and downloaded all of these. I had a guy come to me one day and said, "You come from the same kind of hardscrabble existence I did, and by the way, your mother was hot." [*SL laughs*] And I said, [*laughs*—I said, "What are you base that on. That's all true." He said, "Oh, I follow your sister on Facebook and she—it's all there." I've sort of detached from family. She is really, to this day, she's the record keeper. She wants family to get together. And she visits. She takes a lot of load off me. She visits my mother in the nursing home four or five times a week. She's unmarried. She and my mother lived together for years. And takes care of her, largely. So that's just sort of a—to your open-ended query about the family life, that's sort of the way it was.

[01:57:26] SL: So you mentioned your mom saying, "Now, I'll tell your father" . . .

JB: Yeah. Yeah.

SL: . . . "about this if you don't behave." So I didn't ask about any kind of discipline around the home. Was that—was there strict discipline from your father as the—was he the keeper [*laughs*], you know, of the punishment?

JB: Yes. Yes. He was tough. He was a marine. And he was tough. And he also didn't have a lot in his life, but he was king of his

home. And he also—he prided himself in something that embarrassed me, which is that his two kids were the best behaved in any gathering. I member a family gathering—cousins, my mother's younger brother—sittin' there at my grandparent's home, and my mother's younger brother saying to my dad, "Look at your kids." And there Judy and I sat, perfect little well-behaved, perfectly coiffed kids, while his kids and all the other cousins are tearin' down the house, you know, running around. Said, "Look at your kids. That's how you raise kids." And my dad said—that was—my dad was the boss. He was in charge, and he prided himself on that. And I remember when my uncle said it, I said, "I'm embarrassed. We both should be over there with them. We're kids. We should be playing." But he was that kind of—my dad was that kind of stern disciplinarian that took pride in it. But when you misbehaved, and you challenged and threatened probably what was an insecurity within him, he could—well. This was the era of, for me, corporal [laughs] punishment. Corporal punishment with a belt.

SL: Yeah.

JB: Yeah. Many times. Many times. And, "Stop crying or I'll give you something to cry about." You ever heard a parent say that? Probably not if you're lucky. But it happens. And he—it's

something that I've really had trouble reconciling over the years because he could become very angry if you didn't do as he said. And I mean—and a whipping of a child with a belt pretty—can be pretty brutal. I mean . . .

SL: Yeah, I think . . .

JB: . . . not permanently scarring, I mean, it's just the image of it.

SL: Right.

JB: And at the time it's just normal. I been real bad, so here he comes with the belt. And I think it was probably common of the era, but it was part of our home culture.

[02:00:20] SL: I think my—I'm part of a fall crop.

JB: Yeah.

SL: There's ten year's difference between me and my next-oldest sibling—older sibling. And I think the boys that came before me . . .

JB: Got it.

SL: . . . had that kind of stuff. Now . . .

JB: You didn't.

SL: I didn't from my father. The only thing I ever got from my father was a shaking. And I was grown.

JB: We—yeah.

SL: At that time. But my mother would go cut a switch.

JB: Switch. Yeah.

SL: And do right here on the calves of the leg.

JB: My mom would that, but not often. And she . . .

SL: No. This happened once.

JB: Yeah, she would do the paddle with an open hand, which was
[laughs] . . .

SL: Right.

JB: . . . "That the best you got?" I mean . . .

SL: [Laughs] Yeah.

JB: . . . thank God I'm gettin' that.

[02:01:04] SL: Now what about school?

JB: What about school?

SL: Corporal punishment in the . . .

JB: Had it in the day. I remember three or four times in school—
grab your ankles, bend over, and the wooden paddle.

SL: Yeah.

JB: Three or four. A science teacher in the seventh grade—and I'm
still to this day tryin' to figure out what the heck I did. I mean, I
[laughs]—every time I think about it, I go, "What? Did I look at
him wrong?" but he just came back there and said, "John, you
know what's happening." And this was happening in—that late,
seventh grade, 1966, [19]67 in the junior high school. Did you

have corporal punishment in school?

SL: I had a paddle in third grade.

JB: Yeah.

SL: And it was strange that—you know, the teacher would take you to the bathroom.

JB: Well . . .

SL: To the boy's bathroom.

JB: Huh.

SL: And pa—and it was not severe or anything.

JB: Yeah.

SL: It was more . . .

JB: Is . . .

SL: I think the idea of it.

[02:02:09] JB: Yeah, it's kind of an indignity, but even more so if it's happening in the middle of the aisle of class, you know.

SL: Yeah.

JB: And no, the licks were just kind of firm but not . . .

SL: Right.

JB: . . . not really tough.

SL: And it was just one lick, I mean . . .

JB: Well, I got more than that. But . . .

SL: And I don't—I can't remember what it was I did.

JB: I don't . . .

SL: I'm sure I was acting up or something.

[02:02:27] JB: Not only can I not remember now what I did, I remember that day. What did I do? I mean, I'd like to go back and recreate that moment and just say, "Okay, you hit my rear end three times with your paddle. Now, what did I do?" Because I was afraid to ask. Afraid I'd get another paddling.

SL: Right.

JB: But honest to goodness. It's a lifelong curiosity of mine what I did to get that. But yeah, there was corporal punishment in school.

[02:02:57] SL: So you didn't finish college.

JB: Did not.

SL: And where did you go to college?

JB: I went to UALR. And then I think maybe LRU. No, it was UALR. Because two things had happened. One, I had decided to get married much too early, and two, I had already decided the best time of my life is the day at the—is time spent at the newspaper, where I wasn't makin' much money, but I was moving up to the point that I was wadding up Wally Hall's copy and throwing it away. You know, I was somebody. And I would register every term for fifteen, eighteen hours.

SL: That's a load. Eighteen's a load.

JB: Particularly when you're working and you're . . .

SL: Right.

JB: . . . married man. And I would then steadily drop to the point that I would average maybe nine per term because I would make a conscious decision. Do I go to class today, or do I go down to the paper and work on—and I chose to go to the paper. [02:04:08] Then the *Log Cabin Democrat* was looking for a sports editor and hired me, and we moved to Conway. And I did the same thing at UCA. Would enroll with every intention—UCA or SCA, I forget.

SL: Is that Ferguson? Was he—what was the editors name or the owner?

JB: Frank Robins. Frankie Robins. Hubert Ferguson was the publisher of Conway Printing Company.

SL: Right. Yeah.

JB: Which was the printing company next door to the paper.

SL: Right. Now we've interviewed him.

JB: His—yeah—his—Hubert's a great guy. His brother-in-law, Frank E. Robins III, was the editor-publisher of the paper. The editor was John Ward, who had been fre—Winthrop Rockefeller's PR man and is the person who hired me as sports editor. After a

couple of years, told me, "You"—gettin' in my career now, gonna be—after a couple of years said, "You need to write politics," and then helped me get on at the *Gazette*. So that's . . .

SL: Okay.

[02:05:09] JB: He's very important in my life. But I went up there to be sports wri—editor. And I just never—I never committed to school. I just kept thinkin', "I rather do this newspaper work." And I would pass . . .

SL: Well, which is old sk—that was just old school.

JB: It was its own. And it all worked out. But of course, I mean, I'm no—here I am at a program associated with an institution of higher learning, and I've achieved this status to the point that you invited me to give talks, and I'm—calling me the, what'd you say, most listened-to political columnist in the state, and I'm not sufficiently, properly, formally educated to do that. So but I understand the work stands for itself. But it's a great regret, but it was because I didn't have an education ethic. I mean, this family—I mean, it—there was—we didn't have any money for college. There was no—this idea that we're pressing you every day to do your best and go to college—I didn't get that. I think our culture was a high school diploma is better than we got, and then you get a job. I think that's sort of the way I was—and I

had a job, but not only a job, but it was something that gave me both satisfaction and gave me . . .

SL: Some recognition.

[02:06:36] JB: Yes. So my—I think—so I started college in 1972.

In 1977 the *Arkansas Gazette* hired me. So I'd gone from—I'd gone to college for six years, passing six to nine hours a term and dropping most things. And then when the *Arkansas Gazette* hired me, I moved from Conway to Little Rock, and I think, "I now work at a Pulitzer Prize winning newspaper" . . .

SL: That's correct.

JB: . . . "I don't have to even think about going to college anymore." So that's the last I went. I never went back. And I was the last—I'm—I know this is true. I was the last non-educated newsroom employee ever hired at the *Arkansas Gazette* because I think—I mean, it's just—it was either an unwritten or became a firm rule after that, but I snuck in without it. And the rest is history. That's just how that happened. Here I sit.

[02:07:42] SL: Sarah, how are we?

JB: She's asleep.

Sarah Moore: No. It's about eight minutes past the two-hour mark and eleven thirty, so we're gettin' close to lunch.

SL: Okay. So we can go another—eh—do you need to take a break?

JB: No, I'm good.

SL: Wanna go another fifteen, twenty minutes?

JB: I can't imagine you got anything left to ask but . . .

SL: Oh. [*Laughs*]

JB: But yes. Yes.

[02:08:04] SL: Okay, so this—what's really fascinating to me is—
because you had no way.

JB: [*Laughs*] Right.

SL: Growing up as a kid. But you did have kid neighbors, didn't
you?

JB: No.

SL: No, not out in the . . .

JB: We were at the end of a gravel lane up against the woods. And
we were not in a neighborhood. Most of the kids in those days—
Southwest Little Rock was built up with these strip
neighborhoods of newer homes . . .

SL: Right.

JB: . . . close together with open yards. There's a line in a Bruce
Springsteen song about being—when he was a kid. "Your
mother callin' us home across the open yards." You know, that
was the neighborhood. And I sometimes would experience that
when I—like—some—I would go spend a day with a friend. And

there not—there aren't fences or even hedges between these front yards, and you play football in front of six or eight houses.

SL: Right.

[02:09:04] JB: That's the football field. That's the way it was. And the running home for a meal across the open yards. But we were—we just lived a—we were semireclusive people. We lived in a—at the—on a dead-end lane in a little house backed up against the woods. The nearest neighbor was the Black man. Not far. I mean, li—two hundred yards is Stanton Road, and there may be kids up there, but I don't—my mother didn't want me gettin' too far away from home on that bicycle. I could ride around close, but I better stay close. 'Cause she's very scared something bad can happen. And I had friends at school who lived a quarter mile away, but they may as well have lived in another town.

SL: Right.

JB: 'Cause I never got that far. So I didn't have—I did not have, as a youth, typical, after-school, friendly relations. And I didn't get—I didn't—as I've said, no Cub Scouts, no Boy Scouts, no Little League. Just didn't have a way. So that's how that was.

[02:10:17] SL: So I'm going to assume that there was probably not a musical instrument in your house.

JB: There was not.

SL: So the songs you learned were in church and on the transistor radio . . .

JB: Absolutely.

SL: . . . and on the house radio.

JB: Right. And your point is? [*Laughter*] Where are we . . .

[02:10:42] SL: Well, I'm always looking for musical instruments because . . .

JB: Yeah.

SL: . . . you know, some homes had a piano, and families would gather around the piano, especially during holidays.

JB: What a wonderful image that is.

SL: Well, it's another Norman Rockwell thing.

JB: Right. But not ours.

SL: Not yours. So what were—what was Thanksgiving and Christmas like?

JB: It was usually spent with the extended family down at the shack in the woods in Howard County.

SL: And did your grandparents have a farm table there with benches? Was that . . .

JB: Yeah. Yeah. But it was only—it only seated ten or twelve or fourteen or fifteen.

[02:11:29] SL: [*Laughs*] Only?

JB: Yeah. Because we're talkin' about five children, and they all had four, five kids, except us. We had two. And the cousins. So the kids would all just sit their plates down and go outside or sit on the furniture in the living room.

SL: Front step, porch, front step.

JB: Front—yeah.

SL: Yeah.

