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William Jefferson Clinton History Project

Chris Burrow

Interviewed by Betsey Wright

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Little Rock, Arkansas

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- 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 Chris Burrow on March 29, 2012, in Little Rock, Arkansas.

[00:00:00]

Betsey Wright: Chris, I want you to share more stories about legislative sessions, campaigns, Bill Clinton, as many as you can remember while we're sitting here today.

Chris Burrow: Okay.

BW: So have you got some that you can just start off with? Or do you . . .

CB: Well, I'll start off with—I wanted to—we were wantin' to talk about Maurice Smith. You know, he and I . . .

[00:00:27] BW: Yeah, Maurice Smith was such an incredible . . .

CB: Yes.

BW: . . . influence . . .

CB: Right.

BW: . . . and important person in Bill Clinton's life, and he is worthy of everything that we can get you to say about him so that we capture him.

CB: Well, he was kind of the kingpin in eastern Arkansas in the first district. Anything that—back then it was a whole lot easier to do it because it was usually prominent families that had known each other for a long time, and most everyone then was a Democrat.

You had the Bearden family in Mississippi County, the Portises in Poinsett County, David Solomon in Lee County, and the Feltons in—I mean, 'scuse me, Solomon in Phillips County, the Feltons in Lee County, and they were all connected and had been for years. And so usually when any political activity was happening back then, it kinda went through that group of people. And Maurice was probably the leader of the bunch. And he was just eminent in Bill Clinton's . . .

BW: When did you first . . .

CB: . . . situation in the first district.

[00:01:38] BW: When did you first meet Maurice?

CB: Well, I had known him kinda off and on all my life. But I didn't really get involved with him till I'd gotten out of college, politically. His children were friends of mine, and his nephew was one of my closest friends, so I spent time in Birdeye growing up. But I really didn't—till I got involved in the Young Democrats and Cross County politics, that's when I got to know him. And he was instrumental in my life there for a while, also.

[00:02:18] BW: And was he farming?

CB: Yes. He farmed and had a cattle operation, and they had a store and a gin. Pretty much like a lot of the east Arkansas farm situations at that time.

[00:02:33] BW: And what was Birdeye like?

CB: Well, Birdeye was basically just built up—was around the J—the Smith farms. And Maurice's brother and sisters. It was about thirteen miles north of—northeast of Wynne. And I was even up there one time when Senator Kerr from Oklahoma flew in and landed in the cow pasture. He had a bull with the Smiths. So that was quite a operation at that time. I'd never seen anything like that.

[00:03:11] BW: And did you know Maurice's wife?

CB: Yes, I did.

BW: And what was she like? Where did she come from?

CB: Well, she was from Wynne. And her daddy was the local Chevrolet car dealer. And her mother was a good friend of my mother's in the Methodist church.

BW: And her name was Jane.

CB: Her name was Jane.

BW: And what—how many children did they have?

CB: They had three.

BW: And who were they?

CB: A son and two daughters.

[00:03:38] BW: And who were those children, and where are they now?

CB: Mark Smith and—he lives in Wynne. Annette, the youngest—up in—Annette Stacy. And they both live in Wynne. And then the daughter, Murray, she lives in Wynne also.

BW: So they're all still around the home place?

CB: They're all still in Wynne. Yeah.

[00:03:58] BW: Yeah. And then there are grandchildren, Maurice Smith grandchildren, now.

CB: Yes. Well, their grandchildren are back running the farmin' operation now.

BW: And then I know there's one grandson who's a medical doctor.

CB: One—Stan Bradshaw's a medical doctor in Wynne, and his grandson, Reece, is in Los Angeles. And he's got another granddaughter that was in North Carolina. I'm not sure where she is now.

[00:04:33] BW: How do you think or what—do you know where Bill a—became so close to Maurice Smith? When did that relationship begin?

CB: Well, the first time Bill Clinton went to Birdeye, I took him to meet J. H. Smith, who was Maurice's brother, and he was the head of the Democratic Central Committee in Cross County at that time. And he was so impressed with him that that's how we—how Maurice got involved.

BW: Now wi—that was when Clinton was running for . . .

CB: Running for attorney general.

BW: Attorney general.

