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Arkansas Memories Project

Interview with

George Billingsley  
Bentonville, Arkansas  
10 January 2002

Interviewer: Jeannie Whyne

Jeannie Whyne: You were born in Texas?

George Billingsley: In 1929.

JW: What part of Texas?

GB: North Texas. Wichata Falls.

JW: So 1929, that's the beginning of the depression.

GB: That's right.

JW: How long did you live there?

GB: Two years.

JW: So you don't remember much about Texas.

GB: Thank goodness.

JW: And you all moved to . . .

GB: To Memphis.

JW: And why did you all move to Memphis?

GB: My father was looking for work. His uncle offered him a job.

JW: His uncle was in what kind of business?

GB: Ice and coal.

JW: What did your father do for him?

GB: Sold coal in the wintertime and ice in the summer. He had a gang of darkies

working for him.

JW: So this was retail sales. Where did you go to college?

GB: I started at Tennessee Tech.

JW: Which is in . . .

GB: Cookeville, Tennessee.

JW: And what was your major there? What did you think you were going to end up doing?

GB: Teach.

JW: Did you have a favorite subject?

GB: History.

HW: How long did you go to Tennessee Tech?

GB: Two years.

JW: And what made you decide . . . ?

GB: A friend.

JW: A friend?

GB: Chasing a girl.

JW: Oh, you were chasing a girl? So this is why you came up to the University of Arkansas?

GB: That's right.

JW: What was your previous experience with Arkansas.

GB: None.

JW: Didn't you go to Boy Scout camp in Arkansas?

GB: Mississippi.

JW: Mississippi. That Boy Scout camp was in Mississippi.

GB: Not the one I worked at. The one I went to.

JW: So as you were growing up you went to a Boy Scout camp in Mississippi. I misunderstood that.

GB: Oh, I worked at some in Mississippi, too, but not very much.

JW: And then you went to work at this Boy Scout camp . . .

GB: After I got out of the Navy. Well, before I went in the Navy, I should say.

JW: And you were in the Navy for four years?

GB: Yes.

JW: When did you go in the Navy?

GB: When?

JW: Yes.

GB: 1949 or 1950. Somewhere along in there.

JW: Do you remember the first time you went to Hardy, Arkansas, where the Boy Scout camp was?

GB: Yes.

JW: What was that like?

GB: I got a job offer and went up there from Memphis, a friend and myself, and got a job working up there in the summer. At the Boy Scout camp, waterfront.

JW: And that was Camp Kia Kima?

GB: Kia Kima. Memphis Boy Scout camp. For senior boys. It had been a camp until World War II, and they decided to reopen the camp. My friend and I were offered the opportunity to take charge of water sports – canoeing, life saving. We were

offered the opportunity, and we didn't even know where the hell it was, so we started hitchhiking from Memphis and got as far as Imboden, Arkansas. The last twenty five miles is what we walked.

JW: How long did it take you to get there?

GB: We started in the morning from Memphis and got there the next morning. It took us eighteen different rides to get us from Memphis to Imboden, Arkansas. It was all gravel roads.

JW: Was that on old Highway 63? I lived in Marked Tree.

GB: We went through Marked Tree and Truman and on up to Hoxie and over to Imboden. And we started dating Arkansas girls [            ].

JW: You met your wife there?

GB: That's exactly right. When I got out of the Navy and went back to the University, her father said I could make some money if I went to work for him in the summer at Cherokee Village. I trusted him and gave it a whirl, and with some success did better than he thought and a lot better than I ever thought. I did so well I wanted to quit college, but he said if I wanted a job I'd better go back and finish college, so I did. And then I came back to work for him.

JW: How did you come to northwest Arkansas?

GB: Mr. [John] Cooper sent me here when he wanted to start Bella Vista.

JW: And that is when you met Mr. Walton?

GB: Yes. Sam Walton used Bella Vista to recruit people as the growth of Wal-Mart started. He had a difficult time to convincing people to move here to work for him. He quickly recognized the significance of Bella Vista. What we were doing

in Bella Vista is selling Arkansas every day of our lives because. Sam would just bring them out and say, "Now, look, George, these people are so and so, and they want to come to northwest Arkansas and go to work for Wal-Mart, but I'm having a hard time convincing them of this, of moving down here. Mrs. So and So doesn't see any opportunity for her children," and this type of thing. Because we were very good at it --- Sam would tell you in a New York minute that Bella Vista was a great asset to him.

JW: Let me ask you why you think such giants of business entrepreneurship as Sam Walton, John Tyson, and J.B. Hunt would . . .

GB: Convene in one area.

JW: . . . convene in one area? The one explanation I . . .

GB: Tyson's had always been here. Walton moved over here from eastern Arkansas. He was over around Wynne or someplace. Helen had relatives in Oklahoma. They have a large place over there. Sam could get a bank loan over here and build a store. He wanted a store of his own.

JW: So he came here because he could get a bank loan over here and open his own store?

GB: Yes.

JW: A lot of questions are asked about how this group of very talented people ended up here. Was that a planned . . .?

GB: Well, the chicken industry was one thing, with Tyson, and from that the only thing that J.B. Hunt was doing was hauling hulls up here from down south for the chicken farmers. John Cooper came over because he had exhausted Cherokee

Village. Cherokee Village was very difficult to get to. This is the main north/south road. From Minneapolis all the way to New Orleans. Going north was the road to the money.

