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

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Arkansas Memories Project

Bill Harrison Surprise Interviews

John Dufresne

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

See the Citation Guide at https://pryorcenter.uark.edu/about.php.

Scott Lunsford interviewed John Dufresne 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, John—uh—uh—today is June the eleventh, 2011. We are continuing our—uh—Bill Harrison project.

John Dufresne: Mh-hmm.

SL: This little surprise gathering has been folded into his interview project. Um—I'm Scott Lunsford. I'm with the Pryor Center—uh—which is—uh—an oral and visual history—uh—endeavor that—uh—Senator David and his wife Barbara Pryor . . .

JD: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . began some years ago. Um—so we videotape these interviews, and we will send you a transcript. We will send you the raw footage of your interview, and we'll want you to look at both of those.

JD: Okay.

SL: And if there's anything that we do here today that you regret [*laughter*] or that you don't want to share with the rest of the world . . .

JD: Yeah.

SL: . . . that will be your opportunity to—to let us know that.

JD: Okay.

SL: And we'll—we'll redact whatever it is you don't want in there. It's not about tryin' to . . .

JD: Yeah.

SL: . . . catch people doin' things. [*JD laughs*] It's just—it's really just about you telling . . .

JD: Right.

SL: . . . your stories . . .

JD: Right.

SL: . . . the way you want 'em. Um—and when you—when you sign—when we make those changes, and we'll show you the changes . . .

JD: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . um—and you're comfortable, then we'll probably pick out some highlights from your interview to actually post on the web—the video.

JD: Oh, okay.

[00:01:19] SL: But we'll also post the entire transcript, and we'll post the entire audio of it. And we'll encourage documentarians and students . . .

JD: Great.

SL: . . . of Arkansas history.

[00:01:30] JD: So this'll be at the Pryor Center?

SL: Pryor Center. And you can Google . . .

JD: Website?

SL: . . . the Pryor Center . . .

JD: Yeah. And look at it.

SL: And you will—you will see what we're up to.

JD: Oh, great.

SL: Uh—it will probably take us some time . . .

JD: Oh, I'm sure it will, yeah.

SL: . . . to get to all these interviews.

JD: Right.

SL: It's—it's—it's a lengthy process . . .

JD: Right.

Sl: . . . so—uh—you may—you may be surprised at how long it takes . . .

JD: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . but—but we'll eventually get—get it done. Um—so we'll preserve this stuff forever. It's—it's part of the—the paradigm. We . . .

JD: Yeah.

SL: Uh—uh—we're very particular about that. Uh—there'll be—uh—

copies of the stuff in the Special Collections Department at Mullins Library here at the University of Arkansas . . .

JD: Right.

SL: . . . campus. So having said all that, if you're comfortable with this endeavor . . .

JD: Oh yeah, I'm ready to go.

SL: . . . then—good. [*JD laughs*] That's a good answer. 'Cause otherwise we'd stop . . .

JD: [*Laughs*] I know.

[00:02:15] SL: . . . and we would have some bagels and coffee. Um—so we start with—uh—uh—your—we need to hear your full name and where and when you were born.

JD: Uh—John Dufresne. I was born on January 30, 1948, in Worcester, Massachusetts.

SL: And how do you spell your last name?

JD: *D-U-F-R-E-S-N-E*.

SL: All right. Thank you. Um—Massachusetts.

JD: Yeah.

SL: Um—so your parents' names were . . .

JD: Ber—uh—my mother's maiden name was Berard. **Doris** Berard. *B-E-R-A-R-D*. I have—I have trouble saying Rs 'cause I'm from Massachusetts, but [*SL laughs*]—uh—Berard, and—uh—my

father's—uh—Dufresne. Yeah . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

JD: . . . **Bernard**.

SL: And what—what did they do with—uh—for their living?

