

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

University of Arkansas  
1 East Center Street  
Fayetteville, AR 72701  
(479) 575-6829

**Arkansas Memories Project**

Ellen Gilchrist  
Interviewed by Scott Lunsford  
July 13, 2010  
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
  - standard English spelling of informal words.
- Commas are used in a conventional manner where possible to aid in readability.

### **Citation Information**

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

**Scott Lunsford interviewed Ellen Gilchrist on July 13, 2010, in Fayetteville, Arkansas.**

[00:00:00]

Scott Lunsford: All right, Ellen. Well, today's date is the thirteenth of July in the year 2010. We're here at your home, which is a beautiful Fay Jones home. Um—the Pryor Center is going to conduct this interview. My name is Scott Lunsford, and you are Ellen—what is your middle name?

Ellen Gilchrist: Louise.

SL: Louise Gilchrist. Um—we're going to—uh—videotape this. We're also audio recording it. These—uh—recordings will be archived at the Pryor Center, and also a copy will be in Special Collections at the University of Arkansas Mullins Library in Fayetteville, Arkansas. And what we will do with these recordings—we will encourage researchers and students and documentarians to access this material in their—in their work. Uh—we will take some highlight clips—video-highlight clips. We'll post that on the web. We'll take—uh—all the audio and—uh—all the transcript, and we'll post both those items on the web. You will have a chance to—to look at the material and review the transcript to make sure it's what you meant to say and you're comfortable

with the content before we ever let anyone have access to it.

[*EG clears throat*] Um—we will give you a copy of everything that we do. We're scanning your—uh—family photo albums and all the wonderful photographs you have—we've pulled off the walls and off tables. We'll—uh—preserve all this stuff forever, and we'll make you copies for your—uh—children and for your grandchildren, and we hope that it will be a very meaningful thing for you and your family. We know it's gonna be great for the state of Arkansas. So, Ellen, having said all of that, if you're comfortable with—with all these permutations of what we're gonna do with this, then we'll keep going. Is this all okay with you that . . .

[00:01:58] EG: Fantastic. Fantastic.

SL: Okay, great.

EG: Wonderful public service you're doin' to me—for me.

SL: I have a great, great job. We—we get to—uh—spend time—a lot of time with really wonderful people that have done great things, and—uh—it's always an honor. And it certainly is a thrill to finally get—uh—to be in front of you. Um—uh—you're kind of a local hero here—local figure that—uh—everyone has been in love with forever. So it's great—it's great to be here in front of you, and I really appreciate you letting us—uh—come in and take

over your home like we've done.

EG: I'm delighted. I like to peo—watch people work. [*SL laughs*] I like watching all these young people with all their expertise.

[00:02:43] SL: [*Laughs*] Well, we've got some good folks here with us today. Um—I usually start with—um—when and where you were born.

EG: I was born in the Street Clinic on the banks of the Mississippi River in Vicksburg, Mississippi, because my mother had had my brother at home in Hopedale Plantation with her uncle, who was a physician, attending, and after that, she decided to go to the hospital. [*Laughter*]

SL: Wasn't—uh—as—uh—romantic as it sounds to have the . . .

EG: In cold, cold Delta weather in the winter in February.

SL: What was the date?

EG: The twentieth of February, 1935. The United States was just beginnin' to come out from underneath the worst of the Depression.



SL: What was it that your—uh—father did for a living?

EG: Well, at the time that I was born, he was in Nashville, Tennessee, playing baseball for the Nashville Vols, a starring team in the old Southern League . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

EG: . . . which later became one of the big leagues that we have now. But right after I was born, or right in that time frame, he broke his leg sliding into third . . .

SL: Oh.

EG: . . . and—uh—while it mended, he decided to go on and use his engineering degree from Auburn University, and he joined the—uh—Corps of Engineers and went to work in the Delta buildin' levees. This was—the levee work in the Delta was being done in the wake of the 1929 flood, and it was exciting. My father was standing at a railroad station when the first tractors ever came to the Mississippi delta. Until then, they'd been buildin' levees with slip te—thing—with these slipboards and huge teams of mules, so my daddy considers that one of the great day of his—of his life—that he was there when the tractors came. [*Laughs*]

[00:04:56] SL: What—um—well, I wanted t—I wanna spend some time talking about your dad for a little while. Um—how did he—how did the baseball come about? His baseball career.

EG: He'd been playing baseball all his life. He went to college. He went to Auburn when he was about fifteen, and he was still so short, he had to be a cheerleader for a couple of years. But finally, he started gettin' his height, and he played baseball for Auburn. And—um—he'd been playin' baseball all of his life, you

know, on flat fields in Courtland, Alabama . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

EG: . . . with his cousins. And—uh . . .

SL: Wh . . .

EG: . . . that was the sport. That's what—that was, in the Deep South, what basketball is now.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:05:41] EG: Every plantation had their own baseball team.

SL: And they'd play against each other.

EG: Yeah. There was a man in the Delta who had gone down to Mexico and fallen in love with everything Mexican, and he came home with a Mexican wife, and he brought all these Mexicans up, and they were great baseball players, and they were beatin' everybody in the Delta. Isn't that brilliant? I love it. [*Laughter*] I've forgotten the name of his plantation.

SL: That's great. Well now, what did your—uh—father's—what did your grandfather do on your father's side?



EG: My grandfather and my great-grandfather and my great-great-grandfathers in the 1700s—my Gilchrist family built the small town of Courtland, Alabama, with cotton plantations all around it. You know, little towns were just the center . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

EG: . . . where the livery stable and the grocery store and all of that was, and the plantations were out around it. And they had all been farmers. But they all had engineering skills.

SL: So . . .

EG: And—uh—and his great—his gran—my father's grandfather was the governor of Mississippi. They were also lawyers—a lot of 'em were lawyers and always newspaper people. So there were always people in my father and my mother's family that were readers and writers, always. The houses were always filled with books.

[00:07:06] SL: Did you ever get to visit your grandparents' homes?

EG: I stayed in Courtland a lot. By then my grandfather was dead. I remember him until I was four. But my grandmother—but—and my whole Gilchrist family—all these cousins—but mostly at—because my father was the oldest, they were third and second cousins.

SL: Mh-hmm.

EG: Dooley and Bob and I—my family—we were the oldest children, so all of our cousins were second and third cousins. But I used to go stay in Courtland with gran—Granny by myself all the time. But my whole family would go down to Hopedale for Christmas. And in the summers, my mother would send me down there.



And I'd just spend—I don't know—a month, two months. My grandmother, my great-grandmother, and my great-great-grandmother were all alive, and there was a widowed aunt—and my grandfather—and my uncle, who was a doctor, and his wife would come over every afternoon—and my godparents from the next plantation. I mean, you know, I really liked being at Hopedale because there were so many people there.

[00:08:15] SL: Now was that all Gilchrist family or . . .

EG: No, that's my mother's . . .

SL: Your Alford . . .

EG: . . . Alford family.

SL: . . . family. Uh-huh.

EG: And—uh—so even though—I was living in small towns until I grew up . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

EG: . . . small towns like Fayetteville, which is why I love Fayetteville. It's like the small towns that I remember from my youth. And—uh—but I lo—I—I loved being in the country.

SL: Well . . .

EG: I liked havin' bugs and frogs [*SL laughs*] and fish and rivers and all that kinda stuff. Cow ponds. I'd swim in anything.

SL: Take us—um—take us through one of your grandparents' homes.

Just kinda walk us through. What—what were they like?



EG: Well, Granny—my grandmother's house in Courtland was kind of wonderful because she re—was a—she read all the time. She'd gone to college. I mean, in a time when women didn't go to college, but people in her family did—in the Clark family—in the governor's family. And—uh—she didn't get married till she was twenty-six, which was shocking enough.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:09:26] EG: But she—after my grandfather died, she began to line the walls. Every room in the house—every room in the house was just bookshelves, and they were filled with all these wonderful books. And I liked to go stay with her 'cause you could just read all day. And I don't remem—she didn't know how to cook. We would just live on toasted biscuits and tea, [*SL laughs*] and I don't know what we lived on, but the only thing I remember eating there were toasted biscuits and tea. [*SL laughs*] But we just rea—Coca-Colas—and we read books. She'd be back in her room readin', and I'd be out on the porch reading, or up in the tree house reading, or somewhere reading, reading, reading.

SL: So now . . .

EG: Historical novels.

SL: Uh-huh.

EG: So I'm not a good student of history because my vision of history is warped by historical novels. [*Laughs*]

[00:10:17] SL: By the characters found in the novels. Um—so—when—um—was the—was the house mansion-like? Was it a large, two-story, columned . . .

EG: No, no, no. No, no, this was a—this was a frame house on the main street of Courtland . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

EG: . . . when I visited there after my grandfather died. There was a—a beautiful house out in the country, which my uncle and his wife later restored and lived in after he retired from the air corps. But—um—I don't like great big, mansion houses. I like frame houses full of books.

SL: Mh-hmm.

EG: But this house—this Fay Jones house I live in reminds me of Hopedale Plantation, which was—which my grandfather—my Alford grandfather built, which was a long, flat house with wings on it, and a kitchen, which was out back, that later got incorporated into the house. But they also had—m—m—my Alford kinfolks had lots and lots and lots of books, but they had been Greek and Roman scholars and lawyers, and so they're the

classics. They didn't have a lot of novels and book-of-the-month-club books like Granny did. They had—uh—I re—the first thing I remember reading in my life was a book of Bacon's essays . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

EG: . . . Francis Bacon's essays, and I—I could—I was beginnin', and I—I didn't learn to read. I just learned how to read by seein' words and pickin' things up. A lot of children did that.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:12:00] EG: I knew that word—I knew it said Bacon, and it was very small, just the right size for a little five-year-old girl, and I carried it around 'cause it said Bacon, which was my favorite food, and they'd only give me [*SL laughs*]*—they wouldn't let me eat as much of it. I mean, you know, I was—would have lived on the most fattening foods in the world all day long and been obese [*SL laughs*] except people didn't let children do that back then. They monitored what they ate. But—um—finally, I opened it up, and I read part of an essay by Francis Bacon in which he says, "A person who has children has given hostages to fortune." And every time one of my progeny gets pregnant [*SL laughs*]*—I mean, they're all male, so it's mostly the wom—they get pregnant, and I think, "Hostages to fortune." [*Makes***

*clicking sound*] [*SL laughs*] And I don't think that—we've been so lucky so far. They've all been healthy . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

EG: . . . they've all been strong; they've all been funny; and they're pretty.

[00:13:02] SL: You know, Ellen, it's unusual that there were so many well-read and professional relatives that you grew up around. Sounds like it was true in Courtland and Hopedale that . . .



EG: Yeah, and my mother's sister married the editor of the *Times-Picayune*. I knew the editor of the *New York Times*. I knew two or three of 'em. I took this for granted. But I was always around—uh—Turner Catledge was the one I knew well. He read my early work when I first began to write stories . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

EG: . . . and he told my uncle I could write like a dream.

SL: Hmm.

EG: That meant a lot to me. And always people—there, you know, there are a lot of people in my family right now that are journalists of one kind or another.

SL: Mh-hmm.

EG: One of my fourth or fifth cousins is the editor of the newspaper

in Natchez, Mississippi. They're bossy—my family are bossy people, [*SL laughs*] especially—not on my mother's side, on my father's side. They like to be an editor and run things.

[00:14:07] SL: I wanna talk a little bit about—um—the quality of life—uh—in both those communities. Um—were the roads in town—were they paved or were they dirt? Do you remember?

EG: The roads—the road from Hopedale to the nearest—to Rolling Fork was dirt. Because when I was thirteen years old, my mother—grandmother let me drive her Buick into town. I knew how to change tires. I mean, you know, roads were rutted.

SL: Mh-hmm. What about things like electricity . . .

EG: Or gravel. The good roads were gravel.

SL: Gra—well, st—and that was probably state funded.

EG: My grandfather in—in Issaquena County, Mississippi, was one of a group of people who put the electrical system in so we'd have lights, but I didn't think of electricity comin' into a house as bein' something you could completely depend upon 'cause it went out . . .

SL: Okay . . .

EG: . . . whenever there was a rainstorm.

SL: So early on—uh—you were—you identified with lamps, kerosene lamps, and . . .

EG: Right. And I don't like air-conditioning to this day. I have a friend whose husband has cancer . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

EG: . . . and he begs me to come and stay with 'em—you know, spend days with 'em . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

EG: . . . 'cause she turns off the air conditioner when I come over. [Laughs] His wife [SL laughs]—I just—uh—I don't like the noise that motors work . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

EG: That motors make.

SL: It dries out the air, the air-conditioning does.

EG: I don't know.

SL: I mean, it changes the . . .

EG: I mean, like, summer—I love the way that summer feels.

SL: So you got to witness electricity—uh—hit the communities—both those communities or . . .

EG: No, it was always in Courtland . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

EG: . . . because that was in town.

SL: Uh-huh.

EG: And there was always electricity at Hopedale. But it would just—

the best thing was when the storms would come and the lights would go out. Then things would really get exciting [*laughter*] at night.

SL: Well now, what about running water?

EG: Oh, there's always good running water any place that I ever was.

[00:16:19] SL: That's good. Now, you [*EG clears throat*]*—*you did mention that—was it in—uh—Alabama that the kitchen was outdoors? Did you ever witness that?

EG: At Hopedale. Well, it wasn't outdoors in my lifetime.

SL: Uh-huh.

EG: By the time I was there, it was inside.

SL: Mh-hmm.

EG: But they refrigerated things with big blocks of ice. You know, there was an ice company downtown, and they brought out these big, square—no, rectangular blocks of ice and put 'em in the refrigerator. And everybody in my family—in my mother's family—had scientific minds. They were always teachin' you things about food spoiling, about how that made—the process by which that made people sick, and how careful you had to be about mayonnaise, and how careful you had to be about meats and things like that. You know, it goes on our television now;

they teach us things like that. I hope people are listening.

SL: That probably . . .

EG: But you listened when my great-grandmother, who ran the kitchen, talked.

SL: [*Laughs*] It was—uh—um—you had to listen. You didn't have a choice.

EG: Right. This—these were life-and-death matters—not leaving the mayonnaise out where it would spoil. [*Laughs*]

[00:17:37] SL: So your father—um—uh—baseball player, breaks his leg, reinvigorates his engineering—uh—degree, and comes home and builds levees.

EG: Mh-hmm.

SL: And—um . . .

EG: And then my family moved to Mound City, Illinois, which is the—at the confluence of the Ohio and the Mississippi Rivers.

SL: Uh-huh.

EG: It's where the Mound Builders all lived. Uh—it—wonderful, wonderful—there were mounds on Hopedale. I knew what they were, and I knew that—the different tribes that had built 'em. But—uh—a lot of the work in—uh—say, 1939, was goin' on aroun—at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, and Daddy was really excited—they had lots of great big tractors by

then.

[00:18:31] SL: So you were—you were in Mississippi for the first four years? Four or five years and, and . . .



EG: Well, we were always—yeah, or else we were in Courtland. The first place that I remember living was Louisville, Kentucky, which was the headquarters of the Corps of Engineers when their big project in the United States was building levees on the Mississippi River. And—uh—I guess that's where Daddy got his stripes.

SL: Mh-hmm.

EG: Then we were in Louisville for a short period of time. It was the first time I lived in the city where they had parks. I was very excited about Louisville. And then I was exci—my parents were so—they loved each other so much—they were so powerful. They were powerful people that even though Dooley and Bob and I moved with them—durin' the levee-buildin' thing and then later durin' the Second World War, I went to four different grade schools in small, Midwestern towns that remind me of Fayetteville. But w—it was never an uprooting or a hard thing for us to do. We were part of the war effort. First, we were part of the effort to keep the Mississippi River from flooding the farms, and then we were part of the war effort. "Pack up your

suitcase, we're goin' to a new house."

SL: It was an adventure for you.

EG: Yeah.

SL: Each time. So you . . .

EG: I—I lived in Indiana—uh—in Terre Haute, Indiana, in a writer's house one time. I—I lived upstairs in her daughter's room.

SL: Well, so I guess . . .

EG: I mean, my life was so—it was exciting. Everything we did was exciting.

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:20:19] SL: Well, let's talk a little bit about your mom and her side of the family. What was it—was she educated, too? Did she . . .

EG: She had been voted the most popular girl at the University of Mississippi. And they begged her to be a cheerleader, but she wouldn't put on a short skirt. She was a lady, a beautiful, elegant lady—with sisters—the middle of three sisters. And wonderful aunts—there were—I had a lot of great-aunts.

SL: So . . .

EG: And they all sewed because their ancestor had been a young woman named Ellen Connell, for whom I'm named—my great-great-grandmother. And she had—durin' the Civil War, she was



the only child—the only living child in an Irish family, where people usually had ten of 'em, and so they sent her to London to live with her sister until the war was over, and then they brought her back on a boat. Someone brought her back—maybe her sister brought her back—to Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. And she was about eighteen, nineteen years old, and she married a Yankee officer, and he and six—there was six of 'em all—five other Yankee officers got on these big, flat boats and came down the Monongahela River to the Ohio and down the Ohio to the Mississippi and came to Issaquena County to settle—to clear the land and build plantations.

SL: Is that . . .

[00:21:53] EG: So there were never slaves in my Mississippi family.

The black people that worked for them—extremely tall, black people from Natchez who had always been free. They'd been free before the war. But the first stop in Mississippi was at Natchez to get the lumber they needed to build the little historic churches that are still down there—the Episcopal churches and their houses. On these big, flat barges, they came down the Monongahela River, and she was carrying my great-grandmother in her arms. And the first night that she spent in Natchez, Mississippi, she spent in the home of a tall, free black woman—

the first time she'd ever seen an African American.

SL: Really. That's something . . .

EG: So the plantation life that I experienced was quite different from anything you would have ex . . .

SL: From *Gone with the Wind* and . . .

EG: Yeah.

SL: Yeah.

EG: It was always—they were deeply religious people. My mother was a deeply religious person—a devout Episcopalian who believed in God and Jesus every minute in—of her life. And she was lucky. She found the most four-leaf clovers of anyone that ever knew her or ever knew. But they're easy to find in a place where you're fertilizin' the cotton. [*Laughter*] That's what she used to say later.

[00:23:26] SL: Uh-huh. [*Laughter*] Well, that's fascinating. So how did that impact the household or the households that you grew up in? I mean, was—you always went to church on Sunday? Is that . . .

EG: Mh-hmm. Mh-hmm. Mh-hmm.

SL: And what about at the . . .

EG: In Courtland, I went to the Presbyterian Church, and in the Delta, we went to the Episcopal Church. And the ministers were

always at our house eatin' dinner. But do you know—it's so hard to explain to people now what life was back like—was like back then because people were busy. All the grown people were busy, and they weren't sick all the time, like people are now. They worked all the time. I mean, there was so much to do. To get a meal on the table, you had to go out and pick the food in the garden. Somebody had to milk the cow. You had to go get the eggs underneath the hen. You had to bring it all in, and pretty soon there was this wonderful meal. And people would eat lunch, and then they'd go to sleep for a while, and they'd get up and work some more.

SL: Sleep during the hottest part of the day?

EG: Yeah.

[00:24:38] SL: So were you ever engaged in the food production . . .

EG: Yep.

SL: . . . business of living? Did you . . .

EG: I got to help make the mayonnaise.

SL: How do you make mayonnaise?

EG: Well, you make it with Wesson oil and an egg and a lemon, I think—I can't remember. I know that Wesson oil has to be dripped in very, very slowly. And remember, if this goes wrong,

you can die. [*Laughter*] You gotta do this just right. You gotta get it in the refrigerator. It's a colloid, someone once told me.

SL: What about the . . .

EG: And I killed flies. I made money killin' flies in the kitchen and on the por . . .

