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

University of Arkansas
1 East Center Street
Fayetteville, AR 72701
(479) 575-6829

Arkansas Memories Project

Bill Harrison Surprise Interviews

Paul Berry

Interviewed by Scott Lunsford

June 11, 2011

Fayetteville, Arkansas

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Objective

Oral history is a collection of an individual's memories and opinions. As such, it is subject to the innate fallibility of memory and is susceptible to inaccuracy. All researchers using these interviews should be aware of this reality and are encouraged to seek corroborating documentation when using any oral history interview.

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 Paul Berry 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: Okay, Paul—uh—today's date is—uh—June the eleventh. The year is 2011. We're at Laurie Harrison's house in Fayetteville, Arkansas. Uh—I'm Scott Lunsford with the Pryor Center. Uh—we're—um—uh—recording these interviews as a part of the Bill Harrison project. Uh—this is—uh—coming from an idea of Laurie to capture all the folks that have come in—uh—which has been an overwhelming response.

Paul Berry: Hmm.

SL: Um—we'll—uh—record this stuff. We'll preserve it forever. Uh—we'll transcribe it. We'll send you a transcription. We'll send you the raw footage of this interview. Anything that you wanna take out, we'll take [*PB sighs*] out for you, 'cause we want you to be comfortable with what we put out there 'cause the rest of the world's gonna see it. Um—and . . .

PB: All right.

SL: . . . uh—we'll—uh—uh—leave a copy in the—we'll park a copy of

this stuff in the Special Collections Department, Mullins Library, at the University of Arkansas.

PB: Mh-hmm.

SL: Um—we will—uh—after your approval of script and raw footage—uh—we will post selected video segments from the interview on the web. We'll post the entire audio that you've approved—uh—on the web and the entire transcript. And we will encourage documentarians, students of Arkansas history, researchers to have access—free access to this. Um—so if you're comfortable with all that, we're gonna keep goin'. And I—I just need to hear you say yeah, you're good with that.

PB: I'm good with that, Scott. Let's . . .

SL: Okay, good answer.

PB: . . . let's rock.

[00:01:32] SL: Okay. So we start with—uh—your real complete fir—uh—name and where and when you were born.

PB: Paul C. Berry. I was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, in old St. Vincent's hapi—uh—hospital, October 14, 1940. So that makes me seventy and a half on this June day . . .

SL: And . . .

PB: . . . 2011.

SL: . . . what's the *C* stand for?

PB: Conrad.

SL: Conrad. [*Laughter*] All right, I like that.

PB: My stage name was Conrad Paul.

[00:02:02] SL: Uh-huh. [*PB laughs*] And so you were—uh—born in Little Rock. How—uh . . .

PB: Yes. Moved to Fayetteville as—in grammar school and grew up here.

SL: Uh-huh.

PB: And—uh—I had—and went to—graduated from Fayetteville High School and went to the University of Arkansas and—uh—graduated from there. As the creative writing program was inaugurated here at—at Fayetteville, I was in law school and in and out. First year or so that—that—uh—Jim Whitehead and Bill Harrison, who created the program here as the co-founders, were on campus. I don't think I met either one of them in the first year or so, but by about the third year—uh—there was a—a sizzle goin' on—no better way—a buzz, as you would say in—in modern parlance—about somethin's happening over—in and around the—the arts and science school—the English Department. They got people not just teaching books over there, they got great students coming here at a—at a—at a graduate level who are being taught and challenged as they try

to get their stories written and get them published. And that slowly permeated. [00:03:25] And—uh—to get to go—I'll never forget gettin' invited to one of the first parties—uh—and it—once you went to one of the parties these folks had, that was the best party in town. Might not be the richest, but the conversation and the excitement—uh—just hangin' around it. And—uh—I became a—a creative writing program—uh—not a student, which I never was, but—uh—uh—one of their groupies. Uh—and every chance I got to hang out with those guys and women, I—I—I made room—I made—that's what I wanted to do. And the effect, because I was a native of Fayetteville and lived in town—uh—people like Hayden McIlroy down at the McIlroy Bank—uh—others began to notice this, and it—it was creating an exciting—uh—an excitement in the town and was reinfor—reinforcing a vibe of—uh—that there was an—an intellectual life—a—in Fayetteville beyond what happens in lots of towns. And I—I don't mean to—I don't mean to exclude other towns, but there—there was—uh—businesspeople realized in small but growing numbers—uh—the John Lewises—after John moved back here, all of—all of that kind of support and appreciation of—of writing and—uh—the—the—all the arts, but particularly led by the—the—uh—creative writing program was something that happened

