

William Jefferson Clinton History Project

Interview with

Glenda Cooper
Little Rock, Arkansas
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Interviewer: Andrew Dowdle

Andrew Dowdle: This is Andrew Dowdle and I am here in Little Rock, February 26, 2004. I am talking with Glenda Cooper, as part of the Clinton History Project. The first question that I have is when and where were you born?

Glenda Cooper: I was born in Lexington, Kentucky, March 1947.

AD: And you had mentioned a little bit about moving around a lot, at the beginning of your life. Can you please elaborate?

GC: I am what is known an army brat. My father was in the military, and so I did move all my life. From the seventh grade to the twelfth grade I think I went to ten different schools. There were times when I lived in Hot Springs, when my mother was still alive. My grandmother was from Hot Springs, so for a military brat that was sort of a home base. We'd go there in the summer and in between transfers. When my father was in Vietnam, for instance, was the last time I lived in Hot Springs. It was a permanent base for a year and a half, and that was half the ninth grade and the tenth grade. That would be 1961-1962.

AD: Were you in the same class as President Clinton?

GC: Yes I was. In the tenth grade.

AD: In the tenth grade, so you had mentioned before that your mother lived in Hot Springs . . .

GC: Yes, she was born and raised there.

AD: What was her occupation?

GC: My mother was a homemaker.

AD: And your father's occupation.

GC: He was in the military. He was in the army.

AD: And where did you go to college?

GC: To Fayetteville. Well, actually, I graduated from high school in Germany in Ludwigsburg, the Ludwigsburg American High School. And then I went to college the first year in at the American College in Paris and then I transferred to [the University of Arkansas,] Fayetteville where I got my Bachelor's degree in History in 1968, my Master's degree in 1970, and the equivalent of a Master's degree in Education at the same time.

AD: And what is your maiden name?

GC: Johnson.

AD: So when you moved to Hot Springs what was your impression of the town? Had you been there before?

GC: As I said, I was there often as a child. I moved to Hot Springs immediately from Virginia where I had been for a year and a half. Hot Springs was wonderful to me, everyone was so friendly and welcoming, and when you are an army brat it usually takes about six months to let go of your fear of being new, you know, and Hot Springs was real easy to move in to. People were so kind and friendly and

engaging and really inclusive. I have often said that it was a different town from others in the South. I guess because of the gambling, you know. It just had a different flavor—I lived in Little Rock as a child, but Hot Springs is more open, more friendly. There were more people there from the North, from other places. [It was] more cosmopolitan to me, [and] exciting things were happening. Some of my best friendships throughout my life were founded in Hot Springs, and friends I made there are still friends today.

AD: In terms of your impression of the high school both academically and socially what were your impressions then and what is your impression now?

GC: I [lived] in Virginia when they were having integration problems and in fact had shut down the public schools in Petersburg, Virginia, and so I went to Catholic schools. I was not a Catholic and it was very rigorous, [but] in fact the best educational experience I had ever had, and where I paid attention and became a high achiever [was] before Hot Springs High School. I had an excellent education in Virginia with high expectations—I don't know if that happens as much anymore—so I always got to be with the smartest students. Hot Springs was just a golden time really, when everyone was so patriotic, and we were still involved in competition with the Russians, in high achievement, do your best—characteristics of all the baby boomers I suppose, but I felt that there very strongly.

AD: I know you probably touched on this when you mentioned the racial situation in Virginia, but what was your take on the racial situation in Hot Springs?

GC: Well, I'd have to go back a little bit. In 1957 I lived in Little Rock, and I was in the fifth grade, but I do remember very clearly—and it is a consciousness raising

thing because you are a kid and you are playing and you know and then you have this growing awareness of what's happening in the community and you start asking questions about it and we just found this thing repellent, as much as a fifth grader can, and moving around you are more aware too and in the army which is desegregated I had black friends, so my political consciousness was probably higher than most people there in Little Rock. I was very aware that we had no black students in our high school later because they had a separate high school. I was always aware of the racial remarks and, you know, it wasn't the outrageous vicious sorts of racism but the conduct. People just grow up with it. It is accepted. It was just accepted, so that was always the ground I had to tread carefully—way through, because sometimes I would stop the conversation or interject what I felt.

AD: So when was the first time you met Bill Clinton?

GC: Sometime early in the tenth grade, I remember shaking his hand, I don't know what he was running for, I think he was running for student council, and it is the same as it is today with Bill Clinton—just that friendly engaging smile and the look in the eye.

