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

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Arkansas Memories Project

Bill Harrison Surprise Interviews

Bob Day

Interviewed by Scott Lunsford

June 10, 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 Bob Day on June 10, 2011, in Fayetteville, Arkansas. This series of interviews took place during a birthday celebration for William Harrison.

[00:00:00]

Scott Lunsford: Bob, I'm Scott Lunsford. Uh—we're with the—uh—David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History.

Bob Day: Good thinking.

SL: And—uh—we—uh—have a Bill Harrison project. Um—our mission is to go all over the state recording people's life stories. And when Laurie—uh—let us know that she was gonna encourage a gathering—uh—around Bill—um—she thought it might be a good idea to record some of these stories. I agreed. So we're here to do that. Now let me [*camera clicks*] tell you a little bit about Pryor Center and what we do. Uh—we go out, and we do these—uh—life interviews, life stories, on high-end audio and video—uh—media. We preserve them forever. These will not go away. Uh—we're committed to the—to the preservation. We transcribe them. Uh—we will provide you a transcript of what we do here, and we'll provide you the raw footage of your interview. [*Camera clicks*]

BD: Oh gosh, thank you in advance. [*Laughs*]

SL: Well—uh—we do that because we want to get the story right.

BD: Right.

SL: And if there are anything—if there's anything in our time together that you are uncomfortable with sharing [*camera clicks*] with everybody . . .

BD: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . then you tell us when you get the transcript.

BD: Yeah. I think the only thing I'll be uncomfortable about is I may have to go to the bathroom in a little while, but otherwise . . .

SL: That's all right.

BD: . . . it'll be okay.

[00:01:33] SL: Well—uh—and if there are changes to be made, we'll—we'll change them for you.

BD: Right.

SL: And when we get it right, then—uh—some of these interviews or segments of these interviews . . .

BD: Right.

SL: . . . will be posted on the web.

BD: Right.

SL: And we encourage documentarians, researchers—uh—students of Arkansas history, both in the public schools and . . .

BD: Right.

SL: . . . higher education, to access this stuff and learn more about the real history of Arkansas rather than what someone in Hollywood [*BD laughs*] or New York . . .

BD: [*Laughs*] I understand.

SL: . . . has written about Arkansas.

BD: I understand, sure.

SL: So with that in mind . . .

BD: Right.

SL: And—and—uh—there'll be a copy of this—of course they'll be archived at the Pryor Center. But there'll be copies of this stuff in the Special Collections Department in the University of Arkansas Fayetteville Mullins Library.

BD: Right, yeah.

SL: And so—uh—if you're comfortable with all that, we'll keep going.

[00:02:26] BD: I'm perfectly comfortable with it. I'd like to ask if there'll be copies of at least my segment sent to the—uh—rare books collection at the University of Kansas. I'll give you those addresses.

SL: Sure.

BD: And also to the Beinecke Library at Yale because they're gonna have my papers, and I think they. . .

SL: Excellent.

BD: . . . might like that [*unclear word*], so we'll do that.

SL: Excellent. Just—you just . . .

BD: I'll give you addresses and . . .

SL: We'll give you as many copies as you need.

BD: [*Unclear words*]. Fine. Good enough.

SL: Okay.

BD: Le—let's go.

[00:02:47] SL: All right, that sounds good. Well—um—we usually stop—start—with your exact full name and where and when you were born.

BD: Uh—my name is Robert Paul Day Jr., but I go by the name of Robert Day as a—as a writer, and my friends call me Bob or sometimes Bobby. And—uh—I was born on October 16, 1941, in Cincinnati, Ohio. And I lived there for, oh, I don't know, about six months. And since I was born in October [19]41, and the war started December—uh—I then went to live with relatives. Uh—my father was in the navy, and I spent the war years in Galveston, Texas, and then later in Kansas City. And then I grew up in Kansas City. I got there in 1947, I think. My father spent some time in New York. He was working for Trans World Airlines. But essentially from about 1947 until—uh—the early—uh—late [19]50s, early [19]60s, I lived in Kansas City—in a

suburb of Kansas—small town, not even a suburb, called Merriam, Kansas.

