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

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William Jefferson Clinton History Project

John Ahlen

Interviewed by Betsey Wright

March 28, 2012

Little Rock, Arkansas

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Objective

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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 in the Pryor Center archives. The transcripts, audio and video files, and photographs are made available on the Pryor Center Web site at https://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. We attempt to transcribe verbatim all words that are spoken, including false starts and repetitions.

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 18th 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.
- Brackets enclose
  - italicized annotations of nonverbal sounds, such as laughter, and audible sounds, such as a doorbell ringing;
  - and standard English spelling of informal words.
- Commas are used in a conventional manner where possible to aid in readability.

Citation Information

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Betsey Wright interviewed John Ahlen on March 28, 2012, in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Kris Katrosh: This interview is being conducted by the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History in partnership with the Butler Center for Arkansas Studies. The interviewee is Dr. John Ahlen, and the interviewer is Betsey Wright. The interview will be transcribed and returned to the interviewee and interviewer for their review before being published. The interview transcripts and related materials will be deposited in the Special Collections Department at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, and at Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, Little Rock. Dr. Ahlen, if you agree with this statement, if you'll please give us your verbal consent.

John Ahlen: You have my verbal consent.

KK: Thank you very much. Have a good interview.

JA: Thank you.

KK: We're rolling.

Betsey Wright: Okay.

KK: You can go ahead and start.

BW: Well, I want to start with your beginnings and where you were born and raised and who your parents were and to talk about your childhood and early education.

JA: I was born in Chicago. My dad's name was John Ahlen. My mother was Helen Damaske Ahlen. He was from Fargo, North Dakota, and she was from Kewanee, Illinois. I was born in 1947 across the street from Chicago in Oak Park, Illinois. My mom and dad lived in the city. I was raised in Chicago. Went to Chicago public schools. Went to Henry Nash grammar school, Austin High School, and was in the first class admitted to the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle as a four-year student. Previous to that it had been the University of Illinois at Navy Pier and was a two-year feeder institution to the Urbana campus. I studied engineering, started in aerospace engineering, and switched to bioengineering in my freshman year. Graduated with a bachelor's degree in 1969 and the following fall went into the University of Illinois at the Medical Center program in physiology and bioengineering and received a Ph.D. in 1974.

BW: Now, how did your parents happen to be in Chicago?

JA: My dad's family moved to Chicago when he was five years old. They had been Swedish immigrants and had located in Fargo with a large Swedish population, but they found the winters too

cold in Fargo and moved to Chicago. My mother was a graduate of high school in Kewanee and—in Wethersfield, actually, and read a newspaper story about nursing and decided she wanted to be a nurse and moved to Chicago to study nursing. And it was in Chicago that she met my father, who was a carpenter. And they married just before he went away for World War II. Actually, he stayed in the United States, and they moved around the country during the war and then moved back to Chicago after the war ended.

BW: And you have siblings?

JA: I have one brother who's three years my junior, Steve. My father wanted to be an attorney, and the Depression interrupted that, and the war interrupted that dream of his, so he decided his children, both of his sons, would have the opportunity to go to college because he didn't have it. I went on and got my graduate degree, and my brother went on and got a Ph.D. in physics at the University of California, Berkeley, so he now is a professor of physics at Boston University.

[00:03:44] BW: Where—now, what did you do after you finished your education?

JA: I was a fifth-year graduate student, and my dean of engineering recommended that I apply for an internship with the Illinois

Legislative Council. The National Science Foundation was funding a program for ten months where they would like a science student or an engineering student to work with the Legislative Council and answer legislators' questions about science. Most of the questions were about energy, the environment, natural resources, and some health questions. After doing that for about six months, I was hooked on science in public policy. Was able to travel some and visited the New York Assembly, which had a very senior physicist as a science advisor for the assembly. And at lunch one day—it was actually dinner one evening, he asked what I would do when I finished my internship, and I said, "Well, I'm gonna go back to Chicago. I'm going to look for a position at a university. I wanna teach and do research." And he suggested that I might want to stay on with the Legislative Council, and I told him I hadn't had any offer and wasn't planning on one, so I was gonna go back to Chicago. He said, "Well, I would be surprised if they let you get away." And he was correct. [00:05:16] Before my internship ended, I was offered a job, which I turned down. They wanted me to be a policy analyst like all the other staff, and I said, "No, I've studied too hard to be an engineer. I don't want to be like everybody else." And they asked what else it would take to get

me to change my mind, and I made this preposterous offer, and they countered by saying, "You have it. You can be the staff scientist for the Legislative Council, and we'll give you a budget and an assistant and an intern," and I thought I had hit a home run. And that's how I began my career in science and public policy.

[00:05:56] BW: And how long were you there?

JA: I stayed there for ten years. I moved up. I left as an assistant director of the Legislative Council for Science and Technology, and I left to come to Arkansas to be the first executive director of a brand new organization called the Arkansas Science and Technology Authority.

BW: And that was in 1983.

JA: I applied in 1983, and I began in February of 1984.

[00:06:24] BW: And how did you get recruited for that position?

JA: Well, I answered an ad that was placed in *Science* magazine. I remember thinking about it over the Thanksgiving break in 1983. I was with my mom and dad and brother in Wisconsin at my folks' retirement cabin. And that whole weekend I studied the ad and thought about the letter that I could write and decided the following week that I was going to apply for the position.