AD: So what was your first impression—you kind of alluded to that, but what was your first impression of him?

GC: Oh, he was one of those people that impresses you because they may have a certain sense of personal power. Whether it is that engaging personality, or the sense that they know where they are going and what they want to do, and when you know you are sort of a shy army brat this kind of person was just—for

someone also that would look you in the eye and be happy to meet you and shake your hand—this left a favorable impression.

AD: After that first impression as you got to know him a little bit more was that first impression—was that an anchored first impression?

GC: Yes, yes, but as I mentioned earlier he was not a close friend of mine in any way. He really was more an acquaintance, and my memories probably aren't that sharp of that time as I moved on and lived in many different places, and after seeing him on television in the 1980s I remember thinking how proud I was of him and that was based on observations from long ago.

AD: So you had mentioned that you went on to the University of Arkansas, that you graduated with a bachelor's and master's degrees. Did you have any contact with Bill Clinton after that or . . . ?

GC: Not until 1987. I got married. I lived in California, Washington State, Idaho, and New Mexico, and I came back to stay in 1987 after a divorce, and was lost and lonely and right away my friendships with my Hot Springs friends kicked off—many of them were living here in Little Rock at the time—Carolyn Staley, David Leopoulos, Dixie Kline—a number of people who were here. Carolyn and David were especially good in bringing me back to, you know, this circle of friends really. They had a lunch/bunch thing going, and every month they met for lunch and when he could the President—then Governor—was involved in that and sometimes birthday lunches, but it was sort of casual—we figured out a date to meet and calls were made, so I was brought into that and got reacquainted and got to know him then as opposed to high school.

AD: What were your impressions then as opposed to years before when you got to know him better?

GC: Well, I think he seemed even more powerful, engaging, and fascinating you know, because of his life experiences, but he was the same big guy with the friendly smile and demeanor and you know—sharp.

AD: So did you ever think about either when you met him in Hot Springs or when you met him in Little Rock that this would be someone that would be somebody that would end up moving on to a higher office?

GC: You know we have all talked about that and I think you will probably hear the same thing from a lot of high school friends: we always thought that he would be president. It was just a collective thought. I don't know where it began, and I don't actually remember that conversation in high school but in the late eighties, it was almost a given—it was a matter of when.

AD: So were you able to spend anytime campaigning for President Clinton?

GC: I worked in the 1990 gubernatorial campaign for six months in [a] volunteer capacity, and then I worked in his office as a legislative aide for four months with Bobby Roberts and then I worked in the 1992 campaign—first in a volunteer capacity then in a non-volunteer capacity.

AD: So in terms of these different experiences—did these leave you with any additional insight into Bill Clinton's political ability, or character and personality?

GC: Well, I have always been active politically, and I worked in other campaigns but not as closely—never closely affiliated, but you know with different local political efforts. I did have a chance to observe him closely and that's actually a

good question, so in terms of what specifically should I answer that?

AD: I guess in terms of specific insights you have about his abilities as a politician, personal character, any of the . . .

GC: Tremendous political skills, and I know you have heard this before, but he just never forgot a name—you hear remarkable stories about his ability to recall names and birthdays of people who have met him once or twice in different areas of the state. He also worked harder than any person I have ever known and was so actively engaged in every part of the campaign. I wrote correspondence for him—issue type letters and the detail type letters where you really pay attention to what they say—you know—publicly or other letters or other written communication. [He has a] brilliant mind, and you know he would mark up letters for review and clarify them, and actually it was a really good time [for him] to clarify his [views] on [issues] too by doing that, by the act of being involved in that kind of correspondence, so I can't say how that worked, and how he had time to do that , but I thought it was a very wise practice, and so I was very impressed by it and by his political skills, and his leadership skills really.

AD: Why do you think you chose to spend so much time volunteering? You had done some of this work before, but never to that degree. How much of that was his personality; how much of that was the ties that you had when you were in high school; how much of that were things that were maybe internally driven within you at that time?

GC: Well, there were all those factors. I was in between jobs at one point, and I had the time. Part of it was that I was drawn to what he represented, what he believed.

It was particularly wonderful that I knew him, and it was a team effort. All my friends were behind it one way or another—if they had time they volunteered—so there was no pressure about it. I would always do it, and I think that with the '92 campaign—actually it was 1991. I was working, and I remember the day he announced he was running for president. We just knew it was happening, and I didn't talk to Carolyn or to David, but we all left work about noon. We just left. We did not go back, and we did not talk to each other either, but we met down at the old state house, and we ran into each other, and, you know, we started helping put up banners and taping the microphones. It was just really—we were there and that was just what we did.

