

William Jefferson Clinton History Project

Interview with

Margaret Polk
Hope, Arkansas
22 February 2002

Interviewer: Michael Pierce

Michael Pierce: This is Michael Pierce. I'm in Hope, Arkansas. It's February 22, 2002 and I'm going to interview Margaret Polk. We're at 1301 Walker Street, right across from the boyhood home of Bill Clinton. I'd like to start by asking you, Mrs. Polk, when you first met Bill Clinton.

Margaret Polk: Oh, I've always known him. We're relatives.

Pierce: You're relatives? How so?

Polk: Well, I'm about a third or fourth cousin. His great grandmother was my aunt.

Pierce: On which side?

Polk: On Virginia's side.

Pierce: Where were you born?

Polk: I was born in Nevada County, in the country, way back in the woods. We started to school in an old country church. We were all in one room, the first through the twelfth grade.

Pierce: I know it's rude for me to ask, but what year were you born?

Polk: I was born in 1920. I'm eighty-two years old.

Pierce: What were the names of your parents?

Polk: My parents' names were J. J. Cornelius and Alma Russell Cornelius. That's how we're kin to Bill Clinton. Through the Russells. Aunt Lou Russell Cassidy married, you see, and she came in on Eldridge's side. She was Eldridge's mother, and that was Bill's grandfather. They helped raise Bill over in the old two-story house near the underpass, after you come off of the interstate.

Pierce: On Hervey Street?

Polk: Yes, on Hervey Street.

Pierce: What was it like growing up in Nevada County?

Polk: It was wonderful, just wonderful. We had a peddler that came through once a week, and if we had a nickel or a dime to buy a bar of candy, we were in heaven. In the country, you could wade out into these little branches of water running, pick wild grapes or plums. We rode in wagons in the back and we'd get barefooted and let our feet drag in the sand. It was wonderful.

Pierce: So you've known Eldridge since you were young?

Polk: Oh, yes.

Pierce: All of your life, then?

Polk: Yes.

Pierce: What are your memories of them?

Polk: Good people. Good people, hon. You could tell Clinton was going to be something from the time he was born. The Lord just cut him out to be something. I can look back now and I can see it. From the time he was

born! When he was over in this house across the street, he just had that air of someone wonderful, even though he was humble and down-to-earth. Everybody was the same class as he grew up. He played with all colors of children. Eldridge had a little store over near the old Rose Hill Cemetery. Virginia, his father, grandfather and grandmother—they're all buried over there. His grandfather ran that little grocery store. Bill played with the little black children [and] the little white children. It didn't matter the color, they were all the same. I never in my knowing him saw him think he was better or mistreat anybody.

Pierce: Where do you think that came from?

Polk: I think it was from way back yonder, by being raised by Eldridge and Edith.

Pierce: Tell me a little about both of them.

Polk: Eldridge and Edith? They were down-to-earth. She was a practical nurse and he was an ice man. We had iceboxes. He peddled ice, and went from house to house. They knew everybody and loved everybody. We were all friends and neighbors. We helped each other. Lord, help us to get back that way!

Pierce: Was Eldridge a big man? I think of ice men as huge.

Polk: No. He was a nice-looking man. He was a ladies' man.

Pierce: What do you mean?

Polk: He had another man on the ice route with him and he would send him on ahead away from his girlfriend's house.

Pierce: He would?

Polk: Yes! But now I can't remember their names. My memory—I don't know people anymore.

Pierce: Was this common knowledge in Hope?

Polk: Yes and no. It was no big deal.

Pierce: What did Edith think of all of this?

Polk: Oh, she didn't care. She was a tough gal. A tough gal. She was a good old gal, and there were never better nurses in the country than she and Virginia. But Virginia must have gotten her—I can't really think of the word. She didn't think she was better than anyone else, but she had an air about her. She'd come right in here, and just as soon sing to you or dance to you as anything. She was that type of person, but she was a wonderful person. She was a trained nurse.

Pierce: When did you first meet Virginia?

Polk: Oh, I grew up with her.

Pierce: Do you remember her as a girl? Was she that way then?