[00:06:54] BW: What was attractive to you about something called the Arkansas Science and Technology Authority?

JA: Well, there were two things. One was that, in answering questions for legislators, there were no questions about economic development that had come up or had come to my attention in the ten years that I had worked at the Legislative Council until 1982. And there was one question that was asked about the Ben Franklin partnership in Pennsylvania, which was a brand new, technology-based economic development program that had been put in place to try and replicate in Pennsylvania the kind of success that had been seen in Boston along Route 128 and in Silicon Valley around Stanford University and in the Research Triangle Park in North Carolina. So I was interested in this new, technology-based economic development opportunity that I read about in *Science* magazine, and I was also ready, professionally, to run my own staff. I had been a staffer in larger organization. I was the director of one unit in a larger organization. I wanted to run an organization, and this was an opportunity.

[00:08:12] BW: What is your sense of how you were selected?

JA: I remember that I was interviewed once, and I came back for a second interview.

BW: Who did you interview with?

JA: I interviewed with the search committee, which was a subcommittee of the board of directors of the Science and Technology Authority. And the second interview I actually met the other finalist, and we had been told that we were back for a second interview—that there would be no decisions made by the board at that meeting. This was just an opportunity to compare the two finalists that they had. I was interviewed. I was asked if I would wait until the second interview was completed, which I did, and then I was called back in to the session with the board members and was asked by the chair, Dr. Ron Hart, if I would take the job. And I was wise enough to know that if I said no, I wouldn't get another chance, so I said yes, but I was really not prepared to say yes for a lot of reasons, which became apparent to me that evening in my hotel room, alone. So the next day, I had asked one of the staff from the Authority, Alice Smith, if there was any way I could talk to the chair—that I had something I needed to clarify with him. She said that he had left for Washington. Dr. Hart was the director of the National Center for Toxicological Research, and he had left to visit the Food and Drug Administration in Washington. [00:10:01] But she said, "I might be able to get you in to see the vice chair, who is Bill

Bowen." Well, I went over with Alice and went into Bill's office, just the two of us, and said, "You know, I said yes, and I really want to come, but I didn't ask about things like moving expenses, and I'm very active in my professional engineering society. I have a position as an officer. It requires me to travel. I just have all of these things that I didn't think to ask because I didn't know we were negotiating for the position." And he said, "Well," and he just went down my list. "Don't worry about moving expenses. Whatever they are, we'll take care of them. If being active in your engineering society is important, we will make that a condition of your employment." And so all of my concerns were erased in that brief conversation with Bill Bowen, and based on that I decided to come.

[00:11:03] BW: And when did you first encounter Bill Clinton?

JA: I don't believe I met the governor until after I had accepted the position, and what I remember our first visit being was in Washington, DC, at a National Governors Association meeting. And I had shown up in Little Rock, basically, with a suitcase full of clothes and packed that bag and went off to Washington to the—at—my very first National Governors Association meeting and met him there. And it was extraordinarily important meeting for me—you know, my new boss. I had met governors

in Illinois fairly frequently, but this was a room full of governors, and I was talking to my new governor, so it was a very important meeting. And he and Hillary just made me feel like I was the only person that was coming to Arkansas that week, and if there was anything they could do to help me make that move more comfortable, just let them know, and I felt very much at home.

[00:12:10] BW: Well, as I'm sure you learned from that experience plus the subsequent years, he considered the initiation of the Arkansas Science and Technology Authority to be one of the greatest accomplishments of his time as governor of Arkansas. And at various times he referred to it as an example of a public-private partnership, an example of expanding the higher education role, and of reinventing government. And I'm wanting you to now describe what the—why it was and is all of those things, how it has grown from that. And we expanded the authority of ASTA shortly after you got here in the legislative session.

JA: That's correct.

BW: So I'm hoping you will replay some of that and how—what those first days were like and what working with the commission was like—how involved they were.

JA: Well, I mentioned Alice Smith, and Alice was the deputy director, the first hire that was made at this new organization, and she was just invaluable because she knew everybody in the state. [*BW laughs*] And within six months she had introduced me to most of those people who she had—who she knew. And so that was very important. She knew the board members by their first names. They were pretty much strangers to me when I arrived. That changed over time, but it changed because there was somebody like Alice there who could tell me their biography, their history, their curriculum vitae. She knew everything about these folks. And so that part was six months just getting to know people and the board. We also had to learn how to new—how to use the new tools that had been put in place in the 1983 legislative session, and those tools involved revenue bonds and legislation modeled after Connecticut's Product Development Corporation. Alice and I went off to bond school to learn about revenue bonds, and we learned very quickly that one cannot finance risk with securities. So we had to go back to Arkansas and explore options for making this new organization viable. [00:14:41] I had a conversation with people in New York where we were in school, and they said there was this consultant named Belden Daniels who was very knowledgeable about public