AD: You were talking about what President Clinton stood for to you—at that time he was Governor Clinton—what were the values and ideas and issues that really resonated with you?

GC: Well, for me, one of those important things was the inclusiveness in terms of race. I was always proud of his stance. I liked the fact that he was trying so hard to bring Arkansas up to a better educational level. I was not in the state when he had this big brouhaha about teacher's testing, but I thought it was the right thing to do. Just in talking to him you know—his personal beliefs about public service—the way he gave respect to all people.

AD: You have mentioned these things about race, education, public service—all those things that you had noticed before when he was in Hot Springs, in terms of . . .

GC: Racism is a bit difficult to pin down because it was not something that I ever talked to him about in high school, but in talking to him later and in reading some

of the things he said I realized that he was sort of more where I was because of his experiences in Hope and his grandparents, and it said that our views on race were very similar.

AD: You had mentioned that you had worked in one of the legislative liaison offices—what type of legislation did you work on—do you remember any specifics?

GC: Oh gosh, I did a lot of writing, I did a lot of his letters, and so I was involved in a lot of different legislative issues just in terms of researching them—gosh, right now I cannot remember, but, just as an example, I do remember that a lot of people were writing at the start of the Gulf War wanting [him] to negate all the rights of the Arabs and just deport them and just things like that, and having to write replies about that and explain the Constitution. [Laughter] You know, seat belt laws—I really cannot remember any specific legislation.

AD: So you had mentioned that President Clinton looked over a lot of his letters, edited them, commented in them—were those just across the board, or do you remember certain areas where he would spend more time kind of focusing on the correspondence?

GC: If they were new issues, he would focus more, and sometimes if they were multiple issues you try to do the standard multiple paragraph—you know how that goes, but if there was a twist on that or if he was clearly taking a different position on something then he would spend more time on that.

AD: You had mentioned that you had worked for his campaign for President as a volunteer, then as a paid staffer, then as a volunteer again. Just as an estimate how many months did you work in those capacities?

GC: I think I worked as a paid staff [member] a couple of months and probably as a volunteer capacity a year when his office first opened in 1991. From August to September, six or seven of us just went down and started working: David [Watkins], Mark [Middleton], Sandy [Hudnall]. There were a few others. I would just go down after work and help with the correspondence. As a single mother of twin boys, I had a certain limit to what I could do, but I would just try to go there three times a week after work and then on Saturdays. Then my job ended and that's when I went down and started working on the campaign. It was on Markham Street, not—before the *Gazette* and there were kinds of things I would do, data entry or correspondence, or help [Mel] French. I was [also] an Arkansas Traveler, and then I went on and worked in correspondence, but I couldn't maintain that level of sixteen, eighteen hours, because I needed to take care of my children and had to give that up.

AD: Could you explain what you did as an Arkansas Traveler?

GC: Well, actually there were four of us who came from Hot Springs who went to Georgia with the primary in Atlanta in 1992, and we got together in this trip and decided to go, and that was before the Travelers were organized in all of New Hampshire. We went before they were actually called. The Arkansas Travelers was an organization that was organized later. We met with some people down at the office and gathered some campaign material and they gave us areas. We would go door to door and say, "My name is Glenda Copper and I went to high school with Bill Clinton. Let me give you this information. Would you like me to answer some questions? Let me tell you how great he is."

AD: What was the response you got?

GC: It's mixed. Some people were really interested to have somebody, you know, a candidate's high school's classmate come by, and some people would still slam the door in your face. They still barely knew him, and I think the whole Jennifer Flowers [issue] came out two weeks before, something like that—maybe a month.

AD: So when did you really think he was going to win? What was the feeling from the beginning?

GC: In New Hampshire?

AD: New Hampshire.

GC: Oh yeah, we were very positive about it. I can remember telling people who were coming to town, people that I worked with, that he will be the next president, and they would just laugh at me. We always had very positive expectations. I know I did.

AD: You mentioned that after you were an aide on staff that you went back to volunteering. Did that have any real impact on your volunteering work? Did you feel that you had a better idea on what is going on in terms of the campaign?

GC: Certainly you don't know as much, but I was never up there in the top positions. I knew these people, but I was just working. So clearly there was a difference. It wasn't like a gubernatorial campaign where people would be hanging around on any given work day. [Laughter] This was busy. The whole world was looking at us, and all these bright young suits from the East Coast with their Apple computers . . .

