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

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Arkansas Memories Project
William Harrison Celebration

Walton Beacham

Interviewed by Scott Lunsford

June 11, 2011

Fayetteville, Arkansas

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Objective

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The Pryor Center's objective is to collect audio and video recordings of interviews along with scanned images of family photographs and documents. These donated materials are carefully preserved, catalogued, and deposited in the Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville. The transcripts, audio files, video highlight clips, and photographs are made available on the Pryor Center Web site at https://pryorcenter.uark.edu. The Pryor Center recommends that researchers utilize the audio recordings and highlight clips, in addition to the transcripts, to enhance their connection with the interviewee.

Transcript Methodology

The Pryor Center recognizes that we cannot reproduce the spoken word in a written document; however, we strive to produce a transcript that represents the characteristics and unique qualities of the interviewee's speech pattern, style of speech, regional dialect, and personality. For the first twenty minutes of the interview, we attempt to transcribe verbatim all words and utterances that are spoken, such as uhs and ahs, false starts, and repetitions. Some of these elements are omitted after the first twenty minutes to improve readability.

The Pryor Center transcripts are prepared utilizing the *University of Arkansas Style Manual* for proper names, titles, and terms specific to the university. For all other style elements, we refer to the *Pryor Center Style Manual*, which is based primarily on *The Chicago Manual of Style 16th Edition*. We employ the following guidelines for consistency and readability:

- Em dashes separate repeated/false starts and incomplete/ redirected sentences.
- Ellipses indicate the interruption of one speaker by another.
- Italics identify foreign words or terms and words emphasized by the speaker.
- Question marks enclose proper nouns for which we cannot verify the spelling and words that we cannot understand with certainty.

Brackets enclose
    - italicized annotations of nonverbal sounds, such as laughter, and audible sounds, such as a doorbell ringing;
    - annotations for clarification and identification; 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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Scott Lunsford interviewed Walton Beacham on June 11, 2011, in Fayetteville, Arkansas. This series of interviews took place during a birthday celebration for William Harrison.

[00:00:00]

Scott Lunsford: Walter, I'm gonna—uh—take care of some business here on the front end. Um—uh—we're here today—um—on June the eleventh—the year is 2011—at Laurie Harrison's house here in Fayetteville, Arkansas. And we're doing a series of interviews—um—that will be—um—uh—it was actually Laurie's idea to have a gathering and have all the graduates and friends—uh—come in from the—uh—M.F.A. program here. And—um—we're gonna add these interviews to our Bill Harrison project. We've already done a—had an interview done with Bill, and it was excellent, of course. It was great. Um—and—uh—we will preserve these interviews forever. Um—they'll—they're high-definition audio and video. Uh—they'll be archived at the—uh—at the Pryor Center here in Fayetteville, and also there'll be a copy of this stuff at the—um—uh—Mullins Library in the Special Collections Department on the University of Arkansas campus here in Fayetteville. Uh—you will receive a transcript of this interview, and you'll receive a DVD of the raw footage of this interview. And we'll ask you to read that transcript, look at the

DVD, and if there's anything in [*camera clicks*]—in there that you're not comfortable with or that you don't feel like should be out there for the rest of the world to see, we'll take it out for you. It's—this is—uh—really more about—uh—um—you telling your story than us getting a story. It's—it's really your interview, and so we want you to take ownership of it. If there are any changes, we'll make 'em. And once you're satisfied with the product, we will—uh—post segments of the interview, videowise, on our website—the Pryor Center. Uh—we will post the entire transcript and the entire audio of—of the interview. And we will encourage people to visit and use these materials—uh—documentarians, researchers—uh—students of Arkansas history, public school students. Um—and if you are comfortable with all of that, then you need to tell me now, and if you're not, we'll—we'll stop, and we'll have a good time anyway.

Walton Beacham: Or forever hold my peace.

SL: Yes.

WB: [*Laughs*] I do.

[00:02:36] SL: Okay, great. [*Laughter*] Thank you. Thank you. This'll be a beautiful marriage. [*WB laughs*] The start of a beautiful relationship. Um—so we usually start with—um—the interviewee stating their full name and, of course, spelling any

unusual names, and also when and where you were born.

WB: Uh—Eugene Walton Beacham, otherwise known as Walton, born in Greenville, South Carolina, in 1943.

SL: North Carolina? South Caro . . .

WB: South Carolina.

SL: . . . South Carolina. And—um—what were your parents' names?

WB: Uh—Eugene Beacham and Elizabeth Newman Beacham.

SL: And her maiden name was Newman?

WB: Newman.

SL: Newman.

WB: Mh-hmm.

[00:03:19] SL: And what did they do for a living?

WB: Uh—my dad was an architect, and my mother was a classical pianist.

SL: Wow! So—uh—there was a certain amount of—uh—intellect and—uh—uh—academia in the household, growing up.

WB: From as long as before the Civil War—uh—my family has had advanced degrees. My aunt was the first woman to earn a graduate degree from Duke.

SL: What a legacy that—uh . . .

WB: What a legacy.

SL: . . . that you have.

WB: Yeah.

SL: Um—so did you—eh—eh—and were you raised there?

WB: Yes, in Greenville, through . . .

SL: And you were—and . . .

WB: . . . through high school.

SL: Through high school. And did you go to public schools?

WB: I did. Greenville High.

SL: Uh-huh. And you would've—uh—graduated in—let's see, that would've been what year? Um . . .