finance and that we should try and get him to Arkansas and explore what the opportunities were to change what we had into something that would work better. And I might point out at this time there were not a lot of good models that had been proven. Technology-based economic development was in its infancy. And so everything that the states were doing were brand new experiments that had to be tested. And we were really thrown into that experiment early and had to make some changes. [00:15:21] One of the governor's staff involved in economic development at that time was Bob Nash. So I visited with Bob and explained the dilemma we had, mentioned the consultant's name, and Bob said, "I know him. He did some work for me," and I don't remember when it was. When he was in a community someplace doing community development work, he had worked with Belden Daniels, and we arranged, since Belden was working in Louisiana at the time, living in Boston, commuting to Louisiana, that we would meet at the Little Rock airport for thirty minutes and that we would explore whether there was something in Arkansas for Belden to do or not. That meeting was the cornerstone for what became Governor Bill Clinton's 1985 economic development package. Not only did Belden have ideas about how to fix the tool set at the Science

and Technology Authority, he also saw that by moving the revenue bond authority to another agency that already had that authority but expanding what the bonds could be used for made sense, that there were opportunities to change some of the banking laws, and as a consequence not only did he develop a plan that involved a number of agencies, but we all traveled around the state visiting with communities, economic development leaders, and putting in place the development for the 1985 legislative session.

[00:16:54] BW: So how would you define what the mission of ASTA was to be at that point? What were these tools supposed to accomplish?

JA: Well, we had a great statutory mission to bring the benefits of science and advanced technology to the people and the state of Arkansas. We just didn't have the tools to make that happen. Part of the financing package was public-private partnerships and a whole new public finance infrastructure for the state that retooled the state housing agency into the Development Finance Authority, sometimes called ADFA, took the first Arkansas Development Finance Corporation and turned it into the Arkansas Capital Corporation, created interlocking boards of directors, just a lot of things that had not been done in other

states, but because we had this opportunity in Arkansas—we had the insights of a Belden Daniels, the willingness of the chief executive of the state to do some things differently. We had a portfolio of bills that changed so much in economic development. The bonding authority, like I said, went to the Development Finance Authority. We kept the product development pieces of the legislation and added basic and applied research grant programs to work with universities and increased the research performance of campuses in the state. At the time Arkansas was getting a very small percentage of federal research and development dollars. We received authority for technology transfer activities that became much more important in later years, but that was designed to help us work with universities and move ideas toward the marketplace. We had a brand new business incubator program that allowed us to work with universities to commercialize new products. And perhaps the most unique new program was an investment program funded one time in 1985 with $1.8 million in a revolving fund that could be used by the board of directors to invest in new technology companies. All of the legislation passed. I don't think there was anything anyplace that didn't pass, and in the aftermath of that 1985 legislative session, the landscape for economic

development was forever changed in Arkansas.

[00:19:43] BW: Walk me through how some of those individual program capacities worked. Talk about the incubators.

JA: Well, incubators were a brand-new idea, and in Arkansas we were kidded a lot about having incubators when people thought that's where you put eggs and turned 'em into chicks. So we had to deal with vocabulary and expectations for what incubators were. There were none in the state at that time, and over a roughly five-year period, we did a series of requests for proposals and established a total of seven business incubators around the state. Today the Genesis Business Incubator at the University of Arkansas is a flagship for economic development in Northwest Arkansas. The incubator has expanded into a research and technology park with three buildings, many tenants. Many of those tenants spin off companies from intellectual property developed at the University of Arkansas. There is still an incubator at Arkansas State University in the industrial park. It has been used for different purposes over the years, but it still exists and still houses economic development activities, and in addition there is a new, small incubator in the Arkansas Biosciences Institute building on campus. And we continue to work with those—both of those incubators there.

[00:21:14] BW: So what do they do in those places?

JA: Small companies form. One of the other public-private partnerships that we developed in [19]85 was the applied research grant program. And what that would allow us to do is work with manufacturers that had a problem, find the technology that they needed at a university, and then help transfer the ideas from the university to the manufacturer.

BW: So it was an Arkansas manufacturing company. How did you find that they had a problem?

JA: We had a good relationship—and if you think back to where was the technology in the state of Arkansas in 1985, and it was mostly at the universities, so we had good relationships with people at those universities. So they were being contacted regularly by companies that needed help of one kind or another, and this wasn't the kind of help they could just walk into a state agency, at that time, and get. Today it would be different. At that time there were federal agencies like NASA that were doing technology transfer in an active way, trying to work with companies that provided products to the space agency, but there wasn't a lot going on at the state level. So we didn't have any trouble finding the companies. We had more trouble finding the technologies that they needed. [00:22:40] We found, in one of

these early investigations, a young assistant professor of mechanical engineering. His name is Ajay Malshe, and he did the work for—I think it was Rogers Tool company. It was a $30,000 project cost shared between the state and the company. In doing that work for the company, Ajay had some ideas about how to use materials in new and creative ways to make cutting tools that are used in the machine tool business last longer, extending their life. He worked on that idea for a number of years, got a National Science Foundation grant, a six-figure grant, to do that work at the University of Arkansas. He made disclosures about ideas he had. The University got patents, and he spun off a small company that would commercialize this process. That company started off in Genesis and is now in one of the buildings at the Research and Technology Park. It has five platform technologies including some nanotechnology activity. They're very exciting. [00:23:59] So those are the kind of things that an applied research project, creative university, university spin-off technology can do to lead to new companies, new employment for engineers. If you talk to the—these kind of companies, they're hiring engineering graduates from the University of Arkansas. Some have master's degrees and Ph.D.s. The

average salaries are in the $80,000 range, so this is a much different kind of employment and much different kind of company than we were recruiting to the state when we were diversifying our agricultural economy and recruiting branch plants.