AD: So can you tell me about the difference? What you noticed between the

gubernatorial campaign and the presidential campaign—you already obviously mentioned a lot on it but...

GC: Well, the gubernatorial campaign was local, [and] focused. During the 1990 campaign everybody knew pretty much what was going on. There were district leaders, Judy Gaddy and Kay Goss and—Mary Ann Salmon was leading that effort so you know. I am trying to say something—I forgot what it was. It was local people, local issues, and a lot of local energy. A lot of people took leaves of absence from the governor's staff to work on the campaign. You did not see him there. And, of course, in the 1992 campaign people came from outside from all over and quickly took all the top positions. I remember the day that George Stephanopoulos first got there and moved into his office. There were just people coming from everywhere. So there was totally a different energy, and there was also this—I guess there was paranoia about the [lawsuit] and Larry Nichols and those charges and the womanizing charges that the local staff were so defensive and fearful of. I did not know much about it, because I had been out of state and didn't pay much attention. Nor did I know personally about any of those issues. But they were more concerned about things like that I think, and anticipating the future of national campaign. So I did not see as much of that in 1992—except for clearly the charges of Gennifer Flowers and all that stuff.

AD: You had mentioned the Gennifer Flowers incident. In terms of the 1992 campaign, it seems like it is very much a campaign of a lot of highs and lows—how did people deal with that?

GC: I can't tell you how other people dealt with it. Well, I actually can. Some people

had that fighting urge you know, it was just—James Carville was just “fight harder,” and he would get down sometimes, but he did his best to build people back up again. A lot of people were just steady about it. [They] had this goal in mind and were going to get there, but it is really hard. Something would come up, and you think oh my God you know this guy is finished, or why did he run in the first place, and how can you handle this, but you know you just keep going, because he did, and Hillary did, and if Hillary could why couldn't we?

AD: I know that you really haven't had experience in other candidates' presidential campaigns, but were there people that dropped down or did people just...

GC: People kept coming.

AD: What triggered that?

GC: It was exciting, exciting. It was exciting you know, and he is charismatic, and he had all this positive energy. He was saying good things. He was of our generation, you know, and that has never happened before. It was a good cause. He sure beat George [H. W.] Bush! [Laughter]

AD: After he was president, did you have any opportunities to go to Washington?

GC: The 90s were very special. He was very generous to all his friends in terms of invitations. We just got through this fabulous thing. We went to his first inauguration. As a Arkansas Traveler [I was] invited to many, many parties and got to meet all kinds of people and, you know, interesting things. I remember the first party held at the White House. I don't know how these people managed to keep their lives together, but after all those receiving lines we had the first reception of—you know, the friends of Bill kind of thing—and that was heavy stuff

to be actually at the White House at the party. You know, and I was talking to this Filipino guy—what do you call it, he was not...

AD: The steward?

GC: Yes, the steward, and I asked him, “Where is the Oval Office?” And he said, “I will show you.” And he took me to the Oval Office just to check it out and it was wonderful. I had to go there on business every other year anyway and would stay over a couple of nights with a girlfriend of mine, and that was wonderful. I met Nelson Mandela. I met Jessie Jackson, Vernon Jordan, and Madeleine Albright. He was always very generous with these invitations.

AD: Where in the White House were these accommodations? Did you get the Lincoln bedroom or . . . ?

GC: No, I didn’t stay in the Lincoln bedroom, no. [I stayed] up in the family area in the third floor. The first room was the George Washington room, and I call the second room the fruit room because the wallpaper had a fruit theme.

AD: Looking back in retrospect, did the Clinton administration accomplish what you thought it would?

GC: I did not realize how hard it would be to accomplish what he wanted to accomplish. I was always under the impression that the president was really the most powerful person in the world. If he wanted to do this or that, then it could be done. So it was shocking to see that that’s not true. There was such a vicious and sustained attack on him personally that it impeded so much of what he might have done. And his own personal actions made a lot of that impossible and most of all irrelevant. I am afraid that doesn’t come out in history, and you have to

make compromises that I think you never anticipate, but certainly there was a disappointment.

AD: If there is anything else to add at his point in terms of—what’s the last time you have seen Bill Clinton?

GC: You know I saw the man more when he was President than I do now [laughter], because he is traveling so much it is not as though he has a home here. I saw him last fall when he was in town— you know, for some library [function]. Have you interviewed David Leopoulos?

AD: Not yet, [but] he is on the list.