CB: Right.

BW: And so that's what began that . . .

CB: That's exactly . . .

BW: . . . unbelievably strong . . .

CB: Right.

BW: . . . relationship.

CB: Absolutely.

[00:05:13] BW: Now, Maurice had been on the highway commission I think as a Faubus appointee?

CB: As a Faubus appointment. Right.

BW: And then he had worked—did he work as a legislative liaison in Bill's first term?

CB: Yes, he did.

BW: So it was you and Maurice, and who else was . . .

CB: Bush Satterfield.

BW: Satterfield.

CB: And Alan Bird. And . . .

BW: Monroe—Ark Monroe.

CB: No, Ark wasn't there at that time.

BW: No.

CB: It was—oh, Ron Taylor.

BW: Ron Taylor. Yeah.

CB: Yes.

BW: Yeah. [00:05:53] And it was pretty much the same operation as you then were part of . . .

CB: Right.

BW: . . . in subsequent Clinton terms. And had—Maurice had been connected with so . . .

CB: He'd been connected with the legislator—and this was one of the reasons it made it a little easier for us the first term as governor when he—when Maurice—all the leadership in the senate and house—he was real familiar with all the leaders, and that was a blessing, in a way, because the rest of us didn't know what we were doing.

BW: Well, and then when Clinton came back into office in [19]83, having Maurice in that office next to the governor was a real settling of some of the old-time . . .

CB: That's correct.

BW: . . . legislative leaders.

CB: Yes.

BW: They felt much better about . . .

CB: Well, it's quite a difference from the first term with Rudy and Steve, who were younger and former legislators themselves. But Maurice was an entirely different situation in the—with the operations of the senate and the house.

[00:07:08] BW: I know he was a troubleshooter with the most powerful, the Max Howells, Knox Nelsons. Maurice would go and negotiate people out of anger, tantrums, and brick walls all the time.

CB: That's correct.

BW: I mean, he was as important as the governor . . . . . .

CB: Yeah.

BW: . . . with some of those people.

CB: Well, especially with Max and Knox and also Ben Allen. He was another one that Maurice used to work with.

BW: Well, there were many sessions where we had tense relationships over the highway programs with the legislators and as well as the Highway Department. Maurice continued being a major factor in those. Was his friendship with Henry Gray back to the day . . .

CB: Yes.

BW: . . . when he had been on the commission?

CB: Right. And then we had the weight-distance tax, and you had—

it was really got—it almost got personal between a lot of 'em. The Poultry Federation was on one side, and the Highway Department was on another side, and Maurice was a common effect between all of 'em.

BW: He was an extraordinary bridge of all kinds of factions and worlds. And then in the campaigns, we couldn't've operated. I've never known anyone who could raise money like Maurice Smith.

CB: Right. Well, he was also—also I forgot to mention that he also owned the Bank of Cherry Valley. So he was in the banking business, also. And that—he was just pretty much connected all over the state. He was head of the fair association, which put him involved with someone in every county. He was real close with Witt and Jack Stephens. So pretty much all the people that were really involved in politics, he had a contact with 'em.

[00:09:12] BW: I think it was at his behest that Marlin Jackson was named bank commissioner, too. I think that was one of Maurice's ideas.

CB: That is true. Fact, they met in Wynne, and that's when he was—Bill Clinton came to Wynne, and Marlon Jackson came down from Paragould, and they met. And that's how he became bank commissioner.

[00:09:36] BW: I mean, there's no end to the amount of influence that Maurice Smith had for Bill Clinton. Now Maurice—I know he went to Birdeye a lot, but he also had a place to stay here.

CB: He had apartment at Quapaw Towers from the time that he was on the highway commission. So he maintained it at all times. So his presence was pretty much here in Little Rock weekly.

BW: And he went home on weekends . . .

CB: On weekends, that's . . .

BW: . . . generally. Yeah.

CB: . . . that's true.

BW: So he was unlike anybody I've ever known or gotten to work with.

CB: Yeah.

BW: I just—God, I miss him. I miss him a lot.

CB: Yeah. Well, he—during sessions and then later when I was at State Building Services, he would ride back and forth on the weekends with me. We'd go back on Fridays and come back on Sundays.