JB: Yeah. So and that's—and Christmas morning at my maternal grandparent's home, that old shack in the woods and my granddad buildin' the fire, and then we opened presents Christmas morning. And we've taken—somehow my parents managed to get us in the car and then put in the trunk our presents as if Santa would bring 'em down there. And one year, I said, "This note that says it's from Santa. That's in Granny's handwriting." [*Laughter*] And I ruined it for myself, and . . .

SL: Your sister.

JB: . . . I ruined it for my younger sister. Who's—I think she blames me to this day [*SL laughs*] for takin' . . .

SL: It is trauma.

JB: . . . for takin' Santa away from her too early.

SL: It's big trauma.

JB: But that's the kind of stuff I did. But it was—I mean, the cracklin' fire of this old wood heater in the middle of the floor, sleepin' on Christmas Eve on a pallet with cousin's legs in your face, and then havin' a feast because between all the kids who've gone on in their lives—I mean, my mother and her siblings. They all had jobs, and they were able to bring a turkey and cook it, and we had plenty to eat. We had feasts. That's primarily Christmas and . . .

SL: Did . . .

JB: . . . Thanksgiving for us.

[02:13:20] SL: Did your grandparents cook on a wood-burning stove?

JB: No. They had a . . .

SL: They had electric.

JB: It . . .

SL: Or gas.

JB: Gas.

SL: Gas.

JB: Gas, yeah.

[02:13:27] SL: So at the end of the lane where you grew up, where was the closest creek?

JB: There was an open ditch.

SL: That's it.

JB: But there was no creek.

SL: No creek?

JB: Hm-mm. There were woods. There's a neighborhood in Southwest Little Rock now called—been there for forty years—Windamere, which at one time was a nice neighborhood, and like much of Southwest Little Rock has declined. But our house at the end of this lane backed up to these woods. And my mother wouldn't let me go in the woods, you know. So everything was—everything on bicycle and all the playing was in the yard and on the lane, basically. Stanton Road—can't get on the road. There're cars up there. Can't go in the woods. Who might be in the woods?

SL: Right.

JB: You know, might get lost in the woods. And no creek to play in or anything like that. But I've not—I didn't have the experiences of the chi—this is gonna sound pitiful, but it's just a fact. Fishing.

SL: Not there.

JB: Never. Never. Wha—uncle . . .

SL: Hunting.

[02:14:31] JB: Uncle Bob Bevis, who's a big part of my childhood,

he had a lovely lakeside home. Beautiful place with a fishing dock and a boat dock on the—in Scott. And we'll go down there on Sundays, but mainly on the way down there, sittin' in my place in the back seat, what I'm getting is my mother tellin' my dad, "Don't let Bob get Johnny Ray down there on that dock if we're not down there. He'll fall off that dock." 'Cause she didn't trust—you know, I was gonna drown. "And don't let Bob take us out on that boat" 'cause Bob liked to—what it is when you go fast in the boat . . .

[02:15:16] SL: Hydroplane.

JB: . . . and then you go back over the . . .

SL: Yeah.

JB: Scared her to death.

SL: Well, with good reason.

JB: So—well, good reason. [*SL laughs*] We could've died. He did take me out one night, Bob did. I stayed with him. And 'cause he seemed to like me a little bit. And I stayed with him. And I'm surprised my mother let me stay down there that close to a lake and a dock, but I did. And he set trot lines.

SL: Yeah.

JB: And took me out in a little boat late at night in the darkness checkin' those trot lines.

SL: It's spooky stuff, isn't it?

JB: And I thought, "This may be fun to some people [*SL laughs*], but I don't—I'd just as soon get back over there." You know. It didn't—it just didn't do it. [02:16:06] My dad did not hunt, which is a story unto itself. Marine rifleman. Here's a brief story. Didn't have a gun in the house. Didn't have a gun in the house. Some of his brothers-in-law—he had younger sisters, too, down in Howard County. We were down there one time, and they said, "Why don't you go huntin' with us tonight, JT?" And he said, "I don't want to." They bugged him. "Aw, come on. Come on. Go with us." They're gonna go out and run the dogs, you know.

SL: Sure.

JB: Run the hound dogs, listen to the hound dogs, hunt whatever you hunt, in or out of season, I don't know what they're doin'. Finally he relented and went with them. And the next day came back and one of my uncles, married to one of my dad's younger sisters said—he said to my mother, said, "Something wrong with JT. Something wrong. He doesn't—he didn't wanna be around the guns." He said, "You know, he's—marine, I thought he would," which is, I think, the very reason he didn't.

SL: Of course.

JB: Exactly the very reason. And he just—he di—he had an aversion—who knows what happens. Have you studied at all Okinawa, that experience? It . . .

SL: I have a deceased father-in-law that was there and lost a leg.

JB: Did he talk about it?

SL: Yeah. I've interviewed him about it.

JB: Really?

SL: It's one of the very few veteran interviews . . .

JB: Wow.

SL: . . . that I've got about an actual war experience.

[02:17:49] JB: See, my dad wouldn't. My dad would not talk about it. Just wouldn't, and I understand that's common for many. But I of course, once I got old enough to realize the experience that he'd had, I devoured everything I could about it. And it was—I mean, there—it was as horrible as and more horrible than most. This was take this last island before the mainland. And my dad was in the group that was gettin' ready to be shipped onto the mainland to be human sacrificed, basically. But I'm probably here because of the atomic bomb that—many of us may be here because of the atomic bomb.

SL: That's—yeah.

[02:18:26] JB: But I would always talk about it. And he would tell

an occasional story like the flesh coming off when he took his shoes off.

SL: Yeah. That's pretty graphic.

JB: He would tell that. He would talk bad about the army because the army went up that hill and had to come back and couldn't take it, and then sent the marines, but that's some of that service braggadocio.

SL: Right.

JB: But he would talk about that. But then one day, one Sunday afternoon when he's—I've written about this. He was—I was thirty-seven, so he would've been—thirty-seven and twenty-seven. Sixty-four. Maybe the year he got lung cancer diagnosed and died in three months 'cause it . . .

SL: Wow.

JB: . . . had metastasized. But at that time, he's sittin' around on a Sunday afternoon. I'm out there visiting. The family's sitting around. And I'm more interested than ever in who he is and what he experienced. And I know how to interview people 'cause I've done it for a living.

SL: Right.

JB: And so I start working him. I start talking to him. And I'm drawin' him out. Gettin' a little more. Gettin' a little more.

Gettin' a little more. And then I said, "Well," and I said it sorta conversationally, "I know you saw people right next to you get shot to death, get killed. I know you saw that." And he said—I'm gonna cry.

SL: It's all right.

JB: He cried. He said, "I done everything I could for Sarge." So why—the way he was, as hard as he was, while also had a soft side—those experiences. Nineteen-year-old kid.

SL: Children.

JB: Okay.

[02:20:39] SL: Yeah. Yeah, the details on my father-in-law's experiences is really quite . . .

JB: Was he forthcom—he was forthcoming.

SL: He wa—yeah. Well, I mean, you know, he's lived without a leg since until he passed just the past year. And marine. And it literally—I mean, he—there were markers that he was putting out for aircraft to—where they needed to hit and where they didn't need to hit.

JB: Right.

SL: He was establishing the front line.

JB: Right.

SL: And you know, the Japanese artillery zeroed in on him and blew

his leg off. And the horrible—he wanted to keep the leg. He made the medics give him his leg. And later on they actually gaff—duct tape, taped his leg to his torso 'cause he wanted to have it with him when they put him on the hospital boat. It's a horrible, horrible . . .

[02:21:59] JB: Well, I'm wanting to ask about the prosthetic leg because there was, right, a wooden leg?

SL: Yeah. It . . .

JB: Because . . .

SL: Eventually it was metal. But yeah.

JB: Because the aforementioned Bob Bevis, who's such a—keeps coming up in my childhood life story—leg blown off in Italy. And had a wooden leg that he would take off, and he had—it would bleed throughout his life. It was—they didn't—the technology, the medicine that they—it just wasn't what it is now. A horrible, horrible more than scar, for life. You know.

SL: Right.

JB: I just wondered if his—if he had physi—if had medical problems or. . .

SL: Well, sure he did.

JB: Yeah.

SL: And you know, he really got to where he'd only wear his leg if he

was going to church or . . .

JB: Yeah. Like puttin' on a tie.

SL: Yeah, tie . . .

JB: He would dress up and . . .

SL: Dress up.

JB: . . . put my leg on. Yeah.

SL: You know. And so he got very adept with crutches. And of course, that meant the shoulders go eventually.

JB: Yeah.

SL: But you know, he never felt any animosity about it from him or any anger about it. I mean, it was—you know, you were talking about America being an idea.

JB: Mh-hmm. Last night. Yeah.

[02:23:24] SL: Yeah. Well, I think that's what . . .

JB: That's what they were fighting for.

SL: That's what they were fighting for.

JB: And they knew they were right, and they knew they were moral. And it's horrible what happened to them, but it was for a purpose.

SL: And they . . .

JB: They still believed it.

SL: Believed it. They believed it.

JB: They believed it till their . . .

SL: Absolutely.

JB: . . . till their death.

SL: That's right.

[02:23:40] JB: And that all changed from—well, that changed generally, but for many it changed in the Vietnam experience. But before that it was—no matter how horrible it was, it was for right, you know.

SL: Yeah.

JB: And it was for right.

SL: It was. And it made a difference.

JB: Yes.

SL: Who knows.

JB: Yeah.

SL: What would've been. So I guess we didn't ever really talk about growing up during Vietnam. [*JB laughs*] I mean . . .

JB: I came along at . . .

SL: I think my draft number was 257 or something.

JB: Mine was 250. I remember it. I came—it came over ticker-tape AP wire machine . . .

SL: Oh, I see.

JB: . . . when I'm already down at the paper.

SL: Yeah.

[02:24:31] JB: And I knew it was happening, and I watched it fold over. And when December 4 came up 250—and this was 1970—fifteen, seventeen, eighteen—[19]71, [19]72, and they were—it was ending. It was on its way out. And they were saying if very many are taken out of this year, it'll only be up to number . . .

SL: One twenty.

JB: . . . two—yeah. Yeah. Yeah. They—everything after that . . .

SL: Right.

JB: . . . is gonna be—so I—I mean, it was a celebratory thing.

SL: I don't think I would've survived.

JB: No, I wouldn't.

SL: I'm pretty sure I wouldn't.

JB: I'm not tough as my daddy was. And I mean, I just—and but he—I told him once. I said—I was in high school, and I said, "You know, I'm supposed to register for the draft, and you know, I'm tryin' to figure out what to do." And he said, "The last thing you wanna do is be in a war."

SL: Yeah.

JB: "The last thing you wanna do. Trust me on that." He knew that's the last thing you wanna do. And I said, "I'm thinkin' about gettin' to this National Guard. Bein' what they call a

weekend warrior." He said, "They can call you what they want. But if that keep you out of war, do it." You know.

SL: Yeah.

[02:25:56] JB: So I—there was no—I was not raised with any nobility of marine service. I was—the notion of that. I mean, I think he's proud of what he did, but I think that experience was such that—uh-uh. I mean, that's not something that should happen to a person. I think he knew that. And it's a rare thing. I mean, there're people—there are World War II veterans, and I don't diminish them, but they were on boats or they were doing construction or they were doing . . .

SL: Sure.

JB: . . . that's one thing. And that's noble service to the country. But you're a nineteen-year-old, raw-boned kid off a farm in Southwest Arkansas, you go to boot camp, you get some kind of sickness, so they have to put you in the hospital for a while, and then they put you on a boat, and the next thing that you know, they've dumped you on this . . .

SL: Beach.