BW: That—I love that example you just gave, and I hope you can think of other examples of companies that have been started with a similar base.

JA: Well, we would invest in two or three of these kind of companies every year. Some of them fail. Some of them don't go into commercial production for a variety of reasons. We learned from all of those failures, and today the state has a wider collection of programs to help entrepreneurial startup companies than we did at that time. [00:25:21] The Small Business Development Centers have added technology to their name and to their mission, so we have that help that we didn't have. We have a more diversified public-finance program that came into being after the groundbreaking seed-capital investment program from 1985. We have advocacy groups like Accelerate Arkansas now that have helped fill some of the gaps. One of those fillers is Innovate Arkansas, which is housed in a nonprofit. It's housed at Winrock International, and it coaches new companies.

We can invest in the technology and expect Innovate Arkansas to work with these companies and help with the management and business development activities and make them stronger. They also work—Innovate also works with the business incubators. So we have this interlocking network now of support functions that help these companies not only survive but, in many cases, thrive.

[00:26:23] BW: You refer to the $1.8 million, one-time, revolving loan. What—how did that work?

JA: Well, people said that it wouldn't work. People said that the money would be lost. People said that that kind of private-sector-like function could not operate successfully in a public sector organization like the Science and Technology Authority. But it has worked well. I—we report on the fund at every board meeting. We meet—our board meets every other month. And so the most recent report was that we had a little over $1 million in cash for investments. We had a couple million dollars of investments that there may—and if you add up all of those totals, the value of the fund is now $4 million. And about two thirds of that is actually in loans and royalty agreements with the kind of companies, including, by the way, the NanoMech company that Ajay Malshe founded.

[00:27:35] BW: And how do you get money back from that? How does it get—what are the royalties? How does the investment pay back?

JA: Well, we make loans, so it's just like making a loan, but these are high-risk loans. The interest rates, therefore, are a bit higher than if you went to a bank, but these kind of companies can't go to a bank and get a loan, so that's our market. We also will enter into royalty agreements where we get paid back based on the sale of product by the company to customers that are putting money down. And that's how—and then we—the money that is idle is also generating a small amount of interest income.

[00:28:19] BW: You've alluded to the growth of high-tech jobs in Arkansas out of all of this. That has expanded. Is there a way to put into words or statistics what has occurred in Arkansas to get these jobs and where—what our status is with them now? Because we still don't realize what Arkansas has accomplished.

JA: It's hard to do because these are small firms. They're concentrated in places, mostly, where there is a research university, but not exclusively.

BW: But we didn't have research universities . . .

JA: Well, we didn't. When—I remember this story. And one of the members of the task force that recommended the creation of the

Authority was Dr. Harry Ward, the chancellor at UAMS. And one of the things that—and Harry was later appointed to our board and served two terms as a board member. And one of the stories he would tell is that when he came to the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences in the early [19]80s, the university did $5 million in externally supported research, which in those days was not much. It's next to nothing in terms of research today. Today the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences does in excess of $100 million in research and development. So you are correct. In the early [19]80s, the mindset was that UAMS was a hospital teaching doctors. The Fayetteville campus, which was the closest thing we had to a real, four-year research university in the state offering graduate programs, was doing a small amount of research, and the faculty was expected to teach. [00:30:21] I remember—I don't remember the individual, but we had a proposal from a faculty member in the mid-[19]80s for the basic research grant program. And we returned it with recommendations for how it could be improved. The recommendations came from peer reviewers in other states. And I ran into the principal investigator who had submitted that proposal in Fayetteville on campus, and I asked if he was going to resubmit his research

proposal. And he said, "No, if you wanna fix that proposal and give me the money, you can go ahead and do that." But that's not our business. That wasn't our business at the time, and it reflected a mindset that research wasn't really competitive. You didn't have to ask more than once. If you didn't get it the first time, there were other mechanisms, including sometimes politics, to get that project funded. But that's not the way it works in science, so he never did get an award from us. But that was the mindset. And the mindset changed because of the Science and Technology Authority, because of the public-finance opportunities, because of the business incubators. And all of these things contributed to a change not only in what went on at the Science and Technology Authority but also at the campuses.

[00:31:43] BW: And how would you describe the attitude of the General Assembly to the Science and Technology Authority now?

JA: Well, in many respects, the initial bill to create the Authority was because of legislative interest, and in 1985, which was my first legislative session—and so I thought every session must run just like it did in 1985. Lots of planning, lots of debate about what the bills should look like, a complete package, the governor on board, and that it would be like that every two years. Well, I found out that it didn't work like that, that 1985 was different

from most legislative sessions. And in 1987 when our budget was being heard by the joint budget committee, one of the questions that I received was "How many jobs have you created?" And the answer was, "None." Well, they didn't understand how that could possibly be the right answer, so our bill was held, and it was the most traumatic legislative session that I have had because it was really quite contentious. The thought was we spent a l—we invested a lot of money, and you have spent a lot of money on job creation, but you don't have any jobs. We gave you all these new tools, and you haven't used one. But in f—it's—and because of people like Bill Bowen and Louis Ramsey, who are really high-profile individuals on our board, which the governor appointed, were able to talk to legislators and help get our bill out of committee. [00:33:42] But the story was new bills are passed in the session in [19]85, but they don't become—they're not—I'm blanking on the term. They don't become effective until the effective date, and that is often the first of July, so we didn't get new staff, we didn't have appropriations to spend until July. We didn't do anything with money until we had administrative rules in place to give us guidance and show the universities and other participants of programs what they needed to do. And by the time we had put

out budget proposal together for the [19]87 session, we hadn't shown anything, so we had a pretty flat request. And by the time we were having our bill heard, there just—we had received proposals, but we hadn't funded a lot. So it was just a very difficult thing.