SL: How did you make money doing that?

EG: Well, they'd pay me to swat flies and, I guess, to keep me busy. [*SL laughs*] But I'd go out on the porch and swat flies.

SL: What about—so were there always chickens being raised and . . .

EG: Mh-hmm. Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . and all that—even—what about when your . . .

EG: It was a chi—yard full of . . .

SL: . . . when y'all were traveling around all over the place with the levees . . .

EG: Then my mother became somethin' she'd never known how to do, although she had a degree from Ole Miss in French and home economics. And she would get recipes out of—from her friends and things like the—but my mother wasn't as good a cook as the people she came from. It seemed to be more trouble to her. She was afraid somethin' might—you know, she was cookin' by herself. She didn't have four other people around her, 'cept for me. And there were mistakes, like when she got

into this thing of dyeing things green. Green ap . . .

SL: Like the apples . . .

EG: Yeah, she would do these divine little things, like decide that it would amuse us if she'd dye things green with [*SL laughs*], you know, the vegetable dyes that they used back then.

SL: Uh-huh. Green eggs and ham, huh? [*Laughs*] Well, so gosh, what about . . .

EG: Then I did the dishes. [*laughs*]

SL: You were responsible for doing the dishes?

EG: Yeah, Dooley and I did the dishes.

[00:27:00] SL: When y'all sat around the—was it a pretty formal gathering for meals at the table?

EG: Right.

SL: You had—everyone was expected to be in their place at . . .

EG: Not always for breakfast 'cause people got up at different times, but . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

EG: Yeah.

SL: But especially dinner.

EG: Mh-hmm.

SL: And people took breaks . . .

EG: Or lunch on the weekends . . .

SL: . . . and made their ways back home for lunch and . . .

EG: Mh-hmm.

SL: Was . . .

EG: That's when my father would question us. [*Laughs*]

SL: During lunch?

EG: Durin' dinner.

SL: During dinner, like . . .

EG: That's when you had to . . .

SL: . . . what you did that day and . . .

EG: Yeah. Since he was gone a lot . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

[00:27:43] EG: Mother never told on us. We were, you know, we were really good if he was in the house, but we pretty much did what we wanted to when he wasn't there, but . . .

SL: Well, you . . .

EG: It'd have to be really bad before she'd tell on one of us. He did not like it if we were not bein' nice to our mother. [*Laughs*]

SL: What about grace? Did anyone ever say grace at the table?

EG: Yes.

SL: Who—your mother usually took that on, or was it your father, or did you take turns?

EG: I think my father did if he was there, or my mother, or we would

all—or we could have a turn. I always wanted to have a turn in any public speaking. [*Laughter*]

SL: Even at dinner for grace.

EG: Right.

SL: Well, was there any—I'm still landing around this . . .

EG: "Lord make us thankful for these and all of our many other blessings." It wouldn't hurt anybody to remember that when they eat.

SL: Yeah.

EG: Or do anything.

SL: Well, the Episcopal Church is such a romantic church. I—I've always felt that there's something about it that . . .

EG: The old church with the old prayer book, which was written in the ti—that old prayer book was put together in the time of Shakespeare when they made the King James Version of the Bible. The language is just beautiful. And for someone that's gonna end up loving poetry, who wouldn't love it?

SL: Right.

EG: Except for the part about the Holy Ghost. I didn't like to think about things like a Holy Ghost. [*Laughter*] Vampires—any of that stuff.

[00:29:23] SL: Well, were you expected to know the Bible at all?

Did you ever have to study it or . . .



EG: We—no, I mean, we had catechism classes, but I've been a reader all my life, like constant, always reading—reading late into the night. They knew I'd turn the light back on, but you know, you could also read with the flashlight. And batteries seemed to last much longer but—four books a week from the library.

[00:29:57] SL: When did you start having this voracious appetite for reading?

EG: All my life. All my life.

SL: As soon as . . .

EG: I could read long before I went to school. From the time I was carrying Bacon around with me. And children are that way. Some of 'em just—you know, look at the Chinese. Look at the number of figures that they learn by a very young age. You don't have to teach—real readers don't have to learn phonics or anything. They recognize a word, and then they don't forget it. They're just like collections of things you like—all these words. But I was a—always been a fast reader. If I came to anything I didn't understand, you know, I'd just skip over it. I knew I'd figure it out later. But if it was really an interesting word, I'd look—we always had big dictionaries. No matter how many

times we had to move durin' the Second World War, this great, huge, very heavy dictionary would go with us. And I just loved to read, so you know, if it came to somethin' like memorizing somethin' or a catechism—my brother—my older brother has a photographic memory. I mean, he really can remember any page of an encyclopedia that he turns the pages of. And I don't know how he—it makes him so mad if you say that because he says it's an inferior form of intelligence to just remembering it. And I said, "Well, you know, it's true." [*Laughter*] But I loved any kind of test that had to do with words or memorizin' a catechism 'cause I knew I'd be the first one to do it and do it the fastest.

SL: You know . . .

EG: You know what, maybe it's because I knew I could. Maybe it's because the grown people all around me were readin' and writin' all the time, and it was just a way of bein' grown. Maybe the reason children aren't good at takin' tests is 'cause they're afraid. I wasn't afraid of anything to do with words and books. It was my forte. [*Laughs*]

SL: Yeah, it's different now. It's very different now. I mean . . .

EG: I think children are bored to death in school, but we probably shouldn't put this in the thing—we don't want to hurt teachers'

feelings 'cause it's not their fault. It comes from above. There are edicts coming from above, but . . .

SL: Well, and also technology changes things. There's all—it's a different . . .

EG: I have a friend . . .

SL: . . . it's a different set of tools now.

[00:32:36] EG: . . . I have a friend in Fayetteville named Ed White, who's a really wonderful psychologist—psychiatrist. And he told me a story once of a young—he'd—they'd brought him this little seven- or eight-year-old girl, and she was supposed to be so smart, and she was so smart. And she was doin' so poorly in school, and she wasn't doing anything—they—and so he was trying to figure out what was wrong, and he said, you know, "So explain it to me." And she said, "Well, you go in there, and you take the book, which you've already read." And she said, "And then they start reading, and you sit there and wait for 'em to turn the page." And I thought, "There it is."

SL: That's it.

EG: The ones who can turn the page faster oughta be in another group.

SL: Mh-hmm. Well, it sounds like to me that you immediately started emulating those that were around you that . . .

EG: Right.

SL: . . . everyone was so well read, and there was such a wealth, a treasure trove, of material.

EG: No, what they were doin' in their spare time was reading. My great-grandmother and my great-aunts—they were reading all these magazines. My grandfather was readin' the *Progressive Farmer*. But they were always reading, but especially Granny in Courtland. She was deep into big, real books. From the book-of-the-month club [*laughter*] and the literary guild.

[00:34:02] SL: Well, they—you know, I have to say, this is fairly unique. I mean, you probably—did you have any inkling at all that your circumstances were different or much different than a normal growing-up period? I mean, did you—what about—you were moving around so much, did you ever have—were you able to connect with kids . . .

EG: My mother . . .

SL: . . . your age in different communities?

EG: My father would find me a best friend before I got there. Before I got there, he'd've found me a best friend, and there she'd be. And . . .

SL: So friendships were arranged for you.

EG: [*Laughter*] Right. No, I mean, you know, I make friends really

easily and real deeply.

[00:34:46] SL: But did you find that your friends were experiencing the same kind of values growing up of—was everyone that you knew, all your friends, were they locked into reading and were just reading . . .

EG: No. No, they had the same kind of mothers and fathers. One—my best friend from the fifth grade to about the eighth grade, when we moved away from there, was a woman named Cynthia Hancock. She's still my best friend. We write to each other all the time. She named her oldest daughter after me as she promised she would, but I never had any daughters. But I wanna name one of these grandchildren Cynthia soon—or great-grandchildren. Maybe we can get that new one in New Orleans named Cynthia. Anyway, Cynthia's father was a judge. He was the, I guess, the circuit judge. He didn't have to run for it, whatever it was, but he tried cases. And he read all the time, and he had a wonderful library. And Cynthia's daddy and I, the judge and I, talked to each other all the time. But Cynthia was a cheerleader and the drum majorette. She had many other things to do. She could twirl batons—you wouldn't believe. I always considered—I mean, I knew this thing that I did all the time—reading and writing and everything. And—but not

everybody—not—my friends didn't do that much. And then all of a sudden, I'd have some wonderful friend, like a gay architect who became my friend in Alabama who loved books and loved the same books that I did—as much—or a doctor that I later knew, and people like that, and I—but I didn't need to talk about books to anybody. I just read 'em. And my mother was a—my mother read the kinda books that I liked.

SL: So back in—when—you just don't remember much of your infant childhood in Mississippi at all. You—you're tellin' me that the first mem . . .

EG: Oh yeah, I do because my cousins were—because I had an older cousin, Bunky. I remember goin' into Hopedale in the snow at Christmas and havin' Bunky standin' there waitin' for me, and he was four. And so I couldn't have been more than one. But I have vivid pictorial mem—but it's all about people— you know, it's about cousins.

SL: Mh-hmm. You know, it's interesting. Your father came back to build the levees there. After that flood, there was a tremendous flight of African Americans northward. I mean . . .

EG: When they started goin' to Chicago.

SL: Yeah . . .

EG: When black people in Mississippi . . .

SL: Because, you know, the . . .

EG: . . . started goin' to Chicago.

SL: Uh-huh.

EG: Right.

SL: So . . .

EG: Where they had wonderful lives—some of 'em.

[00:37:44] SL: You were brought into the world after that flight, and I don't know what—you know, you were—there were some—I guess what I'm rolling around to—do you remember much of the segregation and the—and . . .

EG: Yeah, because at Hopedale Plantation, my family—my mother's family were horrified by a man named Bilbo, who was a racist and a segregationist. And they wouldn't—my grandmother wouldn't have his name said in the house. I mean, if people were sittin' out there and they were talkin' about somethin' that was in the newspaper, my mother wouldn't—grandmother wouldn't let his name be said in the house. They were religious people. They just didn't—but everything was so insular then. I mean, we all got newspapers, and we read 'em every day, but I didn't read the newspaper. I was readin' books, you know.

SL: Was there ever any—did this Bilbo guy just stir up trouble all the time?

EG: He was a governor that—I've forgotten. I don't know historically—since my grandmother wouldn't let his name be said, [SL laughs] I never have studied him. I [unclear word] should go read up on Governor Bilbo. I know that it—that they were annoyed by hatred or prejudiced or anything like that. There were wonderful, wonderful African American people on Hopedale.

SL: Mh-hmm. Well now . . .

EG: And they were very tall, so I think these people must have been Watusi because they were that tall. Man, the overseer—my grandfather's overseer and a woman named Diddy, who was the mother and grandmother of the people that would be in the house—they were very haughty. And when I see pictures of Watusi in Africa, I think that's where those people came from.

[00:39:55] SL: Well, did you have any relationships with African Americans growing up?

EG: Sure . . .

SL: Did you . . .

EG: I played with 'em. And that's who I had for playmates when I was little when I'd go down there.

SL: Yeah, I . . .

EG: Diddy would send her grandchildren over there. They'd get

bored with me after the cookies were all eaten. [*SL laughs*] I'd be doin' stuff like makin' doll furniture out of cardboard, and I could amuse 'em for—I could keep 'em around for about an hour, and then they'd go scatterin' back home.

SL: You did that . . .

EG: I didn't like . . .

SL: . . . on the porch just off the kitchen, right?

EG: Yeah. No, I think out front on the front porch steps . . .

SL: Oh. Uh-huh.

EG: . . . is where we used to play.

SL: And your mom would have . . .

EG: The people at . . .

SL: . . . cookies made or sheet cake or somethin'.

EG: Oh, there were al—there was—there were always—there was always lots of food in the kitchen. But I think the cookies came from the store. I think they were things like gingersnaps out of boxes.

[00:41:02] SL: [*Laughs*] I member reading that you would—that they would stick around and play with you for a while, and then they just kinda disappeared, and you used to go look for them.

EG: [*Laughs*] Right. Or I'd go over to Diddy's. I liked to go over to Diddy's house and just talk to her. I have no idea what we

talked about. She was the matriarch of the Afro American families.

SL: Mh-hmm. Now . . .

EG: But she—I liked it—I just liked her bein' so tall and so haughty. She was really haughty. Hard to please.

SL: Mh-hmm. [*Laughter*] Well, she probably had to be that way . . .

EG: But everybody was nice to me because my mother, whose nickname was "Bodie"—they loved Bodie. Everybody that ever knew her loved her, and if I was her daughter, they'd be nice to me, even if I was a lot of trouble.

[00:41:57] SL: Well now, you were kinda trouble, weren't you, growin' up?

EG: I was pretty busy.

SL: Seems like I member you felt like your mother really never had her heart in disciplining you, that . . .

EG: That woman could not dis—my—that woman could not discipline a child. She didn't really want to. She thought we were funny. My brothers loved her so much. They did what she told 'em to do, but she thought I was funny. I amused her. I could make her laugh. She would giggle at stuff I did.

SL: You remember going to a funeral, don't you? There was a funeral early in your life that you—somehow or another . . .

EG: When that little boy died in the first grade and they brought the whole first grade out to—his father ran over him in the driveway. When cars—audience, you don't know this—when cars first came into being and we had sloping driveways and towns with hills, there were—for a lot—a lot of children were killed by a car running over 'em because the rearview mirrors weren't good. Or there were a lot of reasons, all of which have been fixed now, hopefully. People don't back over their children in the driveway anymore. Anyway, he backed over a little boy in the first grade, and they had the child laid out in a coffin on the dining room table, and they brought the first grade down there to march around and tell him goodbye. That was my first funeral that I remember. [*Laughs*] This was not good.

SL: Did they have—did they have ice around him? Do you remember?

EG: No.

SL: Sometimes if they were gonna be there for a couple of days . . .

EG: We didn't stay long.

SL: If they're . . .

EG: I think maybe they gave us a cupcake or somethin', but then we marched back out and went home or back to school—one or the other. Oh my gosh, can you imagine that happening now?

SL: Hm-mm. Wouldn't. It wouldn't happen now.

EG: Takin' the first grade to [*laughs*] view of the corpse of one of the kids.

[00:44:15] SL: Wow. So you were—you started reading very early, before you ever went to school. Let's talk about your early elementary school days. What—it seems like I remem . . .

EG: I liked goin' to school. I liked the teachers. Occasionally I'd get a teacher that I didn't like, but I liked teachers. I was hopeful. I was bored all afternoon. I was—I take naps in the afternoon. I have since I was very young. And I would just kinda—"Oh God, will it ever be three thirty?" or however long we'd have to stay in school.

SL: Do you remember a favorite teacher early on?

EG: I remember a second-grade teacher who had the wisdom to read us a continued story at three thirty, or somethin' like that, in the afternoon right before we'd leave. And all day long, you could look forward to it. She was pretty, and she was reading us, I suppose, a book. And she would read us a chapter in the afternoons. That was wonderful. But you never could tell what you were gonna learn. And besides, there were all those people where you could, you know, interact with 'em. Even if you couldn't talk, you could always be looking at 'em—passin' 'em a

note. [*Laughs*]

SL: So you went to how many different grade schools, then?

EG: A lot. But I don't know the years because my father was building airports—laying the concrete for—they were small airports in flat farmland where we taught people how to fly airplanes. We were building an air force. These factories all over the United States building the planes. Ford Motor was one of those places. And women were doin' a lot of the welding and things 'cause the men were all at war. And my daddy—there's a lawyer in town—his first name is Lynn . . .

SL: Wade.

[00:46:26] EG: Yeah, Lynn Wade. Lynn Wade's father was one of the lawyers whose job it was to buy up the flat land where you could build these airports. That's . . .

SL: Deacon Wade. Mh-hmm.

EG: Yeah, that's what he did at the same time that my father was—I know Lynn and I—their paths must have crossed.

SL: They must have.

EG: Think how quickly everybody did that. And all those concrete runways are—well, the one in Courtland, Alabama, is still out there, and young people like to go race cars on it, but . . .

SL: Mh-hmm. Y'all never made it to Tuskegee, did you? [EG shakes

head] Kay. That's another interview, but . . .

EG: Is that in the northern part of Alabama? Where is Tuskegee?

SL: I'm not sure where Tuskegee is, but . . .

EG: I don't know where it is.

SL: . . . we interviewed one of the instructors for the airmen there. I just thought it'd just be serendipitous . . .

EG: I'd like to see that film sometime. Was that a whole squadron of men who were all African Americans?

SL: It was.

EG: That's amazing.

SL: Mh-hmm.

EG: I'm gonna have to go—I know I've been meanin' to see that movie.

SL: So there were two sets of levee building. There was there in Mississippi and then up in Ohio and Iowa.

EG: Well, it was a whole system. I mean, and they're all still there.

*[Laughs]*

[00:48:07] SL: Did they ever go dow—all the way down to New Orleans? Were you ever in New Orleans?

EG: I know that my father told me once when I moved to New Orleans, to which he was—he really objected me takin' my children and movin' to New Orleans. But he drove me there. I

guess when we were goin' dow—I don't know what we were doing—gettin' the children in schools or what, but it was somehow that Daddy and I were alone. And we went over the Bonnet Carré Spillway, which is the big, winding road that leads into New Orleans from Mississippi, at least. And he explained to me what the Bonnet Carré Spillway was, and how it was built, and what brilliant engineering it was at the time . . .

SL: So he was aware of it, but . . .

EG: . . . to save New Orleans. But I think that he worked at some point or he was a consultant or somethin' on the Bonnet Carré Spillway 'cause he forgot about hatin' me goin' to New Orleans and got excited when he got on the Bonnet Carré Spillway [*SL laughs*] and was telling me about, you know, how it worked and . . .

SL: His mood lightened up.

EG: . . . how it was built.

[00:49:17] SL: Yeah. So how long did this—did it go all the way through World War II that your father was doing the airports or the . . .

EG: Mh-hmm. Until the end of the war. And then he became a road contractor. And then he bought coal mines—strip-mining mines in London, Kentucky. And then he went through a phase where

the only people he wanted to talk to—his favorite people in the world were the Scotch Irish settlers of the mountains of Kentucky. He loved those people. He said, "They're the salt of the earth." [*Laughs*] And he could tell us about the feuds and just laugh like he was telling a love story. He thought that was so—he thought they were so marvelous.

SL: So . . .

EG: They were makin' him a lot of money with the coal mines, and then he became—then—by then, my older brother—when my older brother got out of the University of Tennessee, he went into business with my father, and then they bought—and he and a friend of his talked Daddy into buyin' the Caterpillar dealership in Mississippi. Daddy was never happy bein' a Caterpill—he loved the big tractors, but he didn't like havin' to be—and had to—havin' to own all that inventory, as he called it.

SL: Right.

EG: And be in debt . . .

SL: Yes.

EG: . . . to people.

SL: Not fun.

EG: But he liked helpin' people figure out how to buy enough tractors so they could be successful in their road-building operations.

[00:51:05] SL: What were some of the earliest conversations you remember having with your father?

EG: Teachin' me to tie my shoes; teachin' me to play ball; teachin' me to roller-skate—I re—teachin' me to ride bicycles; teachin' me to ride horses; teachin' me to swim. I mean, he had my brothers, but I mean, he didn't leave me out. My father taught us to do things. He taught us to drive long before we could actually drive. I guess that's why Dan-Dan let me drive into Rolling Fork in her Buick. But he just taught—he taught us things. How things worked. I have—I remember what he loved were post-hole diggers. [*SL laughs*] And to this day—I love it. He loved watchin' people build fences or—and he'd get into it. He'd be doin' it himself, and it was a wonderful thing to me—the invention of this thing that would go down in there, and [*makes crunching noise*] [*moves hands up and down*] and then put it over there, and then you could get that post in there, and you could build a fence—keep the horses from runnin' away.