JW: So this was an advantage to Mr. Tyson and was that an advantage to Mr. Walton?

GB: Very much so. Much closer to his market.

JW: So the geography is important.

GB: Most of his stores were Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Texas. So it was a good place to expand from. He started with one store up here in Rogers in 1965. Went public.

JW: So Mr. Walton would bring prospective employees over to see what you all were doing with Bella Vista?

GB: Yes. And you had the University. The cultural benefits of the University. Mr. Cooper was bringing people to try to sell them on Bella Vista. The first thing we did when we first started Bella Vista that first year we put them in motels and then we bought 200 mobile homes.

JW: I was going to say were there enough motels?

GB: No, there weren't any. This guy across the street had a Holiday Inn, but he didn't have that built at that time.

JW: You mean over where the Quality Inn is now?

GB: We put folks as far away as Joplin at night. We bought 200 mobile homes and took a site that we weren't planning to use and then sold them and then rented them back from the owners.

JW: You came here in 1965 so you saw this growth in northwest Arkansas?

GB: Yes. And there was. University expansion at the same time as Bella Vista started.

JW: Let me ask you about the program you are sponsoring to send Bentonville school children to Europe.

GB: To Normandy. I have very strong feelings about Normandy. The kids come back and attend civic club meetings. They've all taken 400 pictures. We are very careful in preparing them for their trip. We tell them, "Here's the way you are going to dress, here's the way you are going to behave," and I've heard from people over there that these are the best behaved students they've had. You get that from a hotel or motel or restaurant from France and it's shocking, as the French don't have too high a respect for U.S. citizens anyway. Those are the type of things that make it gratifying to fund such a program. When they come back they are just bubbling over with it.

JW: Your interest in Normandy and World War II, does that have something to do with being raised during World War II?

GB: Of course it does, being raised, if it had been the Spanish American War, I probably would have been as well versed. But, yes, when you have two brothers leave the house and volunteer for service . . .

JW: Were they in the Army, Navy?

GB: The Air Corps, both of them. But it was Army Air Corps in those days. So, yes, but in the neighborhood I was raised in and in the school that I was in it was, you did, you joined. When your country needed you, you joined.

JW: My father joined during World War I. He was beyond draft age, but he joined.

GB: I joined the Navy as soon as the Korean War broke out --- working in the middle of the summer camp, the camp director had to plead with most of the staff boys to stay and finish the camping season because we all wanted to go join that day. And soon as the season was over with, off we went.

JW: Do you remember Pearl Harbor? Can you just describe the scene, what time of day?

GB: Well, I had been in the Boy Scouts approximately one year at that time. We would do these weekend trips to our camp at that time down at Mississippi and just forty or fifty miles outside of Memphis. It was the thing to do, and we did that often on weekends. Pearl Harbor was the first weekend that I had missed after joining that group. For some reason I didn't go. I don't know the reason I didn't go.

JW: So you were at home when you heard the news?

GB: It must have been close to noon because there are six or eight hours' difference.

JW: Did you hear it on the radio?

GB: Yes, but I'm sure the word had been passed through the family, through the telephone or some other means. I convinced my mother and father to drive me down to the camp so we could tell the kids because there was no communication down at the camp and I wanted to go tell all my fellow scouts of what had happened, and we did that afternoon and we drove to the camp. The next day was a school day, of course, and there was ROTC in my high school as they did in all public high schools in Memphis. You noticed immediately that cars were stopping and yelling good things at them. And then [President Franklin Delano]

Roosevelt was on the air giving his speech of infamy. We all had the public address system in the school turned into the rooms, and you all listened to that speech by Roosevelt. Those things stand out in your mind forever.

JW: I imagine. So you had two brothers. How old were they?

GB: Five and seven years older than I.

JW: Seventeen and nineteen?

GB: Just prime.

JW: Just prime. Did they both join up immediately?

GB: Right soon. The younger brother was not quite old enough yet. He went ahead and finished high school. He didn't graduate high school until 1942. That was the youngest brother. The oldest brother had finished in 1939. So, yes.

JW: What are your brothers' names?

GB: Boyd and Frank, Jr.

JW: Are they still living?

GB: Oh, no, they passed away several years back.

JW: So they both went into the Air Corps?

GB: Well, they went into the Army, and the Army told you where you were going.

JW: Okay. I think my Uncle John went into the Army Air Corps, too, but he was a little young, so he didn't get in until 1944, and it was almost over by the time he got through training. So, there you were at home during World War II with your family, your mother and father . . .

GB: I had a newspaper route. And, of course, it was important to people to read the newspaper every day in those days to see what was happening around the world

because the newspapers carried a lot more news than what you could get on the radio. You had certain people --- Walter Winchell and H. V. Kaltenborn, and different ones, Edward R. Murrow --- who were on the radio, but only at night, seems to me like, at least I never heard them anytime during the daytime, so the newspaper was a vital item. And, of course, it became rationed during the war. If you were not a subscriber you could not pick up a subscription through the news carrier, so consequently I had an area of north Memphis that was --- everybody wanted the newspaper, and they used the newspaper for a lot of other things other than just news, so I enjoyed that. I did the newspaper for five years, I guess, during the --- I always would leave it in the summer time to go to scout camp. I became a counselor at the camp in 1944, so I stayed on through the war.