Polk: Oh, yes, always. She and her mother never did get along. Her mother went to court and tried to take Billy away from her because they just loved Billy so. See, Virginia went off after her husband died to New Orleans to be an anesthetist. Edith would keep him. She'd come home on weekends and whenever she could on a bus. On a bus, you know, right down this old 29 Lewisville Highway. Edith just thought—well, every morning—

I'm just jumping from country to town and all around—in the mornings there was a colored woman who kept Billy.

Pierce: Do you remember her name?

Polk: No. I'm sorry. I'm sure she's probably in heaven. After each work night [at the old Julia Chester Hospital where Bill was born, where the Oakcrest Funeral Home is right now] the colored woman would keep Bill until noon. Virginia would be working, and they [she and Edith] worked at the same hospital. Virginia worked days and Edith worked nights. Then she'd go home and sleep a while, then go get Billy. Of course, he was little and he'd take a nap, so she'd get to sleep a little more. [Laughs] Another thing I want to tell. Edith bootlegged.

Pierce: Edith bootlegged?

Polk: Yes!

Pierce: I've only heard that about Eldridge.

Polk: Oh, she did because we bought whiskey from her. Right out of that house! The reason I know this is the truth [laughs] is because my husband, who's dead, drank whiskey. We went over there one night and they bought a fifth of Old Crow. It was \$8, and all he had was a \$10 bill. Well, she didn't have any change and I was just—in my mind, it didn't matter, but I would just think about that \$2, you know! Every time I'd think about it—but I just loved her. I visited her after she'd had the stroke and got down and all these things. They fixed her a room in this old hospital. The old surgery room. They fixed her a lovely place to live and took care of her.

In fact, after that hospital closed, they turned it into a kind of apartment or home. She had a room up there and she loved to wear rouge and paint up, and she was a funny little lady. She was heavysset, but nobody fooled with her. She had hellfire in her, but she was a good woman. Eldridge was just as humble as a poor little kitten. She just bossed him like he was her little boy, but he didn't seem to mind. He'd go along with everything she said and wanted him to do. Now, I wouldn't say they were mean, she and Virginia, but they had a streak of hell in them. Sometimes that's good. Maybe we need some people with streaks of hell in them.

Pierce: Two strong-willed people?

Polk: Yes. They were just strong-willed people, but they were good people, good people.

Pierce: Do you remember William Blythe? Did you ever meet him?

Polk: The father? No, I never saw him in this town. She met him—oh, how did she meet him? In Louisiana?

Pierce: In Shreveport when she was at Tri-State Nursing Home.

Polk: She met him when she worked down there. As far as I know, I don't remember him coming to Hope. He might have, and it's just slipped my memory.

Pierce: Do you remember the birth of Bill?

Polk: Yes. I have a sister in Logansport, Louisiana, who was there when he was delivered, and she's a nurse. I want to give you her name.

Pierce: That's great. Her name?

Polk: Margie McKinney. That's a small town and out yonder at the other house I've got her address and phone number.

Pierce: What's her husband's name?

Polk: He's dead.

Pierce: What if I looked it up in the phone book?

Polk: You'll find Margie. Everybody knows her down there. She wrote an article, and I looked for that article the other night. They went from *The Hope Star* to talk to her because she knows all about when he was born. She can give you a better story along that line than I can. You be sure to tell her I sent you.

Pierce: I will.

Polk: My mama lived in this little house over here. In fact, I'm going to get back to Mama and show you her pictures. She lived to be 104. When they had that shooting over here, right across the street when Roger did the shooting? All he was really—he was drinking. But, you know, men get in their heads that their women are running around with men. Did you know that?

Pierce: Yes. I've heard that before.

Polk: Anyhow, he shot at her. He missed her, but the holes are over in that house. Of course, the house is—you probably know all about the house over there. He's probably told you something about it. Mama kept Bill. Virginia brought Bill. He was a little boy. My brother and Mama lived in this house. We were gone. We were in Pennsylvania. She brought Bill

over for Mama to keep two or three days and nights after the shooting. She made the comment that she never thought she'd have to call on anyone for anything. She was that type of person. She probably didn't, but the time comes when you may have to call on somebody. Mama kept Bill. So they got to sleep with the president! My brother is a banker in Houston, Texas. His name is Jim Cornelius. He's a Hartford insurance man, and president of a bank and has a farm over in Brenham. He has a wife, Suzanne, who's an angel. He has two daughters. Catherine worked for Clinton, and, in fact, Catherine's husband is one of Bill Clinton's men right now, who provide him protection.