SL: So he was a pretty physical guy. He liked the physical work.

EG: Yeah. He loved sports. You know, he—but I could never learn to play baseball because I would not pick up the grounders.

SL: [*Laughs*] Why is that?

EG: Somebody wants to throw me high balls and let me pretend like,

you know, I'm puttin' somebody out, that's one thing. But gettin' down—kneelin' down and pickin' up the grounders—no way.

SL: You didn't want to do that?

EG: No!

SL: Why?

EG: Throw me some high ones. [*Laughter*] Throw me somethin' I can catch.

SL: It's too much work to stoop down and kneel down on one knee and put the glove in front of it and . . .

EG: Not my brothers. [*Laughs*] They'd do it. See, you love it. You think it's great.

SL: Mh-hmm. Mh-hmm. That's funny. That's funny. Well, so let's see now. Dooley—what was Dooley's real name?

EG: William Garth Gilchrist III.

SL: And he was your older brother.

EG: Mh-hmm.

SL: Were both your brothers older than you?

[00:53:33] EG: No. My other brother is eight years younger than I was.

SL: Wow.

EG: He was born in the middle of the Second World War in Seymour,

Indiana. And I couldn't believe—why did my mother do that to herself? And then we had this wonderful, little, fat, blonde boy. He was just irresistible.

SL: My parents would call that kind of a fall and spring crop. [EG *laughs*] You know.

EG: My mother liked him so much 'cause he grew up—he di—he did, and he really looked like her—very blonde, very blue-eyed. And he grew up to look exactly like her father. And he acts like her father.

[00:54:19] SL: Well, let's talk a little bit about her father.

EG: Her father—Big Daddy. He was six feet four or five inches tall and . . .

SL: Wow.

EG: . . . he was strong and beautiful man.

SL: And y'all called him Big Daddy?

EG: Mh-hmm. As opposed to my little daddy. My—and we had sandwiches. If it did two pieces of bread, it was a big daddy, but one piece, it was a little daddy. No, it just . . .

SL: Now tell me again, what was it that her father did?

EG: He came to—he came from Madison, Mississippi, where his father was a lawyer and a schoolteacher. He would drive around in a buggy and pick up the children and take 'em to the

schoolhouse and teach 'em. He was a lawyer. But his son, my grandfather, Stewart Floyd Alford, came to the Delta and was an overseer on a plantation called Esperanza, which is the Spanish word for hope, and then he bought the adjoining land and turned it—and cleared the land and turned it into Hopedale Plantation. And he had brothers and cousins—I mean, you know, there were—it was a family of men. There—my grandfather was not the only per—he wore a s—a coat and tie all the time. And then my grandmo—then he married my grandmother, and then my grandmother's sister married a doctor from New Orleans, and they became fast friends. There are all these pictures of 'em together doin' things like figurin' out rural electricity or wells. I rem—I always associated him with wells—artesian wells, which you could dig in the Delta near the river. Just beautiful, wonderful water. There's water in the Arkansas delta that tastes like the water in the Mississippi delta. It's full of sulfur. I love the way it smells and tastes. [*SL laughs*] And if you take a bath in it, it's like the most luxurious bath salts in the world have been added to the water.

SL: I've never heard anyone say that they love the sulfur water.

EG: I love—see, it's just the smell of bein'—I was at Hopedale.

Where there's—you know, nothin' never stopped happenin'

there. In a house with just your mother and your father and your brothers—although we had company all the time—you know, we had our friends over all—but at any moment, things could keep happening. But in a house full of people runnin' a plantation, there is somethin' goin' on every minute. [*Laughs*]

[00:57:14] SL: Now there was an African American named Eli. Is that right?

EG: Eli Nailor.

SL: Nailor. You know, most of the photographs that I've seen of him, he has his head down. He's looking at you or one of the children or picking up—I never got a really clear . . .



EG: Nailor was the same age as my great-grandmother, and my great-great-grandmother adopted him. After—there was an epidemic, either of smallpox or measles or some flu. But I think that it was something like—there was a horrible epidemic in the Delta, and Eli—and Nailor's parents were killed in it, and he was the only person left. And with five or six other orphans—a man drove a wagon full of orphaned African American children around asking people if they could live with them, and my great-great-grandmother, who was a devout Catholic—the one I'm named for—took him. He was about six or seven years old. Think how scared he was.

SL: Yeah.

[00:58:21] EG: But she was such a beautiful, gentle woman. And he was the same age as my great-grandmother. And they grew up together, and they ran the kitchen together, and they argued.

[*SL laughs*] I bet they've been arguin' since they were six years old. They argued about every detail of everything they were cookin'. And it was real quiet, real low-key. No voices were ever raised. And he'd laugh at her. [*Laughter*]

SL: They loved it, didn't they?

EG: They cooked.

SL: They cooked.

EG: And he just spoiled me rotten.

SL: Give me an example.

[00:58:57] EG: Well, the thing I—what I really liked to eat—there were two things that I liked to eat above everything else. Well, I liked French fries and fried chicken and mashed potatoes. But what I really loved to eat was pot liquor, which is the juice off of black-eyed peas. And I wanted pot liquor, and then I'd put buttered corn bread in that and kinda stir it up for a long, long time until it was sort of a—I don't know what it was like.

[*Laughs*] Delta pasta. And then I'd eat it.

SL: I get that still . . .

EG: He'd always get me pot liquor and corn bread.

SL: So pot liquor is just the juice from the black-eyed peas.

EG: Mh-hmm.

SL: Well, I experienced that New Year's Day. You know, we always had—Mama always said, "You have to have this for good luck." I don't know if—that you ever came . . .

EG: I don't know if the juice—I mean, I guess you probably have to actually eat the peas to get good luck.

SL: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. [EG laughs] But I mean, the—those two . . .

EG: Well, you could have some peas in it, too.

SL: Yeah, yeah. Well now . . .

Trey Marley: Excuse me, Scott . . .

EG: He would indulge my little idiosyncrasies like that.

TM: We need to change tapes.

SL: Change tape. Okay.

[Tape stopped]

[01:00:14] SL: [Camera clicks] You know, this is our second tape.

EG: All right.

SL: So we're on our second hour, and I was thinkin' about some of the things we've talked about so far, and what—there's a couple things that stand out for me compared to other interviews I've done. One is your ferocious appetite for reading early on. I've

interviewed few people that have related that kind of activity so young in age. And the other is all the moving about that you did early on, and I was going to ask you—did all that moving take place just in your elementary school years, or did it continue throughout your tenure with your [*EG clears throat*] parents and your family?

EG: Well—and a psychiatrist told me once that, you know, people who have lived in a lot of different places with a stable family, you know, with a loving—so the family unit is solid—there are strengths that you gain from that. You know that you can go someplace else and make wonderful friends and be happy and have things, you know. So I don't ever meet a stranger, and I don't—but in—but I've lived in Fayetteville off and on since 1976, and I never—it's the longest I've ever lived anywhere. [*Clears throat*] [01:01:48] When I was in high school, we moved from Harrisburg, Illinois, where I'd spent a happy six or seven years, and we moved for a year or two to a town in Franklin, Kentucky, which I loved, while Daddy was settin' up the mines. And then he made so much money that he wanted to move home to Courtland, Alabama. But not to Courtland—we moved to Decatur, which is a bigger town. And all of our cousins were there. But when we were in—the only problems that it

ever caused me in high school was the tow—the high school in Franklin wasn't good enough. I mean, it was—there were things I needed to take in order to go to Vanderbilt. It was easy to get into colleges then, but you had to have certain—there—I think it was some history courses or maybe . . .

SL: The prerequisites.

EG: It wasn't math or—it was somethin' to do with history. So they let me choose which one I'd go to, and I went to a girls' school in Virginia for a year [*clears throat*] where my cousins had gone—my cousins from the Delta had gone there 'cause you could bring your own horse.

[01:03:01] SL: And what was the name of that school?

EG: Southern Seminary in Buena Vista, Virginia. It's a junior college now. It was also a junior college then, but it was primarily a girls' high school. And that was an interesting year. I got to meet all these people from New York and New Jersey. I thought they were so exciting. And they loved my clothes. They all wore my clothes. [*SL laughs*] And I hated my clothes. I wanted stuff like they had, which I'd never seen before. And then I stayed after graduation and was in a couple of weddings at VMI. So I was gettin' to see the world.

SL: So . . .

EG: At last, I was gettin' to see the world.

SL: My son went to Washington and Lee.

EG: Yeah.

SL: So I'm kind of familiar . . .

EG: I went to dances at Washington and Lee and at VMI.

SL: Yeah.

EG: You know, you could have forty boyfriends. [*SL laughs*] There were all these boys and, you know, just the few little girls that were at girls' schools. That was nice. [*Clears throat*] But mostly, I had a wonderful history professor at Southern Seminary. She was just wonderful. She'd have me over for tea in the afternoons. It was when—oh, wait a minute. You'll have to cut this out till we remember. Adlai Stevenson was running for the presidency, and my history teacher was a big fan of Adlai Stevenson's and gave me his speeches to read and got me involved in the campaign. It was the first time I got involved in politics. And I couldn't believe that he didn't win. [*SL laughs*] I couldn't believe it.

SL: Yeah. Th . . .

EG: It was the first of my many terrible sadnesses—when someone that I'd decided should be the senator or the president or somethin' didn't get to be.

SL: Yeah.

EG: I still think he would have made a great president. [*Laughs*]

SL: He would have. I'm certain he would have. I . . .

[01:05:04] EG: And so my—so the world was opening up for me in so many ways. I know—when I went home at Thanksgiving from Southern Seminary, I thought I was havin' such a wonderful time there, and I think I generally was, but when I got off the train—my daddy met the train, and I just threw myself into his arms and wept and wept. I'd never been away from my parents for anything near that long, except to go to their parents. I could go to their—or my cousins—I could go away for long periods of time to people that were kin, but that was strange to me. I didn't understand that. I couldn't believe that I'd missed 'em that much.

SL: So that was really your first time outside the family?

EG: Yeah, but . . .

SL: That community.

[01:05:53] EG: And I had a wonderful graduation, and my grandmother, my great-grandmother, and my great-great-grand—not my great-great—she had died by then. But my mother, my grandmother, and my great-grandmother, among many other people, came to Virginia to the graduation. One of

the cousins who'd gone to school there came. And it was this big, bi—and then I stayed there and went to finals at W&L and to weddings, and I stayed in Virginia—and then I went to Williamsburg with my roommate and spent two weeks in Williamsburg when they were first making a little town out of it for tourists and changing everything. Her father was the fire chief. So I began to see—people in the world I lived in, in my part of the country, didn't travel, except to go see their relatives. Now I mean, my mother did. My mother went to New York all the time with her bridge club to see plays, but I had no desire to go to any of these places. I just wanted to go to Memphis to see Baby Sister or somethin' like that, but I didn't—you know, movin' around outside the s—di—just didn't interest me. But now I had seen Middle America. I'd seen the lower Midwest, Indiana, and Illinois. And then I'd seen Virginia, so I figured I'd seen the East Coast. And then I went to Vanderbilt.

[01:07:24] SL: Well, before we get you to Vanderbilt, I want to go back to your Midwestern travels. So how many different towns did you go through until—you said you ended up spending about six or seven years toward the end of the travels, but up to that point in time—I mean, in one place. But up to that point in time, how many . . .

EG: Daddy was buildin' airports at Fort Leonard Wood, which was also a prison. He was buildin' barracks and things. And—but durin' the Second World War, we lived in Terre Haute, Indiana, and Seymour, Indiana, for a long time. And then we ended up in Harrisburg, Illinois, but we also lived a couple—there were a group of men that worked with my father. He was in charge of it, and there were like three or four of the main people, like his bookkeeper, and they had children who were near my age, so there were people—there were children that always were with us when we had to go from one place to the other. It was a large family. And it all just seemed excited. I just didn't want the Japanese to win the war. I wanted us to win the war. That's all there was to it.

SL: In your tra . . .

EG: I didn't care what we had to do or how many towns we had to live in.

SL: So there was a real patriotism in the household . . .

EG: It was . . .

SL: . . . and among this group of . . .

[01:09:00] EG: . . . not in the household—in the United States. We used to have paper drives and have collections of all objects made of iron and steel. You know . . .

SL: And did y'all have the rations—the gasoline-ration tickets  
and . . .

EG: Yeah. I still have an old rationing book. Sure, it was rationed.  
My father's gasoline was not rationed 'cause he had to drive a  
lot.

SL: He was part of the defense . . .

EG: Yeah . . .

SL: . . . so he got an exemption.

EG: . . . but he wouldn't let us use it.

SL: Mh-hmm. So that's honorable.

EG: Well, his younger brother was flyin' bombing missions over  
Germany, and his cousins, and—his younger brother had  
contracted tuberculosis while he was an intern—he was a  
doctor—while he was an intern at Tulane University in the big  
charity hospital in New Orleans, and that happened to many  
young doctors at the time. So he couldn't go to the army.

SL: Each of the . . .

EG: My father used to cry because he couldn't go be in the navy. He  
wanted to go fight the war, but what he was doin' was more  
important. But he wanted to have a gun and go fight it, and he  
worried about his brother.

SL: Now his brother was . . .

EG: Came home unscathed.

SL: . . . in the European theater.

[01:10:23] EG: Mh-hmm. And then when that war was over, he flew with Claire Chennault's Flying Tigers in the . . .

SL: In China.

EG: Yeah. And then they were in the army of occupation in Japan. See, all this exciting stuff was always goin' on. I knew it was exciting.

SL: So during the war, did you ever go to movie theaters?

EG: All the time. Every Saturday afternoon.

SL: And so you watched the newsreels and the little updates that they gave on the war and . . .

EG: Mh-hmm. Mh-hmm. With great attention. But the w—but the way the news was reported from the war fronts durin' the Second World War always led you to believe that we were winning.

SL: Yes. It was really—probably the first major media . . .

EG: I remember . . .

SL: . . . public relations . . .

[01:11:27] EG: . . . after the war when they went into the horror show of Germany and began to find the concentration camps, I remember my mother jerkin' me up out of a seat in a theater

and dragging me out of the theater to not see that. After it had been on for a moment or two, she pulled me up—she had on a hat—went back up the aisle. Years later, I took my oldest granddaughter, who was then eight or nine, to see *Jurassic Park*, and as soon as they tethered the goat to draw the dinosaur, I grabbed Ellen up and dragged her—I thought, "Oh, I'm my mother! I've turned into my mother!" I dragged her out of the theater. [*Laughs*]

SL: Did you go back?

EG: She got to go back. [*SL laughs*] When she got back to New Orleans, her mother let her see the movie.

SL: That's funny. Well, in your travels to these Midwestern communities, were you ever—were there differences in those communities—in . . .

EG: Not really.

SL: Not really? They were all pretty homogenous.

EG: In Seymour, Indiana, and Harrisburg, Illinois, during the Second World War—this is the lower Midwest, which is really—Fayetteville is Midwestern.

SL: Yeah.

EG: It's—people think this is the South. This is not the South. This is the lower Midwest. A lot of Southerners live here, which gives

it a Southern flavor.

SL: Yeah. I think you're right bout that. Well, what about—so this period of time is mainly early forties.

EG: I don't know.

SL: You're born in [19]35, and so you're out making this circuit . . .

EG: Yeah, 'cause I guess I graduated from high school in [19]51 or  [19]52. And then I went to Vanderbilt, and I pretty much made straight As, and I loved it, and I studied Shakespeare. But then I went home to spend the summer, and Mother and Daddy had moved home to Decatur, Alabama, and all my cousins and people were goin' to the University of Alabama. So by the time the summer was over, I said, "Daddy"—and they told me there was a great writing teacher at the University of Alabama named Hudson Strode and that I should leave Vanderbilt for a year [*SL laughs*] and go to study with Hudson Strode. So Daddy gave me a car, and I drove down to Tuscaloosa and checked into school and went over to the Chi O house and told 'em I was a Chi O transfer, and I moved into the Chi O house, and it was, like, a couple of weeks before I found out that Hudson Strode was on sabbatical. [*Laughter*]

SL: The whole reason for you being there . . .

EG: I know it.

SL: . . . was on sabbatical. So did you . . .

[01:14:20] EG: And by then I'd fallen in love with a boy at Georgia Tech.

SL: Uh-oh.

EG: And so the next semester, Daddy said, "Sister, if you're gonna go to school in Alabama, for God's sake, why can't it be Auburn?" which is where all of his family go to school and where he'd graduated. And I thought, "Auburn is really near to Atlanta." And so then I went and spent a semester at Auburn, and the next summer, Marshall and I ran away and got married. We ran away to the north Georgia hills and then went over to North Carolina or South Carolina—one of the Carolinas—where you could get married without a waiting period or somethin' like that. We got a wedding license and got married. And then I went to live with him in Atlanta, and we started havin' babies.

*[Laughs]*

SL: Okay . . .

[01:15:14] EG: And then I spent about, you know, ten years bein' a mother of all these beautiful, little boys. Never did get to meet Hudson Strobe.

SL: How did you choose Vanderbilt?

EG: My brother had gone to school there. My older brother was

there.

SL: And you just kind of . . .

EG: But my daddy's cousins had always gone to school in Nashville—to a girls' school there called—not Agnes Scott—somethin' like that. Agnes Scott's in Atlanta, but the co—you know, people in Daddy's family had always gone to Nashville to school.

SL: And what was it about Vanderbilt that you loved so much?

EG: I loved the first semester, which was broken into three trimesters. The first trimester of school you studied Shakespeare, and I had a great lecturer, and then I had a younger—a graduate student who taught—you know, you'd have the lecture one day of the week. But mostly, you know, I could already read. [*Laughs*] So I was introduced to Shakespeare. It was enough.

SL: Yeah.

EG: Actually, I used to teach Shakespeare at night. I would, you know, I would teach it to groups of Kappa Sigs and their girlfriends in the basement of the Kappa Sig house. My brother had been a Kappa Sig. I would teach what I was reading [*SL laughs*] because they weren't reading it. And so I was already teachin' Shakespeare, which I'm gonna do in the spring of next year.

SL: So as a freshman, you were basically tutoring . . .

EG: And I think I made 'em love Shakespeare.

SL: Yeah.

EG: They all would keep comin' to the classes.

SL: Well, I mean, this was—I mean, were you . . .

[01:17:05] EG: It's an odd thing when someone's gettin' an education. They're not interested in everything they're studyin'.

SL: Right.

EG: I mean, you know, I went to biology and biology lab. I was interested in it. Later, after my children were four and five and two or six and seven—however—when I went back to school at Millsaps to get my de—finish my degree, then I really, really became interested in everything that I was studyin'. But at the time—you know, eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds are interested in one another . . .

SL: Sure.

EG: . . . and in love.

SL: Absolutely.

[01:17:48] EG: And the unbelievable power and energy that they have. If you can get 'em vial—vitaly interested in one thing like Shakespeare, you've done a good job.

SL: Well, didn't you—I mean, what about boys growing up before

you went away to college? I mean . . .

EG: I had a boyfriend mornin', night, noon, every day of my life.

SL: Well, there you go. Let's talk about that a little bit.

EG: Cynthia Jane would give me all of her old ones. [*SL laughs*] And I had my brother's basketball and football teams and—but I always had—I always ended up havin' a close male friend who was not my boyfriend but was my intellectual peer. He'd be what kids call a goop now, I guess, but you know, but respected and loved by other people, but he'd be a, you know, a bookish, interesting person like that. They would always be—and sometimes—no, they would never take me to dances.

SL: The boyfriends would not?

EG: Not the ones that were my close friends.

SL: Oh. Right.

EG: I'd go off to dances with, you know . . .

SL: Well . . .

EG: . . . the cornerback or somethin'.