[Tape Stopped]

JW: We are interested in what you have to say because . . .

GB: It was interesting. Everyone had his mind on the war because everybody in the neighborhood of age had gone. You had the gold star and the silver star mothers and banners hanging on the door, and you hated to see in your neighborhood the U.S. officials B Army or Navy or Marine officials -- arrive with the death message or even missing, which was an even worse message to receive, I think, in some respects. And, of course, you knew every family had some connection to people in the service. In the high schools, returning veterans coming back --- not necessarily discharged, but had seen a great deal of action. Speaking to the students was most interesting and a very wonderful thing to hear. And, of course, I had a very keen interest, not just from my brothers' standpoint, but from the

standpoint of always being somewhat of a history student and a geography student. I think I was the only one in my class who knew certain islands like Guadalcanal and places like that, or where it was or what area of the country. The faculty didn't even know. The American public was pretty well naive.

JW: Yes, and sort of American-centric.

GB: Oh, yes.

JW: Actually, I think, I shouldn't say this, but a lot of people don't even know where Arkansas is.

GB: Yes.

JW: They don't know if it is this side or the other side of the Mississippi River.

GB: One of my best stories I like to tell about meeting people from the U.S. abroad when they ask where you're from, you say, "Arkansas." Oh, yes, this is pre-Clinton. They say, "Yes, we've flown over there. On our way to Arizona or on our way to California. We've flown over there. I know. Pilots have pointed it out."

JW: That's interesting. Well, back to your brothers. Where did they end up serving?

GB: All over. In the Air Corps --- well, the oldest brother was the real student in the family.

JW: Frank, Jr.?

GB: No, Boyd. And they sent him to every kind of school there was from pilot training on down and about the time he'd finish one --- bombardier school or navigator school or gunnery school --- the next thing you know they'd say, "Well, we've got enough of that category. Now we want you to enroll in this other

school.” Of course, he’d gotten married, so, consequently, his wife was urging him to stay in the states if he could. And by all means he did, and she joined him in certain locations where she could. The younger boy, Frank, Jr., was single, and he had been working for Southern Airlines in Memphis, which is now Delta Airlines, while he was in high school working out at the airport in Memphis. So they put him on a cargo plane, a C-47, which is the forerunner of the DC3, and he was a troop chief on there. They went from all over the Caribbean and submarine patrols and things like that, all up and down the country. He went through a lot of the schools as well, but as far as being in action anyplace, neither of them were.

JW: Did you get letters home?

GB: Oh, yes, that was a big event.

JW: Can you conjure up a memory . . . ?

GB: Well, my brothers wrote home about what I wrote home, you know.

JW: Not very much.

GB: Very little, and other than trying to --- certain things you couldn’t write home about, where you were --- but “We received your cookies, we all enjoyed them,” and this type of thing, “And they were great, and send me more news about what’s happening at home.”

JW: Did you write your brothers yourself?

GB: Write to my brothers?

JW: Did you write to your brothers?

GB: No.

JW: Did your mother and father take that responsibility?

GB: Yes. I don't ever recall writing. I think my mother and father both told them how sorry I was. I'm just joking. They gave them a full report on me. I'm sure they did. It wouldn't have taken over one paragraph. No.

JW: So the letters would be addressed to your mom and dad?

GB: Oh, yeah. But she would read them to us. What part she wanted us to hear.

JW: So they were principally written to her?

GB: And, well, Mr. and Mrs. But mother got the mail and, of course, Dad read everything, and he tried to figure out where they were. And, of course, every family had a map. And the maps, most of them, were so far outdated, of what actually where things were. And, of course, he always had cousins and close friends who were in combat somewhere in Europe, everywhere from being based in London all the way to the front lines in France or in Germany. The same way in the South Pacific. But if a guy came in from the Navy or the Marines with a sunburn, you had a pretty good idea where he was coming from.

JW: So you would try to guess where he was coming from on the basis of his tan?  
That's great.

GB: Of course, a lot of them didn't come back. So you had that information to pass around to friends and such who also knew him and knew of him. But, yeah, it was a very interesting time. A period where you had a lot of information, most of it good. You followed almost on an hourly track as best you could. And the same with the Nagasaki and Hiroshima drops. You remember where you were. My newspaper crew chief came and alerted several of us. If the news broke --- they didn't know what it was going to be, but they had gotten a communique that there

was going to be a major, major announcement, same way they did on D-Day. And if you were, if the news broke at a certain hour, there were two newspapers in Memphis, a morning paper and an afternoon paper, and I was working for the afternoon paper, the *Press Scimitar*. And if the news broke at a certain hour, the *Commercial* [*Appeal*] would get it. If it broke in another hour, the *Press* would get it, and consequently, he was responsible for the *Press* and he wanted to make doggone sure of our availability. And the same thing happened on V-J Day.

JW: Well, I think it is just marvelous that you are doing what you are doing with the school children.

GB: It is a pleasure to do it, be able to do it. Wish I could do more.

JW: Well, you've certainly done a lot. Your philanthropy has been outstanding. How do you --- there is a certain conventional wisdom about American philanthropy or philanthropy in general. The conventional story is that it is not new money that is philanthropic; it is old money. But you defy --- as did Sam Walton. Why --- can you come up with an explanation for why you defy that stereotype? What makes you give?

