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Arkansas State Police Project

Interview with

Ray Carnahan
9 December 2003

Interviewer: Michael Lindsey

Michael Lindsey: What was your motivation to join the state police?

Ray Carnahan: I guess there were two reasons. I was born and raised in Scott County, except for six years that I spent in California. From the first grade until fourth grade I attended school in Abbott, Arkansas, which was in northern Scott County. In the afternoons we would ride the bus home, and I sat in the back and was pretty close to the last person off. Where Highway 23 comes in from Booneville, Sergeant Bud Blythe would come in from Booneville heading toward Waldron. From 23 down there to where I got off I would look back and see that pretty blue and white car with the torpedo light and siren and think that it was neat. I went to California with my folks when we did, as I call it, the “*Grapes of Wrath II* in 1954.” [Editor’s note: John Steinbeck wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*, a novel about a family of sharecroppers who leave Oklahoma to go to California in search of jobs during the Great Depression of the 1930s.] My brother was in the [U.S.] Air Force, got

out and was hired on to a police department in California. I looked up to him and that influenced me, too. I came back to Arkansas and finished out my junior and senior year in high school. Mr. Hullender was the social studies teacher at the Waldron High School, and I took a class from him. One of the things he did was ask us to do a paper on professions, and I did a paper on being a police officer. I went to college and played football at the College of the Ozarks [Point Lookout, Missouri] for a couple of years. My wife and I were so in love that we wanted to get married, and I dropped out of school and we went back to Scott County. I was working for the Soil Conservation Service doing temporary survey work for the dams they were building on the tributaries over there to hold back floodwaters. When the work ended, I got laid off and I decided that I needed to find something permanent. I put in my application for the State Police and I also took a test for Border Patrol and the U.S. Marshal's office. I didn't hear anything from the Border Patrol or the Marshal's Service, but I did get a callback and an invitation from the Arkansas State Police. It was a hard decision because I had been hired back by the Soil Conservation [Service] full-time [and was] working forty hours a week. I was off on holidays and had benefits and overtime. To leave that and go to work for the State Police meant I would be working a minimum of six days a week, ten hours a day. If holidays fell on your day off, you lost your day off and never got it back. It was all for about the same amount of

money. I was young, twenty-two, and the State Police had just changed their entry requirements from twenty-five years old. I decided to take a chance with the State Police and figured that I was young enough that if I didn't like it I could leave and do something else. My in-laws were involved in masonry and I had done that as a helper. I took the State Police up on it, and they told me to report to Troop School in October of 1966. They told me they couldn't pay me until November 1 because of the timing problems with their payroll system. They told me they would give me time off for this time later on. I never saw those days off. [Laughs] I went to work at Hope [district] and was physically assigned to Texarkana. I was there about a year and a half. An opening came in Mena, which is closer to home for my wife and me, and I transferred there. I was there for about a year and a half. I was the field-training officer there and I was training Trooper Duvall Moore. We were at the Scott County line on June 12, 1969, at about 2:32 p.m. They had just put new asphalt on the roadway and he dropped off on the side, over-corrected and ended up rolling the car two or three times. Duvall went back to work a day later, but it was over a year before the doctor released me back to work on the highways. I had broken my right femur, fractured my shoulders, and fractured a vertebrae in my neck. I was transferred to Little Rock. I was in a shoulder-spiked cast [which fixes the arm in an upright position]. It looked like I was saying "Hi" to everyone for eight weeks.

They went in and did surgery and took bone from my pelvis to repair my shoulder. In the interim I worked Troop A's desk answering phones. I came here [Little Rock] on temporary assignment, but I retired from here thirty-two years later. [Laughs] When I went back to work they put me on light duty giving driver's tests—although that may be the most hazardous duty the State Police has. I am joking, but it is also kind of true. Just think, you get somebody in the car that is scared and nervous and sometimes they freeze up. When I was in DL [driver's license], my supervisor was Sergeant Hershel Yates at Troop A. I also made the run from here to the dog track at West Memphis. A lab here in Wet Memphis tested the urine of every winner. Excuse the expression, but I did the "piss run." I did it three times a week. I drove over there and ate dinner and waited until the end of the last race, then picked them [urine samples] up and drove them back to Little Rock and locked them up. The next day I would either be off or work driver's license. I decided to go back to school. The Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, the LEAA, was set up by Congress to allow every law enforcement officer that wanted to go back to college. It would pay tuition for any officer that committed to stay in law enforcement for five additional years, which I did. In 1971, UALR [University of Arkansas at Little Rock] started the criminal justice program under Dr. Charles Chastain. I was in the first class there. I went into driver's license so I could go to school at night. In May of