WB: [Nineteen] sixty-two.

SL: [Nineteen] sixty-two. Um—so—uh—there was quite a bit going on in the world in—uh—the early [19]60s. All kinds of things were brewing in the early [19]60s. I guess the—uh . . .

WB: Sputnik changed my life.

SL: How did it change your life?

WB: Uh—I was lying in my front yard on my back at midnight when Sputnik came over for the first time. And I had been vacillating between architecture and engineering, and I thought, "I wanna go to space." And so I went to Georgia Tech as an aerospace engineer.

[00:04:50] SL: Uh—Georgia Tech, one of the most respected engineering schools in the country—uh—as I remember.

WB: I—and I—my—it's my understanding that the president of Walmart is a Georgia Tech graduate.

SL: Uh-huh. Um—so—uh—also there was—uh—civil rights issues were brewing.

WB: Absolutely, and Greenville was a typical Southern midsize town with sit-ins at the—uh—dime-store counters, and—uh—we were in the hot seat. Jesse Jackson is a Greenvillian, and he came back to Greenville to lead a lot of the protest.

SL: Um—we also had—uh—Camelot happening in the White House, I guess, about that time.

WB: Uh—you know as well as I do.

SL: [*Laughs*] Uh—Vietnam War was—uh—uh—starting to escalate and . . .

WB: Right.

SL: . . . um—so we were getting all kinds of—uh—really, youth-driven—youth-energy-driven—uh—initiatives were—were starting to happen—uh . . .

WB: Joan Baez.

[00:05:59] SL: Yeah. So—um—when you were in high school, did you have—uh—you know, you—you were saying you were laying in your front yard looking at Sputnik, and—uh—your father was an architect, so you—you were kinda leaning toward the sciences

anyway, weren't you?

WB: Uh—yes, I was. I actually built—uh—full-scale-size rockets for science-fair exhibits when I was in high school.

SL: Wow! By full-size, what do you mean? How big is full-size?

WB: Uh—well, taller than you are—eh—with a range of fifteen or twenty miles.

SL: Wow! That's really—uh—quite fascinating.

WB: Oh.

[00:06:43] SL: So you go to Georgia [*Trey Marley coughs*] Tech—uh—to be a—an engineer—were thinking aerospace application. Is that—did you end up getting an engineering degree at Georgia Tech?

WB: Uh—I did, not in aerospace engineering, but I got an engineering degree and immediately entered undergraduate school in literature at Georgia State University.

SL: Now what—that's a paradigm shift, isn't it?

WB: Well, some people say it is, and people are constantly asking me, "Is it left brain or right brain?" and "What's going on with your brain?" [*SL laughs*] And I see no difference. I mean, when I talk about—uh—to students, how to write fiction—how to write a novel—it's the same as how to build a—the foundation of a house and how to design a house. People occupy certain

rooms. They have to get in and out of the house. Uh—they have different personalities, so their rooms are gonna be different. Some of the rooms are gonna overlook the creek. Some are going to overlook the—the farmland. And so the same kinds of decisions are made in writing a novel and building a house. So I ultimately [*siren in background*] became an architect—not a licensed architect, but I've—I have designed and built, oh, fifteen houses as a hobby—uh—during my career.

[00:08:04] SL: So—but really, what—what was it that m—made you shift—it is a shift. I mean, I can see the—there's math involved in both, and there's structure involved in both, and I can see all that. But still, that's—there is a shift there. Is there—was there a—a book? Was there a—an author? Was there something that happened—uh—uh—in the arts that made you think, "Oh well, maybe I should be writing in—instead."

WB: My dad was forty-six when I was born, so I really had an older dad. And he never gave me any advice in life whatsoever. He said, "Don't stay out too late. Don't drive too fast." He gave me two pieces of advice. He said, "Never, ever marry a woman with a man's name, like Frankie or Billie or Johnnie." [*SL laughs*] And the second piece of advice he gave me was—and I was just about to check the box to go to Georgia Tech as an architect,

and he said, "You've had an opportunity to share my life as an architect," because I was a draftsman in his office and I grew up building and all of that.

SL: Mh-hmm.

WB: And he said, "I would like the opportunity to share your life as something else."

SL: Hmm.

WB: "Please don't do architecture." And so I didn't; I did engineering.

SL: How great is that?

WB: That's great, and he had the wryest sense of humor. You could never tell when he was teasing, and the whole business about Frankie and Billie and Johnnie—I just thought, "You know, I've got writing in my genes somehow. If he can tell me that and keep a straight face, he's a storyteller, and I'm a storyteller." And so, eventually, I became one.

[00:09:56] SL: Wow! Okay, so you're in the—which program was it that you entered?

WB: Uh—I entered the poetry program because of Jim Whitehead—uh—but switched to fiction and took my M.F.A. in fiction writing.

SL: But you're—you're still in Georgia.

WB: Oh, oh, I'm sorry. Yes.

SL: Yeah.

WB: No, I'm still in [*TM coughs*] Georgia. I graduated from Georgia Tech. Uh—taught math and physics in the Atlanta Public Schools for a year, and then I taught—and I was working on my English degree at the same time. And then I was able to teach—uh—physics and English in a private high school in Atlanta. And so I did that for a couple of years and then came to Arkansas.

[00:10:36] SL: Okay, so—uh—you mentioned Whitehead, but—so how—how did you think Arkansas, or why did you think Whitehead? I mean . . .