[00:10:28] BW: Can you talk about or remember any s—interactions between Maurice and Bill, Maurice and Hillary, that you could share with us?

CB: Well, we traveled a lot with Governor Clinton and Maurice. We'd

go to ball games and to basketball games in Fayetteville, and we went to a couple of ball games together. But one time when we were at the Mansion at a meeting one night, Hillary was gonna implement a new, non-smoking policy at the—for the Mansion grounds. And we were talking, and Bill Clinton was discussing all this with us and what we should do, and all of a sudden, Maurice got up and was—put his hat on and started out the door. And Bill Clinton says, "Maurice, where are you goin'?" And he said, "Birdeye." That's all he said. And then Bill Clinton followed him out the door, and we got another policy worked out for smokin' at the Governor's Mansion. [*BW laughs*] So we were able to get it resolved real fast.

BW: Well, non-smoking was very important to Hillary, but so was Maurice Smith.

CB: Yes.

BW: In the end.

CB: Yes.

BW: It was a great accommodation to work out. In fact, I think he had the longest exemption for smoking [*CB laughs*] of anybody at . . .

CB: That's true.

BW: . . . the Governor's Mansion. Everybody else it got . . .

CB: Yeah.

BW: . . . outlawed for, but ultimately only Maurice. So it was good. [00:12:05] When—did you get to talk to Maurice about his feelings about Bill after he got elected president?

CB: Yes, I did. You know, I asked him, you know—we had to pinch ourself to see that this really happened. And you know, we knew he had the abilities to do this, but you know, everything has to align just right. And I think Maurice, along with myself, thought when he first announced that he was running for president that it was not the right thing to do. But as it worked out, it was the right thing to do. It's kinda hard to imagine George Bush at the time, right after the Gulf War, that he would be as vulnerable as he was. I didn't think so but—and then Maurice and I had picked Bill Clinton up after his speech in Atlanta at the airport and took him to lunch, and that was . . .

BW: That was the speech nominating Dukakis . . .

CB: That's right.

BW: . . . that was a disaster.

CB: But—of Dukakis. And then he—to overcome that. But it didn't take long for that to get resolved.

[00:13:17] BW: What did you all talk to the governor about when you picked him up at the airport.

CB: Well, we were trying to con—it's like we always did. Trying to console him. I knew—but he was upbeat about it, even though he did what he was told to do, and that's what he kept trying to explain to us.

BW: But he had to talk it through.

CB: That's right.

BW: He had to talk about it.

CB: He had to talk about it.

BW: And there wasn't anybody better than . . .

CB: That's right.

BW: . . . you guys to sit down with and talk about.

CB: And we talked about it, and why, it's . . .

BW: So it was . . .

CB: Yeah.

BW: Well, I remember that night that Hillary wanted to take Bill and go back to the hotel, and I said to Hillary, "This guy is gonna walk the streets of Atlanta and talk to everybody he runs into. He has got to talk about it" . . .

CB: Yeah.

BW: . . . "or it'll just get bottled up." And so until the wee hours, that's what happened. He just—everybody . . .

CB: Yeah.

BW: . . . he ran into, he talked to. And then he had to come home and . . .

CB: Right.

BW: . . . talk about it with you all. [00:14:22] Well, when Maurice got appointed to the university board—talk to me about Maurice as a member of that board.

CB: Well, he—of course, having gone to school at the university, he's always been a supporter of the university system, and he represented the, I guess—which would be the first district on the board, and he was involved with the agriculture part of it and with just everything. It was really a—an experience. I was around him several times on the board because I had a cousin at that time who was also on the board.

BW: Who is that?

CB: Hugh Chalmers. And . . .

BW: He loved it.

CB: Right. Right. And . . .

BW: He found a way to like everything about . . .

CB: He sure did.

BW: . . . being on the board.

CB: Absolutely.

BW: Including seats at the football games.

CB: And he—only way he would've gotten off that board was to go to the Highway Department.

BW: And he . . .

CB: And that's what happened. Yeah.

BW: And it—he became the director of the Highway Department.

CB: Right.

BW: He replaced Henry Gray.

CB: That's correct.