SL: Mh-hmm.

BD: That's who I am.

[00:03:11] SL: Okay, and—uh—what was your father's and your mother's names?

BD: My father's name was Robert Paul Day. I was named Jr. because I was born on his birthday. And my mother's name was Ruth Makielski—uh—Day. And the last name—name was changed to McKeel because she was Polish, and the kids didn't want that name. She was—uh—uh—born in South Bend, Indiana. She was a Polish Socialist. Uh—the wonderful story about—uh—Grandmother Makielski—my mother wasn't a Polish Socialist, but my grandmother was a Polish Socialist. And—uh—the wonderful story about her was that they finally after great—uh—effort they got her to hook up to electricity. She didn't want to do it. And—uh—after she hooked it up, the children were happy 'cause they could bring their boyfriends and girlfriends, and the house had electricity instead of gas lights. And—uh—two or three months into it, the electric company came, and Vincent Electric Company wanted twenty-five dollars. Grandmother Makielski said, "No, municipal electric company. I

paid my taxes. I don't owe any money." "Yes you do." The argument broke out. She turned off the switches, the house went dark, and from that was born the Makielski Rule—the Makielski Doctrine. Wires that are connected to the house take money out of the house. [*Laughter*] And so—uh—that was my mother—uh—that was my mother's mother. My mother wasn't a Socialist, but she was a—kind of a quiet liberal—uh—Polish—uh—Democrat, and I can still remember we had a vote, a straw vote, at the high school. There were 1,200 people in the high school. And they had a straw vote for Eisenhower or Stevenson. And the PTA reported proudly that of the thousand students who voted, nine hundred and ninety-eight of 'em voted for Eisenhower. And only two voted for Stevenson. [*SL laughs*] My father was an Eisenhower Republican. And my mother looked at this report, and she said to me, "Were you one of the two that voted for Stevenson?" I said, "Yes." And she said, "We won't tell your father." [*Laughter*] So that's who my parents were.

[00:05:45] SL: What did your father—your father was a TWA . . .

BD: Yeah, my father was the employment manager for Trans World Airlines.

SL: Uh-huh.

BD: My mother—uh—couldn't stay at home. She had worked

through the Depression, and so she got a job as a clerk at the water department. And so I'm an only child. And it never occurred to me that—uh—life was anything any different other than the three of us working. Uh—I mowed lawns and cleaned cars and got a job at Palmer's Restaurant as a busboy. And—uh—we sort of grew up with each other that way. We planted gardens. I was a baseball player. And—uh—uh—so the three of us worked away and made a life of it in this little small town—outside of it.

[00:06:25] SL: Were—uh—did you ever know either set of your grandparents?

BD: Pardon me?

SL: Ever know either set of your grandparents?

BD: Uh—I knew—I knew Grandmother Makielski. Um—and Grandfather Makielski was—uh—not around us anymore. There was some scandal about Grandfather Makielski. We don't know quite what it was. Um—his friends were Knute Rockne and G. K. Chesterton. And they apparently all went to—uh—bars together, and we don't know what happened to—uh—Charlie Makielski, but it was not talked about in the family. I knew my—uh—father's father—my grandfather on the Day side. Uh—but he was an old man when I met him. And I didn't know him well.

And my grandmother on that side had died either before—just before I was born or just afterwards. I had no—Grandmother Makielski lived with us for a while—or visited us, anyway, for a while.

SL: Mh-hmm.

BD: And—uh—she was kind of special.

SL: So that's where you knew about the rule.

BD: Yeah, yeah.

SL: Yeah.

BD: Yeah.

[00:07:24] SL: And—uh—your father was a World War II veteran?

BD: Yes, he was—uh—naval intelligence. Uh—he worked at Har—he was at Harvard. He worked on the breaking of the Japanese code, and then later he went to Pearl Harbor, where he was—uh—breaking—uh—taking codes from—uh—the United States and into our—into—uh—into Pearl Harbor.

SL: So did your father know—uh—Robert Ward's father?