WB: My . . .

SL: . . . which came first, the . . .

WB: . . . my mantra in life is never, ever underestimate the power of coincidence. I believe it. It has altered my life—every path that I've taken. Uh—my first wife, Erin—uh—was in a bus stop waiting for a bus in Atlanta to go teach, and in line was a woman named Claire Carter, and they started chatting. And Claire Carter had been a student at Millsaps in—outside—in Jackson, Mississippi . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

WB: . . . where she had studied with Jim Whitehead. And she couldn't say enough good things about the kind of teacher Jim

Whitehead was. And Erin, who had grown up in Europe—uh—graduated from a ger—German gymnasium—uh—had gone to Vassar—had the upper crust of all education—said to me, "Maybe we should go to Arkansas and study with Jim Whitehead." I was just floored. My absolutely cosmopolitan wife, who had no use for small-town America at all, was suggesting that we come to Arkansas, and we did. And she earned her master's degree in German here, and I did an M.A. and an M.F.A. while—while we were here.

[00:12:06] SL: Well, did you have to submit some writing to get in?

WB: Yes, sure, of course.

SL: What—what did you give him?

WB: Uh—I gave him some poems.

SL: Uh-huh.

WB: Uh—not really having written a lot of poetry. But the program was very young. Uh—I think the—maybe it was started in [19]66. Uh—the first graduates were [19]67 or [19]68, and so I came in [19]68. And much to their credit, them being—uh—Jim and Bill Harrison—uh—they were looking for diversity among their students. And I think they admitted me as much because of my unusual background as the quality of my work.

[Tape stopped]

[00:12:52] SL: So you submitted some poetry—uh—Jim and Bill were lookin' for diversity. Um—very young program. Uh—they themselves were young. Um—you get to Fayetteville—I mean, were you—do—did you come to Fayetteville and not get immediately in the M.F.A. program, or did you . . .

WB: No, I—I—I was accepted, and Erin . . .

SL: Yeah. Huh.

WB: . . . was accepted as—as a graduate student.

SL: Uh-huh.

WB: Um—and the only question was would I have a teaching assistantship . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

WB: . . . which—uh—when I got here, I—I did have one, so . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

WB: . . . I taught two classes and then took classes.

SL: And you taught classes in composition.

WB: Right.

SL: And so you met Claude Faulkner.

WB: Oh, absolutely.

SL: And you know—uh—what did you think of Claude?

WB: I really enjoyed Claude's grammar class. Uh—all the graduate assistants had to take his composition class, and I thought he

was witty, and—uh—he taught me grammar. I'd never really studied grammar. I went from Georgia Tech to—um—the advanced program at—uh—in literature at Georgia State, and so it was really an eye-opener for me to—to learn grammar through Claude's method of composition.

[00:14:20] SL: I—I always heard that there's actually—uh [*TM coughs*]—you can look at—uh—grammar mathematically.

WB: I'm sure you can. I didn't.

SL: Uh-huh. I just thought maybe your engineering proclivity would've . . .

WB: Well, of course, what engineers do is to solve problems, and that's what they do. That's why . . .

SL: Yeah.

WB: That's what they do. And so—uh—Georgia Tech was really a very unusual school, and I went to a lot of good schools. I went to Harvard, University of Washington. I studied for a year and a half in Germany at—at a German university, and so—uh—coming to Arkansas was—uh—a different experience. And I have to tell you, I absolutely loved it. Of all the schools I've studied in or taught in, Arkansas was my best experience. And I—it was terrific because of Jim and Bill and—and the whole program here. But to get back to the—the logic part of it, I apply logic to

everything that I do, and applying it to writing and applying it to understanding grammar is just a process that engineers do. And it was great.

[00:15:32] SL: Um—so what was your—uh—first impression of Bill when you met Bill?

WB: Bill was fun loving. He himself had come from a different background. He was a theologian primarily and had moved into writing. Um—Bill loved to play tennis—he, you know, was fit—he was good looking, and—uh—it was great being in a program where the two principal professors and designers of the program were not much older than me. And—and I loved it.

SL: What about Jim? What'd you first think when you met Jim?

WB: Um—absolutely floored at his ability to pick up a poem that he had never seen before and within five minutes could tell you everything about that poem—how it was constructed, what it meant—uh—probably the con—social context in which it was written. He was an absolute genius and the best teacher I've ever had.

SL: Hmm. Well—um—besides those type of credentials and capabilities—uh—there was also something else about—uh—both of those gentlemen besides their teaching skills and—and their academic prowess. I mean, there was a—uh—by all accounts,

the program was pretty unique in and of itself. Uh—and you—you say that you—you enjoyed Arkansas, and you loved Arkansas of all the schools that you—uh—had experiences with, but—um—this program just didn't happen in the classroom, did it?

[00:17:18] WB: You're trying to get me to tell the story about the Flying Dactyls. I know you are.

SL: I will love the story [*WB laughs*] of the Flying Dactyls, and I will preserve it forever for you.