JB: . . . rainy beach. And they say, "Take that hill." And the Japanese have been waitin' on you, and they're hidin' in caves and—that's—if you—his message was, "That's what happens to

people like us. That's what we have to do, and don't you let it happen to you if you can keep it from happening." That's the message I got loud and clear from him. Because war is for—is fought by the poor people first, the front lines, largely. They—the least educated, those who don't bring a specialty skill to it. "Get out there in that foxhole and take that hill, get shot at. Probably get killed."

SL: Maimed.

[02:27:50] JB: "But that's all right. Probably get killed, probably get maimed, but I tell you what we will do for you. We'll air lift some cigarettes in for you."

SL: Nah.

JB: [*Laughs*] Because he said they were good about ring—they had a lot of cigarettes. But you didn't smoke 'em at night from a foxhole. [*Laughs*]

SL: It's like a spotlight.

JB: Yeah, yeah. Shoot here.

SL: Yeah. [*Laughs*]

JB: You know, what that would be. Well, I told the story about the flag doesn't keep you goin'. Get your ass shot off . . .

SL: Right.

JB: . . . if you raise the flag. Anyway. That's—that was his

experience. I wat—I so wanted to watch the HBO series on the World War II to—and the—one of the—the last one was about the guy Sledge called Sledgehammer and his book about Okinawa 'cause I think my dad was right there with him. I'd love to have—but you know he'd—if I'd tried to watch that with him, he would've fled the room.

SL: Right.

JB: Just couldn't . . .

SL: Too real.

JB: Too real. Yeah.

[02:28:55] SL: Man. You know, and this is before—he was suffering before anyone knew what . . .

JB: Yeah. Didn't know what PTSD was.

SL: How to treat it or even that it existed. That's interesting that those guys came back and said JT—there's something different about him.

JB: Yeah. Apparently he didn't shoot all night. He wouldn't shoot. And he didn't enjoy it, and he was not comfortable.

SL: He got badgered into it.

JB: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

[02:29:28] SL: It's an interesting dynamic for a hardcore marine.

So man, I just can't believe that you were such a . . .

JB: Weirdo.

SL: No, no, no. You were so privileged as far as—even in the poverty, your position was pretty . . .

JB: Charmed life. Yeah.

SL: Charmed. Yeah.

JB: It just has been. And it's—every—things about me don't make any sense. I don't fit—I don't—I just don't think I fit into any standard narrative. [*Laughter*] Because it's just—you don't become *Garbage Man's Boy: Unlife—Life and Times of an Unlikely Arkansas Pundit*. That's—you know, and—I'm—how I got to where I am is not by any logical progression that would make sense under the normal—under convention. But yeah, we were poor. There were insecurities, inferiority complexes coming from that. There were lack of opportunity, lack of engagement with other kids, but that fueled this imagination.

SL: That's what's fascinating, yeah.

JB: There was al—but my mom did all the work around the house. I didn't have to do a thing. My dad did make me cut the grass.

SL: Sep.

JB: And he did make me wash the car. Sometimes he'd come along and wash the car after I did 'cause he could not understand.

"What's wrong with you, boy?" I remember him saying to me, "I

thought you were supposed to have good sense." I member him sayin' that to me one time. "You take a S.O.S. pad to the whitewall." Because that white wall had to be white. "And then you rinse it with the hose, and you let the hose hit the gravel at the ground and the dirt pops up from the ground onto the white wall."

SL: Gotta start over.

[02:31:39] JB: And I wouldn't even notice it. Mean, I just fssh. He'd, "Hey. Hey. What's the matter with you? You know, where's your brain. Do you—look at this." And that's just—so I had to do those. But that was—I mean, mowin' the grass, there's some instant gratification in that, and there's exercise. You know, that . . .

SL: Was it push mower?

JB: Push mower. A power mower.

SL: Oh, it was a power mower.

JB: Yeah. And you know, it looks better, and you've done it, and the car looks better. So and I didn't mind that. But I didn't have to do anything else. And my dad was always—he couldn't afford to have anything done. This is the other thing about . . .

SL: Poverty.

JB: . . . being as poverty as we are. If the plumbing is bad and

company's coming Saturday and we got one bathroom and the toilet's messed up, it's on him to fix it.

SL: Yep.

JB: He can't afford a plumber. And I member my mother saying, "Maybe Johnny Ray could help you. At least hold something or hand you a wrench." He said—he didn't have the patience for that. I mean, I—no. "This is me, and I've gotta get this done, and if he's out here, I'll have to be showin' him stuff, and he'll be more in the way than he'll be helpin'." That was sort of what I hear.

SL: Yeah.

[02:33:00] JB: So I never had to do anything like that. Meanwhile my cousin is his aide-de-camp on his household chores that I never knew anything about it. He's goin' around as his apprentice learning about the multiple uses of a scraper. I . . .

[02:33:15] SL: So I wonder if the protection thing—now was it your mom's parents that fended with the shotgun?

JB: It was my grandmother. Granny. Yeah.

SL: Your granny.

JB: Yeah, that's what I called her. Granny Bearden, my mom's mother. Yeah. There were two girls who were nice lookin'. My mother and her younger sister, Eunice. And I go down there

even now, and I hear stories about how they—of—old men, now, about those two Bearden girls and how attractive they were.

But yeah, there were guys comin' around. And somebody was comin' around that she didn't like, and his intentions she didn't think were noble. And got after him with the weapon. Yeah.

That's the story.

SL: Fired a shot and . . .

JB: I think so.

SL: It was buckshot, probably?

JB: I guess. I guess.

SL: So you know, your mom probably witnessed that.

JB: Yeah.

SL: And saw this.

JB: As—the story is from her. Yeah. She told me the story.

SL: So—I mean, there just seems to be some kind of protection around you that is unusual. I mean, everyone loves their children, everyone wants to protect their children but . . .

JB: I was protected. I was favored. Yeah. And I was—I don't know. You know, I didn't—I'd like to—if I could ask my dad one thing, it's "Why didn't you make me come work with you when David was workin'? How bout the three of us? Wouldn't that have been good? I liked David, my cousin, why didn't we"—I

think he just thought I was different and I wasn't interested, and what I was doing was something that was apart from him, but it was something I needed to do, and that he sort of compartmentalized me as different. Seems to have happened. I mean, I'm writin' letters to the editor and gettin' 'em published when I'm fourteen years old.

SL: Right.

[02:35:28] JB: And he's laminating them and showin' 'em to people. You know, I mean, that's . . .

SL: Something that would've never happened in his life.

JB: No. And the—I—my wife, Shalah, the real wife, the one that lasted [*SL laughs*], she says this is the damndest story she's ever heard. When my dad was an elder at this Eastside Church of Christ, and I'm sixteen years old, he came to me, my dad came to me and said, "The young adult's class's teacher is not gonna be here Sunday. Would you teach the young adu—young, married couples." He asked me, and I accepted. Talk about audacious. "Yeah, I'll go in there and talk to 'em. What's their lesson plan?" And at sixteen, I go for the young marr—and they accept me. They think, "This is interesting. Isn't he cute?"

SL: Right.

JB: But we had a normal Sunday school class, and I instructed from

the lesson with some—granted some measure of credibility to be there. It was assumed until I began to turn, that I was gonna somehow . . .

SL: Ascend.

JB: . . . ascend to—I was gonna be a preacher.

SL: Right.

[02:36:45] JB: I knew better than that. But I was—and I was just always considered precocious by him. You know, like he was walkin'—and he's braggin'. "He's walking early, he's talkin' early." And he would—and then—one of the favorite moments of my life is walkin' toward the house and hearin' my dad say to—who never spoke a complimentary word to me. But he said to my mother, not knowing I was close to the door and could hear, "That boy can do anything he puts his mind to." I'm somebody, you know.

SL: Right.

JB: I'm special around here, you know. That always—I had that experience. And I'm thankful for it.

[02:37:36] SL: Was your dad a big guy?

JB: No. Wiry. Why am I—he's six feet, six one, about 160 pounds.

SL: Wow.

JB: And just all tight muscle, all his life. Worked—wore his body out

working. So yeah, no, not a big guy. I had uncles. His uncles who were my size. His mother's—no, his father's brothers, some Brummetts, one named John, in Oklahoma—don't know anything about 'em, I just have learned about 'em. But Stella, the older sister who kept family lore, she said, "Those uncles, particularly John Brummett, the uncle in Oklahoma, was a massive man." So you know, that's, I guess . . .

SL: The genes are there.

JB: I ge—that's how that happened.

SL: Yeah. Yeah.

JB: But it wasn't from him. My mother's five two. Pixie. Petite. He's six . . .

SL: Yeah, my mom is small.

JB: . . . foot, 160.

SL: Yeah.

[02:38:38] JB: I member lookin' at—this is sort of an interesting story. I member as a young adult lookin' at them one day sittin' around the table, and I said—and I was already a big boy. I said, "I've got to be adopted." This is gonna be a telling story. It just occurred to me. I said, "I must be adopted." He looked at me, said, "Why do you say that?" I said, "Well, look, I mean, I'm the—I don't—not the same size, not the same body type.

That I could come from her, and you're so thin." He said, "That's not what you're sayin'. You think you're smarter than we are." That . . .

SL: Oh.

JB: See, so there was—I said, "I promise you, Dad, that's not what I was sayin'." "Yeah, you've always thought you were better than we are." "No. No. That's not what I"—I may think that, but I don't say it, I don't imply it. I hope I don't think it, but I'm only talkin' about our body types right now. So that's goes to some of that relationship, too. It's all complicated, isn't it?

SL: It is.

JB: Parents and . . .

SL: It is. Especially . . .

JB: . . . fathers and sons.

SL: . . . when they—you learn later so many things that they knew that you had no idea they knew or . . .

JB: Right. If you could just revisit and have the context you have now.

SL: Right.

JB: It would—and we began to get a—I don't know if that's common in families, but for the last three or four, five years of his life, he would come over to my house and help—and build a doghouse

for me or do something, and he just wanted to talk to me friend to friend, and that was good, and I'm glad we had that time. But he was—insecurities. I think that's—poverty, lack of education, not—such a struggle to provide. He's gotta know that other kids are in Cub Scouts and his isn't, you know. He's gotta know that that's not really good. [02:40:41] I member one time he's shaving in the bathroom, and I start askin my mother about—"Some of the kids are talkin' about how their parents are savin' money for their college. Have y'all saved any money for my college?" And she said, "You're gonna hurt your daddy's feelings. He's gonna hear. He can't save any money. He just—you—he—we li—we're livin' literally, you know" . . .

SL: Hand to mouth.

JB: . . . "check to check." Yeah. And "Don't say that." And it was—I should've known that, you know, and been more sensitive to it. On the other hand, I'm a kid, you know . . .

SL: Right.

JB: I was just askin' a question. When I was—I'm ramblin' now.

SL: That's fine.

[02:41:31] JB: But this is a rare thing. This probably has not happened a lot. When I'm eighteen or so, about eighteen, I'm working for the *Democrat*. I'm in the sports department. I'm

making \$100 a week, but I got some money. My dad is living by painting houses and doing maintenance work. Just whatever comes up. And his car, his Chevrolet Impala, broke down and was gonna be too expensive to fix. He needed a new, used car. And my mother came to me, and she said, "He's got this—it's an old Ford Fairlane that's \$500 over here at So-and-so's lot, but he doesn't have \$500. Do you have \$500 you could lend him? He won't ask, but he'll let me ask." So I—an eighteen-year-old kid bought his daddy a car. That's just a—I thi—he—what does that mean? Just somethin' I wanted to tell you, you know. It's—he had a tough life. Not—being poor is not any damn fun, you know. It's just not. Being poor and working hard for what you can get, livin' in a place—he lived in a place, and now you gotta move because the freeway's comin' through. That doesn't happen to people with money. They live in better places where they don't bring the freeways.

SL: Right.

JB: You know?

SL: Right.