JD: Well, they're both retired now. They're ei—both eighty-five. Um—my father had been a—uh—he worked for **Mass Electric**, which became **New England Power**. He was a supervisor, drove a truck, and worked a backhoe, that kind of stuff . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

JD: . . . all his life. Um—my mother—um—was a—I'm not sure. She was a temp worker. She worked for Kelly Services . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

JD: . . . at that time. And she just worked—worked her whole adult life doing that. Um—uh—yeah.

[00:03:28] SL: Did you ever—uh—know either set of your grandparents?

JD: I did. I knew—uh—both. Uh—I even knew my—uh—maternal great-grandmother. Um—she passed away when I was probably about ten or twelve. Um—I spent a lot of time with my maternal grandparents when I was growin' up. Everyone lived in the same neighborhood in the same—in—in Worcester. So we were all, you know, stopping in while we're stopping in at my

grandma's, or I'd stay there most weekends, a lot of the summer with my grandmother, so—so yeah.

SL: Well that's—uh—pretty unusual to have all . . .

JD: It is.

SL: . . . everyone.

JD: Everyone—in those days—my grandfather was one of nineteen children—uh—my mother's dad. Um—and—and he told me that they were never in one place at the same time—uh—because they were—they—they lived in Quebec, and they would come down in the winters. [*Computer noise*] They lived on a farm, would come down in the winter to—uh—uh—work in the factories in—in New Bedford, Lowell, Holyoke.

SL: Uh-huh.

JD: And—uh—and sometimes they'd stay for a year or two. Um—you know, and—and then go back up to the farm, so there was always somebody workin' and somebody down in the states makin' money.

SL: So farm life in Quebec?

JD: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:04:38] SL: Uh—did you ever get to visit?

JD: No, not—well, not when I was growing up. Later on—um—when I was, let's see—I guess I was up maybe in—out of college, I

think. I took a trip up to the—my grandfather's hometown and took photos for him and—and—uh—he said—I said, "You know, there's this bank on the corner." And he said, "Yeah, there's an alley." And he said, "Is there still a poolroom down the alley?" And there was a poolroom down the alley. [*Laughs*] So it hasn't changed much here, so . . .

SL: Happy community, I guess, uh . . .

JD: Yeah.

SL: . . . to keep all that stuff . . .

JD: Yeah.

[00:05:09] SL: . . . like it is. So—um—you—uh—uh—did you—uh—attend public schools growin' up?

JD: No, Catholic schools, actually.

SL: Uh-huh.

JD: Uh—Worcester is a—in my neighborhood in—in particular, maybe, is—uh—maybe 100 percent Catholic. Uh . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

JD: . . . they were just—there were—there were probably a dozen churches in the u—and it was nationalities sort of based. Lithuanian church, Polish church, couple of Italian churches. Irish—even though I'm French, I went to the Irish school, and I was an altar boy in the Irish Catholic church. So I'm French

Canadian, Irish Catholic somehow. Um—and—uh—but my mother went to the French school and grew up speaking French. She didn't even speak English till she was probably in high school . . .

SL: Wow.

JD: . . . uh—or picked it up. I'm sure she picked it up on the street.

SL: Yeah.

JD: But—uh—most of the neighborhood—it was called French Hill at one point. It was settled by the French Canadians, so—uh—and then it became primarily Irish, and they changed—the street was Grafton Street, and it was like bein' in Dublin. [*SL laughs*] So . . .

[00:06:06] SL: Well, so—uh—did you—did you experience any—uh—Irish or Catholic prejudices growin' up?

JD: No. No.

SL: 'Cause you were probably a pretty safe community . . .

JD: Oh yeah. I mean, everybody . . .

SL: . . . there.

JD: . . . that was just—that was it. Which—what parish do you belong to? And . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

JD: . . . when you went to—uh—you played basketball for the church

teams and the church leagues and all that sort of—that stuff. So no, there was—um—it was just so homogeneous. It was like—it was—there would be ethnic kind of squabbles, but it was just—it was silly. There was no real animosity. It was like, "The Italians—oh, they have a better carnival than the French do—the French have"—you know, that kind of thing, so . . .