[00:15:31] BW: And so talk about how . . .

CB: Well . . .

BW: And anything he told . . .

CB: . . . he also . . .

BW: You talked to him about that job.

CB: Yeah. He—there wasn't any—there wasn't just anybody who could've replaced Henry Gray. I mean, this was a guy was a legend in himself. And Maurice filled that void just perfectly. And with the Highway Commission people and with the Highway Department itself. And it was a perfect fit.

BW: And he stayed there until when? Do you member when he left the Highway Department?

CB: He left the Highway Department in probably ninety s . . .

BW: Was it before the presidential election?

CB: Oh, no. No, no. He was still there—he was there probably till [19]95, something like that.

[00:16:26] BW: I want to—if you don't have any more Maurice Smith recollections at the moment, I want to jump to another valued Clinton supporter, part of the Clinton family, who we've also lost, and that was Barbara Ann Rudolph. B.A., we called her. When did you first meet B.A. Rudolph, and what did you think about her?

CB: I first met Barb Rudolph when I came to work the first session. I had seen her around and, you know, knew who she was. But that—the first session was—she shows up, and she's kinda quirky, kinda little bit different. And it didn't take me long to really realize how sharp she really was.

BW: And she had . . .

CB: For a twenty-three year old, I think that's the—how old she was when I first met her—that she was very bright, could understand—see through things. Actually was much more politically savvy than I was. So I—she helped me a great deal even though there was quite a age difference.

BW: She had worked for Bill in his congressional race.

CB: Yeah.

BW: And she was just a kid.

CB: Right.

BW: Like in high school or something.

CB: Yeah. Well, you know, she's also—was very, very close to Maurice.

BW: How did that relationship get . . .

CB: I—you know, it just evolved. I don't know. Because she was a person that could get things done, and Maurice was a person that always could see through things and had ideas. And she helped him implement 'em.

BW: Well, it was a partnership.

CB: Yeah, it really was. And that went on way long after she went to Washington.

BW: Yeah because she went to Washington shortly after the [19]82 campaign, didn't she?

CB: That's correct. Right.

[00:18:19] BW: And of course, then she became an important part of the Clinton family in Washington . . .

CB: In Washington. Absolutely.

BW: . . . once they got to the White House.

CB: Yeah.

BW: Why wo—why did she seem quirky? What was there . . .

CB: Well, one . . .

BW: How do you describe Barbara Rudolph?

CB: She—most of the time she'd mumble, and she'd talk so fast I couldn't understand her. And she just had a little quirky difference about her.

BW: She was very unique, yeah.

CB: Yeah. Yeah, she was like nobody I've ever known before. Yeah.

BW: Or we ever will get to know again.

CB: Yeah. That's true.

BW: Yeah. [00:18:57] Well, she was devoted to Bill Clinton.

CB: She absolutely was.

BW: She was critical . . .

CB: Yeah.

BW: . . . to the comeback campaign. I know she had been before that, too. We have to stop?

Bruce Perry: Yeah. Let's do it real quick one time.

[Tape stopped]

[00:19:09] BW: What memories do you have of interactions with B.A. after she had left the state of Arkansas?

CB: Well, I would see her every time I went to Washington. I kept up. We stayed in contact, and we talked, oh, monthly. And every time I would go to Washington, which would be once or twice a year, I would see her when we got up there. And we

maintained contact till—the last time I saw her, I gave her a tour of President Clinton's library, his living quarters, and she wrote him a note and left it in his drawer. That's—he'd come up—his digs had come a long way from California Street.

BW: A very long way.

CB: Yeah.

BW: And she wrote—what—"It was a great ride."

CB: Yes, that's right.

BW: That's what she wrote. And he used that in a speech on the twentieth anniversary of his announcement for president.

CB: Yeah.

BW: 'Cause I don't know that he had even found the note . . .

CB: Yeah.

BW: . . . until . . .

CB: Right.

BW: . . . that time. [00:20:12] When you talked to her, she didn't talk about her job and her business, did she?

CB: No, never. No.

BW: She wanted to talk about Arkansas and the people that you knew.

CB: That's right. Absolutely. And . . .

BW: She enjoyed being kind of a hostess . . .