GB: Well, I wouldn't dare put myself in the same boat with Sam or any of the other major contributors, but Sam's father was a tough task master, and he brought those boys up pretty doggone straight and made them recognize --- I remember one time Bud walking into the office where I was and threw a whole stack of stock certificates, I guess it was several thousands of shares of Wal-Mart. This was in the early days of it being public. He threw them on the desk and said, "What would you think of a fellow that you gave that stock to and he was giving

it back to saying it was nothing but damn paper?" That was his father.

JW: Oh, is that right?

GB: The difference? I don't know whether you feel an obligation. I personally do. Not only do you get a wonderful feeling out of being able to do it, but Arkansas has been awfully good to the Billingsley family --- the state of Arkansas, the University, and Bentonville, Bella Vista, Cherokee Village, Hot Springs Village, the Cooper family. It's all been so doggone good to you that you couldn't go to bed at night if you hadn't returned something. It is just something. It is a debt unpaid. And I don't know how you could get by without doing it. I think you'd have difficulty. I would.

JW: You have what a friend of mine calls an attitude of gratitude toward those who have helped you.

GB: Well, I have had two of the best mentors in the world in John Cooper and Sam Walton. Boy, you got the class by yourself just being extremely lucky and fortunate to just been associated with them and in the area with them and acquainted with them. My father-in-law was a tough man. Sam was tough. I mean, tough, tough. But, of course, my father-in-law was extremely tough. He could get more personal with me than Sam could.

JW: Well, he was family.

GB: He was family. He'd never let you forget it.

JW: My goodness.

GB: That's just something you obligated to do.

JW: I guess it is just the difference in people, because some people who would come

up like you did — I mean, you had help, you had mentors, important mentors, but some people would come out of that saying, “I’m a self-made man. I made it. Let everybody else make it, too.” You’ve heard that, I’m sure.

GB: Oh, yes.

JW: And I always want to say, “But, no, none of us do it alone.” We all can, if we think about it honestly, look at people who have mentored us and helped us in various ways, but I think it is really wonderful that you are the kind of person that recognizes it.

GB: One can take some self credit by --- if given an opportunity, you did something with.

JW: Yes.

GB: So, consequently, in being at the right place at the right time, I think with any of your successful people a whole lot was timing. If my father-in-law hadn’t sent me to Bella Vista, whether I wanted to go or not, if he hadn’t sent me, probably, I would never have gotten acquainted as well as I have with certain people over here who helped me. So it is a stair-step thing. One leads to the other. But it . . .

JW: You have to walk through the door when some body else opens it. You’re absolutely right. When opportunity knocks, some people answer and some people don’t.

GB: I tell a lot of young people that ask me to help them get started or to give me a resume for a job opportunity and I tell them, “I will be very happy and very pleased to do so, you certainly earned it in my eyes. And I get can get the door open for you, you can get the interview, but it is up to you to do something with

it.”

JW: Exactly.

GB: So that’s my personal philosophy, and I’ll help most of them any way that I can, but once they get it, they better, by God, get after it themselves.

JW: Well, I’m probably tiring you out.

GB: No, that’s no problem.

JW: Are you all right?

GB: Yes.

JW: Do you want to go on?

GB: Sure, if you want to.

JW: All right. Well, I certainly do. So, let’s return to World War II, or the sort of end of World War II, which is where I think we were. Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the bombs dropping. What was it like for you in Memphis in 1945? When did your brothers get out? What was that homecoming like?

GB: Well, one, as I said, had already gotten married. And, of course, his homecoming was a little more different because he didn’t come to our house. He and his wife had bought a house while he was in the service, and they moved right into or shortly thereafter. You were awfully pleased and proud to have them home safe and sound again, but was there a big celebration? There were thousands of them coming back and being released almost daily, and you had trouble just keeping up with who all was back as you wanted to know who was what and where they were what they were going to do now. There was a club formed in the United States called the 52-20 club. And, what the military, or what the Congress authorized

besides the GI Bill was the program, fifty-two weeks and \$20 a week if you didn't have a job. Fifty-two weeks at \$20 a week. Well, in 1945/1946, \$20 a week, a lot of guys live on \$20 a week, but you had to go in every so often to re-up to make sure that you were trying to get a job and what have you. But if you went over to the ball park, softball, whatever, and messed around in the afternoons or the evenings, you'd find a lot of guys in the 52-20 club setting around waiting. They weren't fixing to go back to work until they had to. And \$20 a week would get them by. So I had a few friends in the 52-20 club, or acquaintances in the 52-20 club. We had high school boys leave the school and join the service young, while they were in the tenth grade or eleventh grade, and gone off and spent a year or two in the service. And they were coming back to school and we had some on the football team and some in the class that I was in that came back. And, of course, they were way ahead than any of the rest of us with the knowledge of the world, not just geography but with people and what have you. So, consequently they were interesting to be around, most of them were.

JW: Well, gosh, I would think that a football player who had been through the military would give your team a distinct advantage.

GB: We thought so. [Laughter] If you could keep them out of the beer hall and off the cigarettes! [Laughs]

GB: They would. And we had some who contributed, and we had others who should have contributed, but didn't. They were passed that thinking, of high school athletics. They just wanted to get . . .

JW: That degree.

GB: That degree.