SL: Yeah. Well, that—uh—sounds pretty idyllic.

JD: It was nice.

[00:06:47] SL: Uh—so—uh—Catholic education—uh—nuns, I would guess.

JD: Nuns, and in high school I had brothers.

SL: Uh-huh.

JD: I went to—uh—uh—it was Xaverian Brothers High School. It was all—all boys. It was sort of known for—uh—uh—rigorous academics, they said—um—and—uh—sports. I played baseball, so that's why I went there. I wanted to be a—um—I suppose I wanted to play for the Red Sox one day, but anyway, so . . .

SL: Yeah.

JD: Um—and so we had these brothers and—uh—I—you know, I was probably in that last [*sighs*] group of people who had all nuns and all brothers. You know, now they're all—uh—lay teachers and no more—uh . . .

SL: Contracted out.

JD: Yeah, it's just—that's it, so . . .

SL: Yeah. Thomas Aquinas?

JD: Uh . . .

SL: Get familiar with him in high school, or was that . . .

JD: Yeah, yeah. Um—but it was almost—yeah. It—it's—[*unclear words*]. I mean, they were not—uh—Jesuits. Um—and—uh—religion was pretty just sort of—uh—a basic kind of—just a part of your life. I think I may have learned—uh—more about—uh—religion after I left the schools than before. I mean, it—I was—I was pretty devout kid. I mean—uh—bein' the altar boy and all that stuff.

SL: Yeah.

JD: I wanted to be a priest when I grew up 'cause . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

JD: . . . priests were the most respected people in the neighborhood, and—and they didn't even have to earn it. They just had to put on a collar and stand around, so [*SL laugh*s]—um—and I thought that would be—I thought it would be a nice life, you know. Praying, working with kids—uh—which is what I would have done. Something like that.

SL: Yeah.

JD: Uh—so—but yeah, fortunately, that didn't happen.

[00:08:24] SL: Well, you say fortunately [*JD laughs*]—I mean, the—uh—so you finished up high school—what did you—what college did you go to?

JD: I went to the local—uh—state college, Worcester State College.

SL: Uh-huh.

JD: Um—I—I—to be honest, I—when I got out of high school, I was—didn't want to go to college. I just wanted to . . .

SL: Play baseball?

[00:08:40] JD: . . . nothing. I just wanted to—no, I didn't even—I just quit. I mean, it was so unpleasant. And I played for s—so long, and I had a coach who was kind of a—uh—kind of—um—I don't—so obsessed about winning that he made it—wasn't fun anymore. And I didn't even—I stopped playing.

SL: Uh-huh.

JD: Um—and—uh—you know, I'd play pickup games with friends. But other than that, I didn't even play. And I just had it with school. I just wanted to—not—I didn't like—high school was the worst four years of my life in that sense of—um—it was a school where a lot of rich kids went. Um—we were bussed there from the inner city, you know, to the school. Um—so I didn't fit in. I didn't have my own car and all that kind of stuff, so I felt like an

outsider. I wasn't good academically. Um—and—uh—and I kind of act—I kind of acted out, so I spent a lot of time in PMs, they called 'em. You know, stayin' after school, digging a swimming pool. They put you to work. It was hard labor if you stayed after school at this place, so—um—but I made good friends and—anyway, I didn't want to go to college. And—uh—I didn't apply to college. And—uh—finally, my mother said, "What are you gonna do?" And my father said, "What are you gonna do?" I said, "I don't know. I think I'm gonna go to the Newport Folk Festival or somethin'." That was what I was gonna do. "And what are you gonna do after that?" "Uh—I don't know." He said, "You going to school?" "No." "Then you're gonna work. I'll get you a job at the company," he said. I said, "Oh geez."