CB: Yeah.

BW: . . . for Arkansans that came to DC.

CB: She never talked about herself. You know, you'd have to—I'd have to find out what she was doing from other friends that were up there because she just didn't talk about herself.

[00:20:42] BW: She was really, really hurt when Maurice died.

CB: Yes.

BW: I, you know, I still am pained to hear—to remember what she said to me when she called me about his death. But she was so pers—it was a like a member of her family.

CB: Well, it—she was a member of the family as far as Maurice was concerned. He called on her and—probably more than he did anyone.

BW: Who were Maurice's and—friends—and B.A.'s friends.

CB: Well, his—Maurice had many friends. Depends on what area. If you were talkin' about horses or the horse track, Joe Smreker was his closest friend.

BW: And Smreker got—served on the Racing Commission.

CB: That's right. He got a spot and eventually was the chairman of the Racing Commission. And when Bill Clark was on the Highway Commission, he and Maurice were real close. But Maurice had—he had bank friends—he had friends in all—what

area—it just depends on what area you were talking about. He was awful close to the Stephens for a long time, both Jack and Witt.

[00:22:11] BW: Well, he went up and had lunch with Witt quite a few times.

CB: I . . .

BW: It was fairly regular deal.

CB: Yeah, he did. I was fortunate to be able to go a couple of times with him.

BW: Well, that was because you weren't female. [*Laughter*]

CB: That's true.

BW: I got invited by Mr. Witt once and then uninvited when I got there 'cause it was just crossing the line . . .

CB: Yeah.

BW: . . . bigger than he was ready to do. [*Laughter*] But. [00:22:41] Well, I'm anxious to hear any more stories that you have of anything about Bill Clinton.

CB: Well, I've got a s—I've got a lot of 'em [*laughs*], but I've got one that sticks out about the ethics commission. I mean, not ethics—the ethics session. And it was a tough, tough situation. And one of our proponents was Senator Nick Wilson in the senate. And he . . .

BW: A proponent . . .

CB: Oh.

BW: . . . or an opponent?

CB: Opponent.

BW: Yeah.

CB: He was our main opposition in the senate. And Bill Clark and I took his wife, Susan, and a friend of hers, Cathy Field, with us one night when we were out doing our—working on these bills.

BW: Now, Cathy would . . .

CB: Now, Senator Wilson was supposed to be in—had gone to Pocahontas to speak to the Rotary club and was gonna stay the night. So—and Cathy worked for the senator. So we—ma—did our rounds and whatever—wherever we went. And then we end up goin' to a place called the Checkmate Club. And they had some dancer—some girls and all that Susan had tried to talk out of p—doin' that performance that they did and try to talk 'em into goin' to vo-tech or junior college or some other line of work. [00:24:09] Well, by the time we finally took them back home, it was—back to Capitol Hill Apartments, it was three o'clock in the morning, and we noticed Senator Wilson's car was there. So he didn't stay the night. So the next morning at our seven o'clock meeting, Bill Clark and I decided we better tell Governor Clinton

what had happened. And he just came unglued. He started throwin' papers and saying we'd ruined the session and we were in trouble and we'd just destroyed it and—anyway, he wanted us to go apologize to Senator Wilson. So we did. And the only thing—he said we didn't owe him an apology. He says, "Next time just keep 'em out all night long," 'cause he didn't wanna be woken up at three o'clock in the morning and have everything described to him. [*BW laughs*] So everything was resolved from that situation.

[00:25:06] BW: I, of course—we didn't talk about the Checkmate Club before when we were talking about hot spots where legislators hung out . . .

CB: Right.

BW: . . . and you all had to go and interact with 'em.

CB: Well, now, not all of 'em went to the Checkmate Club.

BW: It was—well, I was in mortal fear [*CB laughs*] of any of you all ever being discovered at the Checkmate Club. Worse than that, I was in mortal fear that you would ever take Bill Clinton to [*CB laughs*] something like the Checkmate Club.

[00:25:32] CB: Well, also—Sandy Ledbetter got concerned over that, too, so she decided to put beepers, pagers—this was before cell phones. She put—gave us all pagers and we were supposed to

check in with her. Well . . .