SL: [*Laughs*] I . . .

EG: My older brother . . .

SL: I was a football player.

EG: My older brother was very, very protective of me . . .

SL: Well, I was gonna ask . . .

[01:19:17] EG: . . . and my family were very old-fashioned.

SL: I was gonna ask . . .

EG: The chances of anyone, you know, makin' a move on me or anything while Dooley Gilchrist was in the world were zero. I was so safe.

SL: [*Laughs*] I member Ronnie Hawkins tellin' me that he was terrified of my father. [*Laughs*] So . . .

EG: You would've been terrified of mine. I mean, not that he—he was just funny and kind and generous and all this stuff, but you wouldn't . . .

SL: You wouldn't cross him.

[01:19:47] EG: Hm-mm. A boy at Vanderbilt tried to rape me . . .

SL: Uh-oh.

EG: . . . one of my brother's friends at a house party in Florida. My mother was chaperoning it, and we were alone on the beach, and he was drunk. And he was a very, very nice—and is a very, very nice person. And he was tryin' to rape me, and I remember turnin' around—finally—you know, 'cause I was real physically strong—I was fightin' him off and everything, and finally I said, "Okay, so-and-so, you know that Dooley Gilchrist will kill you." Everything stopped.

SL: [*Laughs*] Excitement level went down pretty quick . . .

EG: People didn't have intercourse with one another until they got married in the world in which I lived. Occasionally, they did. But not popular girls—not girls from nice families. I mean—well, that's not true. I'm sure that—it wasn't common. I think the boys were as frightened of it as girls. We all believed that the moment you had intercourse you'd get pregnant, and you did. So if I'm thinkin' about boys when I'm that age, I'm thinkin' about who should I marry. I don't think about who am I gonna have for a boyfriend, or who am I gonna hook up with or somethin'. I'm thinkin' who should I marry. Do I like their last name—all that.

SL: Those—all the sex stuff was really never discussed or talked about was it?

EG: We did—we couldn't tal—we didn't know anything to talk about. Every now and then—I had a cousin from up in Tennessee that had some information that was very, very, very interesting, but I didn't believe it—about things people do to one another . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

EG: . . . other than normal intercourse.

SL: Uh-huh.

EG: I really wish she'd never told me that. [*SL laughs*] It's just too horrible to imagine, you know.

[01:21:51] SL: Well, it seems like I remember you writing about how the adults would kinda shelter the children from some of the real things that were going on in life. I mean, the—in particular, relationships that people had, and they kind of . . .

EG: Well, my mother was very nonjudgmental. If she was talkin' about somethin' that happened to somebody, she'd be, you know, tellin' you all the reasons why the poor thing—you know, that happened because of this or that or the other. It just wasn't—that wasn't the thrust of our lives. We were ambitious. I wasn't—I mean, I was ambitious, but my close friends were ambitious.

SL: This group that . . .

EG: They wanted . . .

SL: Go ahead.

[01:22:51] EG: People wanted to do—well, you know, and I had this intellectual friend in Kentucky the year we lived there, and I was writing an article for the real newspaper once a week, and when I went away to sou—when I would go down to the Delta in the summer or when I went to Southern Seminary, I'd have him—he was my intellectual friend—I'd have him write the stories for me when I couldn't be there. And then later—about fifteen years ago, I went to Louisville, Kentucky, to give a speech, and he's

the president of the National Bar Association. Of course he is!  
[*SL laughs*] And has grown into this absolutely gorgeous,  
powerful, movie-star-lookin' man [*SL laughs*—nothing like the  
gawky, young boy that—whose verbal skills were good enough  
to write my column for me when I was gone. That was so  
pleasant to me to have that happen. I hope that students—I  
hope that kids are still as ambitious as we were.

SL: Well, I think some are. I think some of that still—there's some  
great ambition and inspiration . . .

EG: I hope so.

SL: . . . and belief that you can do things, and it does matter. I  
think there's still some of that.



EG: And that there're things that are in the—within your reach. My  
father's first cousin was the chief justice of the Fifth Circuit Court  
of Appeals. My mother was marr—my mother's sister was  
married to a newspaper editor. I thought you could do anything  
you thought up, and it never occurred to me—I didn't need  
Germaine Greer—it never occurred to me to think that bein' a  
woman or bein' a girl limited me in any way. It never entered  
my mind.

SL: That's interesting because that was so atypical that a strong  
woman could be that confident at that time because they were—

I mean, for the most part . . .

EG: Well, the kind of things . . .

SL: . . . I mean, the stereotype is that . . .

[01:25:14] EG: What did I ever want to do? I wanted to be a writer.

But I wanted to be a poet, and I wanted to—and I wanted, maybe, to be a journalist. But the things that I wanted—the things that I was ambitious for were within my reach because I could do 'em easily. You know, it wasn't like I was tryin' to be the senator or somethin'.

SL: In this traveling group that your father kind of had dominion over during the war, were all the kids kind of—I mean, were they all readers, I mean, or . . .

EG: No.

SL: No, it was . . .

EG: Neither were my close friends.

SL: Really?

EG: I just read books, and I'd sit up all night at slumber parties tellin' 'em the stories of 'em. Or I'd write their book reports for 'em. I did that all my life.

SL: Really?

EG: I'd feel so sorry for 'em. They're all sittin' there cryin' 'cause they can't get their book report written. I could write it for 'em

in five minutes if I had the jacket cover. Wouldn't even have to read the book. [*Laughter*]

SL: It was probably a book you'd already read anyway.

EG: Yeah, it was probably a book I'd already read anyway.

SL: [*Laughs*] Well, and they probably got great grades, didn't they?

EG: I don't know.

SL: [*Laughs*] Well, was . . .

EG: I know the father of my children, the man at Georgia Tech that I—the young man at Georgia Tech that I fell in love with—one of the first things I did for him before we ran away and got married was I wrote him a book report on Dorothy Parker. I loved Dorothy Parker. I knew all her work by heart. And his probably gay professor kept him in after class—this big, strapping, athletic KA—and said, "Oh, Mr. Walker, I would never, never have thought you were a fan of Dorothy Parker. This is just wonderful. Made my semester." And he gave him an A on it.

[*Laughter*] God knows I'd give anything to have a copy of it.

[01:27:16] SL: Wow. That's fun. Well, I really hate to jump all the way to your marriage. I feel like there's so much—there are so many great stories that you have about your childhood and growing up and the characters that . . .

EG: Well, it's a bottomless pit. Let's move on. 'Cause then—you

know, because—I don't know. Maybe I've never been young or old. Maybe I've just always been myself. But certainly—no, it didn't make me grow up to have children. I had these beautiful little redheaded boys. I liked 'em. I thought they were so pretty. I mean, you know, you just—I liked 'em. And I never had to have 'em because I had all three of 'em by cesarean section.

SL: Ah. So you were knocked out and . . .

EG: The first one was coming one foot—upside down and one foot first . . .

SL: Mmm. Not good.

EG: So that was a long, hard night . . .

SL: Yeah.

EG: . . . and they told me they were gonna put me to sleep and cut me open, and I said, "And then I'll stop feeling like this? Go for it!" But it was my daddy's cousin was the attending physician, not the surgeon.

[01:28:31] SL: Now is that a Finney, or—see, wasn't there a—I'm tryin' to remember some of your relatives' names. There was a—I can't remember. I'm probably confused, but . . .

EG: Dr. Robert Finley. Now, that was my . . .

SL: Finley.

EG: . . . mother's uncle . . .

SL: Oh, okay. All right.

EG: . . . who was our doctor in the Delta, but this was a cousin of Daddy's in Decatur, Alabama, who delivered Marshall, or who told me that I was gonna get cut open. I was delighted. I wasn't frightened a bit. [*SL laughs*] It sounded a lot better than—to me . . .

SL: Well, you were . . .

EG: . . . than what I'd heard about havin' babies.

SL: Yeah.

EG: They had to do it to keep from breakin' his leg.

SL: Ugh.

EG: Yeah. And he has nine children and two grandchildren, so that's about twelve progeny I have instead of [*SL laughs*]*—you know, at any other age, both of us would be in a cemetery dead. [*SL laughs*] Me at age nineteen and him at age nine months.*

[01:29:28] SL: [*Laughs*] Well, so you meet your—where was it that you met your husband?

EG: I met him on—my friends from Decatur, Alabama . . .

SL: Who . . .

EG: . . . who'd talked me into going to the University of Alabama—talked me into havin' a blind date with Allison Bailey and a gay

architect, who was my close friend and intellectual friend in Alabama. Brilliant, brilliant, brilliant, brilliant architect. So ahead of his time. And he a—he said, "Ellen, you are gonna love this guy. He has the most beautiful body you have ever seen on a man." I didn't know Allison was gay. I didn't know what gay was. And he said, "I promise you, he has the most beautiful body you've ever seen on a grown man," and I thought, "Well, I think—you know, they all look good to me." [SL laughs] But I went up there, and they met us at the Atlanta Airport, and I just fell in love, and so did he. And I guess—and that was in the fall, and the next summer in June, we ran away and got married.

SL: This did not . . .

EG: We had babies. Oh boy, it was hard tellin' our parents.

[01:30:41] SL: You didn't tell 'em till after you'd run off?

EG: No, we didn't tell 'em until fall came . . .

SL: Oh my gosh.

EG: . . . and I didn't want to have to go back to Vanderbilt. I was supposed to be goin' back to Vanderbilt after all of my—you know, searching after fake writers—writers who were on sabbatical. I was goin' back to Vanderbilt, and—I didn't wanna be away from him because it had been summer, and I'd been able to go back and forth from Atlanta and be with him all the

time. So on a given Saturday morning at the same time, he told his parents in Madison, Georgia, and I told my parents in Decatur, Alabama. And my father, with his wonderful, practical mind, started figuring out what should be done. They'd met Marshall, and they liked him. Strong, handsome, hardworking engineer, you know, from a family that—they knew who his parents were; his parents knew who mine were—you know, it was all [*coughs*—Daddy and his mother decided we were all related. Anyway, Daddy starts thinkin' of the practical things—"Oh well, we'll have to go get you an apartment in Atlanta and this and that and the other, and then you can—maybe you can go to Emory." And my mother just ran upstairs and started crying. "'Cause you're our one chance to have a wedding!" [*SL laughs*] Oh, and the year before—was it just the year before I was supposed to make my debut in New Orleans, and I cancelled it. Why? That may've had somethin' to do with Marshall. After my aunts in New Orleans had all started makin' the arrangements.

SL: Matters of the heart . . .

EG: I'd forgotten what I wanted to do.

SL: You mean, once you fell in love . . .

EG: Yeah.

SL: . . . everything else kind of fell away.

EG: Maybe the reason I did that was because I wanted to go to Atlanta and run away. I've forgotten. Anyway, it was close on the heels of when I cancelled havin' my debut in New Orleans. So there goes her big, white wedding.

SL: And so . . .

[01:32:59] EG: But instead, very quickly, she started gettin' these beautiful grandsons. And my brother and his wife had had six daughters in a row, so there weren't any boys. And they wanted some boys. So then I'm havin' boys for 'em, and then they're happy, and they forgot all about the rest of it.

SL: So now, what was your husband's name again?

EG: Marshall Walker.

SL: Marshall Walker. And he was working on his engineering degree.

EG: Mh-hmm. Mh-hmm.

SL: So he was a smart guy. I can't imagine you . . .

EG: Oh, he had to study so hard. All that math . . .

SL: Yeah.

EG: I would shudder to look at the books he was havin' to study.

SL: Physics and—yeah . . .

EG: It was the math!

[01:33:41] SL: Yeah, I have a son that's an engineer. So his intellect, his body—was there anything else about him that just really . . .

EG: No, I liked him. I like—I just liked him, you know.

SL: Mh-hmm. So was he also an athlete while he was in college?

EG: Mh-hmm. He had been. I mean, he'd been—he'd gone to a boys' school in Rome, Georgia. Forgotten the name of it. It's real famous. I've forgotten what he played there. Maybe, I mean, football and all that, but there was somethin'—I don't know what sport he played that was unusual to me. I've forgotten. 'Cause he liked to take cars apart and put 'em back together again. That was about the third time I'd fallen in love with people that liked to take cars apart and put 'em back together—you know, that liked to buy old cars and then fix 'em up . . .

SL: Fix 'em up.

EG: . . . and do the motor and all of that.

SL: You liked the mechanics.

EG: It fascinated me. 'Cause I can't do that. It was somethin' I can't do.

[01:34:53] SL: [*Laughs*] It's so messy. It's so—get your hands into it. And he must've been . . .

EG: I don't think we're really in charge of things as much as we think we are, from the time we hit puberty until we have children. I mean, nature knows what it's up to. It doesn't really care about—it'll convince you of anything to get what it wants, which are all those little boys and girls. [*SL laughs*] Right?

SL: I think you might be right.

EG: And there have been times in my life—not anymore 'cause I've got so many grandchildren now that such a thought would never occur to me—when I thought, "You know, the only thing I really regret in my life is that I couldn't have more children," 'cause you can only have three cesarean sections. That's probably not true anymore, but it was then. 'Cause the scar tissue will pull apart.

SL: Yeah. Uh-huh.

[01:35:47] EG: In fact, they don't like you havin' babies as close together as I did. But I used to think that before I got this plethora of grandchildren, that I really wished I'd had more children. They are just—I don't know what anyone would do with themselves when they got to be my age if they couldn't live vicariously in the lives of their children and grandchildren. And I'm sure you can go out and find other children and love 'em that much, but . . .

SL: There's something about the biology.

EG: It's just overwhelmingly interesting to watch 'em grow and develop.

SL: Do you see your mom and dad in your grandchildren?

EG: Oh yes! I see my father's body, which this gorgeous body at Georgia Tech was of course exactly like—he looked just like my father. [*SL laughs*] Course. Wouldn't take a Freudian to tell you that. I see—as they get older, I see my father and my mother's father in my sons—as their bodies mature and their shoulders and chests get wider. All that kind of stuff. It's real, real beautiful. And their hands.

SL: Well . . .

EG: I love the DNA. I'm interested in it.

[01:37:23] SL: Tell me about your running off and getting married. Where was it—you went to the Carolinas.

EG: Oh, I planned it, of course. I'm the imagination, right?

SL: Okay.

EG: All we're doin' is at a fa—we're just—one night at a place—a famous place in Atlanta where people from Georgia Tech used to go to get these footlong hotdogs—except I wouldn't eat anything that big, but they had all this gross stuff on top of 'em. Marshall loved 'em. And I think we're discussing the fact that we wanna

go to bed together. But people really didn't do that. They just didn't do that. And so we were sittin' there, and we—and I said, "I'll sign up for the second semester at Emory, and I'll come up here," or the f—whatever it was. Must've been the first semester. And then some close friends of ours—one of his fraternity brothers and a girl we loved named Happy—her name was Happy—Happy Chandler—had run away and gotten married in South Carolina. And other people had done it. We knew where to go. And so then I came to Atlanta, and I went out the afternoon before, and I went down to this great big, famous department store and bought a white—long, white piqué dress with the little pearl buttons all down the front and lace on the collar and some white shoes. And then I went down to the bookstore part and bought a book on how to have sexual intercourse. This is true. Or I bought whatever there was. It still didn't tell you what to do or anything like that. But it was mostly about contraception, I guess. But it was a very disappointing book, actually. [*Laughter*] And I don't know what else I bought, and then I went back home, and he came and got me in the morning, and we drove up to North Carolina and got mar—got a license and got married by a sheriff with the sheriff and his wife as the deputies in a little courthouse in some tiny,

small town.

[01:39:43] SL: You don't remember the name of the town or . . .

EG: Hm-mm.

SL: That wasn't important, was it?

EG: I must've known it at some point. It was South Carolina.

SL: Yeah.

EG: It was a famous place to run away and get married in.

SL: Well, I'll have to Google that and see if I can find that out for us.

So how old were you then?

EG: I was nineteen when Marshall was born. Maybe I had just turned nineteen and Marshall was still eighteen because at our grandson's graduation from medical school recently, there was a friend of mine there, a physician, and he said, "I can't believe that the two of you were ever married." And Marshall said, "Well," he said, "she was only about fourteen, and I was fifteen." And I said, "That's a lie! You've never admitted that I'm older than you are. You could never admit that! I'm six months older than you are!" [*Laughter*] It was a wonderful little moment.

SL: Well, what does Marshall do now?

EG: Why did I—he's a banker. [01:40:54] He was an industrial engineer. Self-made man. Has made tons of money and lives in his hometown of Madison, Georgia, with a beautiful woman that

he married about ten years after we were divorced. And I like her enormously, and she's been so kind to my children—you know, I feel like she's my sister.

SL: Yeah.

EG: I like her. And they had a daughter, who just had her first child at age forty. And the children—you know, the—my sons go and be with him all the time.

SL: So how long . . .

EG: And they say the strangest thing. They all tell me this at different times, and I'm sure they talk about it to themselves. They say, "Grandmother, your house—both of your houses are exactly like Granddaddy's house." And I said, "You know, that's one thing—we never had an argument about how to decorate a house." But that's just culturally how close we were. When my father says the families were related, he prob—you know, except they were Methodist 'cause in Georgia, people are Methodist instead of Episcopalians.

SL: Yes.

EG: But—and I'm pleased by that because I like the children that we had so much. I couldn't—that was a good idea.

[01:42:33] SL: Well, how long were y'all married?

EG: Off and on for a long time.

SL: So the children got fully raised by both of you or . . .

EG: No, not really. Not fully raised, but for a long time. But they were always—you know, Marshall was always in their lives and is now. He's a nice person. And I have three ex-husbands, but he's the only one who's alive. I appreciate him bein' alive and bein' so strong and healthy.

SL: So y'all . . .

EG: He's a workout freak like I am. I mean, God, that stuff about us that's so much alike. [*SL laughs*] So strange. You know, he takes perfect care of his health.

SL: Mh-hmm. [*Laughs*] Except for those huge, humongous footlong chili dogs at . . .

EG: Well, he do—hasn't eaten those in years.

[01:43:33] SL: [*Laughs*] Well, so you mentioned that you were—you kind of were together off and on through your children's upbringing, so I'm assuming you guys split and would get back together or . . .

EG: Well, you know, I'd never had to—I had—no, I'd go home to my mother. When the children and I would get sick at the same time or—one of 'em got encephalitis one summer from mosquito bites—you know, when frightening things . . .

SL: Sure.

EG: I really wanted to go home to my family doctors, I think, more than anything else. When I'd think that I couldn't handle it—all these children—I'd go home and stay with my mother and daddy for long periods of time. And I'd just move in, give the children to 'em, and just go out and start seeing my friends. [Laughter]

SL: Well, you know . . .

EG: Then I'd go back to bein' a married lady with children. But I remember bein' horribly frightened one time when we all got the Asian flu. The children were sick, and I was too sick to get out of bed and take care of 'em. And Marshall had to go to work. And that was right about the time of the missile crisis—the Cuban missile crisis when we all thought that we were gonna—you know, the . . .

SL: Get nuked?

EG: . . . atom bombs—we were gonna be nuked. I don't know if it's a really good idea for young people, even in their midtwenties, with children to go off someplace where they don't have a support group of parents and cousins. I mean, I know none of 'em want to hear it, but I want 'em not very—if they're going to start havin' babies, I want 'em close to home where we can go help. But my mother, you know, would fly wherever I was at the drop of a hat if anything was goin' wrong. Or she'd send—I

remember one time—she'd send one of my great-aunts if she couldn't come. [*Laughter*] Auntie Maude would come stay.

[01:46:15] SL: So when you would—I guess back then . . .

EG: I don't really remember the details of all those years because I was too busy keepin' everybody alive, [*popping noise*] gettin' people—you know, you sent 'em on—they went on school buses, you know. There were just things you had to do all the time, from one day to the next to stay alive. Keep things goin'.