Pierce: Secret Service?

Polk: Yes.

Pierce: That's wonderful.

Polk: Yes. Catherine. Last name is Smith. They live in Maryland. I answered her Christmas card and asked her to write us more, but maybe she can't. Too much going on in the world.

Pierce: Tell us about Roger Clinton.

Polk: He was a good-looking young man, and he was a good man. The night that he did that shooting, nobody wanted to call the police on him.

Pierce: No one called?

Polk: No, but I had a brother who was the night clerk at the old Barlow Hotel up by the railway. He walked up and said, "I'll call the police." We needed to do something about it, but we just had neighbors around. We weren't

used to seeing people shooting. We had neighbors all around here. So he called the police and they locked him [Roger] up for the night, but they got back together and moved to Hot Springs. We visited them in Hot Springs one time. Minor, me and the children. We went up there to buy a bicycle. We got the bicycle, but then we were just sick, because what did we do with that bicycle? [Laughter] It was so funny. You want me to talk more about Eldridge. Eldridge was quiet. So good, and just precious, and Edith was good too, but she was kind of, well, she was mean to him, I guess. Maybe he didn't do—maybe she knew about the other women, but I knew about that bootleg. I'm going to tell you something. Back then, there were no jobs and no money. My daddy made whiskey, the best whiskey in the country, and he sold it to the law. Mama and they would put it out by their water meters, and the law would come along a pick up a half a pint that night. Of course, the colored people made the whiskey, and they had stills. They had whiskey in kegs back then. But I don't remember Eldridge ever making whiskey. All I remember him doing was delivering ice. That's all I remember. But he'd have a man with him, and Eldridge would have girlfriends, and he'd send that man on ahead. My sister can tell you about that by long distance or whatever, because she's quite a bit younger than I am and can remember a lot. I just know we lived over here by them.

Pierce: Were you ever over at the Hervey Street home?

Polk: Yes.

Pierce: What was that like?

Polk: It was a lovely, old, kind of plain house. Just plain jane. I don't know if Marie—Marie and them—oh, they were just the most precious people, Uncle Otha and Aunt Mildred Russell, her mother and father, were very quiet and reserved. Marie's family lived next door to the house on Hervey street.

Pierce: Back to Bill. What was he like as a baby?

Polk: Laughing, happy, precious, and the best thing! Marie said he cried a lot, but Edith was trying to reform him. You know how we are. Maybe you won't be that way with yours, but you say, "Just let him cry it out. They're fed, they're dry. Just let them cry." When it was hot—we didn't have air-conditioning. We only had fans, and some of us didn't even have that. Bill was hot, and Marie said it was hot upstairs, and maybe he was just uncomfortable. Marie said that that was one thing that stood out. They could just hear him crying.

Pierce: This house and the one across the street, the one on Thirteenth—when did you move in and when did the Clintons move in?

Polk: We were here. The government built these houses up and down this street. We built this house in 1939 and 1940.

Pierce: And the house across the street?

Polk: Oh, it was built later.

Pierce: Were the Clintons the first people to live there?

Polk: No. Several lived there before them.

Pierce: And they moved there in 1948?

Polk: Yes, and then they lived over there about three years.

Pierce: What were they like as neighbors?

Polk: They were good and quiet, unless they were having a good time.
[Laughter] But we loved them. It was not bad. We didn't have to have the police out except that one time when he got drunk.

Pierce: There are rumors that he used to run around.

Polk: Oh, sure, sure. And another thing. You've heard about Edith tying all the clothes out in the backyard and burning them up? That was over close to Marie in that two-story house where they lived.

Pierce: All of Virginia's clothes?

Polk: Roger had bought her a lot of pretty clothes. He'd given her beautiful things, and Edith just tied them up in the backyard and burned them. She was just that kind of person.

Pierce: Edith did? Why would Edith do that?

Polk: Edith did that, the mother of Virginia.

Pierce: Why?

Polk: Because she didn't want Virginia to have anything to do with Clinton.

Pierce: So Edith and Eldridge didn't go to the wedding?