BW: Sandy was the scheduling person . . .

CB: That's right.

BW: . . . in the governor's office.

CB: So after a couple of weeks of that, she recalled the pagers. I think Bill Clark paged her at two o'clock in the mornin' and—anyway. But it was . . .

BW: It was . . .

CB: The pagers were recalled.

BW: It was really hard [*CB laughs*] to make sure you all were where you oughta be. In fact, it was impossible.

CB: Well, we did what we were supposed to . . .

BW: You did.

CB: What we—we delivered the vote.

BW: You certainly did. [*CB laughs*] More times than not. [00:26:24] We had some notable defeats but . . .

CB: Yeah.

BW: . . . as—and—accomplished an incredible amount . . .

CB: Yeah.

BW: . . . of good stuff for the state.

CB: We par—had pretty aggressive schedules, so it was . . .

BW: Pretty aggressive [*CB laughs*] schedule is an understatement,

Chris Burrow.

CB: Yeah.

BW: It was some—anything else you can think of that we can talk about?

CB: Gosh, Betsey, I—there's so many things. Then there's so many things I can't talk about, but anyway, I think this is . . .

BW: I wish you'd talk about things that you can't talk about. [*Laughter*]

CB: I best not. [*Laughs*]

BW: Okay. Discretion is . . .

CB: Yeah.

BW: . . . an important thing when you have been associated with a politician of any sort so . . .

CB: Right.

BW: It's terrific. Well, thank you again.

CB: Well, you're welcome.

[Tape stopped]

[00:27:11] CB: We could—he could touch every county. And him bein' head of the, you know, the livestock or the fac—or the fair for years touched everything.

BW: Yeah, and I'd forgotten about his having worked . . .

CB: Yeah.

BW: . . . with the state fair, too.

CB: Yeah.

BW: And of course, then that helped when Pledger moved to the state fair.

CB: That's right, when Pledger went over there. And see, and they had known each other for years because he was the Yell County representative on the fair board.

BW: Well, I recently met the grandson who is the doctor in Wynne. Stan . . .

CB: Stan.

BW: . . . Bradshaw. And he told me that he and his wife were going to redo the house at Birdeye . . .

CB: Yeah. They are.

BW: . . . that Maurice and Jane had lived in and move into it, which I just . . .

CB: And . . .

BW: . . . I love that continuity.

CB: And then tie him to the Portis family in Lepanto.

BW: How?

CB: Stan's wife was a Pleasants. She's kin to the Portises.

BW: Oh.

CB: Her mother was a Portis. [*Laughs*]

BW: It's those east Arkansas ties . . .

CB: That's right.

BW: . . . that are indelible. It's wonderful.

CB: Yeah.

BW: All right.

[00:28:18] CB: And you know, the real—it was so easy to do all that stuff back then because everybody, especially eastern Arkansas, were all Democrats. And . . .

BW: That's not the case . . .

CB: It won't ever—that won't ever be what it was back then.

BW: Well, there were some tough times during the Clinton years, like with the Feltons . . .

CB: Yeah.

BW: . . . got upset over, I think, a lot of things. The Democratic Party was changing. The way things got done was changing, and it was hard on the families . . .

CB: Yeah. Yeah.

BW: . . . that had been the pillars of the party over there for so long in the Delta.

CB: Well, and it was some local problems there, too, that we couldn't fix.

BW: That we had nothin' to do with.

CB: And we didn't need to be—we had to stay out of it.

[00:28:58] BW: Carol Willis talked about what he learned from Maurice Smith. And at first his aversion that, "Oh, this is this Faubusite, how can I"—and he talks about how he came to love him so much . . .

CB: Yeah.

BW: . . . because Maurice taught him so much.

CB: Yeah.

BW: And what good working partners they became . . .

CB: Yeah.

BW: . . . as a consequence. And . . .

CB: Well, it's just like Mark, you know, Maurice's son. He had a—he—there's no way he could've followed in his daddy's footsteps. And he had a hard time talking to him, and I had to tell Maurice that Mark said that he loved him. That was kinda hard for me to do.

BW: Yeah, I guess so.

CB: So.

[End of interview 00:29:43]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]