SL: Ooh. [*Laughs*]

JD: So I made some phone calls. You know, I applied. It wa—in those days, you just had to apply, and you got in, you know, the local schools. So I got in.

[00:10:07] SL: Now was the Newport Festival folk or jazz?

JD: Both.

SL: Both.

JD: Both.

SL: Okay.

JD: I did—I did go to both. I used to go every year.

SL: Uh-huh.

JD: Hitchhiked, and we weren't far away. Hitchhike down, sleep outside. It's usually in somebody's yard they would . . .

SL: So . . .

JD: You'd pay 'em a buck, and they'd let you sleep in their yard, that kind of thing. Set up a tent.

[00:10:23] SL: So you were—uh—conversant musicwise, I guess?

JD: I was tryin' to be. I mean, I'm not—you know, I was just a great fan. I wasn't a musician. I just . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

JD: You know, so I got to see—uh—people when they were just coming up—uh—like Dylan—uh—Joan Baez—and the first time he performed there. Uh—all that—Johnny Cash—Freebody Park. It was in a downtown park before they moved it to the big place, so—it was nice. Um—and—uh—yeah, music in those days—everybody listened to the same radio station. So everyone was hearing the same music. All this sort of thing and . . .

SL: Yeah.

JD: . . . it was a bo—station in Boston that started playing folk music early on. So you—everybody had the same—uh—sort of vocabulary and the same—uh—uh—s—songs that they were

listening to, whereas today everybody down—you don't know what—I have no clue who anybody is anymore. Um—'cause they're not on the radio.

SL: Right.

JD: It's a—all downloaded off some . . .

SL: That's correct.

JD: Somebody has to tell you, "Listen to this person," and you go, so . . .

[00:11:23] SL: Right. Um—so graduated high school in [19]67?

JD: No . . .

SL: [Nineteen] sixty-eight?

JD: [Nineteen] sixty-five.

SL: [Nineteen] sixty-five.

JD: Yeah, I—I started—I was a little younger. I started school early.

SL: Okay.

JD: My mother snuck me in early.

SL: Good.

JD: Uh—so I was—uh—I don't think it was a good thing in the long run 'cause I was always like, a little less mature . . .

SL: Tryin' to catch up.

JD: You know, it's—yeah, I was always kind of—I—I probably should have waited a year. But—so I—I—and then I went to—uh—

[19]65—so then I went to Worcester State. I actually got mononucleosis the first year there, and I had to start all over again, so—so I got out of Worcester State in [19]70, actually, rather than [19]69, so . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

JD: [*Sighs*] Yeah.

[00:12:03] SL: So—um—when did you take up the pen, I mean . . .

JD: Well, I was always a good writer—uh—in elementary school, and so you know, I'd write a—a composition, and sister would say, "Oh, Johnny, that's really nice." And I'd say, "I'll write you another one." You know, write another one, and so I could write. I enjoyed writing. Um—and—uh—so when I went to college, I was an editor of the school newspaper and had a column in the paper for four years. And—uh—uh—and—and I was writing stories—tryin' to write stories. Um—and—uh—and I continued to do this. So somewhere—I probably was writing from—you know, writing poetry and what not—probably from what would be, you know, a freshman at high school or eighth grade or something like that. And then eventually decided I liked writing stories better 'cause I liked reading them better. So I started writing stories. And I was doing it, and I was publishing in, like, local places. Uh—and—um—we had a literary

magazine in Worcester at the time. And—uh—but I—you know, so this brings us to—you know, I never knew if I was any good. I didn't know if I was gettin' better. I didn't know—and I had a career, sort of, as a social worker. That's what I did for—when I got out of school. I worked at a—uh—crisis center, like a suicide prevention hotline—one of those things—and drug programs and drug prevention, and so I did that. Mos—I worked with kids. And—uh—all the time I was writing, but—and you know, I'd show it to people, and they'd say, "Oh, that's really nice. Let's go get a beer." You know, like . . .

SL: Yeah.