[02:43:17] JB: Livin' at the end of a gravel lane in the woods, and by the time I graduated from high school in 1971, the gravel lane where he had the first of three little houses on it was now a

low-class trailer park all around him, and he had to—soon after I got out of high school, they had to get away. Because when you're poor, you have no control of your existence. You have no control of your property. You don't have power to protect yourself. And that—I mean, that's just how—I mean, here's a lane over here, they've got some utilities down there, somebody decided to make some money with a trailer park, and the next thing you know, you got some of the lowest riff-raff in the neighborhood. And it's not a good trailer park. It's a bad trailer park. And his idyllic little thing that he—flat-top, four-room home that he built for his family is now stuck in the middle of . . .

SL: Squalor.

[02:44:14] JB: Yes. That happens to poor people. And it's not their fault. They just do the best they can. People ask me, "Why do you get so upset about the Medicaid and the Medicaid work requirement and stuff like that?" Maybe because of that. I just know that peep—we don't—I've gotten to know governors and senators and billionaires. I've sat and interviewed Sam Walton. I mean, I know all that. People, good people of good sensibilities have no idea about being poor, about not having the money to deal with problems that arise. And the challenges that

poses to a proud man. So. That's his story. But you are right, I was somehow largely insulated from all of that. The neighbor, the lane, the Opal Lane where we lived turned to trailer park squalor when? My senior year in high school. I'm gonna be gone. I was always just—I'm away from it. They were left with it to deal with it and find a way to move. So.

SL: So they ended up—did move.

[02:45:33] JB: They bought another house. *[Laughs]* Everything reminds me of something else. Bless his heart. They bought another house. He sold this one, and he decided to carry the note on it. Okay. Well, what happened.

SL: They didn't make payments.

JB: They didn't make the payments.

SL: He lost the house.

JB: It was the land commissioner was gettin' ready to take the house. I found out about it and sa . . .

SL: Kept it.

JB: . . . saved the deal.

SL: Yeah.

[02:46:09] JB: A lot of interesting stories. They're just pourin' and pourin'. Do you have that ability, or do I just like talkin' about myself? I don't know, but it's . . .

SL: Oh. [*Laughs*]

JB: There's—one reminds me of another.

SL: Well, I can tell you that all these stories I'm hearing from you reminds me of stories in my life.

JB: Good.

SL: My . . .

JB: That's what this is about, right?

SL: Yeah. It is—it has—it . . .

JB: And we're tryin' to tell the . . .

SL: . . . resonates across . . .

JB: . . . tell the . . .

SL: Yeah.

JB: . . . story of our time and our place.

SM: All right, I'm gonna have to interrupt, guys. Lunch is here. You ready to eat? We been goin' almost three hours.

JB: Okay.

SL: Yeah, we can stop. We'll give Gerald his shot.

SM: Okay.

SL: All right, thanks, Sarah.

JB: That was good.

SL: It was really good. Thank you.

[Recording stopped]

[02:46:48] GJ: Hi, I'm Gerald Jordan. I teach journalism at the University of Arkansas, and I'm really happy to be here today with John Brummett, outstanding columnist for the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* and on his own website and other social media platforms. An entity.

JB: I am honored that you would take time to query me about my life and career. I appreciate you doin' it.

GJ: Absolutely. You had an interesting spa—start. Little bit like maybe Scotty Reston. You started off in sports. And I believe that we might have actually spent some time in the same encampment there with . . .

JB: I think we may have.

GJ: . . . Jack Keady at the *Arkansas Democrat*.

[02:47:33] JB: This is—will cover a little ground we covered this morning, but just to get us started, I guess, on my career—I was a weird kid in a conser—poor, conservative family in Southwest Little Rock, and I looked forward every day to the throwing of the afternoon *Arkansas Democrat* in my driveway, not the *Gazette* because we were conservative people, and we didn't have the *Gazette* in my home in those days. So I—and I developed my great interest in newspapers. And about the only thing I had around the house to read was the daily newspaper,

and I would get in the middle of the floor and get my elbows inky reading mainly the sports page. [02:48:09] And one night I was listening—this just to cover the ground—one night I was listening to a radio station on Friday night with a live broadcast of Friday night football scores. And on the station, they said, "Hey, here comes the guy with the Hall High score," and this guy said, "Okay, Hall High beat So-and-so tonight such-and-such. Thank that guy who brought that in. What was his name?" And somebody in the studio ov—I hear said, "That's Rod Lorenzen from Hall High School." And a light went off in my head—went—"La—Rod Lorenzen. He's one of those famous bylines I've been readin' in my paper." You know, and it turns out he's a kid. I'm a high school junior at McClelland. He's a kid at Hall my age, and he is—why couldn't I be a sports writer . . .

GJ: Right.

JB: . . . for the—'cause I'd gotten the—I was the sports editor of the school paper. [02:49:02] And I told my mother, "I'm gonna write a letter to Mr. Jack Keady, the sports editor." And she said, "Don't get your hopes up. [*GJ laughs*] The newspaper's not gonna hire a sixteen-year-old kid." I came in from school like two days later, and she said, "You're due at six o'clock in the mornin' [*GJ laughs*] down at the *Democrat* because"—you've

much the—some of the same experience. But in those days, they pu—in the afternoon paper—they produced the sports section from six to eight o'clock.

GJ: Yeah.

JB: And he used these high-school kids, not just me, not just Rod Lorenzen, but a kid from Central named Mike Bayer and a kid from Parkview named John Bloom, who later became the drive-in movie critic, Joe Bob Briggs.

GJ: Joe Bob Briggs. Yeah.

[02:49:46] JB: And we helped produce the morning section from six to eight, and then we went to school. And I went down the first morning, and a guy named Arlin Fields . . .

GJ: Yeah.

JB: . . . who was older than us and seemed to be some—halfway in charge, was cutting out the morning *Gazette's*—articles from the morning *Gazette* sports section, and then he brought 'em over to me. [*Laughter*] And I said—he said, "Here. Welcome to professional journalism." And I said, "What am I supposed to do?" He said, "Rewrite 'em. That's what we do. We rewrite these high-school basketball games that the real newspaper did this morning. [*GJ laughs*] We just rewrite them." So I sat down and just stole from the competition . . .

GJ: The competition.

JB: . . . for my first day. And that was the first day of—my first day as a professional journalist, my first job was to steal from the competition, and I've worked continually with or for newspapers ever since.

[02:50:39] GJ: Wow.

JB: Forty-eight years.

GJ: Not a break in the middle.

JB: Well, like now the last few years I've been a contractor. I don't work at the paper, but I'm still in the paper. So . . .

GJ: Right.

JB: So, yeah, it took a year in Washington to write a book about Clinton, but during that year I sent columns back not just to the *Democrat-Gazette* but to the *Arkansas Times*. I've been published in newspapers, working with or on a contracted basis with newspapers continuously since that day a few days after my sixteenth birthday.

GJ: You are closing in a half century.

JB: I am. Yeah.

GJ: And you have seen everything in that time from clipping the competition . . .

JB: [*Laughs*] Right.

GJ: . . . and rewrite at that level to the advent of social media, digital communication, which you are right on top of. I admire that because a lot of seasoned journalists, legacy journalists, would just walk away from that, but you have embraced that and made it a part of your . . .

JB: Well . . .

GJ: . . . practice and your delivery.

[02:51:46] JB: Yeah, and I resisted. I remember a few years ago one of the local television stations began a social-media-driven feature called Choose Your News, and they would put up three articles. It was KATV—put up three article ideas, and the voters would choose, and they would do that story the next day. And the grizzled old journalist that I am with a column, I just ridiculed that very notion of . . .

GJ: That's what I . . .

JB: What a ridiculous thing to be doing. But somebody said, "You need to see how they're using Twitter." And this would've been, I don't know, six, eight, ten years ago. And I said, "Twitter? What is Twitter?" And the name sounded absurd.

GJ: Right.

JB: Which meant to me the concept is absurd. And then—and that's—as recently as six, eight, nine, ten years ago, that's what

I thought of it. And then when I first broke down and said, "I've got to be on Twitter." It was hilarious. I treated it like, and I still do to an extent, like a newspaper or a provider of news. Twitter's supposed to be about social networking, and you enter things on it, but then you follow people that you choose so that you have your own newsfeed from others. I got no newsfeed at all, basically. It's just me. I'm puttin' it out there like a newspaper columnist. Listen, if you wanna look at it, that's what you're there for. That's how I began treating it, and I still to this extent have not—only a hundred people that I follow. But now I'm almost Trumpian in my addiction to Twitter.

GJ: Wow.

[02:53:24] JB: I just—I have a need to do it. They've gone from 140 characters to, I think, 280.

GJ: Two eighty, yeah.

JB: And that—that's—gives me a little more room to go without weird—it turns out I think—a lot of times my columns are just a series of quips, basically [*laughter*], sometimes, and so, I mean, I just—I'm kind of a—I've got a side of me that's kind of a smart ass. I do little quips, one liners, and that's fun for Twitter. And now—and I just—I like communicating on it. I've used it to interview people. If I'm in an exchange on Twitter with, say,

Senator Jim Hendren, and we get into it, I'll stop the discussion, and I'll tweet to him, "By the way, from this point on, this is for the record." You know. And he'll say, "Oh, okay." You know. So I'll used it as—it's this public dialogue that's part of an old-fashion interview. So it's a tool that way. [02:54:28] And then along the way, I decided the coolest thing would be for the last accomplishment of my career would be if I could win in the *Arkansas Times* Best of Arkansas, the best Twitter feed.

[GJ laughs] I thought this would—this was what I was tryin' to do. I wanted, before I [laughs] died, to have—to be this old guy who had the best Twitter feed that people would—and they don't even have the category anymore. [GJ laughs] They've switched it to best Instagram or something like that. So I do use it, and I try to keep up because you almost have to.

GJ: Yeah.

JB: Really. Have to.

GJ: Yeah. It would be, I guess, the same as if someone in the early twentieth century said, "I refuse to use the telephone."

JB: Right.

GJ: Yeah.

JB: Yeah. Or to say . . .

GJ: You . . .

JB: I'm not—I'm gonna keep my horse and buggy.

GJ: [*Laughs*] Yeah.

JB: I'm not gonna take this car. I don't trust that car.

[02:55:20] GJ: You have adapted with the times, and I think that's part of the reason that you're successful still that you are keeping track of things that change and trying to keep pace with things that change. Let us turn back to the start of your column writing. I would imagine that to go from reporter, the observer with no opinion, to columnist, the opinion leader or opinion tracker, takes a tremendous amount of ego. [*JB laughs*] It's almost as though you're saying . . .

JB: So you're gonna attack me for being an egomaniac.

GJ: No, not at . . .

JB: Right off the bat.

GJ: . . . all. But . . .

JB: No, I'm kidding. I know.

GJ: But it's almost as though you're saying the same thing as a politician.

JB: Yeah.

GJ: That "I can do this because I have the capacity, I have the answers." What do you have to reach in and find to stick your chin way out there to be a columnist?

[02:56:30] JB: For me, it took time. Because I had been a—I'd been a state capitol reporter. I had a very successful career as a reporter, covering the capitol, covering politics. And it was decided at the *Gazette* in the height of the newspaper war we needed some sort of political columnist to answer John Robert Starr or to counter John Robert Starr and Meredith Oakley, who had more license to say things in their columns than we had an outlet for that at the *Gazette*. And the story is that Ernie Dumas and Max Brantley and Carrick Patterson and some others were sittin' around, and they're sayin', "Who we got?" And they thought, "Brummett. He, you know, some of his"—I thi—I—there's a rumor that somebody said, "Half of his articles read like columns anyway." [GJ laughs] Because I got a little attitude, maybe, that I could sneak in from time to time. [Laughs] But that said, my—I go back and read my first year's columns. They're just glorified news articles. They're just basically a little of—the kinds of exclusive stories I would be pursuing or basic news stories I'd be pursuing with a little more analysis than would be in a news article. And it was good, and people were reading it, but I'd barely used first person—referred to myself. And it—I was havin' a transition period. And oddly—the *Gazette* was purchased by Gannett. Gannett sent a quirky man in to run

the paper named Walker Lundy.