[00:34:38] BW: There was very little understanding of groundwork, start-up, and development of an agency.

JA: So NanoMech that I mentioned, the company up in Northwest Arkansas, has about thirty employees, it's got public investments, it's got private investors that have a much larger investment than the public entities. Ajay Malshe's work was done in the [19]80s. It took him fifteen years to get to the point where he was ready to create a company, and then even longer to get the kind of investments he needed to hire the people and make the kind of products that he's making now. So it's a long-term process. And in programs that in 1985 were brand new experiments that now, almost thirty years later, we know are successful.

[00:35:39] BW: And what is the attitude of the General Assembly now to ASTA?

JA: Well, it's much better. It's much better because there are advocates for the kind of thing that we do, both in universities

and in the private sector. We have companies that give us testimonials about how they wouldn't be here, they wouldn't be doing the things that they do without the support that they get from the programs that we and other economic development agencies now have in the realm of technology-based economic development. So it's much different. But there still is this impatience. If you can recruit a plant, you can see the groundbreaking, you can see the walls going up, and within twenty-four months, you can see something happening. For a lot of these technology-based companies twenty-four months in the beginning means you get your idea patented, so it's a different kind of economic development. But I think we can see today, looking globally, this is the way we're going to create jobs in the future.

BW: Well, those plants that we saw get built shut down and moved elsewhere, other countries, in a lot of cases. [00:36:55] How was working with Bill Clinton as the governor for those first few years that you were here? When did you encounter him, work with him?

JA: Well, being a member of the cabinet is really kind of a special position because you do get to see the governor, either through scheduled appointments that you want or he wants, but also at

other events on a pretty regular basis. And so it was very easy—and he was the first governor that I actually worked for, so it was great training to have that experience with him and to have the—like I said, the first time I met him, I felt very much at home with him. That isn't the case with everybody you meet for the first time. So the working relationship just followed that. He was easy to work with. Hillary was easy to work with. And the experience was very satisfying for me, both personally and professionally. He was—beyond the policy, the science and public policy activities, there was something about working with him that invited his staff and cabinet to do things that they might not otherwise do. Running into somebody who would say, "Well, I wish the governor would know this." And so you just kinda scribble off a note and send it to the governor and then find out that he had responded to that person. Those kind of things were very satisfying. It kind of gave the—gave one the feeling that you were working in a government that really did work.

[00:38:40] BW: Compare, if you can—I mean, this is duplicative of part of what you've already said—but the growth of ASTA over all of those years in size, in capacity, in involvement with research communities now.

JA: Well, things change. I think that our business at the Science and Technology Authority's always looking forward and maybe not paying enough attention to our own history and our own success stories. We're always looking for the next, new opportunity. And in our work, there was always something new just around the corner. So if one project runs into a brick wall and comes to a screeching halt, we just go on to another project that happens to be moving at high speed. So it's really exciting to be in this kind of an organization. Some of the things that we did that were successful, like investing in research faculty at universities, we don't do anymore. We may invest the same amount of money in bigger projects in research but at the—the nature of the work is different. The technology transfer, for example, is different from the way it was when we thought we were circuit riders trying to find companies and linking them up with universities. One of the last things that we did while Governor Clinton was still here was get a proposal funded by the National Institute of Standards and Technology that led us, eventually, to get one of the Hollings centers in Arkansas, one of the Manufacturing Extension Partnership Centers, aimed at helping manufacturers. So if you look at the Science and Technology Authority today, we do very little technology

transfer, but we manage a statewide partnership with a federal technology agency and have ten staff at universities and nonprofits around the state working with manufacturers on a full-time basis. So it's changed.

[00:40:57] BW: What does technology transfer mean?

JA: All it means is you're moving something from one place to another place, and it helps the recipient do better work with the technology either by improving a technology in their plant or improving a process. We have—our Arkansas Manufacturing Solutions, which is the tech transfer function that we have today, does lean manufacturing to eliminate waste. Six Sigma work, which is to improve the process and eliminate bad product coming off your assembly line. We're in—we've come full circle with the National Institute of Standards and Technology, which once upon a time thought tech transfer was just about manufacturers and it was just about moving technology into a plant. Now the National Institute of Standards and Technology is saying, "We need to help manufacturers become more innovative." Well, that's what we've been doing for twenty-eight years. So it's natural, and it's a big part of what we do. In terms of research, we now manage a statewide research program, a five-year, $20 million research effort, that has taken

the place of investing relatively small amounts of money in individual scientists around the state. We have three virtual research centers located on seven campuses around the state. And when you look at the research that we do, the manufacturing outreach that we do, and the core programs from 1985, it divides up about a third, a third, a third. So we're three times bigger than we were in 1985 doing probably three times the amount of work.