JD: . . . who cares, you know.

SL: Right.

[00:13:37] JD: Um—so I finally said, "Well, if I—you know I wanna see if I can do this." And—uh—several events happened around the same time that gave me the opportunity. And one, I wanted to go to some kind of graduate program. I—I didn't—I—a friend of mine went to UMass, M.F.A. That's the first time I heard that there was an M.F.A. program. And she was a poet, and she went. I—she said, "You oughta come out to the program." So I said, "All right. I'll do that." I was married—uh—first wife. And—um—she wouldn't—she wouldn't go. She wouldn't move

anywhere. She had a job, and she wasn't goin'. So that meant I couldn't go. So that marriage broke up.

SL: Yeah.

JD: And—uh—and—uh—I let—the job I had as a social worker came to an end. They pulled the money out for the—out of drug prevention programs, and so I was laid off. All of that happened around the same time. And I said, "This is perfect. I can get out—get outta here and go somewhere." And so that's why I, you know, investigated programs and—um—applied to Arkansas. They took me. So I came here.

[00:14:36] SL: So how did you know about the Arkansas program?

JD: I—I must have researched the program. I don't remember how I did this. Um—but—uh—I know I found out who had M.F.A. programs, and I kind of like said where—it wasn't even like where I wanted to live 'cause I'd live anywhere. Um—and—uh—but I just looked. I remember—um—I knew—uh—John Clellon Holmes . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

JD: . . . who was here at the time. And I had read him. And I was a great fan of Kerouac's and Beat Generation at the time. I had gone to Kerouac's funeral—uh—because it was just down the road in Lowell. And—um . . .

SL: Yeah.

JD: . . . and saw—I saw Holmes there, actually. But I mean, I was just a kid in the gallery, but—um—and—uh—you know, so I applied to a bunch of programs. And—um—uh—and here. And then what I would do is I would read, say, Bill's book. I'd get Bill's book and read it or, you know, read books by the people in the program that I could get. Was more difficult in those days to find . . .

SL: Yes.

JD: . . . books, and you couldn't, like, order them on—you know . . .

SL: Right.

JD: . . . I had to look around in used bookstores for—and libraries. And I—and I think—uh—I found a couple of Bill's. One of Jim's, I think. Uh—and read 'em and said, "Oh, this is a good place." And they took me, and I came here. I was just thrilled to come here.

[00:15:47] SL: So you get to—uh—Fayetteville, Arkansas . . .

JD: Yeah.

SL: . . . and what's your first impression? This is in—what year is this, seventy . . .

JD: So when—let's—when—no, [19]82.

SL: Oh.

JD: Yeah. So I had that little . . .

SL: Quite a bit.

JD: . . . [*unclear word*] social work—seven years or something I worked . . .

SL: Uh-huh. Okay.

[00:16:01] JD: Um—yeah, so I got here. I had to—I bought this old van from the market—there was place called **Tech Market** right outside of my—uh—tenement. And—uh—it was a—um—was it Armenian? I think it was an Armenian restaurant. Anyway, this was the truck that they—uh—they—uh—carried lamb in. So they'd go down to Boston, buy the lamb, and drive it back. So it smelled like lamb. [*SL laughs*] And it was a Vandura—a GMC Vandura. I bought it for two hundred bucks from the—**Katchadourian** was the guy's name. Uh—and—uh—drove it down here. Um—I blew all the tires out on the way down. I had a s—had a cat that was hysterical. I had him on tranquilizers. [*SL laughs*] Um—and—uh—and then the transmission went out. So I drove the rest—I—I probably drove about forty miles up the Pig Trail in first gear or something like that, you know.

SL: Wow.