BD: I don't know. Bob Ward and I have just met, so we don't know very much about each other's background. My father worked for Admiral Smith. I'll ask Bob Ward later today what his father did—uh—in the war. And maybe we'll tell stories about it. But I—until you just told me that, I didn't know that he was in Pearl

Harbor, yeah.

SL: Well his—his . . .

BD: Yeah, yeah.

SL: . . . father was a code breaker.

[00:08:09] BD: My father told a great story. He said he was followed everywhere by a Marine—uh—two Marines who had—uh—submachine guns, Thompson submachine guns, and—uh—uh—pistols. And he was followed everywhere with them because my father knew all these codes. And my father was very impressed with himself 'cause he had these Marines that were gonna protect him until one day he realized they weren't there to protect him. In case he was to be taken, they were there to shoot him. [*Laughter*] Sweat broke out.

SL: His knowledge could not get out.

BD: Not a good moment.

SL: Yes. That's funny. And sad. But . . .

BD: Yeah.

SL: Yeah.

BD: It was probably true. [*Laughs*]

SL: And true. Bet true, yeah.

BD: Yeah.

SL: All right. So—uh—you grew up just outside of Kansas City.

BD: Right.

[00:08:52] SL: Uh—how the heck did you end up at the University of Arkansas?

BD: Well, I went to the University of Kansas, where I took a B.A. and M.A. in English Literature. And—uh—after that I had three employment opportunities. One, I had been a pilot and had a pilot's license. And about that time the Vietnam War was cranking up. And United Airlines had a—had a—uh—job opportunity. For people who already had pilot's licenses, they would give them more—uh—training and give them the commercial license. And my father pointed this program out to me. Uh—I didn't have much other—uh—other opportunity was, was that there was an advertisement. Somebody wanted to be the sh—the sheriff of Ten Sleeps, Wyoming. So I applied for that job. It paid $325, and they said you had to bring your own pistol. So I wrote them a letter. And the third opportunity was to teach at Kansas State—Fort Hays Kansas State College. And I went out to—to take the test for United Airlines and passed, and I flew around in the 707. And I asked somebody—I said, "How long does the flight engineer"—I said, "How long do you have to be flight engineer before you get to be a co-pilot?" He said, "Oh, ten years. You're co-pilot for ten years and a captain after that."

So after twenty years, I don't get to fly my own plane. This seems boring. And—uh—and then I didn't want to go to Ten Sleep, so I took a job at Fort Hays, and I taught out there for four years until I got in enormous trouble because—uh—I led a protest against the Vietnam War and wrote a play called *No Negro Problem in Hays*, which excited everybody. The Kansas Bureau of Investigation came out to see if I was guilty of sedition, and one thing led to another, and finally I just didn't have a job there anymore. They were either gonna fire me—and I noticed a sign. Uh—it said—uh—uh—"University of Arkansas M.F.A. Programs." And it'd come to—uh—to Fort Hays State I don't know how, but it did. I thought, "That looks pretty good." So—uh—I applied and got in. And there's a famous remark by Bill Harrison about me. He said—I came down here—I looked at the catalog, and I could take a fellowship, a teachingship, and I would go take courses, two courses, if I taught two courses. But if I didn't take the fellowship, I could take four courses. I had an M.A. I could take two courses in the—four courses in the summer and da, da, da, da, da, da, da, and I realized—I calculated I could go through and get an M.F.A., technically, in one year and two summers. So I declined the teaching position, came down here—because I had an M.A., I only needed forty-

five hours. And I did it all in one year. And Bill Harrison said about me when I left—he said, "Bob Day has put new meaning into the words 'Taking a degree,' taking a M.F.A. from the University of Arkansas." [*Laughter*] I took it and left. That's how I got here. I had a great time. But I—I knew somewhere along the line I did not wanna stay here. I'd seen some of the writers who'd been here too long, and—uh—they just—uh—they weren't getting on with their lives. And—uh—and I wanted to. I wanted to—to move on. In the meantime—that's how I got here, but when I got here, one of the things that bid—Bill Harrison did for me—and Jim Whitehead—is that they introduced me to a whole bunch of very fine writers and editors who came to look at my work, and one of them one was the celebrated editor in New York, Theodore Solotaroff, who then became my champion and—uh—helped me—uh—get an agent and helped me get published. And it directs directly to those men who brought writers here. I was only here for a year. But it was an intense year. Uh—good teaching—uh—good fellowship with the students. And these—this flood of—of writers and—uh—and—uh—poets and fiction writers that Bill and Jim—Jim Whitehead brought in.