WB: Well, Jim had some significant football experience. He had played line at Vanderbilt, and he had actually been—uh—invited to try out for the pros, which he did. And he didn't make it, but nonetheless, he was still a young man. He wrote a novel called *Joiner*, which was about a football player, and—uh—in immersing all of us into the total experience of being in the writing program and being writers, we were expected to do a lot of things. We were expected to drink at Snookers. We were expected to socialize in lots of different ways, and we were expected to play football. [*SL laughs*] And so we were, you know, not a strapping, big bunch of guys. You can look at me and see that. Um [*SL laughs*]—but Jim—mostly Jim, but Bill thought it was a great idea—entered the Flying Dactyls, the M.F.A. football team,

in the intramural league, which primarily were—uh—fraternities. [*SL laughs*] And these fraternity guys—many had—had been all-state football players, and they really came to Arkansas because they wanted to play football for the Razorbacks, but of course, they couldn't, so they formed these very competitive—uh—football leagues. And there we were, the pussies in the group, except we had a—a couple of guys who were—well, they weren't really legally part of our team.

[00:19:05] SL: Ringers, huh?

WB: Uh—they were ringers. And Jim Crumley, who came to teach fiction, I think, in [19]69 or [19]70, had been a professional football player. And so we managed to get him on the team. Jack Butler had been an all-star quarterback. Johnny Wink had been an all-star end, and so between Crumley and Wink and Butler and a few other people—I played line. [*SL laughs*] And the reason they put me on the line was because the other team didn't take me seriously. There was no reason to block me because look who I am. [*SL laughs*] So I was able to sneak through, and of course, it was touch football or flag football. And so at the end of the season, Jim gave me—honored me with the honorary Corvette for the season for being the most valuable player on the team—the smallest—and it was just—and—and we

finished very high in the league, and the Flying Dactyls—I—it was [*SL laughs*]—it was their great claim to fame that year. They never quite rose to—because after that, everybody was on to us. And—but for the—for that first football season, the Flying Dactyls were terrific.

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:20:27] SL: [*Laughs*] Any injuries?

WB: No. No injuries.

SL: That's good.

WB: I mean, people got banged around and—but you know, hey, we weren't about to admit that we'd been hurt by some frat guy.

SL: [*Laughs*] I love that.

WB: Did . . .

SL: That's a great story.

WB: . . . did we get the girls the same way the frat guys got the girls? Nope.

SL: Really?

WB: Nope, the girls weren't interested in poets. When it finally came down to it, maybe we were pretty good football players, but off field we were poets, and they didn't want that.

SL: Well now, that's interesting. I . . .

WB: It is interesting because, you know, as we go through life and as

I grew older, I learned that the ways to get women's attention is to cook for them and to write poetry for them and to involve them in ritual. Women love ritual, and [*SL laughs*] so if you can combine all three—say, a midnight dinner with a special wine and a few verses of poetry, that's when you know your M.F.A. has paid off.

[00:21:31] SL: [*Laughs*] That's what you carried with you out of the program. [*Laughter*]

WB: That's right. Now, no, I carried a lot more than that, but I [*SL laughs*] learned how to woo women as a result of how to write.

SL: Oh, that's beautiful. Well, okay. So you got in by submitting poetry. Did you stick with poetry once you were here or . . .

WB: Well, I tried to write some poetry, and I did write some poetry. And some of it I thought was okay, but I was very attracted to the notion of writing some fiction, and Bill was encouraging. And I wrote a short story that Bill really liked while I was still in the poetry program. And he really liked it and asked me, you know, if—well, I asked him if I could do both, and he said, "Sure, you can do both, but you're gonna have to graduate in one or the other." So I did both for a while and ended up writing a novel.

SL: So that's pretty—did—I mean, Bill was a—I've been told that he had a laser-like quality about which elements work and which

didn't and what to get rid of and what to keep. And Jim, on the other side, was more taking something and expanding or developing further, and so there was this dichotomy between the two. What—it's . . .

WB: Which made for a perfect academic experience—learning how to edit and, at the same time, learning how to put a work of art in a larger context, which is what Jim did. [*Ice cream truck in background*]

[00:23:20] SL: So give me a session with Bill—him looking at your work. What kinds of things would he say to you?

WB: Well, Bill was a very astute editor for a work that was worthy of editing. For the rest of us, Bill was pretty kind and would say, "You know, if you can make these changes and if you can take the work in this direction, then bring it back to me, and I'll help you edit it." I never got there, so I never felt the laser tongue that other people did because their work was better than mine.

SL: So—well, what was it about your work that he liked and encouraged you to head his way as far as the fiction writing goes?

WB: I write about one thing, and I think Bill writes about the same thing, which is absurdity. And combining irony and absurdity is a literary quality that Bill has achieved and which he admires.

And as a young writer, that's what I attempted to do, and I think he appreciated that.

[00:24:44] SL: But you felt like you never really gave him something that he could edit. Is that what I'm hearing?

WB: Well, I—you know, I wrote a whole novel for my M.F.A. thesis. And he certainly, you know, had suggestions, and I can say that he was encouraging in that he really appreciated what I was attempting to bring to this creative experience. And so I—he was very kind to me. I will have to say that—well, I say in all appreciation of Bill—when I had done all of the work for the M.F.A., and I had also done all of the work for the M.A., and I had to do it in four semesters because my sophisticated wife just absolutely insisted that we leave. And so she said, "I'll give you four semesters, and do what you can in four semesters, and then we're out of here." So I did an M.A. and an M.F.A. and taught two classes every semester while I was here, so it was a pretty busy time. And I didn't have as much time to refine, edit, and work on my M.F.A. novel as I would like to have. But nonetheless, I finished it and took all the exams, and Bill congratulated me and said, "You know, I'm going to approve your degree, your M.F.A., but I don't think you're a very good writer, but I think you'll do a world of good for literature and for

writers, and that's part of what an M.F.A. is about." And so I got a degree, not as being a very good writer, in Bill's opinion, but I did do a lot of good for literature, so he was right about that.