GJ: Yeah.

[02:58:09] JB: And er—most people, true *Gazette* people will tell you that Walker Lundy was the most horrible thing to happen to the *Gazette* and was a disaster and a—he had a weird sense of journalism, and they blame him for a lot of things that happened. For me, Walker Lundy delivered me to column freedom. Because one of the first things he did was bring all of us in one by one and talk to us. And I was one of the last ones to go in with him, and he said, "So you're the columnist." "Mh-hmm." He said, "I read it. It's good. It's good. It's very good. You got sources, you've got good information. But do you ever think about just cuttin' loose and sharing something of yourself and having more of an attitude, indeed, more of an opinion? It is your column. You ever think about surprising people by writing about something other than politics? You know, something, some personal anecdote or something or some human-interest thing that you come across." Said, "Your column is good, but it's got to have more attitude, more opinion. It can't just be a glorified news story if it's gonna last, and you need—the readers need to be surprised, and you need to change their topics from time to time and give 'em something different

one day." And I thought, "Okay. You're the editor. Gannett sent you here, they own the paper, they're spending a lot of money, and that's what you just told me. And I'm gonna do it." And I went out, and the first key I hit after that was *I*. [GJ *laughs*] "I think." Or essentially. I say that almost metaphorically, but I mean, not literally—but that's the way I took it. And it was heady stuff.

GJ: Yeah.

[03:00:03] JB: It really was. And a column with that kind of liberty and that kind of license to be personal and share both yourself and what you—and to presume to be opinion. I think the main thing I can say for myself is that's a—that is a vehicle for destroying yourself. You can make a complete ass of yourself doing that. And I've been doing that now for thirty years, and I've made only a partial ass of myself. [GJ *laughs*] But—at most. I have survived doing that. Because I mean, if you just—you can really make a mess of a column.

GJ: Sure.

JB: And along the way you begin to redefine yourself from a reporter to a guy who's told to be opinionated and doesn't mind it as much as he thought he would, to a guy who's starting to join it, until one day, you're lookin' at Charlie Rose, the—when he had

that late-night show . . .

GJ: Sure.

JB: . . . was interviewing movie director John Sayles, who's done some great films. And he was saying, "You know, what—your *Lone Star* and *Limbo*, the movie about the—and the *Sunshine State*. They all have a social—there's a social conscience to your movies. What are you tryin' to do with those kinds of films?" 'Cause Sayles would write—would be a pop movie screenwriter to make money so he could then do these kinds of movies.

GJ: Right.

[03:01:39] JB: And Sayles said to him, "Life at its highest level is an important conversation, and I just want to be in on the conversation." And I thought, "Yeah. Yeah." I'm—I think that's what I'm—I have evolved into wanting to be. But I had to go through this period of transition where I was just writing glorified news articles and trepidatious about opinion to being told to be more opinionated, to getting more comfortable with it, to then sayin', "I'm just—I'm part of the conversation." And there is—I guess it's ego. Sure it is. But I mean, I'm lookin' at the—just today as we tape this, I have a column in the paper stating my preference for mayor of Little Rock.

GJ: I've been . . .

JB: In the mayor's race.

GJ: . . . following that.

JB: It's presumptuous to think anybody gives a damn who you prefer in a mayor's race. But at the level—at where I've evolved to, I think people care. And I think there are some people out there who, in thirty years, have come to trust my views enough that it will matter to them. Whether they heed it or not, they'd like to have benefit of my view. That is the arrogance of the columnist. *[GJ laughs]* But I was slow coming to it. But it is something I'm now comfortable with.

GJ: Sure.

JB: And you have to be comfortable with it to do it.

[03:03:05] GJ: To do it well, and what—I'm sure you remember my saying this to you before. I've always appreciated the fact that you report in your columns. There are some columnists who lie on the beach and tickle their navel, and as the lint flies up, they write about it. And I . . .

JB: Right.

GJ: . . . just go, "Whoa. Are you gonna get to a point, here?"

[03:03:26] One thing I wonder, though, about your longevity and the audience that you've built up over the years—have you surrendered all your privacy? Can you go out to a restaurant?

Can you go to the movies? Or do you get confronted by people, fans or foes?

JB: It's not that degree of celebrity. It's a [*laughs*] dying industry. I mean, there are whole generation of people who don't even know what a newspaper is [*GJ laughs*] much anymore.

GJ: Yeah.

JB: And I can go to . . .

GJ: I'm teachin' 'em.

JB: I can go to the grocery store and to dinner and not be bothered by them. However, generationally and because I'm also do other media, television, other things, I am fairly widely known, and I—to be honest with you, maybe this is the ego, I don't mind being recognized. When somebody recognizes me, I think, "That means my column has connected." It doesn't mean, "You're invading my space. I don't want to be bothered." I'm not Greta Garbo. You know, [*GL laughs*] I'm not tryin' to hide. I'm out here. My job is to be out here.

GJ: Yeah.

[03:04:36] JB: And thank you for even acknowledging that you know who I am and what I do and you read what I do. Most of the hate doesn't—those people aren't brave enough to come up to you and say it. Those come in indirectly through social

media, or they come in comments on your column online by fake names, people not using their names, or they come, sometimes, by people in their names and emailing to you, but not personally. So the negative side of that, the criticism you get, which is expected and just is an essence of the job—it—you don't—people don't come up to me and say, "I hate your column." They'll go home and send me an email [*GJ laughs*] that they hate my column. They're more apt if they do come up to have something positive to say.

[03:05:27] GJ: I admire your one liners. My favorite is [*JB laughs*], "Arkansas is a tailgate party masquerading as a state." [*Laughs*]

JB: I make myself—I shouldn't amuse myself that way.

GJ: Now, do you hang on—do you collect those somewhere and wait and . . .

JB: I should. [*GJ laughs*] I should. I should.

GJ: . . . wait to spring 'em on us or . . .

JB: You're getting into a whole different Twitter identity that I've developed out there. Sort of the anti-Razorback. I just like to poke holes in this Razorback religion that in Arkans—and I want 'em to win, and I grew up on Arkansas football, but this whole glorification of this team, and this obsession with this college sport by—played by nineteen- and twenty-year-olds, and the

deification of these coaches, most of whom are a motorcycle wreck away [*GJ laughs*] from bein' disgraces—[*laughs*] I mean, I just find it all fodder for one liners. And a tailgate party masquerading as a state—I . . .

GJ: It's a classic.

JB: . . . appreciate that you like that one. [03:06:34] The other—I sometimes do what's called [*laughs*] live tweeting during football games. If I'm not with a social group or anything, I'll just do some Twitter during the game. And late in the Alabama game, I tweeted, "I'm sensing that the Hogs are on the verge of their third moral victory in a row." [*Laughter*] And then I said, "There's already talk they are the best 1-5 team in the country." [*GJ laughs*] Now why do I do that? One, 'cause I think it's funny, and I amuse myself, obviously, and some of my followers. I also—people say, "That's just trollin'. You're tryin' to make the Razorback fans mad." Yeah. [*GJ laughs*] I enjoy that. So there's a whole subgenre of my work on social media that is sort of the anti-Razorback, which I'm not really. I'm just doing it sort of as social observation. But the one liners. I don't—you've written a lot, and you can answer this as well as I could. I never—I sit down with a blank screen, and before that a blank typewriter, and I start going. I have no outline. I don't know

exactly where I'm going. And the one-liners—I never build a column around a one-liner that's occurred to me. The one-liner occurs to me through my fingers in the course of writing.

GJ: Okay.

JB: You know, I didn't say, "I'm going—hey, I—this a good line. Tailgate party masquerading as a state. Let's do a column about that." It's just—in this—in the synapse thing [*GJ laughs*] from brain to finger, it hit me to say at a certain point. And you know, I just enjoy doin' it. And I'm glad you appreciated that line.

[03:08:25] GJ: Now when you're deciding what to write, do you have some sort of—I don't know . . .

JB: Epiphany?

GJ: I can't even think of the researcher's name, but this—the guy who came up with the box where you . . .

JB: Oh.

GJ: . . . you have A, B, C, D . . .

JB: Oh, no. No. No, no.

GJ: . . . and you put legislature here, governor there, schools here, agencies there, and decide I need to dip into . . .

JB: Hm-mm.

GJ: Do you keep track of . . .

JB: Hm-mm.

GJ: . . . how often you write about . . .

JB: No. No. Over the years I've—during the height of the newspaper war, I was writing six a week. There was a time I've written five a week. Now I write four a week. It's a rhythm.

GJ: And that's still a lot.

[03:09:13] JB: It's a ton.

GJ: It's an awful lot.

JB: 'Cause you're on more days than off, and on the days you're off, you're tryin' to—you're worryin' about the next day you're on.

GJ: Sure.

JB: But one—and I'm just in a rhythm. I been doin' it for thirty-something years. I don't have boxes, I don't have outlines, I don't have plans, I don't have structure. I can sit around on a Sunday afternoon, and I could have a—no column in mind for Tuesday, and it's due at ten a.m. Monday. And I can be sittin' lookin' at a football game. And here it'll come. Something come. This is—and the sort of the standard is, "What are people talkin' about today?" And if that's what they're talkin' about, that's what I wanna write. Second, "Have I got—do I think I got some angle on it, something that's a little—that's helpful to them or some insight that maybe I could offer." And the reporting

column. "Is there something I know about it?" Because the only reason my opinion might be more valuable than yours is that it's based on information you didn't have before, so that's why I still try to write, as often as possible, a reporting column. That's the standard. And it could be about any subject. What goes in here could be, hey, this Trump thing today—I was gonna go local with my column but the—this is what everybody's talkin' about right now, and this is—I got something to say about it that I haven't heard anybody else say. That's sort of the standard I apply. And it's gotten me through. I me—people talk about the agony of writing and how hard it must be to come up with topics. [03:10:41] I don't have agony. I love it. I love the old adage, "Write drunk, edit sober." [GJ laughs] You know. I got it, I got a subject, let's get it on the screen, let's get it all out, and then I've got—then I'll spend some time polishing, editing sober. And all of it is fun for me. But comin' up with topics—I had just had—I—the—as long as this—as I don't make it too complicated. It is as simple as this is a conversation with readers. This is the thing they're gonna be wanna be talkin' about tomorrow. And if I can say something about it, then I should.

[03:11:23] GJ: I would guess that readers of the *Arkansas*

Democrat-Gazette and those who seek you out on social media would put you in the category of a liberal columnist.

JB: They do indeed. Yes.

GJ: What do you consider yourself?

JB: I am not a liberal. And I wouldn't mind if I were a liberal, and I am liberal on some things. But a true liberal is much less pragmatic than I am in terms of politics than—in terms of settling for less than the philosophy or the ideal. A true liberal says, "Single-payer health insurance." I say, "Well, that'd be nice, but if it can't pass it, let's try to fix Obamacare, and here are a few ideas." I come at things from a—I come at politics, especially, and government from "Let's make this work" rather than "Let's do it exactly the way I might philosophically prefer." [03:12:33] So I find myself for the last four years getting along well with and even admiring a Republican governor, Asa Hutchinson. Because though I disagree with him philosophically on most things, even though down deep I wonder how much—but I mean, you know, I mean, on a lot of things. But he has tackled a couple of tough issues like a state law on religious freedom versus gay rights and insisted on backing away from the most extreme version of that. And then he's expanded Medicaid contin—he's managed to keep that going. I admire

that he keeps government working in service to people. And that's not what—that's not a liberal. I may have liberal sensibilities that come to it, but I was tellin' this group here last night my favorite politician right now is John Kasich. He's a Republican governor of Ohio.

GJ: Ohio.

[03:13:32] JB: But he speaks with passion and fervor about values.