SL: So, okay, let me think. Let me do some math here. You were married in [19]52, [195]3? [Nineteen] fifty-three, I guess.

EG: I don't know. I have no idea. Let me see . . .

SL: That's funny, you know . . .

EG: I have no idea of the dates of anything.

SL: Really?

EG: Sometime in there. But no, my first child was born in 1956, so I was married 1955.

SL: [Nineteen] fifty-five. Okay.

EG: And then my second child was born about ten and a half months later, in [19]57, and then—but I didn't have Pierre for three or four years after that. So that was good.

[01:47:34] SL: So while you're having children, technologywise, we're now getting television . . .

EG: We have televisions in our house!

SL: And I forgot . . .

EG: We watch *Captain Kangaroo* every morning.

SL: Absolutely. Mr. Green Jeans.

EG: When I was grown—after I was famous and in New York, I got to go on the set of *Captain Kangaroo*, and he gave me a Ping-Pong ball. I got to meet Big Bird [*laughter*] on another day. It's 'cause I used to do things for PBS, for the *MacNeil/Lehrer News Report*, and it would be the building where all the good stuff was goin' on for kids.

SL: So you got a little tour.

EG: You could get off on the wrong floor, and there's Big Bird.

[*Laughter*]

[01:48:17] SL: You know, I forgot to ask you—growin' up—you know, I'm assuming that y'all always had a radio.

EG: Oh, Dooley and I were addicted to the radio. They wouldn't let us listen to it all the time, but at night, we listened to the serial things—you know, the scary shows like *The Creaking Door*.

SL: What about *The Shadow*?

EG: One time for a Christmas present, I made him a scrapbook with all the radio pro—you know, the—what do you call it? The schedules of the radio stations glued onto the pages so we

wouldn't miss any of 'em.

SL: So, *The Creaking Door*. What else do you remember listening to?

EG: I mostly remember *The Creaking Door*.

SL: What about . . .

EG: There were things Dooley thought were funny that I didn't think were funny.

SL: *Lum & Abner*. That was early radio.

EG: I don't know. The only one I remember are the scary ones 'cause I was upstairs readin' books. That was fun, listenin' to the radio, but it was unsatisfactory 'cause you couldn't control all of it. You can control readin' a book.

SL: [*Laughs*] Well, but—you got your news. News came over the radio, too.

[01:49:34] EG: Well, our pa—our house was full of newspapers and magazines and *TIME* magazine and—later, I think my grandmother started likin' *Newsweek* first. She got mad at *TIME* magazine and started likin' *Newsweek*, but . . .

SL: That happens.

EG: *National Geographic*, *TIME*, *Good Housekeeping* . . .

SL: Sure. Yeah. Well, there was also—what about the . . .

EG: . . . *Reader's Digest*.

SL: What about *LIFE* and *Look*? Were those two. . .

EG: Oh yeah, yeah.

SL: Yeah.

EG: I wasn't as fascinated by the photog—by photography as I was later—as I became later. I really liked the words on the page.

SL: What about your father? Did he listen to boxing on the radio? Was there . . .

EG: He listened to baseball.

SL: Baseball.

EG: I don't remember [*sneezes*] ever sittin' down and listening to a sports event. He was up and moving and doin' things.

SL: Yeah.

EG: It might've been on in the background. He would read the sports pages. 'Cause when he'd been a baseball player, he was—had many close friends in many different towns who were sportswriters. And I met them for different reasons, like the sports editor of the *Nashville Tennessean*—the big paper in Nashville. His daughter was a friend of mine at Vanderbilt. But when I first went to Vanderbilt, the first place Daddy took me was over to meet this sportswriter and his daughter. So he liked, you know, writing about sports.

[01:51:16] SL: So when did you actually start writing articles for

papers?

EG: You know, I was just was writing all my life. But poems—but I always wrote the school newspaper any place I lived. I wasn't just the editor of it. I'd just take it over and write all the feature articles [*SL laughs*] 'cause I could do 'em all in an afternoon without havin'—go on and get it in print. When we used to have to print school papers on that sticky stuff?

SL: Mimeographs?

EG: Yeah.

SL: Yeah. I used to draw cartoons on that stuff. [*EG laughs*] It was a nightmare.

EG: That was a mess, wasn't it?

SL: It was a mess.

EG: Gettin' it into the press, we stapled it together. I can't remember. The pages?

SL: Yeah. Mh-hmm.

EG: The first ones.

[01:52:06] SL: What about the typewriter? When did you start using a typewriter?

EG: When I was twelve years old, Daddy gave me a typewriter. And I went upstairs and immediately took all the flowered chintz and everything that was in my bedroom and took it all down and

made my room into an office. [*SL laughs*] I don't know where I got all this money. I guess I just—Daddy always gave me anything I wanted. And I went downtown and got some green and gray striped drapes and put in the windows. Plain white bedspread. Typewriter table, which is in—it's a towel rack in a back bath. And my little Royal portable typewriter. I don't even remember learnin' to type. I've been able to do it forever.

SL: It was not an electric typewriter.

EG: No.

SL: Right.

EG: No, it was a little portable, and I think it was a Royal. But I would read in books, like Hemingway, about something called an Olivetti, and I wanted one so much . . .

SL: I got one of those. I got one.

[01:53:05] EG: Oh, I thought, "Where do you get these? They don't have these where I live." It was many years before I could even—I may have been in Fayetteville before I could switch. Yeah, it would have been way up in the [19]70s . . .

SL: Before you went to an electric?

EG: . . . at least seven—before I even went to an electric typewriter, and I was terrified of it. It was only because I couldn't find a copy—any more copies of the old typewriters I'd used. I read

somewhere recently that Cormac McCarthy had managed to get three or four really good, small typewriters, like the one he's been writin' on all of his life, and he's just got 'em stocked up.

[*SL laughs*] I've got about five of whatever it is I use now . . .

SL: But you don't . . .

EG: Two down at the coast and three here.

SL: You told me earlier, you do not do any writing on a computer.

EG: No. I don't like it. It's too much—I mean, there's no, you know . . .

SL: The tactile is not the same.

EG: Writing on a typewriter is just like breathing to me. It's just no problem. I don't make any mistakes. I know how to do all of it. It doesn't get in the way of my creative process.

SL: And the computer is challenge enough to where it slows you down and . . .

EG: Oh God . . .

SL: . . . ruins it for you.

[01:54:28] EG: . . . havin' to go to all that trouble to tell it not to correct your sentence structure or something. Good God. I just—and I don't—I would have to stop and print every page in order to be happy.

SL: [*Laughs*] That's fun. That's—you say you never had anyone

come along and show you how you could make a computer work for you?

EG: No. I've had people beg me to do it, but I don't want to. I like doin' it just like I've been doin' it all these years.

SL: Yeah. Well, why change if it works?

EG: Right.

SL: Yeah.

EG: I don't want to be able to correct anything [*clears throat*] so that—the way you can correct things on a—because I go—sometimes I get up in the morning and go in and make huge corrections to three or four pages, but the day after that, I put it all back like it was to begin with. 'Cause it's marked out with a pencil, so I can see what I did. I mean, you know, I've been doin' this so long I don't even know what the process is. But it's just thoughtless—takes no thought.

SL: That's a real freedom.

EG: Mh-hmm. Can't break. I mean, you know, 'cause I could get a portable one.

[01:55:49] SL: So you always have a typewriter with you, though, whenever you—you've got one . . .

EG: No, because . . .

SL: . . . on the coast.

EG: . . . no, if I have a legal pad and some no. 2 lead pencils, that's even better. The best writing that I ever do is by hand.

Whitehead wrote everything by hand.

SL: Do you keep all your handwritten stuff?

EG: I don't know. I throw everything under the desk into a little wooden box—a little cardboard box, and every now and then I take all of it and dump it into a white plastic bag and store it. And then I take—then when I get too much stuff, it goes up to the attic, and it's all mixed in with letters from people and cards and . . .

SL: Oh my gosh.

EG: . . . notes to myself, and God knows what all.

SL: Oh my gosh.

EG: No organization. But I—if I wanted somethin', I could find it. I'd just start tearin' open the bags, and the minute I saw one piece of paper, I'd know whether I was in the right, you know, five-month period.

[01:56:59] SL: I've seen some of your handwriting. It's beautiful.

All that—all those notes—all that stuff would probably be a wonderful thing to maintain and . . .

EG: Well, after I'm dead, my oldest grandson will give it to the university or some—or part to Millsaps and part to the

university.

SL: What . . .

EG: But I'm not gonna mess with it 'cause there's too much stuff in there that involves other people, especially in—especially from ten or fifteen years ago when people used to write me long letters about their love affairs and things—some of my friends from all over the world.

SL: Uh-huh. Wonder . . .

EG: And when Cynthia broke up with David and had to wait for Griff to come along—I mean, my God! That's not the world's business. Cut that out of this.

SL: [*Laughter*] Well, I understand that. So . . .

EG: I write letters to my children all the time, too. They pretty much save 'em.

SL: Okay. So you run off and get married and—with Marshall.

TM: Hey, Scott, let's go ahead and change tapes.

SL: Okay, good.

[Tape stopped]

[01:58:16] SL: We are gonna skip over your other two husbands . . .

EG: We're gonna skip 'em because it's too complicated.

SL: Okay.

EG: And then we're gonna get me to New Orleans, Louisiana, with my wonderful—well, actually he was my fourth husband 'cause I married the father of my children twice. But I'm promising you, this is all too complicated for an interview.

SL: [*Laughs*] Okay.

EG: And I was all—and I was very young, and it all happened in a short period of time. And then I'm in New Orleans, and I'm running miles every day, and I'm playing tennis constantly, which in New Orleans, you can play tennis all day. I mean, if it—wh—it rains, but it doesn't rain very long, and the court's dry. And my children are turnin' into teenagers right in the middle of the revolution. And Audobon Park is full of hippies. And the first love-in happens. And what else? What else?

SL: [*Laughs*] Okay, now wait . . .

EG: No hurricanes and oil spills—we just got parks full of hippies, and all the children goin' to join 'em as quick as us draggin' 'em back, hopefully.

SL: Make love, not war.

EG: Right.

SL: So . . .

[01:59:32] EG: And so then I got drunk one night—the last time I ever had a drink, I think. I may've had a few drinks since then,

but that was years ago—more than thirty, thirty-five years, somethin' like that. And I fell down a flight of stairs and had a brain concussion.

SL: Oh my gosh.

EG: Please, a brain concussion and was in the hospital. And they gave me Valium, and then I got addicted to Valium. All this is happenin' in about a week. And my mother is there, and she's all goin' crazy, and everybody's goin' crazy. And we were plannin'—we owned a sailboat in the British Virgin Islands that we kept at a place called the Moorings on Tortola. And we had a trip planned, a scuba diving trip, two weeks—about three weeks after I fell down the stairs, and so I went to a psychiatrist to talk to him to make sure my brain was all right before I went on a sailboat. [02:00:31] And he said yes, that I could go on the sailing trip if I'd wear a football helmet. But then he started laughin' and he giggled, and we knew he wasn't really true, and [SL laughs] he said, "But I want to talk to you, you know, four times a week until you leave." So I said, "Okay." So maybe the next time I went to see him, I had just discovered Gabriel Garcia Márquez, and I gave him a copy of *A Hundred Years of Solitude*. And I didn't know at the time, or I hadn't paid any attention—his—he was from Brazil. I mean, he spoke Portuguese, as well

as Spanish. So he read it in English and in Spanish before I saw him again, and he told me how much funnier it was in Spanish, and I should try desperately to read it in Spanish 'cause I'm missin' all the great jokes. So I thought, "Oh, well, I can talk to this guy." [02:01:27] And then I quit drinking. I just completely quit drinking 'cause I didn't want to have another brain concussion. And because I was in psychotherapy with a great Freudian—psychoanalysis with a great Freudian. And I called him the crying doctor. I would cry. I would go in there and just cry and cry and cry about things that I had never known bothered me, like leaving Harrisburg, Illinois, when I was thirteen years old—when I was a cheerleader and had just written a play for the whole school to do. You know, things that my parents, bein' so wonderful and strong and brave—and there bein' reasons for the fact that we were gonna leave. But I had always just—I've—and—but I'm still that way, and on my deathbed, I'm the queen of denial. I can deny—if a close, close friend of mine dies, I will not shed a tear. I will not shed a tear at Jim Whitehead's funeral. It will be over a long, long, long period of time of drivin' by that cemetery that I slowly but surely allow the finality and sadness of my best friend's death to invade me. But I don't let it get me. I don't know whether this is a

strength or a weakness, but it's—I can't get a brain transplant—they don't give 'em to people at seventy-five. [SL laughs] So that's how I operate. And while I was talkin' to Gunther four days a week waitin' to go on the sailing trip, I began to write again. No, I didn't begin yet. When we left to go get on the sailboat, I was sorry that I was leavin' this brilliant Brazilian psychoanalyst that I'd been havin' so much fun talkin' to. Crying to. And then the tears would go away, and I'd be myself again. I'd go eat a donut on the way home. One of those great big donuts that are like a figure eight . . .

SL: [Laughs] Twists. Cinnamon twists.

[02:03:45] EG: You know—God, you know, I've just—you know, real, real release. What is—but I like things like psy—I'm a perfect person for psychoanalysis. I like explorin' the brain. I like opening doors. I like all that kind of stuff, and I believe in it. Not for everybody. I guess it has to be someone like me. But overall I think a psychiatrist can help anybody, actually. But I— we were gettin' read—my husband was waitin' in the car. The couple we were goin' with that we owned the boat with were already out there. Everybody was ready—we were leaving. And I went back in the house and pulled my old Royal type—portable typewriter out of the hall closet and ran out of the house and

took it with me to the islands. And as soon as we got there, I began to write. And the first poem that I wrote was about my oldest son. "Beautiful son, by your golden hair" and the somethin' that touches—"once more I am missing your birthday." I was gonna miss his birthday. He didn't care. He was out in the park with the hippies. Seven or eight of his girlfriends [*SL laughs*] and, God knows, probably drivin' my car while I was gone. But . . .

[02:05:05] SL: How old were you now?

EG: I don't know. How old was I when I was—I have no idea. I don't even know how to pinpoint it. Except . . .

SL: Well, how . . .

EG: . . . maybe I was almost forty.

SL: Mh-hmm.

EG: I was almost forty. Because—and we had a wonderful diving trip, and nobody died. That—I don't think that's the time that Freddy ran out of air and I had to buddy breathe. I gave him the tank and swam to the top and swam ashore and climbed up a coral reef rather than buddy breathe with a smoker. [*SL laughs*] And that's the only bad thing I'll ever say about that wonderful man that I married that I deeply love. Because he smoked, he would always run out of air.

SL: Sure.

EG: [*Laughs*] Don't let your diving partner—if you're a jogger, you don't want your diving partner to be a smoker. You'll have to buddy breathe.

SL: Oh my gosh.

EG: When I got back to New Orleans, I continued to see Gunther four days a week for over a year. My insurance at my husband's law firm paid for me to see him. And I remember at one point he asked me, "Would you rather be anxious or depressed?" And I said, "Anxiety sounds more like me." And he said, "I would think so." So on the basis of the fact that I had anxiety complex, the insurance paid for it while I saw this—while I talked to this incredible mind. Not that he ever said a single word. He didn't. I talked. He listened. And all this time, I'm writin' unbelievable reams of really good poetry. And I'm publishing it. And a little newspaper in the French Quarter owned by Philip Carter—Hodding Carter's son . . .

[02:07:09] SL: Hodding.

EG: . . . began to publish my poems, and then they asked me to be an editor. So now I'm a poet and a journalist. My dreams come true, right? I used to take my youngest son down to the Quarter with me when I'd have to go to the newspaper office. And he

would spend all his time in the antique stores and the junk shops on a little street in the French Quarter while I was up in the office. He found some enormously wonderful things. He found for me once a scarf, and I don't know where it is, that was a—it was an air force pilot's scarf to wear in the Pacific Theater of the war, like my uncle would've worn—with the Pacific Theater of the war on white silk. Oh God, it was beautiful! Where is that? And I've been writing ever since. When I came to Fayetteville, it was because Jim Whitehead was here, and I wanted to learn how to publish my poetry. I was publishing it anywhere I sent it, practically, but I wanted to learn how to make a book out of it. I did not come up here to be a fiction writer. And then Bill Harrison got hold of me and said, "I'll show you how to publish that poetry. You'll just hide it inside the short stories." But I thought he meant that I would write a short story, and then I'd find a place to put the poem. No, he meant to use the poetic skills to write the short stories, [*laughs*] but I didn't know that. I just thought I was creatin' some little genres where I could put my poem in there . . .

SL: Sure.

EG: . . . and get a bigger readership. Oh. And then—and so I've had a home here—whether I lived here all the time or not, I've had a

home here ever since. So that's pretty much the story of how I got to be a writer.

[02:09:05] SL: Well, tell me the names of your children that were with you in New Orleans?

EG: Marshall Walker and Garth Walker and Pierre Walker. But . . .

SL: Pierre.

EG: . . . Marshall came up here and got a—and went to the engineering school for a while and got a degree in land surveying. He has a land surveying business in St. Croix. And he's also an engineer, but—so he went to school here for bout a year and a half, and Pierre came up here and went to undergraduate—finished his—he'd gone to Tulane, but he came up here and finished his undergraduate degree and then went to law school here. So two of my children, at least, know this place really well.

SL: And Garth?

EG: Garth used to come visit here all the time on his way to the—he lived out west. He would co—always come through here on his way to Colorado or Wyoming. But he lives in Ocean Springs where I live—on the—he's a ship's captain.

SL: Wow.

[02:10:08] EG: They're wild men. They're beautiful. [*SL laughs*]

They have a lot of babies. I like it. They like babies. They carry 'em around—one in each arm. I don't know why people in my family like small children so much. We just do. We're not even Catholics. [*SL laughs*] We just like havin' this whole room full of children.

SL: Maybe there's a little bit of Episcopalian influence there.

EG: I don't know.

SL: Maybe. So how long . . .

EG: It's vanity or ego.

[02:10:36] SL: . . . how long were you in New Orleans?

EG: For a long time. From nine—I married Freddy in 1968. I'd been visiting there all my life. I—my mother's whole family are there. I have a lot of first cousins on my mother's side. I have four first cousins on my mother's side in New Orleans—and all their children and grandchildren. And I'd just been visiting there all my life, but I never imagined livin' there. But I lived there from 1968 until . . .

SL: [Nineteen] seventy-six.

EG: . . . I came up here in [19]76, but then I still lived in New Orleans, and I had a house there until about 1980 or [19]81. I just kinda—but I was always—no matter how much—I would just always come back to Fayetteville. And I've had a house here for

a long, long time—longer than I've had this house. I had a small house on the other side of the mountain.

SL: Mh-hmm. So when you were publishing your poetry anywhere, were—was there income coming in from that publishing—I mean, were you . . .

EG: Publishin' poetry?

SL: Yeah.

EG: No! You barely pay the postage for mailin' . . .

SL: That's what I was thinking.

EG: . . . the things out. You don't make money writin' poetry. You get to call yourself a poet . . .

SL: Okay.

EG: . . . but one re—I came up here to find out where—you know, the places I sent my poetry to, I could publish my poetry, but I wanted to find out where you—where the big time was.

[02:12:10] SL: So what was it—it was Jim Whitehead, but tell me how you came across Jim Whitehead.



EG: I don't know. I had met him. My good friend Tom Royals in Jackson was a close friend of Tom's, and—I mean, was a close friend of Jim's—and Tom—I'm gettin'—I'm talkin' too much. Tom is a close friend of mine, and Jim is a close friend of Tom's, and I had met him in Jackson, where my parents live and my

brothers live. I had met him in Jackson, Mississippi, several times. And . . .