JD: And got here and went to this motel that I saw yesterday. Was—it had a—it was called, I think, at the time, the **Big Chief**

Motel or something, and now it's the Hi-Way Inn or something up on . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

JD: . . . um—and—uh—stayed there, got up. I looked around the next day and found a little place on North Gregg, which they have since been torn down. Uh—I moved over there, in an apartment over there, and I brought the car out to the high school, I think it was. They had an auto mechanics program. I brought it up there. [*Laughs*] And I said, "Can you fix this?" And they said, "Sure." They fixed it. It broke down again, though, and I sold it to the wrecker, the guy with the wrecker.

[00:17:32] SL: It wasn't—uh—515 N. Gregg, was it?

JD: I think it was.

SL: Really?

JD: Yeah. It was a f—a duplex . . .

SL: Yeah.

JD: Two floors.

SL: Behind a house?

JD: Yeah, yeah. And then there was—I used to cut through the back by the bamboo and walk up to Old Main. That was it.

SL: Yeah.

JD: That's 515. That's good.

SL: Yeah.

JD: We drove by there yesterday, and there's, like, a little double wide . . .

SL: Sorority thing, yeah.

JD: Yeah.

SL: Yeah, yeah. My brother—uh—Porter lived in—in the house in front.

JD: Okay. Wow.

SL: And all kinds of folks have been in and out of the duplex in back, so . . .

[00:18:00] JD: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, the guy that was—lived across the hall from me was a—a music collector, I remember. Had all kinds of records all the time, and he was like givin' 'em to me when he—he sold 'em . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

JD: . . . on *Goldmine* magazine, I remember. I think it was. All that stuff, so it was a nice place to live.

SL: Wonder if that . . .

JD: Convenient.

SL: . . . was Glen Wheeler.

JD: Huh?

SL: Wonder if that was Glen Wheeler.

JD: I can't remember his name. He was blonde. Bill. His name was Bill.

SL: Okay.

JD: And he was married, actually. Uh—I think he may have been from Tennessee or Kentucky.

[00:18:33] SL: Hmm. Okay, well—um—so Fayetteville. Uh—how did it—uh—uh—I mean, did you feel good about gettin' here and . . .

JD: I loved—I liked—I—one thing is I—you know, I had no idea what to expect. I was a great fan of Southern literature. That was my favorite.

SL: Sure.

JD: You know, Faulkner and all that sort of thing. So I felt like I lived in the South already before I got here. You know . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

JD: . . . I just—I had a—an affinity for it. I really liked—um—and—uh—so I came here, and it was—uh—you know, I'd been livin' in the city, so it was kind of a small town, which I kinda liked that. Uh—I thought the campus was beautiful. Uh—looked like a real university, you know.

SL: Mh-hmm.

JD: Um—and—uh—there were—uh—Dickson Street was kind—was

not as slick in those days.

SL: That's right.

JD: And I liked—I liked that sort of feeling hangin' around there. We'd go to—Cindy reminded me that we would both—we were living together there on Gregg, and—um—I would—I would—we would both, like, study and—or read or whatever till ten. And then we'd go to George's Majestic Lounge at ten o'clock for a beer or two. And everyone—people would just show up, or they were already in there, and would just sit there drinking PBRs. [*Laughs*]

SL: Yes. Pabst, that's right.

[00:19:44] JD: Yeah. [*Laughs*] And—uh—it was very comfortable here. And—and—uh—the program was set up so that you got to meet everybody pretty quickly—you know, the orientation programs. So you—everybody got to know each other and hang out together. Um—and the—the students were very welcoming, so it was an easy place to sort of fall into and—um—I felt really supported 'cause I had no clue. You know, it was immediately—you're here, like, a week, and you're teaching a class—and grammar, and you know, then Claude Faulkner—you're in Claude Faulkner's class trying to stay a week ahead of the students.

SL: That's right.

JD: Or a class ahead of the students and just—uh—reading. And that was a difficult course, and I worked hard at it. Uh—and—uh—I pr—I learned a lot. I still have Faulkner's books at home. *Writing Good Sentences* and that stuff.

SL: Man.

JD: It was the best.

SL: That's what we all grew up on.