[00:26:41] SL: He—they both must've respected your work ethic—I mean, to do all that in four semesters and teach as well. I mean, I—there—I think they admired hard work.

WB: They did, and in fact, one semester—I guess it was my third semester—I taught six hours, and I took twenty-one hours. [*SL laughs*] Now, granted, three of those were ROTC, and six of them were thesis hours, and so they weren't classroom hours. But nonetheless, I taught six and took twenty-one. And Claude Faulkner hauled Bill into his office and said, "Beacham is giving the program a bad name, and so I am rescinding six of his hours from the twenty-one that he took this semester because you just shouldn't do that—couldn't do that." And Bill was livid. Bill said, "You know, he's made all A's. He's worked hard. We admire his work ethic. [*Ice cream truck in background*] Some of the guys in the program stay around four, five, six years, and you know, let's honor hard work." And Dr. Faulkner was insistent, so they rescinded my six hours. Bill immediately just wrote to Harvard and said, "You know, send me the transcript, and we'll transfer six of your Harvard hours to this, and that'll take care of it." So

I was able to graduate in four semesters.

SL: Wow!

WB: And thank you, Bill. That was a very nice thing that you did for me because otherwise I would've had no wife.

[00:28:26] SL: [*Laughs*] Well now, so Claude was thinking that it's just impossible for someone to do that much work and that he didn't want that kind of thing to be encouraged?

WB: Well, that was what he told Bill, which is what Bill told me.

SL: Yeah. Hmm. That's interesting. Well, what about some experiences with Jim?

WB: The experiences—my experiences with Jim—other than the Flying Dactyls—obviously, I was married. I was taking, you know, all this course load trying to get two degrees in four semesters, so I didn't have the time to go to Snookers the way that some of the other—and to socialize with Jim. I—Gen and I had then and still have a real fondness for each other, and I would love to have spent more time in their house, and Jim was constantly inviting the students over, and Gen was constantly cooking for us, and I just didn't have time to do that. So my experiences with Jim, other than on the football field, were in the classroom. And he was so brilliant that I wanted to do everything that I could to please him, and so I did in some ways.

I—he called me Mr. Allusion. I knew a lot about the Bible. I knew a lot about Greek literature and was able to pick up allusions in poetry, and he loved it. And of course, I loved his admiration for that, so . . .

[00:30:03] SL: You know, that's a common theme I'm hearing in all these interviews, is that no one wanted to disappoint these guys.

WB: Right.

SL: It wasn't so much—you know, teachers make assignments, and you do the homework or you get in trouble. But this side of the coin is more "I gotta do this 'cause I'm not gonna feel good if I don't." And that seems—that's kinda different, and it's not—I don't think that's the usual mode for a student-teacher relationship. It's—you know, it's high up here and low down here, and you just do what this person says. And you know, I just think that these guys took a program and made it what it is because they maybe changed the rules a little bit, or maybe they saw what—a different way to make it really work.

WB: They did, and their expectations of us were both realistic but encouraging. And they—there weren't many of us, for one thing, and so they had an opportunity to know us really well and know what our capabilities were and to encourage us to rise to the best of our abilities without having expectations that we were

gonna be something that we could never become. They designed the program as a sixty-hour M.F.A. Iowa, at the time, was forty-five. They had expectations that we would be equally adept as scholars as we were as writers, and that was hard on some people. For somebody like me, it was what I thrived on. And so I took as many of the courses that the doctoral candidates took. I took medieval lit and Milton and all the hard courses in literature because that was really what I wanted to be able to do, was to balance the academic with the creative. And Jim—certainly Jim, and also Bill, really encouraged that because they themselves were both academicians at one point in their lives.

[00:32:37] SL: Is there—you've really already given me some kind of really aha moments you've had with Bill, but was there—is there any other instance in your time with Bill that—I don't know—somehow or another made you—that you've kept with you, let's say, that—maybe something he said, or it's something you saw him do or something he said to someone else? Just any kind of moment where you knew that that was gonna stick with you.

WB: Bob Day, who was also one of the—one of my classmates and I were in the same fiction workshops that Bill taught, and to this

day, we tell Bill Harrison stories that even Bill doesn't remember about when he said something or did something or was outrageous. And there are many of those stories that Bob and I share with each other. We don't have the same stories with Jim. It's interesting. Bill, in some ways, was more of a character and more spontaneous. Jim was so scholarly and so well studied that we didn't even think about telling Whitehead stories the way that we tell Harrison stories.

SL: Well . . .

WB: So the answer is yes. I can't tell you a story right now, but after—you know, at midnight tonight, if you want to tell Bill Harrison stories with me, I'll be happy to.

[00:34:26] SL: [*Laughter*] Well, we'll have to remember that, Trey. Well, is there—so you went on to—what did you do after you left the University of Arkansas?

WB: I took a job teaching creative writing and literature at the University of Richmond in Virginia, where I taught for three years, and then I moved cross town to Virginia Commonwealth University, also in Richmond, where I taught—directed the creative writing program. I taught writing and literature for another nine years.