JW: They didn't have anything like GEDs then?

GB: No, no. Not that I ever recall. You had something --- a test you could take in the service that gave you the equivalent, I guess that was a GED now, of a high school diploma.

[Tape Stopped]

GB: Well, there were some fine people in it [World War II], but there's fine people in every generation.

JW: That's true. I think we're showing our stuff, too. We're showing our mettle.

GB: Sure, absolutely. Heritage of the American people.

JW: Was there some big celebration on D-Day? I mean . . .

GB: V-J Day. V-J Day was a major celebration. And after we got our papers distributed that afternoon, everybody convened downtown and there were mass celebrations and parades downtown. Nothing organized, but it was jubilant time throughout the city. It was the Fourth of July ten times over.

JW: So you must have been sixteen then? Almost seventeen?

GB: 1945, yes.

JW: So that must have been really exciting for you.

GB: 1945, yes. Starting into the eleventh grade, I believe. Graduated the spring of 1947.

JW: So there's all these celebrations going on. Did you go down there?

GB: Oh, right in the middle of it. Happened August 14, I believe, of 1945. Football practice started the next day. And we had some real sore heads out there.

JW: Did you play football?

GB: No, I did not. I played at it, but I didn't play.

JW: You've been very supportive of Razorback football.

GB: Very much so. All the athletic programs. I've tried to do what I could to help.

JW: So, when you were in college here did you go to games?

GB: There were a few of us that did. We went to football games, but not very many, not like today. And, of course, basketball was in the men's gym. And it was maybe a few hundred students at the most who would attend those games, and a lot of them were played in the afternoon rather than at night.

JW: So, let me see, you came --- you started here in 1948, 1949?

GB: I transferred up here in 1949, I guess.

JW: So that is after they started playing games in Little Rock?

GB: Yes, they had games in Little Rock. I never went to Little Rock until I came back out of the Navy and I had a car.

JW: That was some trip down there in . . .

GB: An experience.

JW: [Laughs] So you went into the Navy in 1951, and you stayed through 1955?

GB: Yes.

JW: And you served right in Korea?

GB: I was all up and down. I spent four years. Is that forty-eight months? All but three months of service was spent in the Far East. But I was with demolition team in the Navy.

JW: That's dangerous work.

GB: Well, we had a lot of fun, too.

JW: You actually worked with bombs to defuse them?

GB: I was a signal man. You've seen those guys with the blinking lights and the signal flags. I would work with the teams that were destroying everything from fish hatcheries in northern Korea to --- We would go in at night and sometimes in the daytime, and they would do the topo of the land that could be used for invasion sites and things like that and a lot of other things that somebody smarter than I was. But I was the signal man and I would call to the vessel that was lying off shore, the submarine or whatever, it was to come pick us up or send help or do something. That was my principal job was a signal man, what was known as a quartermaster in those days.

JW: Oh, is that what a quartermaster was?

GB: Well, no, the quartermaster in some terminologies you think of it as supply.

JW: Yes.

GB: In the old Navy, up until right soon after the Korean War, they did the adjustment. They had what they call right arm ratings. And that was the signal man, torpedo man, boatswain, quartermaster, and one other, radio man, maybe, something like that. You wore your chevrons on this shoulder, right arm, and it was part of the old Navy tradition. The Navy is nothing but tradition. It is just wrapped up in it. And people in electronics and all of these other things wore their left arm ratings.

JW :I never knew about right arm, left arm ratings.

GB: Yes. Right arm and left arm rating. And consequently, quartermaster in those

days, principally our job was navigation, communication, visual communication or radio type communication, but voice. I didn't do radio, but I did signal flags and semaphore and flashing lights. They sent me to school up in Maryland someplace to get a few weeks of demolition down at Yorktown, Virginia, to know what not to pick up.

JW: [Laughs] An important piece of information.

GB: A very important piece. But, yes, we were there. We were in the Korean conflict, and then we were sent south to --- we actually wound up in Vietnam part of the time mapping the shoreline of Vietnam for future use. I think they already knew what it might be used for?

JW: Oh, is that right? Did you have that sense?

GB: No, we didn't at that time.

JW: In retrospect. 1954 was Dien Bien Phu.

GB: Yes, we evacuated the French Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

JW: And 1954 was the Geneva treaty, I think . . .

GB: Well, it didn't mean anything.

JW: The U.S. didn't sign, so it didn't mean anything.

GB: It didn't stop the gooks from shooting either, so --- but it was nice, simple, then. The actual peace treaty was signed in 1954.

JW: I think you're right.

GB: What was the name of that town in Korea? Po Yang or something like that.

JW: Did you actually set foot on Korea?

GB: Oh, Lord, yes. North and South.

JW: Oh, is that right? In your --- on leave --- as a military man doing your job or what about . . . ?

GB: That was in North Korea. In South Korea it was, you know. . .

JW: R and R [Rest and Relaxation].

GB: Absolutely.

JW: And how did you find that?

GB: Well, after a while, we were home based in Satchapo, Japan, and from there if we got any type of liberty at all, they had rest camps set up for us and some of them were up north in Niko, Japan, up north in the mountains in northern Japan, north of Tokyo, by train probably an hour and a half. If you were really a student, which I was about half way of a student, you went around to see things.

GB: Japan was a great place to be when it was occupied.