Polk: I don't know if they did or not. I never heard whether they went or not. They didn't like him. They wouldn't have anything to do with him, but he was all right. He worked hard. He had the Buick dealership here. He did all right. She drove a beautiful car and had everything she wanted.

Pierce: Do you remember when they moved up to Hot Springs?

Polk: Yes.

Pierce: Do you know why they moved up there?

Polk: For him to have a better job and her a better opportunity to work. She had her own equipment and did her own anesthetic for years. You've read all those books about all the things she did?

Pierce: Yes. She was an amazing woman.

Polk: She had friends. I meant to bring a book, too. I've just got books and books, but I'm sure you've read some of the books, or if you haven't, you will.

Pierce: Back to Hope. What was [unintelligible]?

Polk: They played together.

Pierce: Who else would play in that group?

Polk: The Taylors, who lived across the street. They're distant relatives.

Pierce: That would be Donna Taylor?

Polk: Yes. In the book, that's Donna Wingfield. Of course, we were here, and our children. We had a sandpile under that tree out front. Bill had a slide out back, and they'd play, you know, but they guarded him. He'd play over here some, but they'd watch him. There was not a lot of traffic like there is now. Like I told you, that old colored woman would work for them to stay over here in the morning after Virginia went to work, about 6:30 or 7:00, until about 11:30 or noon. Edith would pick him up, then Virginia would pick him up from over there.

Pierce: I heard one story about Mitzi and Bill playing, and something with a hat. What happened?

Polk: Mitzi had a hat around her neck. She had a straw hat, and it hung at the top of the slide.

Pierce: She was choking?

Polk: Yes. He was smart enough, though Mitzi was a little bit older than him—these were small children—and he climbed up that slide, while we were running and they were hollering, and he pushed Mitzi up by the seat, and got it undone. He was just that smart. Of course, Edith had worked with him and his mama had too. But Edith got all the credit for putting the cards with the letters and numbers on the high chair, which was wonderful. She did it. She really worked for her family that she loved, but she wanted to rule everybody. She wanted to—oh, all right, I guess you have to put up with people like that, and maybe we need people like that. Anyhow, all I can tell you is that Bill had a little tricycle. I can see him now sitting and watching the street. He'd have loved to come across the street more, but they watched him and he couldn't run. He knew better than to run over here or to come without permission to come.

Pierce: Do you remember his broken leg?

Polk: Yes. He broke his leg at school jumping the rope with Donna. You've seen pictures with his leg way up in that hospital? Wasn't that something, with that child laying flat on his back? Something about him that's just love.

Pierce: When Roger, Virginia, Bill and little Roger were up in Hot Springs, did you see them more than just the time you went to buy the bike?

Polk: Oh, sometimes they'd come down here. We visited some, but not a whole lot. Not like you'd think. People didn't visit a lot, but we did enough.

Pierce: When Bill entered politics in the 1970's, what did you think?

Polk: There wasn't much to think. Everything he did turned to gold. Have you ever noticed that some people, everything they do—when you're born with stuff in you, and you've got to bring it out yourself? You can't put it in me. I can't put it in you. The goodness has got to come from your soul and your heart.

Pierce: He has that?

Polk: He has it, hon. It's in him. If he ever meets you, he'll never forget you. Have you ever met him?

Pierce: I've shaken hands with him.

Polk: If you walked up to him today, he'd know you.

Pierce: I wouldn't doubt it.

Polk: Have you heard that about him?

Pierce: I've heard these amazing stories about his memory.

Polk: It's just something. We just marvel at him.

Pierce: Is there anything about Clinton's life in Hope that you haven't talked about? Did you ever meet Hillary and Chelsea?

Polk: They were kind of on the Virginia line. They were kind of on that line, but they were precious, precious to us. They weren't down-to-earth

people like Arkansas people. She was raised up in Chicago, somewhere up that way, and they're just a little bit different, but just wonderful. They're not better than anyone else. They're just human like we are. There's that air about them, but she was good. Virginia didn't think he'd pick that kind of a woman out, but you see, she helped make him in politics what he was and what he is.

Pierce: I read somewhere that Clinton was drawn to her because he was used to strong women in his life. Do you think that's true?

Polk: Good call, good call. I think that's true. Because of Edith and Virginia.