1978 I was fortunate enough to get a degree in criminal justice. In 1976, while I was in the driver's license section, I competed for a sergeant's position in the fire marshal's office and was successful. In July of 1976 I went to the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] Academy [Quantico, Virginia] and enjoyed that immensely. I came back and worked in the fire marshal's office to determine if fires were the result of arson. I did inspections on new buildings to make sure they complied with the state's fire codes. I worked under Lieutenant Casey Jones until September 18, 1980, when I was promoted to Lieutenant in charge of the fire marshal's office by Colonel Doug Harp. Lieutenant Jones had competed for a promotion to captain in the Criminal Investigation Division [CID], which the fire marshal's office was a part of. I stayed in that position until May of 2000. I had the best of both worlds. I worked with all phases of emergency management, including sheriff's offices, police departments, emergency medical technicians, the governor's office, and earthquake preparedness organizations. I was doing what I liked to do. I never competed for other positions because I would have had to move, and my wife had a job here and my son was going to school here. As a kid, we had moved to California. My parents were hard-working and provided a good living to me. They were uneducated and forced to become migrant farm workers that followed the crops. I decided that if I ever had the opportunity I wouldn't do that to my children. I was fortunate to be able to stay in

one place. My boss in 1995, Colonel John Bailey, set up the Special Services Division and Captain Bill Young was the commander of that. I worked for Bill as the fire marshal and as his assistant commander. We worked that way until his retirement, and I replaced him and stayed there until I retired on February 11, 2002. I then became U.S. Marshal for the eastern district of Arkansas on August 12, 2002. [It is] a huge honor to serve my country.

ML: You mentioned that your family moved to California as migrant workers. Do you mean that they would move out during harvest season and then come back to Arkansas during off years?

RC: We wouldn't always come back. Many times we wintered in California, although there were one or two [times] where we came back and I went to school at Mansfield. I guess that was the seventh and eighth grade.

ML: Whenever you moved out to California, would both parents work in the fields?

RC: Sometimes they would both work. When we first moved out, we moved into these little apartments which just had a living room, kitchen, and bedroom. There would be Hispanics, Armenians, and Japanese. There weren't very many Japanese in this court that we lived in because they were already established there and lived in houses. We finally rented a house. We started out working in the fields picking grapes or anything that was in season. Dad finally got a job working in a packing shed. That was steadier. If it was raining, they could still work, and they worked later in the season because the crops still came in. In the winter, Levi Holmes, who was also from Arkansas, took dad under his wing and they would

trim grapes. Finally, he was able to gain enough quarters on his social security and he retired in 1960. We came back to Arkansas in the middle of my junior year [of high school]. My mom's father lived north of Bakersfield, California, and her sister lived near there as well. That was one of the things that got us to California. Another reason was a terrible drought in Arkansas in 1953. There was another in 1954. Dad sold a full-grown cow for thirteen or fourteen dollars. That was low even back then. Then, just like the Clampetts [reference to family on "The Beverly Hillbillies" television show], we boarded up in a 1950 pickup truck with a tarp on the back and went out there. We stayed at my grandfather's for a short time. My dad knew a man named Prince who got us work picking grapes. My brother who was the police officer stayed out there and became chief of police at Fowler. He was killed in a car crash in 1972. Most of the people in the 1950s went to California or Michigan to find work and make a living. I had an uncle who stayed here and never drove a car, but they made a living. They were subsistence farmers.

ML: To get back to the State Police, during this time, you had to know somebody, but I don't see that in your background.

RC: Someone had told me that I needed the help of my state representative, and I did go down and talk with him. My family wasn't politically connected at all. We had 110 acres in Scott County and it was a hard life to make a living. We didn't have a cash job.

ML: In your perception, was everyone in the same [economic] boat in Scott County during this time?