[Beginning of Tape 2]

GB: R and R in places like Hong Kong was super in those days. And you just didn't get to spend enough time there. The whole Orient just fascinated me. I didn't join the Navy to stay in the U.S., and they saw to it that my wishes were fulfilled.

JW: [Laughs] You got what you wanted.

GB: I got what I wanted.

JW: Wonderful.

GB: So I think our ship came back, maybe once, twice in four years.

JW: So you only got home a couple of times? You weren't married then?

GB: Oh, no. Oh, no.

JW: That would have been more difficult, I would think.

GB: Well, it was a good time to be single.

JW: Yes.

GB: No responsibilities and so . . .

JW: Do you think that contact with the Orient influenced you later on when you . . .

GB: Got into this other business?

JW: Yes.

GB: It gave me a knowledge, especially in places like South Korea where we were securing a lot of merchandise for Wal-Mart. The reverence and the respect that the businessmen in Korea gave to you and the entry fee you got from him because of your experience there. If he knew that you had served to help his country, it gave you a great deal of reverence with him. And so you had an entry slip to them already.

JW: That is very important in the Orient.

GB: Oh, that face --- all very important in the Orient. I loved it and enjoyed every minute of it. I never thought about reenlisting in Navy, but the thought the does run through your mind --- swish, like that --- because you make a lot of friends and shipmates you think a lot of and enjoy being with --- close relationships that you don't have in civilian life.

JW: The term shipmate has come to be --- you use that term to describe close friends, having nothing to do with ships. When you say, "We're shipmates," it means . . .

GB: That's close.

JW: That's really tight. We've been through the war together, and we've been through some stuff together. So this affection that you have for the Asian area, and the

ability to get entry with your experience there played a role in your success.

GB: Well, don't misunderstand. Wal-Mart had an entry already, but to expand that entry and to solidify that entry and to cultivate new vendors in Korea was important, and that was what we enjoyed doing. We ended up or will be ending up the thirty-first day of this month with twenty-some-odd --- twenty-nine offices around the world, so you went to a lot of different places in that eleven-year relationship we had serving Wal-Mart.

JW: PREL?

GB: Pacific Resources Export Limited.

JW: Do you call it PREL?

GB: PREL.

JW: Well, it is convenient. It does spell something out, unlike some of those. Now you are not actually representing Wal-Mart anymore?

GB: The thirty-first of this month we --- and actually they've asked us to stay another month or so to help them in the transition and we're doing so, but yes.

JW: How did that come about?

GB: Sam ---we talked about business as we played tennis and take breaks and go on vacations together, and he said to me one day -- I'd left Cooper. I had retired [and] I was going to play tennis the rest of my life-- -- and Sam said, "You know something about the Orient and I've had contact from another source that tells me that there's people over there that do the job a lot better than what the offices." He had an office in Hong Kong and one in Taipan. He said, "We don't think we're getting the best for what we do and the money we spend. Why don't you go over

and meet these people and come back and tell me whether or not they are real and whether they can do the job?" And I wasn't doing anything, and so I said, "Sure." It was a chance to go back and meet some new people and go to some --- they were from Indonesia. I went over and met them and was impressed with their financial ability, but they had limited knowledge of what they were doing. But they had willingness and the money to do whatever was necessary to become the supplier for Wal-Mart of foreign goods. So I came back and told Sam that, and he said "Well, I'll send Bill Fields over there and we'll work a negotiation with them, and why don't you go with him." Hell, so I went with him. Bill thought they could do the job, too.

JW: Excuse me, who was Bill Fields?

GB: Now, he was head of merchandise for Wal-Mart, graduate of the University of Arkansas School of Business and classmates of Rob Walton. He was a Bentonville boy. He had started working for Sam while he was in school, high school and college, at the lowest level, and Sam took a real affection to him. Bill is very smart, very smart, and very hardworking. So, Bill gave it a green light, and I came back and he told Sam, and so they said, "Well, now, George, we want you in this thing, too." And I said, "Well, now, wait a minute. I don't know a thing about retail and don't think I've been to Asia to start learning." And he said, "That doesn't make any difference. We don't know these people and we don't really trust them. You stay."

JW: This was Sam talking to you.

GB: He was like Mr. Cooper. I said "Yes, sir," and went right on.

JW: [Laughs]

GB: And that went on for a year or two and it was building up, but it didn't really suit Bill Fields or Sam I don't think as well as it should have. Bill told us — told me I had hired a guy that didn't know something about retail, a Chinese boy, an American citizen, and he was very instrumental in helping get us started over there, but he was running into some stone walls with the Indonesians, so Bill just said "You and Charles," my partner, he said, "You buy them out." I thought, "Boy, the Indonesians, you've read about them." I said, "That's one of the wealthiest families in the world. You're telling Charles and me to go buy them out?" He said, "Yes, they'll take your deal because I'll tell them if they want Wal-Mart they won't sell to you. So we'll still do some business with them." So he did, and we did, and we struck a deal and went about borrowing money and got -- -- we banged on a lot of bank doors and got turned down, but finally we got them some funds and bought out the organization that was in existence at that time. I think we had four or five offices, Singapore, Bangkok, Djakarta, and got Taipei. We didn't have Hong Kong. And Bill said "You all prove yourselves now, you all do this job, and we'll give Hong Kong," which means giving you China which is one-stop shopping for the world. So we did and we got better and took on the Middle East --- Dubai, Egypt --- Italy, Europe and Spain. They didn't like their romance that they had going on in South America, so we took South America.