Pierce: Let's get back to . . .

Polk: We're off the path. He got to go to kindergarten and be with all those kids and all, but he was sheltered.

Pierce: How so?

Polk: Very so. He played with the boy—what's his name? [Vince] Foster. They stayed in that house. Their backyards were right together.

Pierce: Right over here?

Polk: No, the other place.

Pierce: Hervey Street?

Polk: They played together, went to school together and were good friends, but Bill was sheltered. Somebody else—Donna and Lynn. They live in Vine, Texas.

Pierce: Donna Taylor?

Polk: No, no, no. I can't even think of their last name. My mind's gone. [They were] Opal's daughters. Opal Russell married Carl Russell, who was my mother's brother.

Pierce: Donna Earl and Lynn Carroll?

Polk: Yes. Anyhow, when Clinton was a teenager, Aunt Opal was married to a Russell, my mama's brother. See, we're kin this way and that way. I tell people no matter what cousin, we're still cousins. He visited them a lot in the summer. He'd go to Dallas and stay with Aunt Opal. In fact, he loved Aunt Opal Russell. She was Edith's sister. He loved Opal like she was a mother or something. Those girls were a little older than him, but young enough. He'd get to go to Dallas and they'd go to a lot of things in Dallas, Texas. They could tell you about that if you could get hold of them, or if Aunt Opal was alive. They could tell you about that period of life.

Pierce: Myra gave me their information.

Polk: Good. It wouldn't hurt to call either one of them. They were just precious, and she's says they don't work anymore. You know, I can't believe they're seventy years old. To me, they're still just young girls and kids and what have you. Life is wonderful.

Pierce: You have a great attitude.

Polk: I wake up with it and I go to sleep with it. Now, I've had Mitzi, she's been . . . She's epileptic and retarded some, but she can talk. She can tell you about Clinton, but she's an angel. She's had cancer. She's had a fractured hip, and we had her daddy down for almost ten years, but we

took care of him in his house. They wanted to put him in a nursing home, but my girls said, “Momma, Daddy’s worked too hard, he’s not going in there. We’re going to have to take care of him.” Then I had Momma down eight or nine years, and, honey, you have got to make life what it is. It isn’t coming to you. It’s in here. It’s in your soul.

Pierce: You and Virginia are a lot alike, aren’t you?

Polk: Yes. She asked me one time what kind of cream I had on my face. I have laughed about that so many times. She was a jealous person. She didn’t want anyone to have any more than she did. But I had everything I ever wanted. A new car every so often. God has blessed me. Everything I’ve touched has turned to gold. It might not have been money, but it was in blessings. She asked me one time, “What kind of cream do you use?” I said, “Gosh, I don’t know, just whatever is on special.” In a minute she asked me again. Then she said, “I’m just not going to ask you anymore.” But she had that lipstick, and she primped, and she didn’t have any eyebrows. If you read in any of these books—I read where she had to sleep in makeup when she was on call because she’d scare people to death if she went up there with no eyebrows! But she had beautiful clothes, and she just had everything. But you better not cross her, because she’d be as mean as hell.

Pierce: What would happen?

Polk: She’d cuss you out. I never heard of her fighting, but she’d cuss you out.

Pierce: What would make her mad?

Polk: If you crossed her about anything. She smoked and drank. But she was a good nurse.

Pierce: I should have told you this. What's going to happen is that we'll make a transcript of this. We'll send it back to you and you can edit it, so if you don't want it, it's not going to be in there.

Polk: Myra's going to call.

Pierce: One thing I'm interested in. How did Eldridge and Edith take it when Bill, Virginia and Roger moved to Hot Springs?

Polk: She didn't like it because she wanted to boss everything. She didn't like it. They didn't like it. You know that. They didn't like it here and they didn't like it up there. But she had a wonderful life. But Roger kept drinking, so she divorced him, then married him again, and had little Roger.

Pierce: Did you ever meet any of her other husbands?

Polk: This last one, [unintelligible]. He's a wonderful person. My children are all grown, and Mitzi and I are kind of settled.

Pierce: What else can you tell us about the Clintons?

Polk: It meant so much to Hope for him to be president.

Pierce: How so?