[00:12:47] SL: What year was that, that you were . . .

BD: I came here in [19]69 and left in [19]70. I was at—it was the year of [19]69. It was the coldest winter the—Fayetteville has ever had. And the—and the—and there was—there'd been a corrupt—uh—governor. Faubus, Faybus, something like that.

SL: Faubus.

BD: Yeah, Faubus.

SL: Uh-huh.

BD: And he had had the streets paved, but they weren't—the—the—the asphalt wasn't thick enough, so when the freeze came [*laughs*], there were just potholes everywhere. [*Laughs*] It was wonderful. You just bounced—you just ruined your suspension in your cars. All of us banging around. People's wheels falling off. [*Laughs*] It was a mess. Got very cold. Everything froze that winter.

[00:13:27] SL: Yeah, I remember that winter.

BD: Yeah.

SL: I didn't know the—the story about the asphalt, though. That's—that's interesting. Uh—Faubus was a great champion of roads [*BD laughs*] in Arkansas.

BD: Yes.

SL: Because before Faubus they were all dirt.

BD: I understand that. [*Laughter*] But if I—I don't know—I don't

know, but I think the pavement was about this thick [uses fingers to suggest thickness of about one inch]. [*Laughter*] Faubus roads.

SL: That's interesting.

BD: Yeah.

SL: That's interesting. Well—um—so what was your first impression when you—besides it being cold and the roads—uh—wh—what was your first impression when you got to the University of Arkansas?

[00:14:05] BD: Uh—my first impression was that—uh—I—uh—I was struck by the vitality of the—um—of the people who were here and the literary people. I had no particular sense of the countryside. I didn't know about the countryside until later. Um—and—uh—but—uh—I had been in this area once before. I had—uh—gone down the War Eagle River with some f—uh—with a college friend. And we'd fished all the way down the War Eagle. And from that point of view, I knew it was quite—could be quite beautiful country. Um—I—uh—I don't think I had—um—I had an impression of Old Main. If I remember the building right as being wonderful sort of Edwardian building.

SL: Mh-hmm.

BD: I remember thinking that was quite lovely. On the town—uh—

with its bars down by the railroad tracks, and I thought that was—uh—quite fascinating. Um—and—uh—but I didn't have any strong impression of the physiognomy of the country. It's not like western Kansas, where you have an immediate impression of it. Uh—years later my friend, the novelist John Barth, told—uh—two stories about—uh—a folklorist and—you—and—uh—Arkansas. And they're pig stories. It's the stories of—of folklorists, I suppose like you, goes out to see a—uh—take a tour of the country and see pig farmers. And he sees this one pig farmer. The pig farmer's lifting up pigs to eat apples off the tree. And the folklorist stops—says, "What are you doing?" He said, "Well," he says, "when pigs have apple in their—in their blood, I can—in their—in their meat, I can sell them for more money." He said, "But you're picking them up." He said, "Oh, they can't eat rotten apples. You've gotta eat apples right off the tree." And the folklorist says, "My God, but the time, the time." And the pig farmer says, "Time? Time? What's time to a pig?" [*Laughter*] [00:15:54] And the other—the guy goes out a little further, and he sees this pig that's running around the yard with the children that's only got three legs. So the folklorist stops and says—uh—to the—uh—uh—the pig farmer, "Tell me about that pig running around with three legs." He said, "Oh,

that's a special pig." He said, "That pig saved our boy's life. Fell down the—fell down the well. We had it up in—in the pen, and it—we—it broke out of the pen all by itself and began, 'Oink, oink, oink,' by the well. And we hauled the boy out. It was amazing." And he said, "You know, two or three weeks later, we put the back in the pen, the pig comes out—breaks out again. 'Oink, oink, oink' at our door at night, and the house is on fire. We come on down and put the fire out. And so we decided to let the pig play in the—in the yard. He's just a wonderful pig." He says, "Yeah, but what about the three legs?" He says, "Mister, a pig that valuable you don't want to butcher all at once." [*Laughter*] Those are my—those are my Arkansas jokes. And they come from John Barth. [*Laughs*] Man has got a wonderful . . .