JW: I didn't know you had that.

GB: Oh, we've got offices in three places --- in Brazil, we've got offices in Chile, Honduras, and places like that. Also, we've got offices like Bangladesh, offices

that you don't want to ever go to, but they are very productive.

JW: So, obviously Wal-Mart isn't your only customer.

GB: It is our only customer.

JW: It's your only customer. So what is going to happen with the end of this Wal-Mart marriage?

GB: They're hiring about eighty or ninety percent of our people. We've gotten a nice settlement out of them.

JW: Oh, so you're happy.

GB: Very pleased. I'm ready to get out of it.

JW: Well, time to retire for what, the second time in your life?

GB: Yes.

JW: Just twenty years after the first time, is that right? Fifty-two when you first retired?

GB: No, not 1952.

JW: Oh, somebody's got it wrong. One of the little biographies I read.

GB: I retired from Cooper in 1981 or 1982.

JW: So you were sixty then?

GB: Fifty-nine when I took on PREL, or started working with PREL. Then we bought it out in I guess 1991 or 1992.

JW: When you said you retired from Cooper, you actually didn't totally retire, you bought into a travel agency.

GB: Yes, but back to Cooper. When I left Cooper, retired from Cooper, I still had stock, ownership, as all three of my children do, because their grandfather set it

up for us that way. And we have that, but when I left Cooper I didn't have anything to do until Sam came along. That was about a year or so. I messed around, went over to Holiday Island and helped them organize a sales program for a year or so. Then I wasn't doing anything and along came this opportunity with Sam, and I did that for eleven years. That is where I am now. So 1952 I was going in the Navy.

JW: Oh, I meant at age fifty-two.

GB: Oh, hell, I don't know.

JW: [Laughs]

GB: Age is nothing but a number.

JW: [Laughs] Oh, I agree with you there. You'll get no argument from me.

GB: I got a birthday tomorrow.

JW: Oh, do you? Well, happy birthday.

GB: As they keep telling me in my family.

JW: Is it --- will you be seventy-three?

GB: Seventy-three.

JW: My goodness. Well, happy birthday.

GB: Thank you.

JW: That's wonderful.

GB: I hope not.

JW: You have two daughters . . .

GB: Two daughters and a son.

JW: That's right. Are they all going to come in for your birthday?

GB: I think so. And why? I don't know. That's not a normal procedure for them. They normally send me greetings or call, that type of thing. That's the way I prefer it, but my wife tells me they're going to be here.

JW: So your son . . .

GB: He lives in Little Rock.

JW: He lives in Little Rock. What's his name?

GB: Charles Morgan. My stepson.

JW: Oh, that's right.

GB: My wife's first marriage. Then I have a daughter who lives in Charlotte, North Carolina, that's my youngest daughter. She graduated at Queen's College there in Charlotte and fell in love with it and decided to stay there.

JW: I can understand that.

GB: Then the oldest daughter married an Italian boy who worked for us in PREL as an office manager in Florence, where our office was for a number of years. When Bill Fields left Wal-Mart, he offered him a job with Blockbuster. He moved back to the states, and they moved to Colorado, to Aspen.

JW: And what's his name?

GB: Paolo. Paolo Wolfram. And then those two got divorced, and she moved down here this past summer with the two grandchildren and bought a home in Bella Vista.

JW: Well, it must be nice to have her close and with the grandchildren.

GB: And Kelly, the youngest daughter, spends a great deal of time over here, almost as much time here as in Charlotte. Does she work? She informed me years ago that

she really does not enjoy work..

JW: Well she knows what she wants and . . .

GB: That's exactly right.

JW: And what she likes, and that's an important thing. So how old are your grandchildren who are living here?

GB: Ten and six.

JW: Nice ages. It must be very nice to have them here.

GB: Yes, it is.

JW: What are their names?

GB: George Maximillan, that's the oldest.

JW: Wolfram?

GB: Wolfram. And the girl is Rebecca Wolfram.

JW: How do you spell Wolfram?

GB: W-O-L-F-R-A-M.

JW: That's what I would have thought. Interesting. And where is he from, where he's actually from?

GB: He is from Italy. Tuscany.

JW: That doesn't sound like an Italian name.

GB: Paolo?

JW: Wolfram.

GB: Wolfram. His father was German.

JW: Oh, okay.

GB: His father was German. He's got a head like a German, too. Hard as a rock.

JW: Laughs. Speaking like a father-in-law, are we?

GB: I didn't know his father, but from what his son tells me, what his code of conduct was, he was pretty tough. So he's a good boy.

JW: So is that a bust of who I think it is? [Behind GB]

GB: Robert E. Lee.

JW: That's what I thought.

GB: You better believe.

JW: You really are quite a history buff.

GB: I'm what?

JW: Quite a history buff.

GB: Oh, well, he's my hero.

JW: I'm writing a book now on the Robert E. Lee Wilson plantation. Do you know the Lee Wilsons?

GB: Very well.

JW: Of course, I'm from that neck of the woods. I feel like I am anyway. Northeast Arkansas, that's where my father was born, and my uncle, one of the pharmacists in the family, was their pharmacist for a while.