Polk: How so? I have had more letters. People have come to my yard. I have pictures of my yard. We've met people from all over the world, and I just stayed out in the yard. People were in here having coffee, and news reporters and everything! Honey, we just lived the life! They'd come

down here from—and it would turn cold. Where they'd come from—it would be different from wherever they'd come from, you see. We've just got tapes and tapes. So it's been wonderful. I haven't really told you much.

Pierce: Yes, you have.

Polk: Now the [unintelligible]. I've thought about them. He's dead, but she lives over on . . . This next street over is Fourteenth. Her name is, let's see—let me find a phone book.

Pierce: I can find it back in Fayetteville. Now, what about Dale Drake?

Polk: She's dead. She lived right across yonder back of that alley. She was a lot like Virginia. She married several times, but Dale never did drink. After we moved out yonder, she grieved because I'd just go across the alley if I'd cooked up some turnip greens and baked sweet potatoes and corn bread, and I'd take her some. She just grieved because I was gone. I was some like Virginia. I never did go to school to be a nurse, but I had the opportunity to work for the doctor who delivered me out in the country—came on a little mule, way out in the country. I had the opportunity to take care of him when he was in a nursing home. I was making much more than my daughters who had been to school.

Pierce: I must ask you this. There are rumors about the paternity of Clinton. Do you know anything about that?

Polk: Now, why did you ask me that? I wanted that damned thing turned off when I told you that. Well, I'll just keep on going. All right. Dr. Wright

died. He was in the funeral parlor at Oakcrest, and Uncle Buddy was in the funeral parlor. Have you talked to George Wright? Are you going to talk to him?

Pierce: I haven't talked with him, but I will.

Polk: Have you got guts enough to ask him that?

Pierce: I probably will ask him. We will ask him.

Polk: Right at the back of the hospital—let me go back to the funeral home—and they talked. He came to his daddy's funeral and [unintelligible]. Did you forget? And he looked like Dr. Wright. Dr. Wright was a damned good-looking man. One day Dr. Wright was over there, and she called me. Virginia called me and wanted me to come over there. And they were having drinks. And you know what? I have thought in my mind, I have wondered. [Laughs] I just thought she thought that if Roger came home—do you see what I'm telling you?

Pierce: So you were there to protect her? In case Roger . . .

Polk: I have wondered that in my mind.

Pierce: When did Hempstead County go dry?

Polk: Oh, Lord! Now you've asked me something I don't know. Long ago, long ago.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

Polk: Georgie—George, Jr.—was out there smoking a cigarette, and I just pulled over to the curb. I was leaving and he worked then. Anyhow, he

wanted me to talk to Roger, to Clinton about that. I said, “Are you nuts? Talk to him about it yourself!” He thought that that was his daddy. But they looked so much alike. They’ve got that air. When you see George, you just think about it.

Pierce: When did George Wright, Sr. die?

Polk: The same time Uncle Buddy did, just a few years ago. Up there at the Oakcrest Funeral Home. Clinton came. The whole nine yards came. And when they had Virginia’s funeral. They had those dogs and everything. Of course, we got into the cemetery, but they had those dogs and looked in our purses. They raised the hood. They just worked people over. Wasn’t that something?

Pierce: Well, you can’t be too careful.

Polk: No, hon. It’s a wonder no one has—hasn’t he been lucky? Hasn’t he been lucky?

Pierce: He’s been very lucky, but he’s also talented.

Polk: He never would have gotten where he was if he wasn’t. [unintelligible].

Pierce: Is there anything else we should talk about?

Polk: I don’t know. I could talk for a million years and never tell you what needed to be told.

Pierce: What needs to be told?

Polk: I don’t know. I told you about the whiskey and the two dollars. [Laughs]

Pierce: Did you ever try to collect the two dollars?

Polk: No, no. Good Lord. Bless their hearts. They didn't have a whole lot, but Virginia had it better than most children. She had an air. We're not going to say that you think you're better than me, but it was just an air.

Pierce: Confidence? Was it confidence?

Polk: I don't know what it is, but I can show you some stuff. What time is it getting to be? I don't have to answer to anybody, but I've got grandchildren. One granddaughter's going to play ball. She's just an angel. I've brought some pictures, but I just didn't have time. See, this is the last time Clinton came before he won the last election.