SL: That's funny.

BD: See, ol' limpy over here is even laughing. [*Laughter*] All right. Keep goin'.

[00:16:49] SL: Well okay, so—uh—tell me what—uh—a class with—uh—uh—Bill Harrison was like and a class with—uh—Jim Whitehead was like.

BD: Well, they were two different kind of teachers. Uh—Whitehead—uh—I think, was a man who loved all of his students. Whether

he was a good poet or a bad poet or—and he—he believed in having a literary culture of poets and—and—and—and—and wine and booze and parties and so forth. Um—and—uh—there was a sort of robust quality about—about Whitehead. I was in the poetry workshop a couple of times, and he was an aggressively good teacher. Bill was cool. Uh—not cold, but he was cool. He was a cool guy. He had things to say about stories, and sometimes they weren't—uh—kind things to say. He was always good to me, I—I would say. Uh—but he was very precise, and when you went into his class, you knew when you came out of the class you were going to have learned something because he would repeat it to you until you learned it. And he was tough on stories. Um—he was—uh—I don't think that—uh—he—I don't—I think, in a sense, he did not suffer fools gladly. I think there were some writers who shouldn't have been there, and he sort of knew what he—he was never—um—mean to them, but you could just tell—uh—that he would—his—he had a kind of impatience with—uh—people who didn't really try to learn their craft. And they weren't—um—you know, never knew what happened to them, but they weren't in the next workshop. I didn't know how that all worked. [*Clears throat*] But I respected him because he—he demanded in his reading—uh—that we read as if we

wanted to be writers, not as if we wanted to be English majors. [00:18:39] So when he would assign us stories or novels to read, the answers he—he gave—he gave us things called—famously called "quizzie poos." He called quizzie poos and I—I—his quizzie poos are—are forever alive because I'd give them all the time when I was a teacher. And they would be ten very specific questions. What is the color of the light at the end of the dock of Daisy Buchanan's—Daisy and Tom Buchanan's—uh—dock that goes out into the water? Green. And he—it's that sense of detail that he wanted us to see that was in fiction. [00:19:14] And he—uh—more than any teacher I knew—I've known—knew how to combine—to those writers who wanted to stop being English majors and become writers. He didn't care about theme or meaning. But he wanted you to know that there were details that were significant. And he did that by getting you to read books in that way. And—um—I—I owe him for that. I owe him for that. He was fabulous at that. That was my—that was—that was—that was the best education I ever had. He did. He taught me about Nabokov. I didn't know about Nabokov. He—he had us read *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. These are wonderful books for somebody to read. But he had a great sense of detail—uh—about those as well. Uh—you had—you had to know

the names. What was the name of the lake where—uh—Dolly Schiller went? Lake Climax, of course. [*Laughs*] And that kind of stuff. Uh—and—uh—you pick up that detail. And it changes the way your brain works as a writer. Uh—it changes you from trying to write stories that are gonna be interpreted by English departments to learning how to write stories that are stories. Tell me a story. And—and I learned that from Bill.

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:20:27] SL: That's good. What about—what was the best thing that you learned from Jim?