GB: For the Wilson family?

JW: Yes.

GB: Have you read *A Painted House*?

JW: Oh, yes, it's a wonderful book. I purport to be an Arkansas agricultural historian, but I learned some stuff from that book. Interesting. I think my emphasis has been too much on, perhaps too much on plantation agriculture, so I lose sight of

what it would be like on a smaller operation. I generalize too much.

GB: Forty acres and a mule.

JW: Yes. Fascinating story that he tells. And that he's from Arkansas, too.

GB: Oh, yes.

JW: One of the interesting things that came up yesterday with the reporter that I was talking to was the way that the world doesn't — before Bill Clinton, but even after Bill Clinton --- have any idea about Arkansas. It's like what you said about how these executives having to be wooed to come to Arkansas. The world doesn't appreciate how dynamic and vibrant this economy is, particularly in northwestern Arkansas. They don't associate people like Sam Walton or the Wal-Mart Corporation with Arkansas. They may have heard it somewhere, but they don't "get it." It's like Arkansas . . .

GB: My wife says, "If you searched Sam's background far enough, there's a Jew somewhere. No merchant is entitled to be that successful unless he's Jewish." But, no, I agree with you.

JW: I don't know why that is, and I don't know how to --- I sometimes --- I don't want to be this "rah, rah" Arkansas booster, but on the other hand . . .

GB: Why not?

JW: I don't know. We just did some interviews. We're hiring an assistant professor this year in diplomatic history, and we went to San Francisco at the big American Historical Association meeting, and we did --- it felt like twenty-five, but I think it was more like fifteen interviews in a two-day period with aspiring assistant professors, people who just got their degrees.

GB: You get some dumb questions, don't you?

JW: You get some dumb questions, and I have learned. We've hired seven people over the last few years, since I have been chair of the department. I've learned I need to find out what their attitude is toward living in the middle of the country because we have an awful lot of people coming out of universities on the East Coast or the West Coast or Chicago, which may as well be on the East Coast, and they have an attitude about middle of the country, and they have an attitude about small towns. And I just need to know when I'm talking to them what kind of attitude they have about that so I know how to approach it. And also, so I know whether to take them seriously as candidates. You don't want to go to all the trouble of hiring somebody, and they come here with one eye on the next job.

GB: Yes.

JW: Because it takes a lot of effort to go through then to see them leave.

GB: We used to hire salesman for Bella Vista and Cherokee Village and sometimes during the summer months we'd have as many as a hundred sales people working at Bella Vista and another hundred at Cherokee Village. We would start every year in February interviewing and hiring, and ninety percent of the people that we would interview would be from out of state and a great many of them from northern states. It was a pleasure for me to bring down that barrier. I loved to break it down. You can break it because you are more knowledgeable about what your product is and how happy you are with your product and where you are, but it is more fun to let it, to see the light go on in their own minds and get them down here and get their family down here for just a week sometimes will be the turning

tide to get them. So Sam did the same thing, more times than I can think of. If you read the resumes of several of his key people, how many times he actually had to try to hire them before he could get them. I mean, interviews he'd do with them and how often he had to go fly off someplace and meet with them to try to talk to them into coming down here, how difficult it was for him.

JW: I can believe it.

GB: But it's a pleasure to break them.

JW: We actually hired one person, a senior person, who only stayed a couple of years because his wife just wouldn't move here. She was determined not to.

GB: We've had the same problem. I mean on high levels.

JW: Yes, this is pretty high level, too.

GB: Yes.

JW: Some people think they can't live outside the city.

GB: No, Lord, no. Find out a lot of them are actually afraid of driving, you know, because they've always taken subways or commuters into the city, into the inner city. I don't have any use for them.

JW: I love the woods, but I was given some insight once in, of all things, a Woody Allen movie, where he was talking about his fear of the woods and the open spaces and how frightening those were. I suppose for somebody who's been raised on concrete . . .

GB: Oh, yes.

JW: It would be a scary thing to find yourself in the middle of a woods, disorienting and scary, I guess. But I was raised in Arkansas, mostly . . .

GB: Still got the hay in your hair?

JW: Oh, yes, and I hope to always have it. We are --- we're way passed the lunch hour, aren't we?

GB: Oh, we need to wrap up. I've got an appointment at one, supposedly.

JW: I'm sorry that I . . .

GB: No . . .

JW: What I'd like to do is --- what we'll do with this is I'll turn it over to a transcriptionist and she will transcribe it, and we will send you a preview of the transcribed copy for you to look over and make any corrections.

GB: Why don't you do it this way? You make your transcription, and when you review it and get it the way you want it and the material out of it that you can use, then put that on paper and bring that up on what you want to use and any unused, not unused, but any parts that you've gotten a void in or that I have not told you all you wanted to hear about that particular subject or --- and you'll think of other things that you'll wish you'd asked . . .

JW: I have a [lifts up notepad] second page I haven't gotten to.

GB: When you get the first part done, come on back and we'll put the rest of it together for you.

JW: Oh, I appreciate that. What I'll do, too, is at some point I'll need to ask you, once you have had a chance to review the transcripts to sign off on them because Special Collections . . .

GB: I have no problem with that.

JW: They won't take it unless we have the gift agreement, which is understandable, of

course. Well, I really do appreciate your willingness to conduct this interview.

[End of Interview]