Pierce: Those are your grandchildren?

Polk: Those are my grandchildren. That's Mitzi. We're over at Falba's old brick house. You go to Falba's house and . . .

Pierce: I want to talk to them next time I come back.

Polk: This is when he won in 1992. And there's Mitzi and Ashlyn. And she's hugging Ashlyn. And here are these people in office at the courthouse with her. There's Bill with Ronnie Kidd. Somebody painted a picture and gave it to him. Dale and Roger. Here's Mama. Of course, she kept on for a long time. That was on her last go round before she died. This is my sister in Logansport. She's just like Virginia. She's mean as hell. She's a licensed nurse. And this is Virginia. See how she was? See? I was wired. They had come here and wired me for the . . . Just like you. Oh, reporters! They wired me see, and they were saying Clinton would say something to me at this 1992—at this reunion of all of us, all those people

over there. Well now, that's at Toni's house. And this is Sox the cat.

You know about Sox. Oh, Lord, I've just had the best time.

Pierce: Did you go to the inauguration?

Polk: No, I had had a heart attack. They thought it was a heart attack. I had bought a new coat. My kids had bought me new luggage. And, honey, I went out to this hospital—I had on a hat. It was a white straw hat. It was a red hat. It had that red, white and blue ribbon. The doctors were putting it on in the ICU [Intensive Care Unit. See, I didn't feel good and I told the darned doctor I had a few pains. One of the doctors told me to go on, but I was in ICU, then went over and had an arteriogram in Texarkana. So I didn't get to go. I'm just way down here in the country. This is over yonder. You'll see him. This is some when we go [to] Western Sizzlin' [restaurant] at the last. And I'm not in anything. I'm so damned busy trying to run the show. Now, this one—my kids said this is when he had first driven up and Mitzi was in a walker. He said, "When did all this happen?" It was her hip. She was in the hospital when he was president. They haven't worked so much for Clinton, but these are my nieces over in Oklahoma City. They've got all that paraphernalia. And we just have a good time. And there was the dog with the Clinton sign. And that's Dale. Have you seen Carter Russell out yonder?

Pierce: No, I haven't yet.

Polk: Well, you need to see him. He'll make you think about some of the old times, further back about Eldridge. Ask him if Eldridge had girlfriends!

People haven't guts enough to tell you. I wish I could think of some of those old women's names. But, see, Mama is dead—but now there's a— isn't that Dale? That's me. And there's Grant. He's a little boy who's finished college. I just jerked up a bunch of stuff. Here I am working in the yard.

Pierce: Are these people who were here with you at the house?

Polk: I should have heard from you weeks ago because I have boxes of stuff out yonder. I just hadn't done what I should have done, but I had a good time.

Pierce: You know, I sent you a letter about two months ago, but the address was up in Crusted.

Polk: I don't live in Crusted. I don't know how it got up there.

Pierce: I would love it if you could spare . . .

Polk: Now, this guy, this Watkins? He double-crossed Clinton. And this is Vince, who killed himself. They thought maybe that he went with Hillary. Have you heard that?

Pierce: Yes, I've heard lots of people say that.

Polk: I don't think so, I don't think so. I think people just want to drag up slander. I think they drug up a lot on Clinton, but by golly, he ain't in jail and he ain't in the pen. Look at him, he's so tired. God bless him. This is some—oh listen here.

Pierce: Oh, there you are!

Polk: I came out on the front page of *The Arkansas Gazette*. Here I was with this telephone book, toting the phone—they wanted to know when these

streets were paved. I was just saying, “What in the hell is he going to get into next?” He was telling about something—Clinton was—and I was saying, “What on earth?” I was trying to call someone to find out when these streets were paved. Back then, we had to pay part of it. When we built this house, we had to pay to get gas, electricity, and water piped up here. We had to build our own sidewalk, and we had to pay half for the paving of the streets. We were tickled to death, of course, because when we built this house, we had gravel streets. We were lucky to have gravel. When I married—my husband worked at a sawmill.

Pierce: What year were you married?