BD: Oh, I—what I learned from Jim was a sense of form in poetry. He knew how that worked. He could—he could show you a poem, William Stafford poems, other poems that weren't traditional form poems like sonnets. He himself wrote sonnets. But he could show you where the form existed in a poem that didn't look as if it was formal. He's the one who said to me, "There's no such thing"—he said, "Free verse is not free from form. It is free to choose its own form, and it must." And I was not a successful poet for Jim. I just didn't have that—that muse was not for me. I could do craft, and I knew how to do that. And he admired that. But one day I said to him—I shouldn't have ever said this to him. I had wrote a poem that was going

to—it later got published, as a matter of fact. And I was very proud of the fact that it evoked a meaning, an English department meaning. And I said to him—I said—he said all these nice things about it, and why I can make lines different. And I said, "But, Jim, what do you think of the meaning?" And he looked at me, and he said, "We don't talk about that. We don't talk about that." He said, "Let that be in the poem without our conversation about it here." And I thought—but he was very good at that. And he was very good at introducing us to poets. I learned about Alan Dugan because of Jim Whitehead. I learned about Howard Nemerov because of Jim Whitehead. All the poets that I later taught in my own educational classes I learned from Jim Whitehead. [00:22:14] Both of these men were literary people. They were very strong literary people. They just weren't English department literary people. They had writers that nobody else knew about that were quite wonderful writers. Donald Justice—my God, beautiful poetry that Justice wrote. Stafford—I knew about Stafford, and so did Jim. But no, they were—they were the best—it was the best kind of program to be in. For one thing, it was better than Iowa at the time because as near as I can tell—I talked to people that went to Iowa, and then later I taught at Iowa—in the sense that the program made this

mixture happen. It was like putting all these things together, and these guys were catalysts. And so all of a sudden, the water heated up. And it was an organic ex—and probably with all the boinking going on, probably not only organic but orgasmic [*laughter*] experience.

[00:23:11] SL: Well now, that's interesting. As far as writing programs go . . .

BD: Yeah.

SL: . . . across the United States, what—how does this one compare or . . .

BD: Well, I wouldn't know. I later became sort of acting president of AWP, and I don't think these things are comparable. I do think we know that there are programs now that are good and programs that aren't so good. And—but I don't where—I don't think we can be in the business of rating it. I think I got a very good education here. I got a very good education at University of Kansas. I got a very good education in M.A. But it was in—it wasn't in contemporary literature. It was in historical literature. And I know a lot about eighteenth-century literature, and I learned it there. I learned a lot about John Donne. But when you came here, you were with a group of people who were writers, and that's what they were. They were writers. And the

program was burly, and there were football games, and there were all kinds of other things that were going on, and you recognized that somehow these two men had created this culture—this literary culture—that I don't think probably could last very much longer past their retirement. I don't know. I don't know anything more about it, but for those of us here at the time from the late [19]60s into the [19]70s, anyway, it was well known as a burly and wonderful program. But I think it's difficult to rate things. I don't . . .

SL: Yeah.

BD: . . . I wouldn't know that.

SL: Well, I don't know that I'm . . .

[00:24:40] BD: I do wanna tell a story without you even asking me about Bill Harrison.

SL: Okay.

BD: And that is this. There was a prize given here for fiction, and it was a hundred dollars. But a hundred dollars was a hundred dollars. My wife was—in those days was dipping ice cream cones and working at the—at a school for a little money. And Bill said, "You want to enter this contest." I said, "Yeah, I will." And he said, "This short story. Put this one in. Double space it, put it in. It's a good short story." So I did that. And I went home and

told my wife—I said—you know, I said, "He told me—said, 'I'm not the judge,' but he said, 'This is the story.'" And I said, "I think I've learned in code that I'm about to win a hundred dollars because Bill has told me, 'This is the story.'" He didn't wink or anything. So we were so happy. And I said, "You know, I get the hundred bucks, we're gonna go out for dinner." Wonderful. [00:25:34] Week goes by, two weeks go by. The prize is announced. I didn't get it. So I go home, and I say, "I didn't win the hundred dollars, but we'll go out to dinner anyway." "No, no we can't afford to go out to dinner." So we're sitting there drinking some Gallo wine in misery and thinking about goddamn [*unclear word*]. The door—knock at the door. Go to it, it's Bill Harrison. He says, "I've got something for you." He got this something in a—wrapped up in newspaper. He opens it up, and it's an award. It's not the award for the prize, but he feels so bad about it he made his own award to me. [*SL laughs*] And it says—it's got, you know, my name and the story, and it's got—he's got a little blue ribbon that he's attached on it [*SL laughs*] or glued on it and so forth. And he's got, you know, a Jack Daniel's label. He says the Jack Daniel's label's from Crumley, and he's gonna give you a bottle of Jack Daniel's. And he taped a five-dollar bill on it and gave us that award. And you