[00:35:04] SL: So did you basically take what you got from Bill and

Jim to your classes that you were teaching?

WB: Of course. And I taught fiction and poetry the way that they taught me how to learn writing fiction and poetry. But I took something else that turned out to be more important than just techniques in writing and techniques in teaching, and that was a sense of what the writing community is and was at that time. One of the most important influences on all of our lives—and all the people here from that era will tell you that George Garrett, the novelist, taught us almost everything we know about surviving as a writer. And for me, George taught me how to talk to other writers, how to attract them to my university, and so I was able to produce at the University of Richmond something that became known as the Boatwright [*ice cream truck in background*] Literary Festival. And through George's help and certainly with the support of Miller Williams and Jim, who came to Richmond to participate in the Boatwright festivals—we brought in writers like Katherine Anne Porter and Anthony Burgess, I. A. Richards, the critic. It became the literary event in America in 1971. Four hundred people from all over the country came to attend, and famous writers like James Purdy were writing me to say, "Can I come?" And of course they could come, and we—Richmond in those days had one Holiday Inn,

and that was—that and the Jefferson Hotel were the only two [*SL laughs*] accommodations. And all these writers were coming in, and so the only thing I knew what—knew how to deal with them was to ask patrons of the University of Richmond if they could stay in their houses. Turned out that was the best thing that ever happened to the university because these patrons of the university, who were already giving money, were now having a famous writer staying their house, they were giving dinner parties for them, and it became all the buzz. And the Boatwright Festival survives today as a major image-producing festivity of the University of Richmond.

[00:37:35] SL: Well now, tell me this professor that taught you this?

WB: George Garrett, the novelist.

SL: And was he here at . . .

WB: No, he wasn't.

SL: No, no.

WB: One of the wonderful things that the writing program did here was that they brought in writers . . .

SL: Oh, I see.

WB: . . . and editors. And almost every three weeks, there would be a new writer who would come in, because Bill and Jim were so personable and they would invite their friends to come in, and

they would come all the way to Arkansas by way of Fort Smith to get here. [*Laughs*] And . . .

SL: And 71.

WB: . . . and so I learned how to communicate with other writers. And the Boatwright Festival not only put the University of Richmond on the map, but it just absolutely concreted my career as a university person.

[00:38:30] SL: So when these visiting writers, editors, publishers would come to Fayetteville, did you get to spend time with them outside of the classroom? I know you were awfully busy, but usually someone would have a reception or a dinner and . . .

WB: Right. They were always available to the students, and they would also look at our work individually and critique our work for us, so we—all of us had that kind of contact with them. And then, yes, there were receptions and parties, and Fayetteville in 1968 was a late-night partying place, and . . .

SL: [*Laughs*] Yes, it was.

WB: . . . and the writers and editors who came in loved it. And so the reputation of the writing program here was enhanced as a result of the social activities that people enjoyed when they came here.

[00:39:25] SL: All right, so what did you do after Commonwealth—is

that . . .

WB: Virginia Commonwealth University.

SL: . . . where . . .

WB: Right.

SL: . . . where we left you? What happens after that?

WB: In knowing various writers, the novelist David Madden from Baton Rouge was in an airport—never, ever underestimate the power of coincidence—was waiting for a flight, and sitting next to him was Frank Magill, who owned Salem Press out of California, and they started talking about producing a book of interviews with writers. And as their flights were ready to board, Frank Magill said to David Madden, "David, I'm so glad you're going to do this for us. Here's a check." And Madden said—and Madden had come to Richmond. He'd been part of the Boatwright Festival. I'd gotten to know him, and he—Madden said to Magill, "Oh, I'm not going to do this for you. Walton Beacham is." [*SL laughs*] Course, I had no idea. So I get this phone call from Frank Magill and agree to do the book and did the book and then started doing other books for him, eventually began participating in the editorial office out of Los Angeles, and I became the director of a sales office out of New Jersey. And so for three years I was producing his products and selling his products, and

it suddenly occurred to me that I could do the same thing for myself and have more flexibility and probably make more money. So in 1985, I established Beacham Publishing and was a—was and still am a publisher.

SL: Wow! What a path.

WB: What a path.

SL: [*Laughs*] Did . . .

WB: As Bill Clinton would say, "What a ride."

[00:41:23] SL: [*Laughs*] So did your father get to share in any of your career at all like he . . .

WB: Well, as . . .

SL: . . . asked you to do?

WB: . . . as a professor. And I did some architectural work when I was in Richmond. I bought and renovated three nineteenth-century townhouses in downtown Richmond, and he got to see those. And so—I mean, I've always been interested in building—always been interested in design. And it was no surprise to him that I would gravitate toward that. But I think he was really proud that I was a professor and not an architect or . . .

SL: Right.

WB: . . . or I could be both.

SL: Yeah.

WB: Yeah.

SL: Is there anything else that you want to say about Jim or Bill?

WB: Only just unfounded admiration for the early program here and for the involvement in it, and they were just terrific. They changed my life.

[00:42:30] SL: Okay, that's good. That's a good one. Anything else?

WB: [*Laughs*] Like what?

SL: Well, I kinda wish there—it was midnight, and you were tellin' me some [*TM laughs*] stories, but—about these two. But you know, if—that's okay. I mean, we've got lots of stories, but this is a good opportunity for you to . . .

WB: Well, there . . .

SL: . . . tell it your way if . . .