And in the age of Trump, man, I love that. And I think I even told him last night, I know he would appoint Supreme Court justices that I would—whose rulings I would not like. But I'm even willing to sacrifice that. We've got Kavanaugh and Gorsuch anyway. He's a good man. And he brings good principals. So I think I just think I'm much more prone to pragmatism. I've watched government long enough, I've been close to government long enough, I've seen the people who do our government enough that I'm just wantin' it to work, you know.

[*Laughs*] This is—the American system of government is a tenuous thing.

GJ: Yeah.

JB: You know.

GJ: Yeah.

[03:14:19] JB: I mean, we elect these people, and they have power,

and then we appoint these judges, and then these judges make these rulings, and we're all supposed to agree to it, and that we do. That seven people on the state supreme court or nine people on the US Supreme Court can say something, and we all go, "Okay. I hate it, but that's"—we don't go to the streets, we don't revolt. Just a government that works, that this tenuous nature of government in the way that we do it, that we let it work and we abide by it, I treasure that. So it makes me a person who has—who's liberal on most issues, but I think the theme of my writing is often pragmatic, I think.

GJ: I have detected that, and couldn't agree more with you. I couldn't express it so eloquently but . . .

JB: Well, I don't know that it was eloquent, but it's a . . .

GJ: But I . . .

JB: I rambled, but . . .

GJ: . . . I do agree that you . . .

JB: I mean, a column . . .

GJ: . . . come down on the side of . . .

JB: . . . a column that . . .

GJ: . . . pragmatism.

[03:15:19] JB: And I'll admit this: My aversion—the atrocity that I consider Trump to be and that I feel a need to express makes

me a more ideologically predictable columnist than I really want to be because it—I just think, "Today I gotta say he's horrible, he's horrible again," and we've got to say that. But those columns really don't do anything except pump the adrenalin of the people who agree . . .

GJ: Exactly.

JB: . . . and fuel the anger of . . .

GJ: Of those . . .

JB: . . . of those who disagree.

GJ: Right.

JB: And that's all they do.

GJ: Right.

JB: That's all they do. And I'd like to do more than that. And I think over the years at times I have done more than that. [03:16:03] A column about your liberal manifesto or conservative manifesto is self-amusement, really [*GJ laughs*], to me. And 'cause you're not gonna persuade anybody without new information. You know what persuades people? The power is still information.

GJ: Yeah.

JB: This is the information age.

GJ: Marshalling the facts.

JB: And when you—you'll start to change people's perceptions, you

can start to change opinions if you can get them to consider facts, facts different from those perhaps they assumed to be so. So that's what I try to do. Don't always succeed, particularly in the Trump era. I mean, this man just—he pushes all our buttons, I think.

[03:16:52] GJ: I—he does, and I just admire your outrage because I mean, you hit it right on the head, if I can borrow that cliché, every time you call him out on something.

JB: Well, that—I try.

GJ: But then you turn within the next week or so and give Governor Hutchinson a pat on the back.

JB: Or even Trump. Yesterday, I think, online-only column. This man—the theme of my column yesterday was—and I thought, "This is a new way to look at Trump, maybe." That's presumptuous of me to say that I have a new way, but basically I'm saying he is getting more absurd by the day, I say, first. I mean, the Kanye episode in the Oval Office, the *60 Minutes* interview, "I'm the president. You're not." Whatever else he did the day before that, you know. He's getting more absurd to the day—by the day. But he seems to be gaining political credibility by the day at the same time, in part by conventional, substantive accomplishments by his administration. Two things.

One is, the sheer multitude of his absurdities numbs us to each of them.

GJ: Yeah.

JB: You know. I can't remember what the thing that I thought was the end of the world two days ago was. The world didn't end and two other things have happened.

GJ: Yeah.

[03:18:09] JB: So we're numb to that. The other is he's a standard Republican president who's cut taxes. He's renegotiated NAFTA. He started a trade war. The economy's good. You know, that—like a man said to me the other day, "I feel like the world's coming to an end, but it's okay for me." You know, but . . .

GJ: Yeah.

JB: I mean, just like my life is not really affected, he's saying, even though I recognize this perilous condition that we're in. So I think he, at the same time, I think he's—I was tryin' to explain. He's more absurd, even to those who are for him, they've got to see the absurdity sometimes. But he's becoming more credible. Anyway. Why'd I get off on that? But . . .

[03:18:52] GJ: Well, let me stay with that because in a way, Arkansas's a microcosm.

JB: Right.

GJ: Of what's going on with our economy nationally. And that is there are pockets of the state that are doing extremely well. And there's a portion of the state that is just in the throes of intractable poverty and left with an education system that's on the brink. Yet—and I guess statistically, we are not a wealthy state.

JB: No. [*Laughs*] One of the poorest, statistically.

[03:19:34] GJ: Why is it that with conditions like this, with things that people feel, things that people experience, we are among the reddest of the red states? I bet Mike Beebe could not get elected today.

JB: The only Democrat in Arkansas, only person with a D who might is Beebe because he was a pragmatic governor who people liked. I think he couldn't—he—only one who might.

GJ: Just because of that label.

JB: No. I think it's been four years since he was governor, and I think people forgotten. I think our—this—I just told you a minute ago, Vernon, that I can't remember what the Trumpian outrage three days ago because of the two that have come since. This pace of information, some good, some bad, but just the utter pace of it, the breaking news every minute when you turn on the cable television, the social media, the incessant

bombardment of things which seem important, the instant coverage of what the president says, rather than in the good old days when we could have a—have until the next day.

GJ: Right.

JB: You know. But to—yeah.

GJ: Think about it overnight.

[03:20:46] JB: That's just wearing us out. Why Arkansas is red.

It's because—well, we're gettin' into political—I—how can Arkansas be poor and deprived and yet vote for the party that offers the least traditional aid to those who are poor and deprived?

GJ: Exactly. How is that possible?

JB: Sadly, it requires some ignorance by people in that condition. They don't know how to—they're in such cycles of deprivation, educational, cultural, that they're disconnected from the political process, and they don't know that they can achieve solutions through the political process. That's sadly part of it. The other part is—of it is that there are white people, white working conservatives, who believe that their life will—their life is made bad because of government and because of liberalism and this—and the liberal courts and the liberal congress. And they believe that because Donald Trump tells people off, he's one of them.

[03:22:15] And it's as simple as they don't know what they're talkin' about. They just don't. They either are so culturally deprived that they're disengaged from potential political solution, or they misapply their anger. And part of it is because certain in the conservative movement, the Republican party, and especially Trump, they have an—they've made an art form of tappin' into that anger. These Trump rallies are simply, "I'm gonna go out here, and I'm gonna say a bunch of stuff because I love your applause, and I know what you wanna hear because you're angry, and you like a guy who tells everybody off, so I'm gonna call some names, and you're gonna love it." And the only way outta that is for people to know better. And right now, we have too many people who don't know better. That's not to say they're deplorable. I'm not callin' anybody deplorable. I'm calling them in a tragic circumstance in many respects. And how do we solve that? You know, I don't know. I don't.

GJ: Well, it's the heartbreak.

JB: It is terribly heartbreaking.

GJ: It's a heartbreak to live in a state that you know is statistically near the bottom, and to see people vote against their own best interests.

JB: We have . . .

GJ: Consistently.

[03:23:40] JB: All right, here's how it works. And I'm get a little candid here. Issue of Medicaid expansion to the working poor in the state. We've done it in Arkansas, and we've covered a quarter million people, 250,000 people now have Medicaid, state health insurance, who didn't have it before. The other night in a debate, the governor warned if you—"If they take this work requirement I've put on it away from 'em, I don't think our legislature will pass Medicaid appropriation. I think we lose all 250 if you all don't let me do this work requirement," which I consider to be absurd and have been writing about. Okay, 250,000 people—250,000 people. Insurance. If they lose the insurance, there are 250,000 of them. All they gotta do is go vote out the people who took it away from 'em 'cause there 250,000 of 'em, you know.

GJ: Significant number.

JB: But they don't. They don't. They're so disengaged from the standard opportunities of our society that they're too far removed from the political solutions. They're not voting against their interest. They're not voting at all. They're not voting against the interest. They don't tie their lives to an election, sadly. And there are enough poor people that if they got kicked

off of health insurance and wanted to blame the people who did it, they could vote 'em right out of office. Two hundred and fifty thousand will swing an Arkansas election.

GJ: That's almost 10 percent of the . . .

JB: Right.

GJ: . . . population, isn't it? [03:25:23] What—if you look at American history and go to the nineteenth century Know Nothingism, are we trying to re-run that?

JB: That's what the historians say. I don't have the scholarship or the ec—knowledge to make a direct connection. But the historians—and sometimes when I chat 'em up and I talk about how dreadful things are now, they say, "Well"—and then, what, "In the nineteen-teens or 1900s, American Bolsheviks were bombin' things, and that wasn't good. In the [19]60s we had—you know, we're rioting in the streets and burning our cities down. That wasn't good. And then there was this whole period in which we celebrated our Gilded Age, and that wasn't good. That—don't overreact. America is just a series of bad eras that it always comes out of." I tend to think that's true. I tend to think that guy sayin' to me, "It looks like the country's goin' to hell, but I'm okay." [*GJ laughs*] And he's tryin'—he's feelin' almost bad that he's doin' okay while he can recognize a country

that seems to be comin' apart at the seams. It's not comin' apart at the seams because the country's fabric may be stronger than the demagogue or the problem or the outrage of the moment. That's what we can hope.

[03:26:54] GJ: Let me ask you a little bit about your reporting in . . .

JB: Sure.

GJ: . . . the red state. [*JB laughs*] One example might be Benton County.

JB: Yeah.

GJ: It's rapidly becoming statistically a very diverse population, but the voting there is as bright red as ever. And what I wonder is what's driving that? Is it just the apathy that you talked about earlier, or is it something as direct and targeted as voter suppression? Why can't Benton County, with a substantial Latino population and an increasing young population—why can't they get over the hump there?

[03:27:58] JB: Well, elections are all about those who participate in them. And also I still think the predominant culture of Benton County is the long-embedded Republican culture. It's still there, and it's still strong. And those things are like ships turning at sea. You don't change them quickly. I see a lot of the growth

over the years, and it's been magnificent growth, largely coming through Walmart and firms needing to locate close to Walmart or having some business dealings with Walmart. I don't know, but I think a lot of that population is white, suburban, moderate Republican, so that comes in. I think—somebody was telling me last night the number of languages spoken in Benton County and the Bentonville schools is a phenomenal number. Incredibly diverse population. That's not enough to change politics that largely affect children and people who are not yet fully engaged in the political process, and it takes time for that to come to the fore. But Bentonville, I believe, is a ship turning at sea. It may be forty years. One of these days, we're gonna look up and this—political change comes to active, demographically vibrant, changing places. For every ten years, Georgia and North Carolina and Florida are different because they have so much change in their population. Arkansas, whenever it's a D, it's a D for generations. Whenever it's an R, it's an R for decades because we don't have—because we're static. We don't change. Benton County is the exception. And it's changing in the ways I've described and in the ways you've described, and it will, in increments, begin to show it. I think—be interesting to see in this upcoming election. We're speaking in October of 2018.

[03:30:13] Got a November—we got the midterm elections or state legislative elections coming up in two weeks. They're seven, I believe, women, young women, running as Democrats for the state legislature in Benton County. Okay. Phase one in changing is that there are actually Democrats now running. [*GJ laughs*] You know, there weren't from . . .

GJ: Yeah.

JB: Two, they're women. That's changing. Three, they're young. Four, they tell me a couple of them or more than two of them are pretty sharp on the ball. And the fifth thing would be if—though they're gonna get beat, they don't get beat 71–29 but they get beat 61–39. That still looks bad, but is it? We are just tryin'—these things take time. Changes in demographics in areas require—actually a generation, but certainly a decade to start really showing changes, but if you go back, you can see them happening along the way. So I wanna see—I'm go—I wanna see how do these women do? It's important that they're running.