know, I mean, he was living frugally himself. He didn't have a hundred dollars to give me. But he was—he showed up. He did it. And I thought—we sat down and drank some Gallo wine. And he patted me on the back, and he left. And you know, it was a sense that he knew that I should won probably. I'm reading code here. He never complained. He just said I was a writer. I didn't win. But I was a writer. And he wanted me to know that. And he did. He let me know that. And I never forgot that story. Obviously. [*Laughs*]

SL: That's a great story.

BD: Yeah, yeah.

SL: That is.

BD: And then sure enough, Crumley showed up with a bottle of whiskey later with the label gone because he couldn't come over, and they'd taken the label off and put it on the other thing, and Crumley showed up with a bottle of whiskey. [*Laughs*] So my wife and I stayed home and drank the whiskey.

SL: That's good.

BD: That was what—we were very happy. Hangovers the next day, but very happy. [*Laughter*]

SL: That's good.

BD: Yeah. It's a great story.

[00:27:25] SL: Hmm. Well, did you do much on Dickson Street? Did you do much—did you spend any time on Dickson Street at all or . . .

BD: Did I what, now?

SL: Spend any time on Dickson Street and, you know, George's Majestic Lounge and the community of Fayetteville? Did you engage at all with Fayetteville?

BD: No. No, no. We—the workshops were—you're talking about the life outside the workshops?

SL: Yeah.

BD: Yeah. No, the workshops—I was taking two workshops at a time. I was taking poetry and fiction. And the workshop sort of consumed us. But Leon Stokesbury was here at that time, and Gen Whitehead would—was sort of a mother hen to all of us. She would feed us. What was the name of the bar you just mentioned?

SL: George's . . .

BD: Yes . . .

SL: . . . Majestic Lounge.

BD: . . . we would go down to George's every once in a while and have drinks afterwards. And we would talk about the workshop and about the writers. And so we would retire to that the way

they did at the Iowa Writers' Workshop—they retired to a bar. But most of us—there was enough party going on at Whitehead's and at Jim Crumley's later on so that we got enough of that. I think probably most of us spent after a workshop, if the workshop was in the evening, maybe an hour down at George's, and then . . .

SL: Yeah.

BD: . . . we'd go on home. None of us that I know of took courses in the English Department. We took our literature from our writers. So we didn't go [*unclear word*]. [00:29:04] However, there is a wonderful—for me, there was a wonderful moment. I was hired by a college that asked me to teach American literature, and I didn't have a graduate course in American literature. I'm not even sure I had an undergraduate course in American literature. And there was a professor there. I forget his name, but he was from Harvard. And I stopped him one day. I said, "You're a professor of American literature." He said, "Yes." I said, "I need a list of books that I should look at. I have to teach this course when I go to Washington College, and I'm not well versed in American literature. And he looked at me, and he said, "I'll give you the list. You read the books and stop in, and we'll talk about them." And in a voluntary way, this

man, who was, I think, enormously shy. I'm sure Bill Harrison would know who he is. Fact, maybe he introduced me to him. And he'd meet me, like, every Thursday or after class, and we would talk about, you know, *Moby-Dick* or *Huck Finn* and so forth. And I got a kind of bonus education because of the generosity. But I suspect that the reason this man did it is because Bill Harrison told him I was worth the time. And so I got a kind of British tutorial from this guy. And I can't think of his name.

SL: Kinnamon?

BD: Yes. Older guy?

SL: Yeah.

BD: Yeah.

SL: Yeah, I had him.

BD: Harvard.

SL: Yeah.

BD: Yeah.

SL: I had him too.

BD: That's who it was.

SL: Yeah. He was great.