RC: You had the town people. They were what I would consider the money people. They owned the grocery stores, car dealerships, and had pretty nice homes. All of our neighbors were kinfolk or long time friends. My dad was originally from Poplar Bluff, Missouri. At the turn of the century he had some folks in Sayer, Oklahoma, so they loaded up in a wagon and moved to Sayer. The story goes that the corn was about waist high when a hailstorm came through and then there wasn't anything but the nubbins left. Somewhere in the interim, my grandfather, Richard Carnahan, had moved out to Roswell, New Mexico, and homesteaded a piece of land out there. You had to be on there and improve the land for so many years before it was yours. So they loaded up and moved to New Mexico and stayed there until 1917. I asked them what they were running from—I mean, was the law after them? [Laughs] I asked my dad and my aunt and she told me that when Dad said they were going, they just went. There was no debate. So they came back and my uncle had bought a farm in Scott County. We bought seventy acres across the road. They held this land until about 1933. Then they bought forty acres adjacent to this. Mel Carnahan, who used to be governor of Missouri, is a relative of ours. I had no knowledge of that until we started attending reunions there in Poplar Bluff. He was evidently a real good person.

ML: It sounds like your blood has the migrant spirit.

RC: I am not moving anywhere. [Laughs]

ML: Whenever you went to the fire marshal's office, you said it was part of the CID. Was it segregated, or did you also work other cases?

RC: It was segregated. We coordinated if it was a homicide that involved fire. In

1975, legislation was passed that established the fire marshal's office and specifically said it was to be separate and distinct from the Criminal Investigation Division. I didn't go into the fire marshal's office until 1976. When they started talking about forming the fire marshal's office as a separate entity, they put out notices for the new positions. I figured it would be a good chance for me to practice taking the exams, and it surprised me as much as anybody that I was promoted. They had a test, followed by an oral interview. I think it was a pretty good deal. First, you had a written examination. Second, you had an examination of your personnel file. Third, tenure was factored in. Then they had an oral exam, which was worth twenty-five points. You would drop the high and low scores from the interview. They have paid a lot of money to consultants to work out a promotion system, and in my feeling that was the most fair promotion system. You would have troopers on up the ranks on that oral board. Promotion is one of the things that no agency can make perfect.

ML: Did they give you any training in arson investigation?

RC: Major W. A. Tudor was the CID commander then, and they put on an investigation seminar for the new fire marshal officers, CID investigators, and drug interdiction people. It started off as fifteen of us in the old Rush Apartments by the [Arkansas] State Capitol. Part of it was report writing and investigation. It got to a point where they said that the people in the fire marshal's office and drugs could leave if they wanted to. I stayed. It included a lot more detailed crime scene investigation techniques. We then went to the fire academy and did a two-week course put on by the National Fire Academy on arson investigation. Then we had

on-the-job training.

ML: If somebody sent you plans that did not meet code, what recourse did you have to get it corrected?

RC: We could shut the construction down and prevent it from being built. We could write summons for court or we could go through circuit court and get an injunction. [In] all of those years, I never had to do that. We would talk with them and let them know exactly what they needed to do to fix it, and we never had a problem. I wanted to be sure that I was right, and if there was any doubt I reached out to experts on every level to make certain my assessment was accurate. I never had any pushes from the director or anyone asking me to be more lenient on their buddies. I worked under eight or nine different directors, too. The only big deal was that we didn't have adequate staffing.

ML: Were there any directors that stick out as being, maybe, your favorite, or most memorable?

RC: Harman Lindsey was my first, but I didn't work under him long. He left when [Governor Winthrop] Rockefeller came in 1967. John Bailey really tried to advance the department, but he only lasted four or five years. In 1979, Doug Harp was the director and they had just built the new headquarters over on Natural Resources Drive. It had an open squad room without any privacy or anything. I asked the question one day, "Why they didn't design it to have more privacy for interviews?" Someone said that the director wanted to be able to come back and see who is back here. Of course, he wasn't the director when we finally occupied the building. Tommy Goodwin came on. He was my babysitter during troop

school. He and Lieutenant Logan were the babysitters at Camp Robinson. We were in the barracks just north of the theater. You make some silly statements sometimes, and I had never been to Little Rock before. I said that if they put me in Little Rock I would quit and go back to the hills. [Laughs] In 1969, I was back in Little Rock and didn't want to leave. I remember one story when we were in troop school. Captain R. E. Brown was a great guy. It is possible that he killed more men in the line of duty than anyone else in the State Police. Inmates were helping keep the barracks clean, and they would do the cooking and things. One day we were in formation marching and we heard this "kerwhap." We looked over and one of the convicts had gotten out of line and Captain Brown was applying some discipline to the backside of the convict with a Sam Brown belt. He was definitely someone you did not want to fool with. He was a good person, but he believed in consequences.