[00:42:48] BW: I listen to you, and I can just imagine Bill Clinton's excitement at everything you've said. Have you had a chance to talk to him about some of this growth and development?

JA: Well, he got it when he was governor. We didn't have to do anything to convince him.

BW: He got excited about it when you . . .

JA: He was . . .

BW: . . . talked to him.

JA: And if we happened to be in the same place talking to the same crowd and I, for example, might have a speaking role and get all excited about the research and development activities, the governor would stand up and say, "Let me tell you why that's important," and just carry on the story and take it to a whole different level. So he got it, from the beginning. The

Manufacturing Extension Partnership that I've alluded to was actually something that came to fruition in his first term as president. I was able to serve a year in his White House as an engineering fellow at the Office of Science and Technology Policy working on what was called the US Innovation Partnership, which was between the Office of Science and Technology Policy and the federal government and the National Governors Association, trying to reach out to all fifty states. So he got it when he was governor. He kept on when he was president, and to answer your question, it's been too many years since we've had that kind of conversation.

BW: Well, you need to . . .

JA: But I . . .

BW: . . . make that happen.

JA: I can imagine how it would go.

[00:44:19] BW: Well, ASTA got recognized beyond the borders of Arkansas quite frequently. Can you talk about some of the opportunities that you then had to brag about this agency?

JA: Well, the legislation from 1985 was replicated in Oklahoma and Nebraska and in the years that came right after the [19]85 session. The breadth of programs from [19]85 just continued to grow. We filled in some gaps that we had that we learned about

later. We moved more into math and science education as a way to develop the work force. We did, with Hillary Clinton's help, we were tagged by the governor to do the feasibility study for the Arkansas School for Math and Sciences in Hot Springs. So . . .

BW: Which is thriving.

JA: I ran into—I run into graduates, now. And the graduates say, "I got the best education over there. And I've gone on, and now I have my bachelor's degree in something." They're working here in Arkansas. There've been over two thousand graduates from that school.

BW: I'll—well, see, we need to do follow up on what's happened with those graduates, too. [00:45:43] Do you think many of them have stayed in Arkansas?

JA: Well, I run into some of them. In fact, one of them married one of our staff, came back and married one of our staff, so . . .

BW: Well, we were hoping . . .

JA: We know we . . .

BW: . . . we were creating people who would keep their brains in Arkansas.

JA: We—so we have this collection of programs that maybe in some ways is smaller scale than in other states, but we have a full

portfolio of things. We know what works, what doesn't work. We're as knowledgeable—the mindset here is as good as it is any place that does technology-based economic development, and that is recognized because of the programming and the staff that we have. And we've been around a long time. We've—we're really seen as one of the pioneer states in terms of putting these kind of programs in place.

[00:46:35] BW: And do you get called on for guidance by other states?

JA: Well, while the governor was—while the president was governor—when Bill Clinton was the chairman of the Southern Growth Policies Board, he and the governor of Florida helped to create the Southern Technology Council, which was a way for those of us in the South doing this kind of work to meet on a regular basis, exchange best practices, talk about new ideas that we wanted to try, and have that kind of network where we could call one another and both ask questions and give advice when called upon, and we often would get those calls.

BW: Has that continued?

JA: It has.

BW: In the Southern Technology . . .

JA: It has.

BW: Good. That's great.

JA: It's a little bit different from what it was in the beginning, but it—in fact, one of our senior staff just got appointed to take my place at the Southern Technology Council.

[00:47:37] BW: You have now been in this position from the beginning days of the agency.

JA: It's true.

BW: Of the Authority, I should call it. And you have moved through quite a number of legislative—of leadership changes in the state with different governors as well as different—well, the legislative setup is completely different now because of term limits. The giants who had seniority aren't there anymore. How have you managed to endure all of this? How have you managed to keep your job there?

JA: I don't know that I actually know the answer to that. I think one of the reasons is that the transitions prior to the election of Mike Beebe as governor were different from a full-blown election campaign where people were taking positions and making promises. You know, the—Governor Clinton became president, and then Jim Guy Tucker, the lieutenant governor, moved up. And then when Jim Guy Tucker left office in the middle of a term, Mike Huckabee moved up from lieutenant governor. So

the transitions were different, and the timing was such that you didn't make sweeping changes if you were governor. You had to kind of ease in. And I think that had something to do with it. I think part of it is that the Science and Technology Authority in the scale of state government is really quite small, and so by the time a transition gets down to the smaller agencies that it's not quite as important as it was on the first day with the big agencies. And then I think the structure with a board of directors that we use as a real, honest-to-goodness board of directors that makes the decisions on where to put scarce resources is a good model for making these kind of investments, and that that's been assessed as a good way to do it, and if it's working maybe we don't need to change it.

[00:49:48] BW: The board was critical in those early years because they were, as you referred to Bill Bowen and to Lewis Ramsey, who were so well respected, but they became advocates very strongly from day one. Has the board continued to be that kind of an advocate or have—is—are things just settled now that you don't need those kinds of advocacy roles?

JA: Well, the board's personality changes about every eight or ten years, and we have term limits for board members as . . .

BW: How many people are on the board?

JA: We have a fourteen-member board.