[00:30:22] BD: Wonderful, wonderful moment. Bill did things for you that he didn't brag about. And so you'd have to kind of

piece it together. And maybe he told me just to go ask him and then and so forth and so forth. So it was kind of fun. So I did that, and when I got there, I knew enough about American literature so that I could teach it. And Bill was also the one who—I think he was the one who told us about theme and meaning. He said, "You gotta watch out for theme and meaning." He said, "When your teachers ask you—when your professors in the English Department ask you to make—to describe the theme and meaning in twenty-five words," he said, "practice that in advance." He said, "For instance, the theme of *Moby-Dick* is you'll always hurt the one you love." [*Laughter*] Isn't that wonderful? And then we thought of it ourselves—I think we said, "You know, the theme of *Oedipus Rex* is 'I want to marry a gal just like the gal who married dear old dad.'" [*Laughs*] But they had—the two of them had so much fun with literature. That was it. And I think that the difference was is that Jim Whitehead also had fun with his students, and Bill had fun with some of his students. Not all of 'em. He wasn't—that kind of gregarity didn't exist. [00:31:42] I one time asked him how it is he came to be a writer. And he said, "I came to be a writer because I didn't come to be a minister." I said, "Minister?" He said, "Yes." He said he was studying the

ministry. And he said he was at a camp someplace in west Texas as an apprentice minister, and he was riding a horse, and he fell off his horse. And he was out in the wheat field. And he said he was conscious, but he'd been hurt, and the horse had run away, and he said all of a sudden he could hear the camp—the kids from the camp coming through the wheat field, or the tall grass, and they were calling, "Reverend Harrison, Reverend Harrison." And Bill said when he heard that, he knew he was not Reverend Harrison. [*Laughter*] Said, "That's not me." I still remember that story.

SL: That's good.

BD: Yeah. That's how he came to be a teacher.

[00:32:40] SL: Is there anything that you would—if you had something to say to Bill, what would you say?

BD: I'd quote Pericles to him. Pericles says it is not the—it is not the monuments that are built for you afterwards or the plaques that are made that are important. But it is the—it is what you weave into other people's lives that will last. And I'm weaving what Bill Harrison taught me into other people's lives. And that is going to go on and on. And we'll all pass and be forgotten with the rest. I'm now retired myself. Not retired from writing, but retired from teaching college. And there's now a generation of

students at my own college who don't even know who I am. But there are generations and generations of students out there who do, and the reason that they do is because I've woven into their lives many of the things that Bill Harrison, in a literary way, wove into my life. And there are students now who write back and say, "You taught me how to make a quizzie poo for my students so they know precisely that this and this exists." And I write back to them—I say, "It was taught to me as well." So I pass that on. So that's what I have to say. Bill—Bob and Bill and Pericles are all in good company.

SL: That's very, very good.

BD: Yeah.

SL: Love that.

BD: Yeah.

[00:34:23] SL: Anything else you wanna say?

BD: No, I'm fine. I'm finished. It's been—it was a great time. I'm glad to be here. And nice to meet you guys. And I don't know whether the jackrabbit story got into the text or not, but . . .

SL: It's there.

BD: All right. Take care. [*Laughter*]

SL: Okay.

Joy Endicott: [*Unclear words*]. I wanna—will you say the

jackrabbit story again because it didn't get that?

SL: Oh, it didn't.

JE: No.

SL: Okay. Let's do the jackrabbit story again. [*Laughter*]

BD: All right. All right, the jackrabbit story. I'm just tellin' it because the cameraman's got big cast on his foot, and the first time I saw a cast like that, I was hunting in western Kansas, and I was blocking—pardon me, I was hunting down a road a mile up, and a friend of mine was blocking, and I yelled ahead. I said, "There's a jackrabbit coming." Jackrabbits run twenty, twenty-five, thirty miles an hour. I didn't mean for him to shoot it. I just wanted him to know the jackrabbit was coming. And improbably, the jackrabbit comes by him, and he kicks the jackrabbit. Now jackrabbits weigh ten, fifteen pounds. You kick a ten- or fifteen-pound jackrabbit running twenty-five miles an hour, and you break your foot just like this guy did here—the cameraman. You can't see it, but he's got a broken foot. [*Laughter*] There we go.

SL: Okay, great.

BD: All right. See you later.

SL: Thank you.

[00:35:29 End of interview]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]