SL: Well, now . . .

EG: . . . was—I liked him enormously, and I was very impressed, and I knew the story of Gen havin' the triplets, but I had never seen the Whitehead children. So when I decided that I wanted to go someplace just for a semester or for a few months to find out how to publish what I was writing, I sent a big box of poems to Jim, and he showed 'em to Miller and Bill, and he called me, and he said, "We need you to come up here." And I said, you know, "Why?" And he said, "'Cause this is wild and powerful stuff. You shouldn't be writin' this by yourself." [*SL laughs*] "You need other writers around."

SL: Yeah.

EG: And I said, "Right. Bingo." Although I knew all the poets in New Orleans, but they weren't like Jim. So I came up here that fall and rented an apartment and—near the campus. And I meant just to go home every weekend, and I did go home a lot.

[02:13:53] SL: So what was goin' on with the kids?

EG: And I studied with Miller, too, a little bit. You know, Miller taught me a lot about gettin' rid of all the adjectives and adverbs, but in the end, I'd generally put 'em back in 'cause I

don't use that many anyway. Pierre was in college at—down in Texas; Marshall was at Tulane; and Garth was in Alaska.

SL: So Garth sounds like the big adventurer.

EG: He is. He handed me a high school diploma, and he said, "Mother, that's the last time I'll ever sit behind a desk and let a man—a grown man boss me around as long as I live." And my daddy gave him a pickup truck. And his best friend was a forest ranger's son, and the two of them went up to Alaska. They drove the Alaska Highway in a pickup truck.

SL: What a great adventure.

[02:14:54] EG: Yeah. We went up there and saw him a few times. He's always done things like that. And you know, I don't worry about my sons. I know how adept they are. I know how good they are at things. And I've never had any power over 'em. I have the same kind of power over my sons that my mother had over me. Zilch. [*Laughter*]

SL: Well, and you must've thought they were fun and funny . . .

EG: I did.

SL: . . . too.

EG: And my daddy and my brothers and their father were all always, you know, bossin' 'em—tryin' to boss 'em around. Wasn't any reason for me to. It all turned out all right. They're all happy.

They're successful. They've wonderful women. And they have all these babies! [*SL laughs*] Sometimes I have to remember to love them first.

SL: So you get to Fayetteville, Arkansas. Had you ever—you'd never been to Fayetteville before you came and . . .

EG: No . . .

SL: . . . met Whitehead . . .

EG: . . . I loved it from the moment I started—from the moment I got to below Fort Smith and I started climbin' into the hills, I just loved the country. It reminds me of north Alabama, where my father's family are from, but the hills there aren't this high. But I just loved it.

[02:16:21] SL: So you start taking classes at . . .

EG: Yeah. Yeah, I was . . .

SL: You must be working on a master's degree now. Is that . . .

EG: Yeah. I went into the M.F.A. program, and I did it all that year.



And by then I'd started writin' short stories, and the first one had won some big award of the Associated Writing Program—that's the biggest thing you can win. It was the first choice of the publication of the nationwide Associated Writing Programs. And I don't know if—oh yeah, and then Bill Harrison came to me and said, "Ellen, this is a book—we—you know, I wanna take this

to my agent." And I said, "No! I'm not gonna show this to someone I don't know in New York City." I said, you know, "Leave it alone. I don't want people judgin' my work." And he said, "But you know"—somethin'—he said, "I'll tell you what. Miller is starting a press—the Arkansas Press—and he wants a book of fiction. Will you let Miller publish it?" And I said, "Yeah, I'll let Miller publish it, but you're not goin' up to New York—talk to some strangers about my work." You know, I'm comin' around to feelin' that way about things again. And then Miller published *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, and it was this huge success and sold all the copies in about a week, and then he st—kept printin' 'em. He was printin' 'em as fast as he could, but they were bein' sold as fast as he printed 'em. And then someone who'd been in the program here took a copy of it to the agent that he worked for—Don Congdon, who represents some of the great names in American fiction for many, many years. And in European fiction. And he called me and asked to be my agent, and then after that, people started givin' me lots of money. Which is why I kept writin' fiction instead of goin' back to poetry . . .

[02:18:15] SL: To poetry. Yeah. Well, so this was a surprise to you—to have that kind of success right out of the shoot?

EG: Nope. I wish I could say it was. None of it's ever been a surprise to me. It's just interesting. It's interesting and exciting, but not surprising.

SL: So you knew . . .

EG: What is surprising is, you know, when you get up there and—well, I had a wonderful editor, who became, while he was my editor, the editor in chief of Little, Brown. I never had to argue with anyone. I never had to—you know, I never asked for anything that was outrageous, and he and my agent have been friends all their life, and everything was done with a telephone call. There was no, you know—and I never—after I published *Dreamy Dreams*, I never had to send anything to anyone. Since then, people have, you know, commissioned anything that I write. So if I'm writin' somethin', I know I'm gonna get paid for it. And I know how hard I work when I'm writing. And when it's funny, I know it's funny. So I know why people like it 'cause I think it's funny. And all I'm doin' is writin' down things that other people did and other people said. Half the funny stuff in *Falling Through Space* is stuff Jim Whitehead said to me, and I credited him with it, you know.

SL: [*Laughs*] So . . .

[02:20:04] EG: So now I'm tryin' to teach . . .

SL: Well . . .

EG: . . . which is complicated and strange.

SL: You—how long was it after you got here that your first book came out?



EG: I don't know because I was—the first year I was here, I was just interested in—I was just mailin' poetry off to all the really fine poetry magazines, and I prob—I had the most publications of anybody. You know, I wrote the most; I sent the most poems out; and I had the most publications. And people get jealous when stuff like that happens—among the poets . . .

SL: Yes.

EG: . . . which surpri—that surprised me. But by then I was spendin' most of my time talkin' about poetry to Frank Stanford, who helped me and loved my talent, or to Jim, who loved everything. He wanted success for me as much as he wanted it for himself, you know. I didn't have to deal with any of that. I just talked to my peers. Is that a terrible thing to say?

SL: No.



[02:21:10] EG: And then I was—you know, I like—it's always been about the work. It's been about doin' the work.

SL: Well . . .

EG: It pleases me that other—that people like to read my books. It

pleases me enormously. And when people write intelligent reviews about my work, I love that, too. But it's really just—there's something that happens when you're doin' creative work. I'm sure it happens to painters and to photographers, but certainly I know for sure it happens to writers. The process of writing—if you write for an hour or two every morning, the day is different than a day when you don't do that. And it's not all cathartic—well, neither is psychoanalysis. It's just—if you're writin' for an hour—couple hours every day, you're movin' toward a goal of creating a finished product of a short story or the beginning of a novel or somethin' or an essay. And I'm real sure of myself when—but it's not all good. I throw half of it away.

SL: I was gonna ask you, are—do . . .

[02:22:21] EG: I throw novels away. I throw novels away every year. I'm more likely to get—to be pleased with what I've done if I stay in the short forms. Then I get sucked into some insane idea, end up in a long novel, and then I . . .

SL: So, I guess, do you think of it at all as a continuing therapy for you when you're writing? I mean, does it . . .

EG: No.

SL: . . . it's just mechanics for you?

EG: No, no, it's not that. No, it's just makin' stuff up. [*SL laughs*]  
Makin' things up. Makin' somethin' out of nothing. That's what I  
tell my students: "Look, you're making somethin' out of  
nothing. It can be anything you want it to be."

SL: Let's talk a little bit about Jim Whitehead.

EG: I'd love to talk about Jim Whitehead . . .

SL: Good.

EG: . . . the wonderful, marvelous, irreplaceable Jim Whitehead.

SL: Big guy. He was a big man.

EG: He was a big man in every way. I think I never noticed how big  
he was physically 'cause I'm too busy arguin' with his big ideas  
or talkin' to him about his big ideas or learnin' from his big ideas.

[02:23:52] SL: One of the things that I remember having been said  
about him was that he did love to argue. That he would take a  
different point of view for the sake and for the fun and for the  
path that argument revealed.

EG: Who told you that? 'Cause I don't think it's true. I think Jim  
would never pretend to believe somethin' he didn't believe.  
Whatever he was believin' at the moment, he believed it with the  
power and force of a hurricane. [*Laughs*]

SL: Well, I mean, do—I mean, would he believe the same thing the  
next day or—I mean, it would seem li—I don't know.

EG: Well, his political views . . .

SL: Ah.

EG: Not about philosophy or science or literature. We usually agreed about those things. Or we could teach each other things about 'em. But oh, he had so much fun when Bill Clinton was elected to the presidency. After doubts—he may have had some doubts. I can't remember if he had any doubts or not, but that was fun. We all had so much fun doin' that.

SL: So usually these sessions were—didn't he have like a study . . .

[02:25:17] EG: We—no, we talked about people. I mean, not that we gossiped, but we have a big group of friends—mostly writers or other artists or Ginny Stanford or someone like that. You know, we explored. We talked about our friends, and how they were, and if we could help, and did they need help, and how were they doing, and—Jim always knew everything that was goin' on with everybody in the literary world that touched both our lives. He knew if their children were sick. If somebody got cancer, he knew the exact technical details. When his daughter Kathleen—now this wonderful surgeon here—doctor and surgeon—when she was in medical school, we would argue. If we were gonna have—we would argue about what Kathleen's specialty should be. [*Laughter*] As if . . .

SL: You had any say in it at all.

EG: . . . as if either one of us—Jim probably had some power. And when she was going through her rotations, she would call me up, and she would get excited about each rotation. And I'd say, "I think she wants to be a psychoanalyst." He'd say, "Oh my God! You've got to be crazy. You didn't tell her to do that?" Or I'd say, "No, I think she's doin' internal medicine." He'd say, "No, I'm not sure that's right." [*SL laughs*] We'd talk about our children and what they should be doin', and we'd just talk about everything. Do you have a really good friend you just like to talk to?

SL: Sure.

[02:27:04] EG: That's all we'd do is just talk about it. And not about the past. Always were talkin' about what was goin' on in the present, in the real world, to real people. And before I ta—I didn't teach at the university until after Jim left. And he would tell me about students that he had and problems he was havin' with 'em and problems they were having. He's just so involved—in so many lives, all at once.

SL: So he was a football player, wasn't he?

EG: Mh-hmm.

SL: At—was he at Ole Miss or . . .

EG: Hm-mm. At Vanderbilt.

SL: Vanderbilt, that's right. That's right. I'd forgotten that. I'd . . .

EG: I've forgotten what he—he was on the—he was a person—on the offensive line, I think. Person—no, the defensive line. Person that keeps the other people from makin' touchdowns.

SL: He—you know, stereotypically, you don't think of a big football player having the intellect that Jim had.

EG: No, or bein' a philosopher. Maybe it was scholarship money. He may've gone there—you know, it might've been his scholarship to Vanderbilt.

SL: Uh-huh. Did he ever talk about his football stuff with you? I guess not.

EG: I used to listen to him talk about football to—no, the only thing that ever interested me was the fact that he had injured his left shoulder so badly. I think it was his left shoulder. Might've been his right shoulder. [*Clears throat*] And he was just in pain for many years of his life from the shoulder—dislocated the rotator cuff or somethin' like that, and finally he had it operated on a few years before he died. But the surgery was helpful, but not that successful.

SL: Yeah.

EG: Maybe it was too late.

[02:29:24] SL: Yeah. I know people that have had as many as three rotator cuff surgeries to—and it's never—it never is the same. I mean, I don't know of anyone that's had suc—a totally successful shoulder rotator cuff surgery. So . . .

EG: I liked to listen to him talk on the phone to people about football. 'Cause while we were talkin', people would call up if it was nearing time for the Arkansas-Ole Miss game or somethin'—people would be callin' from all over the United States.

SL: So there was Whitehead, and there was Harrison at the department when you came, and Miller Williams.

EG: Mh-hmm.

SL: Pretty—three pretty strong—not only personalities, but . . .

EG: Well, they'd created the program. It was theirs.

[02:30:32] SL: Yeah. If you—so of those three, you were probably closest to Jim, you would say?

EG: Mh-hmm. Mh-hmm. I was all—you know, he was just always my best friend. But I love Bill and Miller, and I appreciate everything that they taught me and did for me, too.

SL: Mh-hmm. So how long were you in the M.F.A. program?

EG: I stayed for that year, and then I went home for the summer.

[*Clears throat*] And I had told them that I'd come back and teach—you know, have a teaching scholarship in the fall, but I

couldn't do it. But I came back in the fall and stayed for about five weeks, and Bill Harrison showed me how to write the short story. And then I went back to New Orleans. But I always—but I bought a house up here, you know, and I was always coming back up here. I never really left Fayetteville. I just mostly lived in New Orleans for a while, and then I mostly lived here, and then I do like I do now. I live here most of the time, and I live down there because that's where all my family are. So I ha— now I have a main home here and a house down there. It's not big enough for all those babies.

[02:32:00] SL: So after your first book, you started—you just moved to short stories? Is that . . .

EG: Mh-hmm. I was makin' a lot of money writin' short stories, and I loved to do it. And I had not exhausted my love affair with the form. I wrote—no, I wrote a novel 'cause Little, Brown wanted it, but then I immediately went back to—I must have written three or four collections of stories. I don't really pay much attention to what I did. I just think about what I'm doing at any given moment or somethin' like that.

SL: Well, is there any one collection of stories that you're most fond of? Probably not.

EG: No.

SL: It's kind of hard to . . .

EG: It's just a body of work—you know, it all comes—fits in together.

SL: Well, I've loved—I've really enjoyed *Falling Through Space*.

EG: I love the two books of essays and *The Writing Life*. I loved those two books.

SL: If—so when did you kinda leave New Orleans and ended up basically here—until you ended up with the house where your family is?

EG: Oh, I don't know. I mean, I finally sold the house in New Orleans, but I always kept goin' back down there 'cause—well, but where I was really goin' was to—I mean, I was goin' back down to Ocean Springs, which is where the grandchildren were at the time. But then I was always goin' to New Orleans anyway to give speeches or to talk at Tulane or—about four or five years ago, I had a chair—I had two chairs at the same time—I've forgotten what the names of 'em were—at Tulane. And so I went there and stayed a whole semester. But I'm always gettin' called back down there. I like to go visit there as I did when I was a child.

[02:34:21] SL: Now it's not nearly the same now as it . . .

EG: Since the hurricane?

SL: Yeah.

EG: The part of New Orleans that I know is the same.

SL: The Quarter?

EG: Yeah. No, no, not the Quarter. Uptown.

SL: Uptown. Uh-huh.

EG: Between the Garden District and Carrollton Avenue. You know, the part that includes Tulane and Loyola and Audobon Park . . .

SL: Right. Now . . .

EG: . . . where I lived.

SL: Weren't they—wasn't Tulane really hit hard by the hurricane though?

EG: No, Tulane has made—of everything in New Orleans, it's made the most magnificent recovery . . .

SL: Recovery.

EG: There's a chancellor there named Scott Cowen who had raised a billion dollars. Do you remember when the university here said it had raised a bil—it was the same year. And that was right before the hurricane. [*Clears throat*] And Scott—I guess that's when I was there in 2005—before the hurricane came that fall. Because it was just—but he's just done such wonderful things with Tulane. They sort of run a big charter school and high school there, which they use for teaching. I mean, the—all the legal things about all of that aren't finished, but it's done.

They've been enormously involved in the recovery of the rest of New Orleans, and when students come there, even the medical students, they have to spend a certain number of hours every semester working in New Orleans, helpin' the recovery effort of the schools more than anything else. And Tulane's a big success story. It's got branches out in the Gulf—it's got branch universities out in the—down on the Gulf Coast, and I don't know where all else. Outreach programs and—it's big business.

SL: Yeah. So . . .

TM: Excuse me, Scott. We've got a little bit of light. I'm gonna stop tape.

[Tape stopped]

[02:36:38] SL: So we've kind of—we've gotten you to Fayetteville, and you had a very successful first publishing out of Fayetteville and had—have since continued to be a successful writer. And let's see, you were talking about going back and forth between Fayetteville and New Orleans . . .

EG: Yeah, I had to go back—in fact, the fall that Bill taught me to write the short story, Pierre was finishin' high school. My mother had moved to New Orleans while daddy was out on a ranch in Wyoming learnin' to ski, [SL laughs] and so I had mother right around the corner, and my husband was there, who adores

Pierre. But I kept worryin' about him, and I kept goin' home. And it was very difficult flyin' back and forth every weekend. I don't know how anyone could do that. You know, living one place for five days and then flyin' home for the weekend. I don't understand how salesmen or people that do that can do that. You just—you don't know where you are.

SL: You know, it's amazing to me that in five weeks, Bill Harrison could teach you how to write a short story.

EG: That's all it takes, if my students would listen. It's really simple.

SL: I need to take your class.

EG: And I learned it—no, I learned it in a class called Form and Theory. Not in a workshop. I didn't learn much in workshops. And Frank Stanford says workshops are all loss. And sometimes, they are loss 'cause they're—I had a great one about a year ago 'cause it was very small—no, last semester. I only had eight students at the most, counting two people who were auditing it. I never let people audit my classes, but these were ex-students who were working on somethin' new, and I only let 'em in 'cause the class was so small. But it worked so much better, rather than have fifteen people. Fifteen people criticizin' your brand new baby you just created? Uh-uh. So I'm real careful and leery about workshops, and I'm glad I'm sayin' this

'cause I need to remember to be careful and leery about it  
'cause more harm than good can be done.

[02:39:13] SL: You know, you've mentioned Frank Stanford a couple times now. Do you—I feel like you might ought to talk to us a little bit about Frank and who he was and his influence here.

EG: He was just a great, young, brilliant writer who killed himself because he was an adopted child who wasn't adopted until he was a year old, and we don't know why. He was probably depressed. But it was as bad as when they made us march in there and see that little boy in the first grade. It was really an amazing thing. You know, if someone—if a young person is killed by a drunk driver in the middle of the night or driving drunk themselves and dies, that's somethin' we've all experienced. That's horrible and terrible, but predictable in a way. But a really beautiful, talented young person takin' their own life is—oh, just too horrible. And everybody around 'em feels guilty. They think they could've prevented it, but you can't prevent somethin' if you don't know it's gonna happen.

SL: So was Frank a . . .

[02:40:34] EG: I don't like to talk about Frank 'cause I'm afraid some young kid will get the idea of gettin' famous by killin' himself.

SL: Oh.

EG: You know, at one point, when I really had recovered completely from the horror and terror of a friend's death, I marched into my house and took every book written by a suicide—all—which is a lot of poetry—off my shelves and took it out and threw it in the trash can and threw it away. All the Anne Sexton, all the Sylvia Plath. Out, out, out. This might influence some young person. That's not how you get to live forever. You get to live forever through the DNA. [*SL laughs*] And not forever but, you know, as long as human life lives on.

[02:41:27] SL: That's something that nature is good at providing us, isn't it?

EG: Yes.

SL: Well, let's talk a little bit about Fayetteville then and why you love it so much here.

EG: You're the one that knows it. You're a native. I'm not a native. It's my adopted . . .

SL: I know, but no one wants to listen to me.

EG: . . . it's my adopted town, but it's got the ghost of all those small towns in Indiana and Illinois where I fought the war against Japan. [*Laughs*] I just love to be here. I know everybody in this town—I feel like I know everyone in town. I can hardly go

anywhere without feelin' like I know—without running into someone I really wanna stop and have a long conversation with. Who was it I ran into—I ran into Judy McDonald yesterday afternoon, Jay McDonald's wonderful wife . . .

SL: Sure. Yeah.

EG: . . . at Collier's Drug Store at four thirty in the afternoon. And she was gettin' some medicine for one of her ailing animals . . .

SL: Yeah.

EG: . . . and I was pickin' up those photographs for you. And we just talked for about forty-five minutes, and then we walked out together. [*laughs*] I mean, this town is just full of people that I love . . .