GJ: Yeah.

[03:31:23] JB: It's important that they're female, it's important that they're young, it's important that they're on the ballot, and they're goin' door to door, and as some old Republican rascal in

Benton County goes to his door, and there's a young Democratic woman [*GJ laughs*] thinkin' she—he might—that might vote for them. That's progress . . .

GJ: Yeah.

JB: . . . for—at—that's change.

GJ: Okay.

JB: It's a step. And it—eventually, it'll start to show up. But it won't show up quickly.

[03:31:47] GJ: Yeah. I want you to talk about two things about our home state. One is whether we'll ever get over our inferiority complex, and two, how much does your heart grieve when you see a big manufacturer turn us down after we've done everything we could to attract them here, and they've turned us down and said, "Well, your school system isn't quite up to snuff. It doesn't produce the workers we need."

JB: I'm so touched by the second part. What was the first part? What was it?

[03:32:23] GJ: Will we ever get over our inferiority complex?

JB: I think so. We ever get over our inferiority complex? Yes. I believe Arkansas's inferiority complex is based on a history of backwardness, which was real, a history of poverty, which was real, a history of bad images, which were deserved. Little Rock

Central High, for example. And I think with each generation, it's bad that people lose sight of their history, but it helps them move beyond it at the same time. And each generation—you've got some kids today I might have to explain to them what happened at Central High, you know.

GJ: Yeah.

JB: That's bad, but it's good that they're living in a world defined by something that transcends that in terms of their place where they live.

GJ: Sure.

JB: Maybe they think—my—I just—in the morning session I talked about my parents born in—on tenant farms in Southwest Arkansas back in the pine woods in 1930. Poor people in a poor region in a poor state in our poorest time in our nation's history, the Depression. I come along, one generation later. I'm doin' a lot better, and I'm sittin' here analyzing them. [*GJ laughs*] See? Th—at—these things change generationally.

GJ: Yeah.

[03:33:55] JB: And I was actually talking to Asa Hutchinson once. He said—he—we were talkin' about I was from Howard County; he was from Howard County. And I said, "You know, that poverty where I came from, that's really given—gave my family

an inferiority complex and gives me an inferiority complex and represents the state." He said, "I don't have that." I said, "Really?" Well, his family was officeholders, county officeholders. It's different. That—and as we come—as we steadily become more prosperous, less defined by poverty and backwardness, more defined by what's happened lately rather than what happened thirty, forty, fifty years ago, then it—we'll have a generation of people that it won't occur. Why would I be inferior about Arkansas? Seems fine to me. Don't know what you're talkin' about, you know. Because they will not have had those things that drag down their perception of themselves. So yeah, we'll come out of it, and we'll be in the mainstream of states in another half century. [*Laughter*] I mean, it—and that's not that long.

GJ: You and I won't see it.

[03:35:06] JB: No, we won't. The—does it—how does my heart—oh, man. I guess the classic case you're talkin' about is the Toyota plant.

GJ: Exactly.

JB: In East Arkansas. Toyota. A man—auto plants. Major auto plants. Big things. They've redefined some of the rural job opportunities and the economy in areas of Mississippi, Tupelo,

areas of Alabama. Went to . . .

GJ: And South Carolina, too.

JB: South Carolina. Moreover—I'm gonna start to sound like Trump, make America great again, but we went to, a few years ago, my wife and I went to San Miguel de Allende for a vacation. We flew to whatever the city is at the foot of that hill. And it's a well-known city, and we're being transported up the hill to San Miguel and—giant auto plant. Okay. Mexico has got it. Alabama's got it. Mississippi's got it. These aren't garden spots of high [*GJ laughs*] educational achievement or technical proficiency. So now it's gonna be our turn. And we've done everything we can. We've got the land right there at I-40 and I-55.

GJ: Right.

JB: We got rail. We got Mississippi River.

GJ: Yeah.

JB: This is the place. We've got every tax break you need. We're gonna run everything over to missi—to the West Memphis Community College and train your people. And in the end, Toyota said, "We think we can go to Tupelo, Mississippi, and have better workers." That oughta break the heart of every person in Arkansas.

GJ: Yeah.

[03:36:57] JB: And what ought to break the heart of everybody in Arkansas is not that they thought that, but that it may be so. That we are not educating our people in certain sections of the state. We are not bestowing them with enough natural opportunity that they can outrate Tupelo, Mississippi, or a place in Alabama, or maybe even a plant in Mexico. And that is a failing that we have based on a lot of things, one of which is—I don't know if we're gonna get to it. I don't know what we wanna say about it. One of which is continuing race division in this state and race prejudice and isolation and neglect of Black people. That's one thing that's happening. Tupelo is like—I think. I could be corrected, but I think it's like Jonesboro. It's a white area with the, you know, decent education accomplishment or educated workforce, educated population. I think these people looked at East Arkansas and thought, "These people been trapped in poverty so long that I don't"—I think they said, "I don't know if they're teachable." Whose fault is that? It's a state that's supposed to be educating 'em. It's in the state constitution, right? Ed—equal educational opportunity for . . .

GJ: Absolutely.

JB: . . . all.

GJ: Yeah.

[03:38:05] JB: And it's a human tragedy. And it requires more than we're doin'. We're doin' some good things. But the good things we do get caught up in too mu—in so much political bickering. The best educational development I've seen in East Arkansas are the KIPP schools, the KIPP charter schools.

GJ: Right.

JB: Corporate-funded charter schools. Helena, Marianna, Blytheville. Young African American children going to schools that have in their title college-preparatory school. And they are taught—ingrained in them that you're here to qualify for college. That is your goal. And they crank out college-bound students. It's not hard. It's—there's no problem with our gene pool, there's a problem in our willingness to do the hard work to grant the opportunity. And that's what's heartbreaking, I think.

[03:39:39] GJ: That is a heartbreak. And while we're on schools, I would guess that our whole state school system is long past overdue for an overhaul.

JB: Well, we have these supposed overhauls about every twenty years. Somebody will file suit saying that the constitutional mandate for equal and adequate and equitable education does not exist, and they'll prevail, and then we'll have a special

session, and we'll do something. It is time for an overhaul. And it's time by that cycle. We had the Alma case in [19]71, we had the Lake View in the [19]90s, it's about time for another one.

GJ: It's time for another.

JB: But we need another one that's gonna amount to more than just a twenty-year Band-Aid, really.

GJ: Yeah.

[03:40:26] JB: And we've got Little Rock. Little Rock school—Little Rock City school district . . .

GJ: Yeah.

JB: . . . is under state control right now goin' on, what, four years to lift six of its schools from substandard academic achievement, academic performance. And the latest tests—all the ed—all the high schools and junior highs that were in that original assessment are still doin' about as bad.

GJ: Yikes.

JB: That—the li—elementary schools are easier to reform. The earlier you start obvi—it stands to reason . . .

GJ: Sure. Sure.

JB: . . . the better you can do. So Baseline Elementary and the other elementary school, their test scores are up. But a school that's predominantly English as a second language or as—or its

student body is largely locked in a seri—locked in a cycle of poverty and lack of opportunity, those are harder, and they're not—and the state's not gettin' it done any better than the city. [03:41:29] And then the solutions that some say is let's semi-privatize education. Let's have charter schools. Let's have competition. Whatever you think of that, mainly what that has led to is a political fight between the left and right.

GJ: Yeah.

JB: And you know, sometimes at some point, we're gonna have to say, "You know, our standard political fight between left and right may not work on everything. And we need to shut up and look at these schools and what we can do, and get off your turf, and get of your philosophical predilection, and let's get in here and make these schools better." And if that means schools have a different design of a different—if you're goin' to school a longer period of time rather than nine months, if you're goin' in the summer, if you're goin' a longer school day, if you've got diff—entirely different avenues of teaching and instruction that maybe have come out of some of the alternative ideas, that's what we're gonna have to do, but we can't get there politically. Because at the same time our education system is failing, our political system is totally broken down as solving problems. And

it's just according to how long we choose to put up with that and to have a leader who can start—somebody needs to bridge these gaps. I thought Obama was gonna bridge all kinds of gaps. I think he had the ability. I think he had the message. We just—the other side just wouldn't stand for it. They weren't ready to bridge gaps.

GJ: Yeah, I was gonna say he had a pretty stiff resistance . . .

JB: Right.

GJ: . . . there.

[03:43:10] JB: Yeah, I told people from the start. I said, "I think he's gonna try to govern largely from the center. I think he's gonna reach out to the Republicans." He did, and what did they do?

GJ: They slapped his hand.

JB: Slapped the heck out of him.

GJ: Yep.

JB: Guy asked me last night, "Is our two-party system short term? Is it on the way out?" I don't think so because I think they're so controlled by money and they're—they'll feed off each other, I don't know how we get rid of 'em. They're two monsters that feed off each [GJ laughs] other. But we need to. We need a new definition of our politics. Or a new—or a higher level of

performance.

[03:43:42] GJ: Let's go back to the leg—

JB: Okay.

GJ: We were talkin' about education. The legislature now funds state higher education at, I think, the lowest rate . . .

JB: In the country, maybe.

GJ: And [*laughter*] what's the point? What's the end game there? I mean, you got a legislature that's stocked with—what, 40 percent or so don't have college degrees. And they now see takin' money away from state institutions of higher education. I—what's—I'm confused. What is the point?

JB: There are several things goin' on there. One is—well, let's take where we are. This is the Pryor Center for Visual and Oral History affiliated with the University of Arkansas, right?

GJ: Correct.

[03:44:48] JB: There's the Walton School of such and such affiliated with the University of Arkansas. Millions poured in from the private sector. These legislators of a conservative nature—first thing that happens is they go down there and they try to balance the budget. And they say, "We're under a court order on constitutionally funding the public schools. We gotta take that off the top. Medicaid is driven by the—we gotta pay the bills as

they come in, so we can't arbitrarily cut Human Services," even though they are tryin', but that's hard to do. "Prisons are just—you know, we gotta put these people in jail. You know, we gotta do that. We can't let these people outta jail. Where can we cut? Well, here's where we can cut. Higher education." And me—tell you why. Because they can go—they're goin' out every day and raisin' the millions from other people. There's an—let the Waltons, let it be the University of Arkansas at Walton. I don't care if that's—they can rai—let ASU raise its money. Let everyb—it's two different things, as you know, being in higher education. The—your resources—the quali—what we devote and instructi—higher-education instruction are different from the buildings that are built by big donors and from the specialty programs they create.

GJ: Exactly.

[03:46:14] JB: That's two different things. But you—it becomes too easy for the conservative policy makers to rely on that. The other is, there is a per—and I say this as, myself, not a college graduate. There is a growing sentiment in our culture that higher education is just a place where old liberals go to amuse themselves. That it's just a bunch of liberal old rascals sittin' around thinkin' this'd be a good place to work if it didn't have all

these kids runnin' around. [*GJ laughs*] That's a perception.

And that you know, this is a highly technical economy now. And a liberal arts—this is not just Arkansas, but it's in the—but it's strong in Arkansas. A general liberal arts higher education is less important than it used to be if you can computer code or if you can do—or if you can go to vocational-technical school and learn a trade. Trade becomes a big deal.

GJ: Sure.

[03:47:21] JB: And it is a big deal. It is a big deal. The problem is all of that serves as an excuse not to fund what remains, in a civilized society, the thing that separates us, which is knowledge and learning.

GJ: Exactly.

JB: Higher learning. So that's what's happening. It makes perfect sense to some of these policy makers. "They can raise their own money, and anyway, fewer people need to go to college than used to. And anyway. [*GJ laughs*] They're sittin' around with tenure just spoutin' liberal ideas." So that's how that happens. I mean, I [*laughter*—well, I just explained it you, Vernon.

GJ: Yeah, you did.