BW: And they each serve for how long?

JA: Four years, except for the director of higher education, one of those interlocking board members, who serves as long as they're in their position. But we have a private-sector dominated board, so we have three manufacturers, we have five members at large from the private sector, and that means the decisions that the board makes are generally driven by good business instincts, and they make good choices. [00:51:00] The—I was talking about the personality. We had very high-profile individuals in the beginning. We probably don't have as many of those. But we occasionally get them. And the members that we do have are very knowledgeable. The mindset is different today. I can remember one of the bankers on our board in 1986 having to leave as we were voting on our first seed-capital investment, and as he walked out of the room, he was saying, "This will never work." [*Laughs*] And it turned out to be a company that paid us back, so the mindset today is we have attorneys who are doing the incorporation papers for new technology companies. They understand the role of public finance in the startup of these businesses. So the mindset of the board is much different today.

[00:51:48] BW: It's—what I hear you saying is that those initial directors knew that it would be good for us, and those that you have now know that it is good for us.

JA: Right. That's well put.

BW: And it wasn't just a vision, it's an accomplishment. It's a great kind of change to have occurred. What—how long were you at the—with your fellow at the White House Office of Science . . .

JA: It was for one year.

BW: And you just took a leave of absence from your job? How did that work?

JA: Well, I needed a management plan to get the governor's approval to take a year.

BW: And the governor at that time was?

JA: Was Mike Huckabee. And so I put together a management plan, and we had to make some staff changes before I left, but once that plan was in place and the right people were in place, it worked very well. I had designated two people to be the go-to folks while I was out of town. I was back every other week for a staff meeting. They would contact me with big decisions, but for the most part, things ran on a day-to-day basis without any special attention from me.

[00:52:59] BW: What year was that?

JA: That was in 1997. I started in June.

BW: So it was fifteen years old by then.

JA: Mh-hmm.

BW: The Authority was. So it was able to walk on its own legs.

JA: Well, and there're two thoughts about this. One was that the management plan worked so well that when I did come back, I didn't change it, which meant I had time to do important things outside the organization, and the inside things took care of themselves.

[00:53:34] Scott Lunsford: Let me stop you real quick. You're moving your foot around, and it's making a little creaky in the floor there.

JA: Okay.

SL: Yeah. [*BW laughs*] So.

JA: Thank you.

SL: That's all right.

JA: And the other thing was, being at OSTP, at the Office of Science and Technology Policy, inside the fence at the White House right across the drive from the West Wing—in terms of science and public policy, that was the apex, professionally, that people doing what I was doing in Arkansas—that was the apex to climb. So that year just gave me so many new things to work on, and I

was anxious to get back and see what else we could do in Arkansas.

[00:54:13] BW: And can you talk about any of the kinds of things that you've been able to launch since then?

JA: Well, we had—I had a plan for getting a different kind of board member, getting different board members. We had some very important people from the Clinton administration who had retired and come back to Arkansas. Dr. Mary Good was one of them. And while I was there, I wanted that—I decided I wanted somebody like her on the board. Was able to get the governor to appoint her to one term as a board member. A lot of it was just strategic thinking. I remember there was a New Zealand model for community economic development that I was exposed to while in Washington, and I was anxious to see if that kind of thing would work back in rural communities in Arkansas. And so we came back thinking that it's not just about where the universities are, it's not just where the research takes place, it's what can communities do to get into the twenty-first-century economy. And the idea is that you don't recruit plants, you grow your own. And so we've been working with communities on generating their own entrepreneurs, working with the Arkansas Capital Corporation, one of those new tools back in the [19]80s

that has probably one of the best if not the best student business plan competition in the country. And so we just have this opportunity to do new things, and many of those ideas were generated from me being in Washington for a year.

[00:55:50] BW: That's very exciting. Are there any other stories that you can tell us about those years during the time that Clinton was governor?

JA: Well, I have stories about him being at—and they're mostly at events where he would pick up the mantle for this technology-based economic development or the role of science education in our schools and how important that is. I remember being at a conference, and he was one of the speakers. And he'd done what he needed to do, and then he kinda disappeared from, you know, the podium. And I wasn't paying any attention. I was standing, leaning against the wall in the back. And I sensed this presence behind me. I had no idea who it was. And it was the governor. He had stuck around. He was listening to what the people that followed him were saying. It was kind of . . .

[00:56:51] BW: What kind of conference was it?

JA: I don't remember. But what I remember is he was right there behind me, and I didn't have any idea. He'd snuck up there.

[00:57:01] BW: Well, he really has always been—he has found

discussions of science and technology to be extremely engaging, and he reads a lot.

JA: I would get—I would receive in interoffice mail pages torn out of magazines, newspapers. In his handwriting, there'd be a note, "Send to John Ahlen," and it was all about science and technology, all about policy in the areas that we were interested in. So I know he was a very avid reader.

BW: Well, and he wanted this to take root in Arkansas so . . .

JA: He did.

BW: . . . deeply. And it has. And will continue to do so.