SL: There are lots of . . .

EG: . . . that I love to talk to.

[02:42:50] SL: It is interesting—I mean, this is probably true of any community in the United States, but there seems to be an inordinate amount of fascinating and interesting and exciting people and things that they're working on that seems to gather here, perpetually, and it just seems to renew.

EG: I know. Maybe I shouldn't say this, but Judy told me that she had finished writing the children's book that she told me she was gonna write the last time I saw her. And I had this memory of

bein' up at the health club and runnin' into her, and she said, "I wanna start writing," and she told me she wanted to write a children's book, and I said, "Write it!" So she thinks I gave her an assignment, and she did it. [*Laughs*]

SL: Finished it. Isn't that funny how . . .

EG: We had just been talkin' about a friend of ours who's obsessive compulsive—all my friends are obsessive compulsive. Tell 'em to go write a children's book [*laughter*—couple months later, there it is!

SL: That's great that—the conversation just kind of picks up where it left off.

[02:43:57] EG: Right. Like, I believe—I don't need any scientific proof that whales, you know, go all the way around the ocean, and when they come back to San Francisco, they start talkin' to their friends [*laughs*] in San Francisco. They pick up the song exactly where they left it off.

SL: Yeah, they mate for life, don't they? I think they do.

EG: I don't know.

SL: I think they might.

EG: But they have these friendships. I mean, they have these songs they sing to other specific whales.

SL: I may be wrong on that. Maybe I just want to believe that. I

don't know. So now you teach.

EG: I know. I only meant to do this for one semester . . .

SL: How long have you been teaching here?

EG: . . . but then I got hooked. Well, it was the year before 9/11, so that's the year 2000—in the fall of 2000, and the first day I was on the campus, a professor was killed in Kimpel Hall.

SL: John Locke.

EG: Yes. What a terrible loss.

SL: I had classes with John.



[02:45:04] EG: Yeah. And so I can always date—I began teaching the year that my oldest grandson went to college. He ended up—I mean, I agreed to do it before I knew this, but he ended up havin' wonderful scholarships. He went to Duke. And so I didn't need to send money, but I thought I would. I thought I'd need extra money, but I really was doin' it because if he—if Marshall was gonna go to college, I wanted to be where stu—where people his age were. I wanted to know what it was he was experiencing. I mean, I had many, many reasons. And I was curious to see if I could do it. And I was worried about the program because Jim had left, and Bill had left, and Miller was not there full time, and—I mean, I trust Skip Hays with my life and certainly with the writing program, but I thought I needed to

go lend an oar. And then I just got hooked. It's wonderful.

SL: What is it about teaching that's so wonderful?

EG: I don't know. You just get caught up. You get caught up in the—well you know, a long time will go on, and you think, "What are we doin'?" Oh, this is not working. Oh my God, are we dream merchants? Oh, I don't know what to do." And then all of sudden, there it is. Someone hands you a real short story or the beginning of a book of essays that has real power, and they've understood what it was you asked 'em to do, and there aren't a bunch of dumb adjectives and adverbs, and it's clean. I mean, you know, and there it is. Then you're just—you know, you can get hooked again for two years on one good manuscript. It's exciting. And it's not that difficult to do because I only teach two days a week and . . .

[02:47:12] SL: Yeah, but there's all that work between, isn't there?

I mean, you have to . . .

EG: Well, yeah . . .

SL: You can't—you . . .

EG: . . . but it's not exactly work. It's what I know how to do. And I don't know if it helps my work or hurts my work, but I know I was rewriting or editing somethin' of my own yesterday, and I thought, "God, I'm good at this." [*Laughter*]

SL: You might should teach it!

EG: And I was thinkin', "I've honed my skills on the students' manuscripts." Maybe I have and maybe I haven't, but thinking makes it true. I like doin' it. I like havin' colleagues. And writing—art is a lonely work. It's a—you know, you have colleagues who are interested in the same things you're interested in. Molly and Skip are better teachers than I am, probably. They know all sorts of—not probably. They definitely are. They've been doin' it for many years, and they can see the endgame better than I can see it. But I think we're holdin' down the fort.

[02:48:35] SL: So do you think that you'll just keep teaching for—I mean, is there any—have you set a goal in mind as to . . .

EG: No, I'm healthy and strong, and I swim sixty laps a day, and as long—and you know, any time I want to, I can memorize seven numbers and remember 'em the next day, so nothin' wrong with my mind. [*Laughs*]

SL: Is that the test? I've never . . .

EG: Oh, I've just always heard that as long as you can memorize seven numbers in sequence and then remember—so just memorize phone numbers.

SL: I'm gonna have to start giving myself that test.

EG: Besides that, I learn things from my students.

SL: There is that, isn't there?

EG: Mh-hmm. 'Cause I don't use all the technology that they use, but I can tell them how to use it in a short story. I can't believe that no one has written using this insane stuff that all the teenagers write each other.

SL: You mean the twittering and the texting and . . .

EG: *F-O-T-F-L-O-L*, which means falling on the floor laughing out loud.

SL: [*Laughs*] Yeah.

EG: They have all these things—they all recognize 'em just like that—just like Chinese hieroglyph. When they—when my, like, eleven- and thirteen-year-old granddaughters use Facebook, all of their messages to one another are one, two, or three words.

SL: In abbreviations and . . .

EG: And their answers, and they're answered in one, two, and three words.

[02:50:15] SL: So what do you think about that? I mean . . .

EG: I like it.

SL: You do?

EG: I like it. Whatever they're doin'. Then they'll, you know, actually write somethin', but it's usually in a guise of "I have

joined a club called 'Girls Who Pretend to be Goth,' except I'm not pretending." [*Laughter*]

SL: That's funny. Well . . .

EG: I can read their facemails all day. I love bein' on Facebook. My eleven-year-old grandson in Denmark asked me to get on Facebook so he could communicate with me 'cause it doesn't cost them much to call me, but it costs me a lot to call them, so I don't call 'em very often. And I love it. All my nieces and great-nieces and nephews and great-nephews and all my grandchildren, especially with my granddaughters—especially with the girls—the girls are the leading typists in the Facebook world, I think, or it looks to me like. Boys are too cautious. [*SL laughs*] But how cautious can you be sayin', "Awesome" . . .

SL: Yeah.

EG: . . . and bein' answered with "Love you, too"? [*Laughter*] Oh, I can't—I don't know how to use this in fiction, and I want the generation that has it at their hands to learn how to use it in fiction. It could be so funny 'cause it is funny.

SL: This is one of those things that—technology once again starts shaping the culture quite a bit. I mean, before radio people were always working really hard just to eat and to have shelter and, you know, raise a family. And radio came along, and then

there was kind of a entertainment—home entertainment thing that didn't require having people over and throwing a bash or going down to the church on Wednesday nights or to the courthouse square to see who's talking. They could sit around a radio. And then TV came out, and you got—which begat . . .

EG: I have to go downtown every afternoon. [*Laughs*]

SL: Yeah.

EG: I have to know what's goin' on down there in flesh and blood.

SL: Right, right. Well now, you know, people—I'm certainly guilty of shopping online and hunting for—you know. We were talkin' about the three word—three-letter words and stuff, but you know, I still find it kind of fun to be reading something and come across a word that I'm not familiar with and looking it up. I mean, there's some—a little element of adventure in that.

[02:53:18] EG: I was up at the English Department yesterday afternoon—this is the kind of thing that only happens if you're teaching at a college or a university, and one of the secretaries was tryin' to talk to me about somethin', and she was answerin' the phone, and there was some young man on the phone who was frantic to know the meaning of a word. And I said, "Give it to me," just on a fl—I mean, I just felt like doin' it. So I got him on the phone, and I said, "Tell me what your problem is." And

he had found a word called *L-O-I-U-I-U* or somethin' like that. And I said "Well," and he said, "I think it might be a name." And I said, "Well, is it capitalized?" And he said, "Well, it's in this"—and it was a werewolf book that he was reading—a fantasy werewolf book. [*laughs*] And I—and he said, "I've looked it up everywhere, but it's nowhere." And I said, "I think that that author has made up a word, and it's probably just a name. How far are you into the book?" And he said, "I'm halfway." And I said, "Is this the first time the name's come up?" And he said, "Yeah." And I said, "It'll come up again." [*Laughter*] And then Lyna Lee Montgomery, the patriarch of the humanities, much less the English Department, came in, and I told her, and she was giggling. And she said, "I can't help him. I don't know anything about werewolf fantasy literature." [*Laughs*]

SL: It is amazing, isn't it? There is . . .

[02:54:49] EG: The amazing thing is to think about that young man who's deep into a fantasy werewolf book, and his whole morning's been ruined because he's had to spend hours trying to research a word that he does—he can't find the meaning of this word! But he's buyin' the werewolf fantasy other than that. [*Laughs*]

SL: That is funny.

EG: I don't know why I like that story so much, but I really do.

SL: [*Laughs*] Well, so you're gonna just keep teaching . . .

EG: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . as long as you can . . .

EG: Long as I . . .

SL: . . . remember seven—memorize seven numbers?

EG: My long-range plan always was that until—and it certainly won't happen in these economic times, and who cares? There's no hurry about it. Until we get on firmer ground and our endowment gets back up to where it was—the money the Walton family ga—that Carolyn Walton gave us, and hopefully until we can get another strong, young person with real skills who's published real books in to be another professor. 'Cause Molly wanted to leave, and we begged her. Skip said, "I'm on my knees if necessary," and I just got on mine. So now she's gonna teach one semester a year. And until we can—as long as I'm needed, I'm there. And I want to be there. As long as I'm healthy and I'm needed, I wanna be there. I wanna see what happens next. [*Makes clicking sound*] Turn the page.

SL: Turn the page.

[02:56:34] EG: Things are goin' well at the university. Dave Gearhart is the most wonderful person we have ever had there.

I mean, any—every decision he makes is exactly the decision I would make. I mean, I'm just—you know, what else can you ask? And he's doin' a great job in what should be difficult times, but they're not difficult times. We've got a huge freshman class. The English Department is gonna have five hundred extra students . . .

SL: Wow.

EG: . . . to teach Composition to. We have four p—we were able to give four small positions to people to teach English Comp. And we were just bombarded with man—you know, with submissions of people wantin' to do it. And I think everything's gonna be all right. It—you know, it's about teachers and students. The rest of it really doesn't matter.

SL: Well, I, of course, am a great fan of David Gearhart's.

EG: Oh, I am too!

SL: And Jane.

[02:57:43] EG: Haven't they—I mean, hasn't he just made the right decisions? And who's the ec—who's the person that does financial work with him?

SL: Brad.

EG: Yes.

SL: Brad Choate.

EG: Yeah. His right-hand man that I was introduced to. I was just real taken. I just feel like we're in good hands.

SL: There is that general feeling of well-being.

EG: Mh-hmm.

SL: That . . .

EG: In the midst of what oughta be fear and terror and all that.

SL: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

TM: Scott, we need to change tapes.

SL: Okay.

[Tape stopped]

[02:58:19] SL: I still—I mean, I know that you have an infinite well of stories to tell or that you could tell because you tell them in your books. You . . .

EG: Well, I make some of 'em up.

SL: Yeah.

EG: Or I elaborate on somethin' that really happened, like goin' down to see those wild animals in Mexico with my brother and my cousin Bunky. I mean, they really took me down there, but I mean, you know, nobody broke their leg or any of that stuff, which is . . .

SL: Little drama.

EG: Yeah.

SL: A touch of drama. Seasoning. Throw in there. Well, when you—we did talk a little bit about how the best, for you—what works best for you is a pencil and a notebook—a pad . . .

EG: And a—no, it's got to be a yellow legal pad.

SL: A yell . . .

EG: Except I really like the white ones better now.

SL: Easier to see?

EG: Whitehead liked yellow legal—no, he began likin' white ones, too. But the typewriter's the best.

SL: Is it the pressure of the keys and the . . .

EG: Hm-mm.

SL: . . . the mechanical nature and the sound that it makes or . . .

EG: Hm-mm. Hm-mm.

SL: . . . what is it about a typewriter that . . .

[02:59:36] EG: It's turnin' my thoughts into written prose 'cause if you're typin' on a typewriter, you can see what you're typing, you know. And it's—I like the way it looks. But I don't even know that—once I get started, I don't even know what I'm doing mechanically. There's nothin' that drives me crazier than havin' to stop and fix a ribbon. No, I don't let myself get upset. You know, this is my weapon that I choose to use it, and sometimes I have to put a new tape in it. [*Laughter*] That's . . .

SL: Ammo.

EG: . . . all there is to it. Only takes me a second, and I always have about a lifetime supply of 'em 'cause when I go buy 'em, I always think, "They're gonna quit makin' tapes for this typewriter at any given moment. I better buy all of 'em."

[Laughs]

SL: Well, there's probably some truth to that.

EG: I know it.

SL: Eventually, they . . .

EG: Especially the eraser tapes. [SL laughs]

SL: So . . .

[03:00:37] EG: I was gonna tell you about the good parts of bein' famous . . .

SL: Yes.

EG: . . . 'cause I could tell you about the bad parts in a heartbeat.

SL: Okay.

EG: The bad parts are havin' your work judged by other people. Even people who write very pleasant things about your work usually miss the point. Nobody knows what you wrote but yourself. But that's okay. The work belongs to the world; they can interpret it however they want to. But one—some wonderful things have happened to me because I became a famous writer

that would nev—once, right after I won the National Book Award, Eudora Welty had told me four times that I should fly on the Concorde. And I said, "Oh, Eudora, there's no way I could—I don't want to fly at supersonic speeds. I don't even like to fly, you know, down to the coast. Why would I wanna fly?" But right after I won the National Book Award, my British publishers, Faber and Faber—I was so honored and pleased to have this great publishing company in Great Britain become my publisher, and they would publish the books right after they were bought. The list at Faber and Faber is just like Nobel Laureate after Nobel Laureate, so I wanted to do it. And they wanted me to come over there and meet 'em. And the National Book Award had an award of \$10,000, which was thirty now—you know, at the time—it would be thirty now. So for—I don't know how I got myself to do it. Probably because I thought, "If Eudora could do this, as timid as Eudora is, I'll do it." [*SL laughs*] [03:02:19]

So I bought a ticket on the Concorde and flew to Great Britain on the Concorde, and I had on a long, white pleated skirt and a white—a soft, white blouse that came down. You know, it looked like a flapper dress. And I was so excited, and so I was probably very pretty because I was so excited. And we were in the lounge where you have to wait to get on the Concorde. It's a

special lounge with all kinds of beautiful food and things. And there's a gray-haired gentleman sittin' there, and I think we spoke or exchanged newspapers or somethin', and when I got on the Concorde, I was sitting next to him. That's wh—at the beginning, the Concorde seats were this big. They became about the size of this chair, but at the very beginning, they were this big. [Uses hands to suggest width] And he introduced himself, and he was the president of Lloyd's of London, which insures the British Airways planes. It insures the Concorde. And I was telling him about my excitement. And he explained the plane to me and showed me the little clock, so you can see when it goes to Mach 1 and Mach 2. We have, you know, Mach 1, Mach 2, and Mach 3. We were gonna fly to London. I guess—I've forgotten—I think it takes three hours if the wind's right. And this incredible airplane was still very new. It takes off at seven hundred miles an hour, almost straight up, and then somethin' happens to the nose cone. [03:03:47] It straight—and then it straightens out, and then within about fifteen or twenty minutes, you're at Mach 1. And you feel the plane go past the speed of sound. You know, you feel the plane pull like some giant has jerked it—so exciting. And he said, "Have you ever been to England before?" And I said, "No, I don't like to

travel; I'm from the American South. You know, I don't even like to go to New York." Plus, I—well, I do like to go shoppin' in New York or to see the ballet but—and he said, "You've never been to England?" And he said, "Obviously, from your name, your ancestors came from the British Isles." And I said, "Did they ever! Every one of 'em from Scotland or from England." And he said, "Would you like to go up in the conco—in the cockpit?" And I said, "Of this airplane?" [*Laughter*] And he said, "Yes." And he got up, went up front, and right after we finished eatin' dinner, the pi—he came back with one of the pilots or the copilots. There were three officers in the cockpit. [03:04:51] And they took me up to the cockpit of the Concorde. And there were four—pilot, copilot, third—second, third officer, and then there was a seat right here [uses hands to suggest layout of cockpit] near the door that went back into the main cabin. And I sat down in it and put the seat belt on, and I said, "This is—I cannot—I can't believe this. This is amazing. Thank you so much. I promise not to touch anything." And the pilot said, "Oh, it would be better if none of us touched anything." [*SL laughs*] And then the second officer said—the third officer said, "The plane is flown by computers." [*Laughter*] But I could see out the wide, wide front window. I could see the panorama

of the British Isles come into view late in the afternoon—or we left New York around nine in the morning—three hours would be twelve, and then a time difference—it would've been six in the afternoon in a spring day. And there's—there are the British Isles looking just like they look in a children's map—you know, on a salt map, spread out. And from so high up that you could see everything all at once. You know, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, London, England. Too much. I don't know when I left the cockpit. Not until we were completely landed, I don't think.

SL: Is that right? That's the best seat in the house.

EG: That's the most amazing thing that ever happened to me in my life. And then I had lunch with the gentleman who'd let me do it later in London.

[03:06:38] SL: What about—after you had success with your writing and—or it started and started to roll very well, did you meet other writers that you'd always . . .

EG: Well, I'd always—as soon as I began seriously writing and publishing poetry again after many years, I was in contact with other poets all over the United States—writing to 'em, telling 'em that I liked a poem that they'd published in *Poetry* magazine. They'd write back to me. And after my books became successful and after I was on National Public Radio—when I did that little

stint for Bob Edwards and I made up the genre of the little personal essay, which God forbid is used by such corny people now. Most of the time I just shudder and want to turn the radio off. But I was, you know, invited to universities and colleges all over the United States. I gave addresses to the graduating medical school class at the University of California in San Francisco and to the University of Nevada. I just—it—where there're women, graduating students would beg to have me. And I flew all over the United States givin' lectures at—I had an agent out in San Francisco who was very good at all this. And I had a great time, and I met—you know, but by—I already just—if I really like a person's—a writer's work, then I want to be friends with that writer, and there's an instant rapport. I feel that way about Larry McMurtry.

SL: Okay.

[03:08:31] EG: I love his work. He's said nice things about mine also. It's, you know, it's just an immediate and lifelong bond, if you really like their work and they really like yours. But it's impossible for a writer to be friends with another writer if you don't like their work 'cause it's hard to pretend that you like someone's work.

SL: It's not in you.

EG: Hm-mm.

SL: And it's not in them.

EG: Hm-mm.

SL: So . . .

EG: But I have—I don't keep up with all of 'em the way I used to. I used to—huge voluminous correspondence in those boxes and plastic bags between myself and other writers. Mostly about somethin' they're publishing; somethin' I'm publishing; somethin' they've read of mine.

SL: Well, did you—are there any that you ever got to spend some time with? Did you ever get to meet and . . .

EG: If I wanted to, but I don't like to leave home. [*SL laughs*] I mean . . .

SL: Do you . . .

EG: . . . and I'm busy writing. You know, I don't wanna . . .

SL: Mh-hmm. And it's probably true of them, too.

[03:09:40] EG: Right. I have a lot of friends. You know, I kinda have enough friends. Busy people don't, you know, just go flyin' around to hang out like you do when you're young.

SL: Yeah. Well, let's talk a little bit about your NPR involve . . .

EG: The only time I ever did things like that were—one time I went up to see a famous movie producer—oh, in New England—and

stay with he and his wife to talk about writing a screenplay for him—I've forgotten what it was about—really famous, powerful producer. God, what a dreary three days.

SL: Really?