then. I got to see it, and I—I just wanted to take this opportunity to say that Bill Harrison and Jim Whitehead were heroes of mine as much—and for many people here that weren't involved, just as much as Razorbrulack—back—great athletes were. And—uh—they were titans. They were heroes of mine that I got to know and then in later life became—uh—close personal friends with. And so—uh—looking back, I salute what they did. Uh—Jim Whitehead and Bill Harrison took the first trip for a lot of us.

[00:05:39] SL: So tell me—give me a—a—a Bill Harrison story. Tell—tell [*PB laughs*] me—you know . . .

PB: Well, one would cringe. Uh—I know one time Bill—we were in a conversation with several people, and he'd been asked a lot of questions, and—uh—his—uh—if you've ever been with him in a social situation—uh—he's one of the most adroit and entertaining conversationalists I've ever been around. And—uh—so he had spoken for a few minutes and then said, "Enough of this." He said, "I'm tired of talkin' about me. What do you think about me?" [*Laughter*] That's—that's classic Bill Harrison, all right. [*Laughter*] If he didn't originate that—uh—saying—uh—it suits him to a *T*. Anyway.

SL: [*Laughter*] Okay. Well, what about Whitehead?

PB: Well, Jim Whitehead was this—uh—major—just physically, he—he commanded your attention, and then when he spoke—uh—Jim—I never saw Jim offer an opinion that he had any—uh—doubt about—uh—its correctness. They [*laughs*]—uh—but later on, I taught briefly at Springdale High School for a—a couple of years, and Jim Whitehead—I had heard him read in a pub—public performance, and he should've been a star. It's—it is criminal, almost, that we don't have—uh—Jim Whitehead reading not only his own work, but—uh—the—selections of other writers, both passages of fiction, but particularly poetry. And he came to Springdale High School and read to my class, and here's this big, strong guy making poetry real for a bunch of kids that didn't have much of an ear for those kinds of—of—uh—moments—uh—in their reading. And—uh—he made a great impression. Jim—Jim was so generous with his time and his talent—uh—and that was the—for me, that was the dearest—uh—and most wonderful thing about Jim is—uh—he was completely unselfish about his—about that kind of thing. No money, no nothin'. Uh—if you wanted Jim to come and try to help turn on kids to—uh—to—uh—matters literary—uh—he was there. First one there.

[00:08:15] SL: Couple things about Jim—uh—uh—I think—uh—Merlee was—was saying that—uh—when he walked into a room,

sparks flew. [*PB laughs*] Just . . .

PB: Oh, I . . .

SL: He—all he had to do was walk in and . . .

PB: I—yeah, I—you know, I abs—I can remember fits of—uh—temper and anger that I had with Jim and shouting at one another and whether we were gonna come to blows or not was—I can't even remember what it was about [*SL laughs*], et cetera, et cetera. But Jim was a—was a takeover guy, and [*laughs*]—uh—sometimes when I'm cookin'—uh—or somethin', I don't need any help and—uh—but Jim and I had—uh—I—the bottom line was, I—I loved him very much and—uh . . .

[00:09:01] SL: Well now, that was the second point I was gonna say. He—uh—you—you mentioned how sure he was about what he was saying and [*PB laughs*]—and—and how right it was, but at the same time, he was kind of—he always invited an argument. It was like . . .

PB: Oh—oh yeah, yes, sure. And—and Bill and his—each—each in their own way—uh—were agent provocateurs of—uh—world-class—uh—ability. Uh—I know once after Jim's untimely and sad death—uh—Bill Harrison told me—he said, "I—I—uh—I miss him so much because—uh—I don't know what I'm—what I'm against [*laughter*], or I—it's hard for me to know because I don't have

him to contest with." [*Laughs*]

SL: Uh-huh.