GC: Well, he has got great stories, and he has known [Bill Clinton] probably the longest, and Bill’s friendship has meant so much to David particularly in the last...

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[Beginning of tape 1, side 2]

GC: . . . since his daughter died. It was just horrible and just devastating. It was just a tight family, and a strong belief in family, and [Clinton] had always been very good to him, and so they started a foundation in honor of their daughter with the idea of building stronger families, and Bill and Hilary have helped raise money. They have attended dinners in Washington where people would pay 500 dollars to come.

AD: So you mentioned before the group of friends from Hot Springs that had come back together and met in Little Rock—are you still as close as you were before?

GC: We don’t have the opportunity to see each other as much and that’s because a lot of them have moved]—well, we had lunch with Bill right after the elections

and—you know—lunch bunch. We went to Juanita's, so that was exciting, and the Secret Service was around. We had all these great conversations, because he is always good at telling stories—he'd tell you stories about—you know, this is what Nelson Mandela told me, and I have learned about leadership from him, and this is what you know and so-an-so told me. You know—just great [stories]. We had a wonderful lunch, and we were talking about expectations, and at the end Bill pulled out a credit card, and he said, "I will get this one—I have got a new job." [Laughter] So we let him take the check on that one! Carolyn moved to [Washington] D.C., and she is still there. While my other friends moved to Fort Smith, and David and Joe and I do get together, but not as frequently as we used to, but birthday lunches—we try to keep touch with each other through email.

AD: So have you had any relationship with any of Bill's immediate or extended family over the years?

GC: I don't know—Virginia died a long time ago. I haven't seen Roger in years, I see Liz Burks occasionally. No, not really.

AD: Is there anything else you would like to add?

GC: What is missing in your talks with people?

AD: We really just started this second round, but a lot of it is the things you began to fill in in terms of, again, people who really may not have known him from the start but sort of got this outside perspective, people who I think that knew him at a later date, and then the period of absence that you were talking about, and a lot of things that I think were missing really are peoples' views of him, in terms of how that changed over time, and it seems like there hasn't been that many changes...

GC: No not really, except an new awareness and knowledge of him...

AD: Do you have any . . .

GC: Good stories? [Laughter]

AD: Yes, good stories.

GC: Yes, that's why I was hoping you would ask the right questions, because I was trying to get ready for this, because I was thinking "He will bring my memories to the forefront so I don't forget some of the funny stuff and good stuff and then think about it later." Then I said, "No, I am not going to do that. I am going to just let him ask me questions," but I have one James Carville story that I like very much. Carolyn Staley always had Christmas parties—wonderful Christmas parties—when she was still here. Bill and Hillary would usually come in late, because they would have other events that they would have to go to. I remember that Christmas party in [19]91 because it was a very busy day. They had so many events they had to go to that they did not come, I think, until maybe eleven thirty to midnight, and he was just all aglow, and he was telling stories, and said he'd just been to Georgia not too long ago where he said he found his main political advisor, and he says this guy was like the missing link but he is smart. [Laughter] That was how we learned about James Carville.

AD: I have never heard of this story before.

GC: You know, and that was wonderful and I never forgot that. I think [during] one of his first visits home when we all got together he said he felt he was the crown jewel in the American president system. You know, security in the White House—he really rebelled against that.

AD: You had mentioned the correspondence that you did when you were with him as governor. Were there any times when he kind of rolled his eyes and made a comment about any letter, any issue in terms of anything you remember?

GC: Well not really. He was always pretty respectful about what people had to say, you know. There was this one guy who used to write to the Governor's office all the time, and he would write in all capital letters. I got in the habit of referring to him as Owen Meany because it was always as if he was shouting. So we would talk about it—we'd say something about it, but he would take everything seriously. Everything was serious, but he could always interject humor in it. He was always respectful of other people's views, and he'd give it good and full consideration.

AD: Is there anything else that you would like to add?

GC: Well, I would just say that it was a privilege to have known both Bill and Hillary, and it has been a wonderful, wonderful, and terrible time in my life [laughter] if you know what I mean. I just hope that history treats them better than we tend to think it might right now. I think the work he is doing right now is very important. I think that his efforts to work with the AIDS [Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome] plague in Africa are just fabulous and so necessary.

AD: So you think that history will have maybe a more positive view . . .

GC: If we live long enough I think we will find that out. Yes I think so. I think so.

AD: Well, I'd like to thank you for your time.

GC: Sure, my pleasure.

[End of Interview]