EG: Walkin' around some Yankee producer's house up in upstate New York. Ugh, listening to his wife. Oh God, what a boring thing. It's better just to—and his ideas for what he wanted me to write were so far away from anything I was ever gonna do, but I couldn't find any way to truncate the weekend. I had to keep stayin' till I got to leave. [*SL laughs*]

SL: Well, wha—I mean, if he was asking you to be something that you're not, I . . .

[03:10:52] EG: Well, he was askin' me to write somethin' that wasn't—I've forgotten what it was.

SL: Yeah.

EG: Maybe it was—I don't think it was an adaptation. Maybe it was an original idea, but it's not anything that I ever wanted to do.

SL: Do you ever feel an infinit . . .

EG: And he was so dreary and depressed, and so was his wife. You know, [*unclear words*]. [*Laughter*]

SL: You know, we haven't really talked about music at all. When I got here this morning, you had the . . .

EG: Yeah, but you're a musician. I listen to music all the time.

SL: Do you have some favorite works?

EG: Classical music and jazz and whatever captures my eye at the moment. Whatever captures my ear.

SL: Mh-hmm. What about—is there—are . . .

EG: I need some new—I probably need some new music. I got—when Bob Brinkmeyer was the head of the English Department at the U of A—I don't know if you ever knew him. He had a radio station on Monday nights—I mean, a radio program on the student station playin' African music from all over the world, from different countries. And it was so wonderful. And there were no interruptions. You know, maybe every forty minutes he would say—you know, tell you what station it was and tell you which country the music was comin' from. I was thinkin' the other day—I was swimmin', and I was thinkin', "I gotta call Brinkmeyer and ask him to send me some more tapes or some more CDs."

[03:12:25] SL: So what about . . .

TM: Can we fix your necklace a little bit?

EG: Mh-hmm.

TM: Center it up a little bit?

EG: It's itching me.

TM: Well, just—yeah, just do . . .

EG: That's why I moved it.

TM: There we go.

EG: There we go.

SL: Okay.

TM: Kay. Thanks.

[03:12:35] SL: What about lyrics in music? Are there any lyricists,  
any . . .

EG: Since Bob Dylan?

SL: Yeah.

EG: [*Laughs*] I don't know.

SL: Are you familiar with Dylan's work? Are you . . .

EG: Yes, I probably know it all by heart.

SL: Is that right? So . . .

EG: Barry Hannah, the first graduate of the U of A writing program  
and a famous Mississippi writer who we just lost last year,  
named a book *Yonder Stands*—what is it? *Yonder Stands* the  
somethin' with his gun? Is it—*Yonder Stands Your*—oh, it's a  
word for young people. I'm gettin' tired. We've been doing this  
long . . .

SL: It's out of a Dylan song or . . .

EG: Mh-hmm. "Yonder stands your somethin' with the gun." Da-da-

da-de-da-de-da-de-da.

SL: Hmm. Don't know. I . . .

EG: But anyway, I have never been jealous of another writer, but I was so jealous of Barry thinkin' of usin' that as the title of a book. *Yonder Stands Your* somethin' with his gun. It's a word for a young person.

SL: I wish I could pull that up. I can't . . .

EG: But I'm—you know, there are so many wonderful lines in some music.

[03:14:20] SL: I—you know, course, I'm a big fan of the Band and all of the stuff that they—in their heyday. And of course, they're strongly affiliated with Dylan, but you know, those guys used to play here out at the Rockwood Club. And you know, we used to see them around town, and it's just amazing to me that—you know, some people say all the best writing is out of the South. Do you . . .

EG: It always feels that way, doesn't it?

SL: Uh-huh.

EG: I hate to say it, but it feels that way.

SL: I wish I could think of that quote for you from Dylan. I . . .

EG: I do, too. [*SL laughs*] It's not soldier, but maybe it's soldier.

*Yonder Stands Your Soldier with His Gun.* It may be soldier. It's

just a book of short stories. It has nothin' to do with that title, but that's the most wonderful title for a book.

TM: Not orphan, is it?

EG: Yes! *Yonder Stands Your Orphan with His Gun*.

SL: Woah. You gave me the chills . . .

EG: "Cryin' like a sailor in the sun" or somethin'.

SL: Yeah.

EG: Somethin' like a sailor in the sun.

SL: Good job, Trey.

EG: "Yonder stands your orphan with his gun" . . .

[03:15:34] SL: "With his gun." Yeah. Well, you know, there was a period in time when the lyrics and the stories just kind of fell away from pop music and became kind of an endless—endless guitar rides or instrumentals that didn't really have that much melody, and—what about the Beatles? Did you ever embrace the Beatles and their st . . .

EG: I like the Beatles' music, but that was—you know, at that time in my life, I probably only listened to classical music or really fine jazz. I never really liked much popu—I mean, it's not that I didn't like it, and sometimes there'd be a song that was so beautiful and haunting, especially beautiful, haunting love songs . . .

SL: Mh-hmm. "Long Black Veil"? [*Laughs*]

EG: . . . but I mostly like—I like just music in the background. I just like listenin' to it.

SL: Backgroundwise, I guess there's a soothing nature about it.

EG: Well, to Bach.

SL: Yeah. Well . . .

EG: I never tire of Bach, and there's not much. You know, in the end, there's not much.

SL: Yeah.

EG: You've listened to all of it very soon.

[03:17:07] SL: Okay, so let's—I was about to ask you about NPR and your time with NPR. What—how did that come about, and what was that like . . .

EG: The night that I won the National Book Award, a young man who had helped Bob—he and Bob Edwards had created *Morning Edition* together. We did not have an NPR station in Fayetteville. I was prayin' that we would get one. And as Woody Bassett told me later—I think it was Woody—the work was bein' done by lawyers in Washington, DC, [*SL laughs*] but I had no idea how you got NPR to be in your town so that you didn't have to be drivin' round California to get to hear it—the wonderful talk shows and things. And so there were hundreds of people tryin'

to interview me that night, but I picked out the NPR person. What was that kid's name? He was just twenty-six years old, and he and Bob Dylan had created *Morning Edition* and were still creating it. And he interviewed me, and I said a lot of funny stuff. [SL laughs] And then the next day, Bob Edwards called me on the phone, and I knew who he was—how, I don't know, 'cause we didn't—maybe I just—'cause I'd been in New York listenin' to it—and asked me if I would be on *Morning Edition*. And I said, "Doin' what?" And he said, "Anything you want to. We just want your voice on the program." And I said, "Oh, but w—I don't know." So we talked for a while, and I said, "Okay." I said, "Look, I get all these fan letters constantly. And they're people askin' me, 'How do you—why are you who you are, why you instead of me?' or whatever. And I don't know how to answer these questions, and I never feel like I've answered 'em satisfactorily." And I said, "You know what, I'll do—for a few weeks, I'll do a little diary for you, like journal entries." And he said, "We'll call it journal entries." And I said, "And I'll just tell you what I'm thinkin' on a weekly basis. What has captured my imagination. What book I'm reading that I'm involved in"—like a new biography of Einstein's, which led to Einstein's great biographer becomin' one of my closest friends in New York

'cause I reviewed his book. But—and not really a book review.

[03:19:28] And so I began to make those little pieces, some of which are in *Fallin' Through Space*. And they were just this huge success, and Bob would end the program with 'em. He'd open the program by tellin' 'em I was gonna be at the end of it, and he'd end the program. Which was good, because I never turn on media in the daytime, but I'd want to listen to myself. But I didn't want to spend a whole hour listenin' to myself, so if I could know what day it was on, I'd just turn it on at the end. And I had fun doin' it. Nobody ever edited it. I can't remember what that young—Jay Kernis , who's now a big producer on CBS or NBC. He's now a grown man and a happy man, and I've seen him three or four times down the years. We love each other. Jay never touched my stuff. Bob never touched my stuff. I'd go down to KUAF, and I mean, I'd type up three or four things, or I'd type up two or three of 'em, go down to KUAF, spend thirty minutes with the kids down there puttin' 'em on tape or whatever they used at the time to se—and they'd send 'em to New York, and they would go on the air exactly like I wrote 'em. And that went on for about a year and a half, and I was happy, and the audience was happy. [03:20:45] And then NPR began to change, and they got all these young, Ivy League girls in

there. Rabid feminists—you know, all the new wave and everything. Politically correct to the ninth power. And they'd call me up and say, "Are you sure you want to say this?" about somethin'. And I said, "Look. I'm doin' this for a hundred dollars a week as a public service to try to get NPR in Fayetteville, Arkansas. I'm not gonna—you're not gonna edit my work. Who are you?" And it—and then I got irritated with 'em. And then I started just makin' a tape every other week and, you know, and after a while, it just all kind of fizzled out . . .

SL: Yeah.

EG: . . . 'cause I wasn't gonna put up with that. As long as it was just Jay Kernis, Bob Edwards, and me, and I'd write the things, and they'd put 'em on the air, okay. But if I got to go through the politically correct battalion to get there, it's not happening.

SL: That's neat though that you could just . . .

[03:21:49] EG: All this time, my—good lawyers from Fayetteville were in Washington, DC, gettin' us an NPR station. [*SL laughs*] And my editor kept sayin', "Ellen, quit puttin' that silly stuff on the air. I don't know if you oughta be doin' that." And then my book sales started climbin', [*laughs*] and all of a sudden, Roger quit complainin' about me bein' on NPR.

SL: Well, that stuff was—was it hitting all the NPR stations all across

the country?

EG: Oh yeah.

SL: What a great avenue. What a great venue.

EG: Well, I never thought of it as that, but I sure got a lot of wonderful fan mail. I used to try to answer it. Oh my God! It would take hours.

SL: You felt a responsibility to respond.

EG: Mh-hmm. Mh-hmm. [*SL laughs*] I'm sure that that's true, and I'm glad that I was there and got to experience it. The really good part—when Jay Kernis and Bob Edwards and I were havin' a really good time, the audience was laughin' its head off, and everybody was happy except my editor. But when the politically correct battalion started questioning every word that came out of my mouth—and that's what goes on now in media. That's why it's all so brainwashed. Videos are still—PBS still is pretty pure. I mean, they're allowed to—you can see some nice stuff on PBS, and you can see some nice stuff on video. But just the—you kn—I can see the lineup behind every word that gets spoken on television 'cause I've been there and had to put up with it. And the bleached-out language [*laughs*] with which they all lie to each other and pretend to be good buddies . . .

SL: Yeah.

EG: . . . and they're not even in the same city—the two people who are allegedly talking to each other.

[03:24:01] SL: I guess there's something wild and woolly and irreplaceable with early stuff.

EG: Oh, early NPR. Wasn't that fun? And I don't know who was pickin' out the music, but the musical segments that would go in between the little pieces on NPR were just brilliant. I learned a lotta great music from that. And I'd be callin' Washington sayin', "What in the hell was in between—what is that? I gotta have that!"

SL: [*Laughs*] Well, they really cared. They had the right priorities.

EG: Uh-huh.

[03:24:40] SL: Keepin' stuff pure like that. Makes it more valuable. I was thinking of another question. Oh, now was it Dooley that had the radio that he built? Was that . . .

EG: No. No, no, no, that was one of my cousins in the Delta. And he was one—he was a fraternal twin. Laura and Bubba. [*SL laughs*] Except Bubba was Uncle Robert Finley's son, so—and I think his name—and it wasn't Robert 'cause his name w—I mean, I cannot remember Bubba's real name 'cause we all called him that. He was a genius. His father was a—was the only physician in three counties, and he had all this radio equipment

down in the basement. And all durin' the Second World War, he talked to people all over the world, and he could get into—he was always—you know, what a wonderful person Bubba Finley was. And his sister, who was a gifted pianist, got married and has a daughter who wrote a symphony that was produced at the New Orleans Symphony recently and all kinds of—you know, the whole family are just wonderful. But Bubba Finley ended up livin' in Houston, Texas, and he was an inventor, and he invented things. What was it you were askin' about him?

[03:26:11] SL: Well, I just remember one of the comments that you've written about the NPR thing—that you were comfortable being in the studio.

EG: Oh yeah, it was like Bubba's. [*Laughs*]

SL: Yeah. You had an affinity already f—you know, some people have a . . .

EG: Right. And I knew a newspaper editor's son later in Harrisburg, Illinois, who also had radio stuff, and he had, you know, he had egg cartons all over the wall and . . .

SL: [*Laughs*] It's funny how that early stuff makes you comfortable when it comes back around in a slightly different form or in ways that you wouldn't expect it to enter your life again. It's—you were so—I'm not sure . . .

EG: I get excited about things. I get excited about—I mean, you know, we have three or four sets of fraternal twins in our family, and the one—the girl is always the dominant twin. [*SL laughs*] Always. And the boy gets to do things like be a crazy inventor and never even has to pick up his hats and coats. She picks 'em up for him.

SL: [*Laughs*] The nutty professor.

EG: Right. They should all come with a girl fraternal twin. [*SL laughs*] Pick up after 'em all their life.

SL: Well, that's funny.

[03:27:49] EG: I saw Bubba in Houston about fifteen years ago. It was so wonderful. People don't change. They're just like they always were when you finally get to see 'em again.

SL: That is interesting. I've always felt like the first five or six years of your life, the foundations are laid for what's—what you're going to be. I mean, you're gonna have influences and pressures and situations bring up different stuff, but who you are—the way you're raised before you can really remember much about it, I think, give you the blocks that set who you are. And it's what you go back to. Unconsciously and willingly or unwillingly, it seems to me that the blocks are . . .

EG: Well, it's what you're drawn to.

SL: Yeah.

EG: But then, whatever your parents exposed you to is what they are interested in, so it's also genetic. I mean, you know, there are predispositions for things for sure.

SL: I love how—I love that story about how your father would seek out your friends for you whenever . . .

EG: Oh, I know. But I mean, he didn't want me to be lonely when I got there. He'd have—I mean, I don't know how—it would just—you know, if—he'd have to have a new lawyer and a new banker and a new—whatever people—real estate agent, and surely—and one of 'em would have a daughter my age, and she'd look like she was—as he'd say, "Just your speed, Sista."

SL: "Just your speed, Sister." [*Laughs*] That's fun.

EG: I think I found Cynthia on my own though. I think I found Cynthia at the swimmin' pool. Just my speed. [*Laughter*]

SL: Well, where do you wanna go now? What do you wanna talk about now?

EG: I think we've probably covered everything you need to make a program.

SL: Well, you know . . .

[03:29:51] EG: I don't think we've left anything out, except that I'm not gonna talk at length about the four or five crazy years when

I got married four times.

SL: [*Laughs*] Do you want to talk at short about it . . .

EG: I like . . .

SL: . . . other than it was just crazy?

EG: Yeah. No, I think that—a great writer once said, "I spit on the grave of my twenties." That's pretty good.

SL: Yeah.

EG: But you know, when you don't know what you're doing—but the thing is, I like what happened durin' those years. If I lived now and had birth control, you know, and was that same, young—would I be wise enough to have those three wonderful children who've given me this plethora of riches of grandchildren? N—probably not.

SL: Probably not.

EG: I'd been too s—how would you know, you know?

SL: Yeah.

EG: How would you know when to go do that? And yet people still do.

[03:31:00] SL: It is interesting. The whole birth control thing really changed things, didn't it? I mean, you were talking about how people just didn't have intercourse until you were married. It just wasn't happening, but once birth control hit and was

available for the masses, it did change things somehow.

EG: For good and for bad.

SL: Yeah. I always feel like those early twenties betwee . . .

EG: The thing is, I can't ever—I don't really feel any need to think about it or examine how those years in my life happened, I mean, because it's—what has happened—what happened because of all of that is exactly—I mean, I like it. I've always liked it. Ever since I got pregnant for the first time, I have loved the idea of havin' a child, and when I got the children, I loved 'em. They were exactly what I wanted. It's hard when you're a young mother if they get sick. It's difficult, and that's why I think that people should live near their families or near their mothers or their grandmothers or their aunts or someone. You know, not just a good friend.

SL: Mh-hmm. A support system.

EG: Right.

SL: And backup. And more backup.

[03:32:24] EG: I mean, the child's gonna get well by in the morning, but you don't know that when you're twenty years old . . .

SL: That's right.

EG: Your baby's runnin' a temperature!

SL: Oh, I can remember waking up in the middle of the night just to

see if they're breathing.

EG: Oh, right.

SL: Just, you know . . .

EG: Just go check on 'em. [*Laughs*]

SL: Sure. Well, they're at the foot of the bed—you know, sit up . . .

EG: I don't want 'em sleepin' on their stomachs either. Because—especially a tiny baby like this new three-and-a-half-month-old Josephine that we have—they sleep so still and so quiet, you're not sure they're breathing! You gotta get down close.

[03:33:02] SL: That's right. [*Laughs*] That's right. Well, is there anything that you wanna say—anything more you wanna say about your children?

EG: No, just that . . .

SL: You've . . .

EG: . . . I've been so lucky. I've been lucky. They're all strong and happy, and—we lost a pair of identical twins at birth. They would've been my second and third grandchildren. Beautiful little girls. Aside from that, we just get 'em. [*Laughter*]

SL: They just keep comin'.

EG: I know, and they're pretty, and they're strong.

SL: Well, okay. If you're comfortable, I—we can stop. I . . .

EG: I think you'll have a wonderful piece. I think havin' it be

long . . .

SL: Well, you know, we don't really . . .

EG: . . . I think havin' it be long won't make it any better.

SL: Well, it's interesting. You know . . .

EG: I think it's like those novels I try to write. I think we oughta stop while we're ahead.

SL: Maybe so. I will say that maybe a third of the time, someone will call me after I've interviewed them and say, "I can't believe I didn't talk about this" or "Oh my gosh, I forgot about this person and how important they were" or this event or, you know, stuff like that. We don't really do much with these as far as—we don't—we only edit the things that you want us to take out, basically, or add explanations that you want . . .

[03:34:45] EG: I want you to take out the part where I couldn't remember the line from Bob Dylan's song and just go to the part where we remembered it. [*Laughter*]

SL: Where we—you're right. Okay, yeah, we can do that. That's all right.

EG: *Yonder Stands Your Orphan with His Gun* . . .

SL: What a great line.

EG: Jesus, what a title for a book of short stories.

SL: Yeah.

EG: I'm not the only person jealous of it. Every short story writer I know that I've talked to is jealous of it. "How did he think of that? Why didn't I do that? I knew that!"

SL: [*Laughs*] Well, Ellen, thank you for givin' us this day.

EG: Thank you. I think we're gonna have a wonderful piece.

SL: Well, I think it'll be fascinating for everybody and certainly an inspiration for the—you know, Barbara and David thought it was time for the people of Arkansas to tell their own stories instead of people in New York or Hollywood tellin' 'em for us.

[03:35:35] EG: I wondered who thought this up. It's a great idea.

SL: It's—I have to say, it's all David and Barbara Pryor. They . . .

EG: Did you just jump on it, or did you have second thoughts, or did you just say, "Okay, I'm in"?

SL: No, no, I was on—I jumped on it immediately . . .

EG: Good. Good.

SL: . . . I mean, they had leftover campaign funds.

EG: Fantastic.

SL: And they could've kept the money, but they started this program, and I don't know anybody that . . .

EG: What a gift. What a gift.

SL: . . . I don't know anybody that doesn't think it's a great idea.

EG: It is. I can't wait to see all the ones.

SL: Well, it's on your favorites list now . . .

EG: I can't wait to go see Al talkin' about something besides—arguin' with me about Hillary Clinton. "She's just a lawyer." "No, she's not." He'd say, "She's just a lawyer." I'd say, "You're so jealous." [*Laughter*] Don't put that on the thing.

SL: Okay, okay. We'll go ahead and stop. Thank you.

EG: Okay, wonderful.

SL: Okay. Okay.

EG: Wonderful fun.

[03:36:36 End of interview]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]