PB: But somehow they had a—they had a real chemistry, and—and it worked. And I don't know whether—uh—anybody's ever told this story, but—uh—in any walk of life, the—what I'm bout to tell you is—is unique, and in higher education, this is almost miraculous. But the two founders, Jim and Bill—uh—decided they had to have a real poet—uh—a recognized poet to come and be the third member of their—of their faculty. And they went and recruited Miller Williams and paid him more money than either one of them was receiving. That's—you don't hear that story very often, but that's how dedicated they were to their students and to the program. They were willin' to bring in somebody—fill a need and pay more money for—to fill that need than what they themselves were receiving.

[00:10:50] SL: Uh—part of Miller's deal was to have a press, right?

PB: Yes.

SL: I think.

PB: I—that had been a need, and I never was part of that, but that was a . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

PB: . . . that was a big thrill, and—and it was established and then—

then foundered and then through the—uh—once again, the—uh—resources of the late, great Don Tyson and—uh—and his—the—one of the wonderful extensions of—of that—uh—corporation, Archie Schaffer—uh—the two of them really stepped up to the plate, and with Don's resources, that press was saved and continues to this day. And—and thank goodness for that.

[00:11:32] SL: Uh—it's amazing—um—everyone that I've—I've talked to so far—uh—they talk about the connections that they attained once they got here, that Bill . . .

PB: Oh—oh, well . . .

SL: . . . Bill and—and Jim—now all—all these writers have editors, and they have publishers, and they have people that are reading their stuff, and they're—all this stuff just spun out of this little . . .

PB: Yeah.

SL: . . . department in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

PB: It—it—it—it's—it's very special, and—uh—as—as you may know, I've been—uh—in and around government policy and tryin' to—quote—"lobby" that, and one of the things that—uh—I hope to see before—uh—my little mediocre career in government relations expires is to see that creative writing—uh—has the funding necessary that—uh—to take it and—and just on a lot of

balin' wire and twine, they have become one of the really small—ah, I say small—strike that—one of the really great writing programs in the country. And with just a little bit more money—uh—I—it—it could—it could service—uh—long after I'm gone and—and—and the originators are gone. Uh—I—I hope that comes to pass and—and happens soon. So . . .

[00:12:59] SL: You know, it's—uh—just one more thing—you know, the—uh—the program and—and what it did to spawn the careers of so many folks—but you were—you came in talking . . .

PB: I was a spectator.

SL: . . . about this—talk—well, yeah, but [*PB laughs*] you came in talkin' about the sizzle that the program did to the . . .

PB: Oh yeah.

SL: . . . local community.

PB: Oh yeah, right.

SL: Uh—and that's a real impact on—on—on a small community and . . .

PB: It became as much fun for people in—in my status, which was not part of the program and—and not a writer and not one of their students, but it—it became as much fun—uh—to be around as—and—and was as—as exciting and many ways more so in its own way than big-time Razorback athletics. And of course, this

was year-round.

SL: Yeah. [*Laughs*]

PB: You didn't [*laughs*] just have five home games or—or [*laughs*] whatever. It was—the game was on every day, and it was exciting to get to see—get peeps at it from time to time.

[00:14:03] SL: I think that all the students that came here and this community are—they're all stronger . . .

PB: Yeah.

SL: . . . because of what Bill and—and . . .

PB: Oh, it's . . .

SL: . . . uh—Jim put together.

PB: Well, the—the depth and the—the—I love music, and I don't know whether this is an appropriate metaphor, but they—the resonance and the—the—the chord that it struck in the community and its—uh—the—those chord suspensions still resonate now, and—uh—and I—it's my firm belief that as long as books are important—uh—the creative writing program at Fayetteville at the University of Arkansas will be important too.

SL: That's great. [*PB laughs*] Anything else you wanna say about Bill . . .

PB: Nah.

SL: . . . or—or Jim?

PB: Gettin' me all—I've already run—I've already run on longer than I intended to.

SL: Oh, this is the shortest thing we've done so far.

PB: Good. That's . . .

SL: Okay.

PB: I—I get to at least claim that.

SL: All right, now wait a minute.

PB: All right.

SL: Before you leave . . .

PB: Was all—any of that okay?

SL: Yeah.

TM: It was great.

SL: It was all great.

[00:15:04 End of interview]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]