WB: . . . there were great moments in workshop, which was just the highlight of the week. We would have one three-hour workshop, usually at night, and it would usually go on much longer than three hours and would usually end up at Snookers or somewhere like that. And so it was just a magical experience. And in my own teaching, I had a magical experience just like that. At Virginia Commonwealth University, the computer went awry and enrolled forty people in my creative writing class that only had

chairs for twenty people.

SL: Yeah.

[00:43:37] WB: And it was in an old convent that had been converted to a university building, and we were in the basement of the convent. Do you wanna hear this story?

SL: Yes.

WB: In the basement of the convent, and twenty people were sitting in chairs, and twenty people were sitting on the floor, and it was a night class. And there was an eighty-one-year-old man, Mr. ?Uhler?, who hitchhiked twenty-one miles to come to class, and he couldn't hear very well. And there was a basset hound who came to class. He didn't belong to anybody. [*SL laughs*] We called him Sherlock because we didn't know his name. And the class was total chaos. There was a ditzy blonde woman who turned out to be a labor lawyer and not ditzy at all. There was a bricklayer who turned out not only to be a bricklayer, but he had a degree in—from Boston University. And so we would start to read something, either a work of—a short story or a class member's work. And so we'd be reading, say, Faulkner. Ditzy Phyllis would stand up and say, "I don't know why we have to read this stuff. This is just the most obtuse stuff. I don't understand it. I don't wanna read it." The bricklayer would

stand up, and he would say, "But you have to understand, this is the voice of the South." Mr. ?Uhler? would say, "I [*telephone rings*] can't hear you. Speak louder." At which point Sherlock would say, "Oooooh!" [*SL laughs*] To this day, I'll bet there are members of that class that are still talking about that class. [00:45:15] Well, similar kinds of experiences in the workshop with Bill and Jim. One of the fun ones with Bill was that Bill was trying to make a point about credibility, and there was a member of the class who had a motorcycle helmet. And Bill said, "Now, for example, he's got a helmet, but unless he has a cycle—a bike—he's not a credible person." Next class period—this was in Old Main—third floor of Old Main—what do we hear? He's brought his motorcycle up to the third floor, turned it on, and rides his motorcycle into class [*SL laughs*] with his helmet. [*SL laughs*] In poetry workshop—and there were some really very good poets—and Jack Butler and Leon Stokesbury were the two who were kind of the stars because they had already published in the *New Yorker*.

SL: Right.

WB: And—but everybody had a little bit of an ego, and Jack and Leon had a pretty big ego. And so they didn't really wanna hear any criticism about their work. But on one particular evening—and

Bob Day was also taking a poetry class even though he was in fiction, and so one night [*SL laughs*] Leon took particular offense to criticism about his work. And he just really began blasting everybody about it, and so finally, Bob had had enough, and he stood up on his chair, and he said, "Leon, if this building doesn't fall down from the weight of your ego, it's going to burn up from the fire of your passion." [*SL laughs*] And to this day, we all see Bob Day standing on this desk, delivering this dictum to Leon, who thought it was very funny. And so—but there were a lot of moments like that in the workshops, and you know, writers are different, and they do things differently, and that was certainly the case at—between [19]68 and [19]70 at the Arkansas writing program.

[00:47:25] SL: It's almost like a shared boot-camp experience or going through two-a-days in a football season. It—these moments where the students are together and they're working out their—they're working on their own personal, very personal work. I can see how you hold on to that, how this bond that's created back then brings you back to Fayetteville however many years later.

WB: Right. Yeah, all of us . . .

SL: Forty-somethin' years.

WB: . . . all of us didn't come here this weekend just because Fayetteville is the garden spot of Arkansas. We came for one reason, to honor Bill and, in part, to see each other, but mostly to honor Bill and Jim's memory.

[00:48:21] SL: Yeah. Well, it's been awfully—I've been awfully blessed to be a part of this and just hear all these stories. I mean, I'm gettin' to hear all of 'em, you know. Or at least . . .

WB: Right.

SL: . . . I'm gettin' to hear from everybody individually. No one's really competing for time on the floor or anything. They just—it's really quite remarkable. Is there anything else that you need to say before I let you go?

WB: So are the rest of us going to hear the entire interviews or . . .

SL: Well, I—you know, I don't know how we'll do that. I think that there is an argument to be made that everybody should get everybody's stuff, so it—certainly, I can say that the—all the transcript and all the audio of all these interviews will be available. And we will make individual DVDs, so it wouldn't be that huge of a deal for us to make a collection of all this.

WB: Good. Well, I'd love to know what everybody else had to say. [*SL laughs*] Were—are their experiences as they relate them to you similar to my experience?

SL: They are. Now you know, the only [*TM coughs*] instances I've heard where Bill would've told someone they're not a very good writer was usually said as a favor to maybe suggest that they get out of the program. And that that wasn't delivered to you tells me that he really, really respected how hard you worked and the quality of your work. I think that—other than that, yes, there are common threads that go through here, and a lot of it has to do with the personal responsibility that those two men took for their students.

WB: They did. Right. Well, I've written, since leaving here, four novels, two collections of poetry, two novels for young adults [*SL laughs*], and two children's books.

SL: So he probably was wrong. [*Laughs*]

WB: Well, I don't know. None of those were published.

SL: Ah.