ML: You mentioned the New Madrid fault. Did the state make up some emergency plans in case of an earthquake?

RC: The state's fire prevention code had regulations regarding buildings in earthquake zones. The foundations, walls, and overall design must meet certain criteria. That is a big part of how you prevent problems in the future. For the first three or four days [after a major earthquake], we are going to be on our own before outside help can get to us. It could be so massive. If the epicenter is south of Marked Tree, it could collapse high rises in Memphis; but if it is north, it would affect Illinois, and Arkansas might not even feel it. Nobody knows when or where it will happen.

ML: What happens to Memphis under the worst-case scenario?

RC: Memphis will be devastated. Is it a four-point or three or even a seven or eight on the Richter scale? If it is on the high end, it will lay waste to that whole area. Every day there are tremors in Arkansas, but they are so small people don't feel them. Supposedly, there is a blue hole up by Eureka Springs that when Mount Saint Helens blew [in 1980] it distorted the water, so there must be some kind of connection between these areas of activity somewhere. Because of the alluvial plain, liquefaction will occur and it will produce a wave of sand that will destroy anything in its path, [such as] bridges, roads, and telephone lines. The State Police had emergency plans for this and for things like tornados. The reality is that the local State Police officers will be concerned about their relatives, so we have a plan to bring in replacements. We have a list in each troop of all the people that own bulldozers and different types of equipment in an emergency operations plan. Each troop is supposed to have one of those. If Hope was having a flood, they should be able to go to the book and find out where to get a bulldozer. With the cutbacks they are experiencing, I don't know if they are keeping up with that. There are a number of lieutenant positions open, and the lieutenants are the ones that do all of the work in a troop. [Laughs] When I left, they didn't replace me, they just added my duties to another person. They took just about all of the sworn personnel [from Regulatory Services] into CID or highway patrol and left the same number of secretary people to handle the work. I feel for them. You have people calling in to get an answer, and there is nobody there to talk to with them. Those secretarial people are not there to interpret the laws.

- ML: Do you feel that the legislature and the governor gave the State Police mandates without following up with appropriate funding?
- RC: I think so. They gave us the mandates, but didn't give us the personnel, commissioned or civilian. Most of the stuff we handled in Regulatory Services can be handled by civilians, but a lot of the time people wanted to talk with a commissioned officer. Even if the secretary gave them the right answer, they would still ask to speak to an officer. The State Police is not any different than any department in state government, and everybody have needs.
- ML: You went to the FBI Academy, which is a huge honor with only two people being selected a year to attend. How did you get selected for that?
- RC: You had to submit an application to the director's office. The State Police could send two a year, and the other police agencies could send a set number. I submitted an application while I was still in the driver's license division, and, for whatever reason, I was selected. I had a young boy, and it was hard leaving him. They paid one round-trip ticket so you could come home one time. I was up there a month and then came home. About three or four days later I had to pick up a registered letter, and it was a card from my wife. It held a plane ticket for me to come back home in three or four weeks. That really helped. My wife and Chris came up for graduation, too.
- ML: Are there any cases that stick out over your career?
- RC: J. R. Howard is the CID and highway patrol commander now. They are really thin administratively now, due to budget problems. We worked a fire at Malvern where some people came to a house, called a guy out front, and shot him in the

head. They dragged him into the house and tried to burn it down. The house was so tight that if they had left the door open, it would have burned down. But it burned up all of the oxygen and burned itself out. There was a big frost and we could see where they pulled up, went to the side of the house and clipped the telephone wires, and walked up to the front steps. We didn't know at that time it meant anything, but you notice the unusual [things] and you try to record them. That ended up being one of the important clues in the trial. I look back now and there is no way they would have let us go into burned buildings and pick up and sniff things like we used to. There are all kinds of contaminants and hazardous materials and stuff that can knock you out. I remember some times getting really weak from both the heat and other things. I would have to go lie on the hood of the car and rest and pour water on my head to get rejuvenated. Usually, we were there by ourselves because by the time we got the call and got to the scene, the fire department had already headed home. I never thought about it until years later just how dangerous that was. Now they have them wear gas masks and self contained breathing apparatus. You could step on sharp objects, which would go through your shoes. One day I felt something, and there was a barbecue fork sticking in the side of my boot. You made sure to keep your tetanus shots up to date.

[End of Interview]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]

[JD]