Polk: 1937. I was young. They cleared down in McNabb out from Fulton, down here to McNabb down in the sawmill country, and they cleared the ground. They built up a new house. One day, I was going to go to the next little town, and I was afraid that I was going to drive over some of those stumps out there. The husband said, “If you can’t miss the stumps, you can’t go.” I missed the stumps. [Laughter] We drove in ruts! In the old days, when Eldridge and Edith and they were growing up down there, in the wagons, in the country with the branches—you know, people have cleared this country up. Learning and growing all your things from the earth, that’s like the farm, way off. Of course, people put stuff up in freezers. Used to I had big old freezers, upright and full. Now we don’t do things like that. My mama had to can everything. They lived in a log house. They put up food in those great big jars—those half gallons, we

called them. Now they're collector's items! But, honey, that's the life you lived back then when Edith and Eldridge were being raised. When the Grishams—Edith's mama and daddy—I can just see them sitting on the porch now, rocking. In fact, we've got some chairs that we've been meaning to take to the Clinton house, and they're in a storage barn out yonder at Emmett! We've been fussing about putting them over there, and we never have done it. Somehow, mama ended up with those rocking chairs. One was his and one was hers.

Pierce: That was [unintelligible]?

Polk: Yes.

Pierce: [unintelligible]

Polk: I don't know, so I ain't going to tell you because I forgot. But I can tell you that she was a big old fat lady just like Edith.

Pierce: What were they like?

Polk: They were just good old farmers. They didn't have much to do, but they sat on the porch and rocked. They had to raise what they ate, and they hunted. Honey, they hunted and fished. They came on up behind the Indians. They had rock piles all down in the country, honey, just like the Indians had piled up in that land. But now, over there where we owned—and gas, I sold gas to the Cowboys man. I sold gas to him. Springs running through your property—there are springs running through there right now.

Pierce: Let me ask you about Lou.

Polk: Aunt Lou. Eldridge's mama. Eldridge nursed until he could walk. Eldridge nursed Aunt Lou until he could say, "Come on, Ma." And she let him nurse over at the school behind the door.

Pierce: How old was Eldridge?

Polk: Well, he was two or three years old. They just kept letting him nurse and nurse and nurse way back then. People didn't worry about the health, and people were healthy back then.

Pierce: Did Lou and Edith get along?

Polk: No, no. And when her mama and daddy lived with them some—when they got down sick—she would take them upstairs and hide them, like if somebody was coming, like if she was having a meeting or something. She didn't want people to see them, you know? I heard Mama always talk about that when I was growing up. But she just never was—Virginia was good and all, but there was something about them both; just an air, as I told you. Eldridge wasn't like that. Bill is more like his grandpa's folks than he was Edith's folks. But I love Bill. And I love Falba and Myra, just like they were really kin, because we're all kin to kin to kinfolk. Like when she [Falba] called me, she said, "Do you remember me?" I said, "Are you nuts? Remember you? You're kin to me!" But they—oh, Lord, bless their hearts . . .

Pierce: Is there anything I've forgotten to ask you about?

Polk: We've been down the road in that wagon, haven't we? We had a good time. People made whiskey. We were in with the law. We loved each

other and we helped our neighbor. If anybody died, we helped out. We had plenty to eat, to wear. We went to school. The world has just gone to hell and back. Isn't it something?

Pierce: Yes.

Polk: Breaks your heart. I just wish my children could—now, Matt, where we went—that little girl, he's really interested in stuff. Now, there's J. D. Allen. Well, you know them. They're our cousins. He could tell you a lot about that old stuff. He lives down there in the country, he and Marie. In fact, Matt and them have never hunted there. They go hunt turkey right away, and they're going to go down there Saturday. So I was just kind of bringing him up to date about way back yonder when I'd chop cotton. We'd go down in the summer and we'd chop and pick cotton so we could buy our school clothes.

Pierce: With a big bag?

Polk: Yes, and drag it behind. And they laughed at me because I'd stand up and holler "What time is it?" Aunt Leona would keep the children and she would make up cornbread in a dishpan with her hands, in long pans like that because we'd have to feed so many people. And they raised their meal. We'd go to the gristmill, and then grind the corn. They had the grist mill. All my relatives had all that. They ground that corn. They made syrup. They had sawmills. They made and sold whiskey, and what else? They've just done everything, you see?

Pierce: Well, thank you so much.

Polk: I'm just glad to meet you. And you just wad this up and take it with you.

[End of interview]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]