[00:50:30] WB: However, after I founded Beacham Publishing, we bought new computers. And it came—they came bundled with a unknown software program called WordPerfect. And so I was teaching my staff how to use WordPerfect, and I was taking notes and giving them the notes. And so after going through the whole program, I had maybe a hundred pages of notes, which my staff was learning. And my new wife, Deborah, who was in

the software business, said, "You know, why don't you see if anybody wants to publish these?" So I sent them off. Now, understand, I had been sending all this fiction off for years and years. I actually had a very good agent at William Morris. Sometimes I would get a rejection notice; sometimes—usually—I wouldn't hear anything at all. All these years I'd been trying to publish the work that was just dear to me. By return mail, I got three offers of publication for the WordPerfect notes. They were just notes. I turned them into a book called *Using WordPerfect*, which became the second best-selling computer book of all time. [*SL laughs*] Talk about poetic justice. And of course, once you've written a best seller, everybody else wants you to write another best seller, and so I wrote many more third-party computer books. You know, the engineering degree come full circle through the writing degree. [00:52:02] Unfortunately, I built characters into *Using WordPerfect*. There was, for example, the Printer Pixie. Printer Pixie—back in those days—getting your software to print was really the hardest part.

SL: Sure.

WB: You may remember that, and . . .

SL: Yeah, absolutely.

WB: . . . you know, nothing interfaced between what was on the

screen and what came out of your computer. So the Printer Pixie was just a wonderful, mischievous little girl who had the greatest personality, and you know, she would just size up who was tryin' to get her to print, and she would have a reaction to it. And [*SL laughs*] maybe she'd print, and maybe she wouldn't print. It was wonderful, except the publisher wasn't having any part of characters . . .

SL: Oh.

WB: . . . you know, literary characters, in a computer book, so I had to cut all of the good stuff out, but . . .

SL: Oh! That's funny.

WB: . . . but *Using WordPerfect* was—you know, again, that changed my life too, because suddenly there was a lot of money and a lot of prestige, and so life took another fork.

[00:53:07] SL: You could probably—you might consider doin' the same thing for all the mobile devices that are out there.

WB: [*Laughs*] Right. Yeah, well, I probably should. But I . . .

SL: There's a—you know . . .

WB: . . . I've—I'm still an architect, and I'm still a publisher because we're—as I told you, we're publishing this major consortium on terrorism research and analysis. Huge project, may become the definitive work in that subject area the same way that

Endangered Species did in 1989. So in addition to that, I've turned my creative energy to playwriting and . . .

SL: Oh.

WB: . . . as I was telling Bill, composi—writing descriptions was not my strength; writing dialogue was. And so Bill said, "So you wrote a novel and took out all the exposition, and now you've got a play." Well, that's kind of how it happened, and playwriting is just a lot of fun for me, and I've been a lot more successful as a playwright than, certainly, as a novelist.

[00:54:15] SL: And you're writing about a ventriloquist.

WB: I did. My most—well, my most recently produced work was a play about Barbie the doll turning fifty. It's called *I Am Barbie*. It opened in Houston at the Main Street Theater a few weeks ago. That's an Equity theater in Houston. Had a three-week run to rave reviews and full houses every night, and you know, that—how gratifying is that?

SL: That's gratifying.

WB: Yeah.

SL: That's beautiful. Well, okay.

WB: Okay.

[00:54:48] SL: Anything else?

WB: Well, [*laughs*] how long do you want this thing to run?

SL: Oh, we can go forever.

WB: [*Laughs*] Well . . .

SL: I mean, I don't know who's out there and who's waiting . . .

WB: You've got other people, so . . .

SL: Do we have—do I have other people?

WB: You do. Right.

SL: We could maybe check on that. But I really appreciate all this time.

WB: It's, well, great fun.

SL: You gave us a lot of time.

WB: And you know, it's—as you can tell, I just am so appreciative of my time here, and you know, I have to thank a lotta people for making it happen, including Claire, who was in the bus line, who had studied literature with Jim Whitehead at Millsaps.

SL: At Millsaps.

WB: And you know—and for Erin, who gave up a lot of what she wanted to do and believed in to make it possible for me to be here and study here, and just a whole lot of people. And now you.

SL: Thank you.

TM: Well, hey, Scott, real quick.

SL: Oh, wait.

[00:55:38] TM: How has the technology from typewriter to WordPerfect and what we have now changed the act of writing, or do you think it has?

WB: I'm sure that it has, and I have older writer friends who laugh and say, "Well, I'm still using a quill pen." And they are, pretty much. They're either writing longhand or using their typewriters. I compose on the computer. I—it's just all very natural for me, so it hasn't changed. I mean, it's made things a lot easier for me, and obviously, the technology that involves being able to upload files and send them to publishers or agents and, you know, the—everything about e-mail has not only changed the ease with which I can write, but it's also changed—radically changed the way that my publishing company works. And you know, we had a five-story office building on Connecticut Avenue that was full of editors, and now we don't have anybody. We have—everybody . . .

SL: At home.

WB: . . . is at their computer, and I guess they're at home. I don't ask. And they do their work, and how fun is that?

SL: Well, it's different. It probably is fun, but . . .

WB: It's fun for me because I can make lunch and, you know . . .

SL: Yeah.

WB: . . . talk to my editors at the same time.

SL: Right. And they can do the same. Yeah, that's cool.

TM: That's a good point.

SL: Okay.

TM: Thank you.

SL: Good. All right.

WB: Kay.

[00:57:08 End of interview]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]