JA: Well, it was—one of my engineering friends a long time ago—and he's—I don't see him much anymore, but he told me this story years after the governor was in the White House. And he said, "You know, I remember back in the [19]80s when you moved to Arkansas, and I thought you were nuts. And you said, 'No, it's not bad. There's this guy down there who's governor, and some day, he could be president.'" [*Laughs*]

BW: And you thought that when you recee—you were way ahead of me. I didn't see it. [*Laughter*] I was too busy to even think of those kinds of things. [*Laughter*] Well, I am just thrilled that you agreed to do this interview to talk about . . .

JA: Oh, well . . .

BW: . . . this key aspect of his . . .

JA: . . . thank you because I didn't have any stories to tell. I just have been answering your questions, and you've done a great job leading me through these thoughts.

BW: Oh.

JA: Through these memories.

BW: Well, it's because it's your baby, and you can talk about it so well. Thank you very much.

JA: Well, you're welcome. Thank you.

[Tape stopped]

[00:58:55] BW: I remember well when Louis Ramsey and Bill Bowen were describing you as coming to Arkansas to do this job and my thinking, "Aren't we lucky that we're gonna get someone who will come here for a few years?" You've now been here a long time. And you have raised a family here, and I wish you would talk about Arkansas as a home and as a place where your children were. Talk about your children and who they are.

JA: Well, like you said, I took the job and figured I would be here for four or five years. That's a kind of a university mindset. You know, move on after that. Linda and I came with—I had two children from a previous marriage, as did she, so we have four kids between us. They were—probably the oldest was ten and

the youngest was five or six when we moved to Arkansas, so they weren't really heavily into school. We didn't have to worry about that. All of them went to public schools, and all of them graduated from high school and went on to the university. And all of them left the state at one point to go to school or work, and now they're all back. Three in central Arkansas and one up in Northwest Arkansas.

[01:00:20] BW: What are their names?

JA: My oldest is John. He's named after me, my dad, and my grandfather. And he is a graduate of Central High. Graduate of Hendrix. And he left the state to follow his bride to Washington, DC, where she was a graduate student, and after that she and he moved back and lived in Atkins for a while. And he now works for the Arkansas House of Representatives in Constituency Services. Very much like my first job with the Illinois Legislative Council, so I'm very happy about that. [01:01:01] His sister, Jenny, went to public schools and graduated from Parkview. She is a very bright young woman, and she went to Boston University on a full scholarship, graduated—I was set to go back and pick her up. I took her to college—just the two of us went, and I was gonna go and pick her up, bring her home, and I was driving from Fayetteville to Little Rock one night. It was dark,

and she called on my cell phone and said, "Well, my plans have changed." And I said, "What do you mean?" And she said, "You don't have to come pick me up. I'm gonna go to graduate school here." And I said, "I didn't know you applied to graduate school." She said, "Well, I didn't." And I said, "Well, and I didn't know you took the GRE, the Graduate Record Exam." She said, "I didn't." I said, "Well, how are you going to graduate school?" And she said, "I did my capstone project presentation today, and one of the professors asked what I was gonna do, and I said I was gonna go back to Arkansas, and he says, 'No, you're not. I've got a program that's funded, and I want you to stay and do a master's degree with me." So she got a master's degree at Boston University. And then after she married an Arkansas boy and moved home, they came back. She worked for the Energy Office for Maria Haley for a while, and now she works for the Environmental Defense Fund and works with Walmart in Northwest Arkansas in sustainability issues. [01:02:29] My stepson, Derek, is the only engineer among the children. He got a degree in chemical engineering from Fayetteville. Took his first job with Black & Veach in Kansas City. Had a child. And when the parents started taking care of a baby, they realized their support structure was back here, so

Derek trained to become a programmer and moved back to take an information technology job, and now works for the Southwest Power Pool as a data person. [01:03:10] And his younger sister, Leah, was the—probably the toughest to get out of school, but she was persistent. She graduated—she and her brother both graduated from Oak Grove High School, and she went to a number of institutions. UCA, University of Arkansas Little Rock, Pulaski Tech, and finally wound up graduating from UALR. She now works at UAMS in occupational safety and is pursuing a master's in public health.

[01:03:46] BW: And what is your wife's name?

JA: My wife's name in Linda and . . .

BW: And where was she from?

JA: She was born and raised in Springfield, Illinois, moved to Maumelle in 1985, and we have raised our kids in Maumelle. They've attended the public schools that I've mentioned. And she worked at the law school and was the assistant to the dean for many years, including to Dean Bill Bowen for whom the school is now named. That was a very nice family relationship to have. And she now works for Judge Rhonda Wood as a trial court assistant in Conway.

[01:04:29] BW: And my conclusion is that you all are now deeply

rooted Arkansans.

JA: Well, I . . .

BW: Are you gonna stay here and retire here?

JA: I left Chicago when I was twenty-six, and I've lived here for twenty-eight years, so I have been here longer than any place else. I was willing to retire and move back to Springfield, Linda's hometown, but she said she didn't wanna go. She wanted to retire here. Her friends are here. Our kids are here, so there's no reason to go back to those old hometowns.

BW: So you're rooted in Arkansas deeply.

JA: Mh-hmm.

BW: Well, I'm thrilled. I'm so happy that it was the place that you chose to come.

SL: That was great.

BW: Yeah.

SL: Great.

BW: That was a really nice . . .

SL: Yes.

JA: Thanks for asking.

SL: I'm glad we did it.

BW: Yeah. Me, too.

[End of interview 01:05:20]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]