JB: I don't know why you have to laugh at me like that. [*Laughs*]

GJ: In clear terms.

JB: It's just the way that they see it.

GJ: In clear terms.

JB: Yeah. It's—you may as well laugh. You laugh or cry, right?

GJ: Yeah, laugh to keep from cryin'.

JB: Right.

[03:48:12] GJ: There was a story—I think I read it maybe a month ago in the *New York Times* about the . . .

JB: The *New York Times*.

GJ: . . . the complaint that even research was now all weighted toward some liberal ideology and . . .

JB: Yeah. See, the Trump era's making all this worse. 'Cause he gives license to this whole notion that, you know, California's not real, California's no good, they got too many great colleges out there. [*GJ laughs*] I mean, that's why they vote for Hillary. They got all these colleges.

GJ: And the Texas legislature's scared to death of California . . .

JB: Right.

GJ: . . . because the Californians are movin' to Texas and bringin' along progressive . . .

JB: Some . . .

GJ: . . . environmental ideas that . . .

JB: Some of those ideas. [*GJ laughs*] Yeah. And next thing you

know, Beto O'Rourke's gonna get 45 or 48 percent of the vote.

And [*laughter*] then what's the world comin' to?

GJ: Oh, man, oh, man, I would just like to see the bottom of this soon so that I know that . . .

JB: It's—I think it's . . .

GJ: . . . it's gonna be all right.

[03:49:15] JB: I think the bottom's comin', but I'm—I wonder how low we're gonna have to plunge before we get to it. I'm not sure we're there yet. We . . .

GJ: I've quit sayin', "This is a new low," because, as you said, two days hence, it's gone even lower.

JB: Yeah.

GJ: I mean, just—how do you end up with a president of the United States who's in a Twitter battle with a porn actress?

JB: Calling her a horse face.

GJ: I—[*laughs*] . . .

JB: And . . .

GJ: What in the world.

JB: I told the story last night—I turned from my—I work at home. I turned from my desk, which is against a corner. I got the TV on in the background, but I got the sound down 'cause I cannot stand to listen to that new—breaking-news jabber. As two

newsmen I—let us say for everybody who ever sees this [*GJ laughs*], breaking news is an oxy—is redundant. News can't be news unless it breaks.

GJ: Unless it's bra—you are so right.

[03:50:10] JB: What you've got is news. The old fa—it's news news.

GJ: Right. It's like a . . .

JB: It's not breaking news.

GJ: It's like a new record.

JB: Right. It—[*laughs*] right. [*GJ laughs*] "Set a new record!" Yeah. Breaking news. But I turned with the sound down, but they give you the crawler.

GJ: Yeah.

JB: So I can see what's goin' on . . .

GJ: They go crazy with it.

JB: . . . by the crawler. If I've missed something, I'll turn it—and I turned, and it [*laughs*] it said, "President calls porn actress horse face. She responds by saying he's tiny." [*GJ laughs*] And I just, honest [*laughs*] to God, I just sat in my chair and just studied the American condition for a few minutes. [*Laughter*] I s—really, this is now—this is the breaking-news crawler on our television. [*GJ laughs*] Horse face and he has a tiny member.

Welcome to contemporary America.

GJ: Oh, my goodness.

JB: We—[laughter] laugh to keep from cryin'.

GJ: You have to.

JB: You got to.

[03:51:08] GJ: You have to. So how much longer are you willin' to do this?

JB: Well, I'm—I will turn sixty-five in December. Thrilling. Signed up for Medicare.

GJ: There you go.

JB: As—I been a—for the last—since I came back—since I left Stephens Media in 2011 because it was goin' away [laughs] . . .

GJ: Yeah.

JB: . . . I have been a contractor by my choice with the *Democrat-Gazette*. I'm self-employed. So I been buyin' my own health insurance, individual plan on the—for a lot of money.

GJ: Yeah.

JB: When you get fifty-nine to sixty-four—you know, anyway. For a lot of money. So that's—I—the insurance agent told me—I was fifty-nine. He said, "We've gotta get you"—this is the dichotomy of Mary. I'll get to your question. "We'll get you to six—we gotta get you to sixty-five, John, without goin' bankrupt because

at sixty-five, you get the best health insurance in the world."

And I said to him, "I thought you were a Republican." [GJ laughs] And he said, "I am." I said, "You just called America's public single-payer health plan the best health insurance in the world." He said, "Don't confuse me with stuff like that."

[Laughter] He said, "Just 'cause it's good for you as a sixty-five doesn't mean it's good for everybody." Well, okay. Anyway.

[03:52:31] How long'm I keep doing it? Sixty-five next year, next, at sixty-six, I qualify for full Social Security. I announce to you now I have recently signed a new four-year contract with the *Democrat Gazette*. I'm gonna write through 2022, [20]23.

GJ: That's good.

JB: And I am as fired up about my work as ever. I think I'm doin' it better than ever, if I do say so myself. I mean, I been doin' it—it's just like if you mow the grass every day for forty years, you'll get better at mowin' the grass. I'm better at writing these columns. I can—I—than I used to be. I think I got something to say. Like John Sayles, I wanna be part of the conversation, and I still do. Blessed with good health.

GJ: Yeah.

JB: And I do it at least four more years 'cause I'm contractually obligated and glad to be, but I hope that as we get on toward

the end of the four years, I'll say, "Hey, let's re-up it." Maybe for not four a week, but three. Maybe not for this much money, but this. I got Social Security now. I don't—and I think that—I don't—this is gonna be a definitive thing to say, and I don't—I find it hard to imagine myself drawing breath and not being published in the newspaper. It's just been the rhythm of my life.

GJ: I can understand that.

[03:53:51] JB: It's been the rhythm of my life.

GJ: Sure.

JB: And I think I could be, until dementia sets in, I think I could be in my seventies and a couple of times a week, writin' somethin' based on my experience that would be of value to readers. So I don't have any real plan to ever quit, to be honest with you.

GJ: Well, that's good. That's heartening because we actually need more John Brummetts on the op-ed page than just the one we have, so.

JB: Well. [*Laughs*]

GJ: We need more reporters . . .

JB: Yeah.

GJ: . . . who are able to bring to bear their reporting skills on a column.

JB: That's not an art form anymore.

GJ: It . . .

JB: You just don't see it very much.

GJ: It's hard.

JB: And . . .

GJ: I mean, it's just shots from the hip.

JB: Right. Right.

[03:54:39] GJ: And we have a generation if not more of readers who

see that as, "Well, that's good column writing there. He just said what he thought." Yeah, but it was uninformed. [*Laughs*]

JB: Yeah. Uninformed and also just philosophy, just opinion. And even if you agree with the opinion—I re—I love it when anybody tells me, "John, keep doin' what you're doing. I love your column." When they next say, "I love that column this morning because I agreed with it," that's not what I wanna hear. I want 'em to say, "I don't agree with you very much, and I don't take what you say as gospel by any stretch of the imagination, but that one this morning has me thinking or reconsidering." That's what I'm goin' for. And sometimes I get there. And that's the reward, that somebody, because of the way I present an issue, is looking at something differently from what their instinct might be. And we've all got to start doin' that. Somehow in this—see, what's—this is a woe-is-me session we're having here

[GJ laughs] about the decline of our . . .

GJ: Everything.

JB: Everything. But it's—in addition to the instant, non-professionally composed excuses for journalism, there's the fact that journalism is now merged with not only celebrity but, more devastatingly, with partisan politics.

GJ: Yeah.

[03:56:17] JB: I p—I had a line the other day, and I think it's right up there with a tailgate masquerading as a state. Just go to Google, go to the little box on Google, and type in "agree with me," and the algori—Google's algorithm will produce things that agree with you.

GJ: They've been reading over my shoulder, lo, these many years.

JB: And here it'll come. Here'll come a *New Yorker* piece that I agree with. Here—anybody can get that based on your record of searching, and so we can all live in these vacuum compartments from each other.

GJ: Yeah.

JB: So yeah, I'm gonna keep writin' and—as long as I can and as long as they'll pay me a little bit. Yeah.

GJ: John, keep on doin'. It's a pleasure . . .

JB: You bet. You bet.

GJ: Thank you so much.

JB: Well, I need to go see your oral history that you did about your career in journalism.

GJ: Um . . .

[03:57:13] JB: How's teaching? Do you get distressed with the . . .

GJ: I get extremely . . .

JB: . . . generational changes?

GJ: . . . distressed, and I can tell the difference. I can tell the difference between the students who started in the—with me in the [19]90s versus the Gen Zers today. The student—in fact, I just unloaded on 'em about contactin' their parents several times a day. I said, "For God's sake, grow up." [*Laughter*] And one said something about, "Well, I need that emotional support." I said, "You had eighteen years of emotional support. You're on your own now. Get outta here." [*Laughs*] I'm . . .

JB: Is that a thing? Today?

GJ: A big thing.

JB: A continued closeness to parents and reliance on parents?

Not . . .

GJ: Based on cell phones, text messages.

JB: The attachment we have to each other.

GJ: It's just amazing. I mean, I—it's frustrating to me because that

spills over into reporting.

JB: Right.

GJ: And you tend to have less confidence or less courage to even just step out and say—press on the story. Somebody says, "I can't talk to you right now," and you know, they go into a funk and say, "Well, I can't do the story. He wouldn't talk to me." I say, "Well, that's one. What about the other eighteen people?"

JB: Yeah, you don't just quit.

GJ: [*Laughs*] Yeah.

JB: Yeah.

GJ: Yeah, they're . . .

JB: Resourcefulness.

[03:58:35] GJ: They're different. They're smart.

JB: Yeah.

GJ: Much, much smarter than my senior class was. But boy, they just not yet at the point where they wanna go out and kick ass and take names. I mean, pssh. I don't know. And I have a few more [*laughs*] years, too, so I don't know what I'm gonna do.

JB: It's all gonna get better.

GJ: It has to.

JB: Surely.

GJ: It has to.

JB: It's got to. [*Laughter*]

GJ: But we gotta be near the worst of it.

[03:59:07] JB: I had a—play tennis with a guy who said he supervises some younger employees he said are brilliant. He's in a high-tech field. And he went to one of the younger employees, one of the stand-out young employees the other day and said, "You got that thing I asked for? It's due tomorrow." And the young employee said, "That was your deadline, not mine."

GJ: Oooo! [*Laughter*]

JB: And I said, "Well, what about that?" And he said, "Well, you know, you wanna say, 'You're fired.'"

GJ: But he's the one who'll . . .

JB: "But the next thing" . . .

GJ: . . . show up.

JB: . . . "he knows how to do it. I don't." [*Laughter*] You know, so it's the way it goes. But we—you know, maybe we're just like our parents and grandparents sittin' around complainin' about the young people. Maybe it's just a rite of generational . . .

GJ: I know . . .

JB: . . . passage.

GJ: I know there's an element of that. I know that. I can hear it in

myself. But I have seen students who visit the . . .

JB: Yeah, you just said.

GJ: . . . classes, [19]98 graduates who would go to lunch afterwards, and they will say, "What is" . . .

JB: Yeah. Yeah.

GJ: . . . "with this bunch?"

JB: Yeah. [*GJ laughs*] Yeah, yeah. You—that's—that was—that's your lay-down hand. It's not me, as old as I am. I mean, since the [19]90s, it's been a notable decline. Well, good luck with it. And thanks for . . .

GJ: This is great!

JB: Well, thanks for honorin' me by . . .

GJ: No, man, this . . .

JB: . . . even carin' about what I've got to say.

GJ: Oh, you're terrific. E—I'm serious. I—we should be adding to your numbers and not—not number of columns you write, but the number of John Brummetts rather than cutting back or . . .

JB: All right.

GJ: . . . and we have . . .

JB: Just not too many. I don't need the competition.

GJ: Well [*laughs*], I think you're established now.

JB: All right. We're done in here, folks.

[End of interview 04:01:00]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]