JD: Yeah. It was the best.

SL: Yeah.

JD: I still tell people, "You want it, get it. Go on eBay. You can buy 'em on eBay. They're like—they're expensive, but they're worth it."

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:20:36] SL: So your emphasis was fiction then.

JD: Yes.

SL: And so you had—tell me about your experience with the instructors and the classroom.

JD: The first day—the first workshop—I was—Bill was teaching the workshop, and Bill did it anonymously. No one signed their stories. So you didn't know who wrote it. I didn't know that at this point, so I'm—just before class, I go over to Brough to get coffee or somethin' like that.

SL: Yeah.

JD: So I'm over at Brough, and I meet this guy, **Matt Harris**, who had been—he was in the program, and he had been an editor at one of the New York houses. He had been James Jones's editor, I think, on his last book. Anyway, so we're sitting there, and I introduce myself, and he's talkin', and he said, "I can't wait till workshop tonight." And I said, "Why?" He said, "That story, that story," and he—whatever the title was. I said, "Why? What about it?" He said, "Harrison hates experimental stories. He's gonna tear this apart." And I said, "Oh shit, that's my story." [*Laughter*] He said, "It's yours?" So I went over there thinking, "Oh my God, this is like what you read about. They're gonna—I'm gonna be, you know, a puddle before this is over." [*SL laughs*] Anyway, so they did my story, and the others were—Lee Martin's was the other story. Anyway, they did my story. The discussion was mixed, but it was—there was a lot of—sort of some praise for it and, you know, that sort of thing. I'd say primarily positive rather than negative. Anyway, and Bill said something like, "It's an experiment. I think it's a good experiment, but it's an experiment." Right? That kind of thing. So after class, probably the next day, I go into his office, and I said, "You know, so, Bill what am I—what do I do?" And he said,

"Well you know, you really know how to write, but you have no idea what a story is." [*SL laughs*] [00:22:27] So I said, "Well, what's a story?" And he said—and he told me what a plot was. He says, "You know, a central character wants something, goes after it despite opposition, and as a result of a struggle comes through win or lose." I said, "That's it? That's how it works?" You know, I'd been reading all this time, and I didn't realize that? And he said, "Yeah." So I said, "All right. I'll go write you a plot." And then I came back the next time, did a story, and you know, again it was kind of mixed. And I said, "So what"—I talked to him again. I said, "So what do I do this time?" He said, "Well, you don't have any detail. You need more detail." "Okay, I'll put so much detail in here." He said, "You can't put too much in here." So, all right—so he actually walked in. I was sitting at George's writing a story. And he said, "What are you doing?" "I'm writing a story with detail." He said, "Okay. Go ahead. Put it—I'll leave you alone." Goes on. So it was like every—every class was just a lesson in how to take the next step for me. I mean, I came here—I was a little older. I'd been out of school for seven years or whatever—eight years. [00:23:20] And I just said, "Tell me what to do, and I'll do it. Whatever you tell me to do, I'm gonna do it." I mean, I must have been a

perfect student in that way. Like, "Just tell me. I'll do it. I don't care. Okay, write in third person, anything. I'll do it." So he—so I learned a lot in that first semester from Bill. And also, you know, I was lucky to be in class with—Skip was there. He wasn't in that workshop with Steve Yarbrough and Lee Martin. It was just people who read a lot, who told me what I should be reading, who took the work seriously and all that, so it was great. I was learning as much after class in some ways as in class. And then I had John Holmes, who had been out for a while sick. He came back. He was great, wonderful person, very warm. Almost too easy in a way. It was almost like he just wanted to like your stories, and he always found nice things to say about it. James Leo Herlihy came through for a semester, and I had him. He was really good, really terrific. A little more structured than Bill. It was like, kinda, "You talk, and you talk, and you talk, and then I'll talk." But very—took it very seriously and was a really good teacher, I thought. And then, of course, Whitehead. And I remember in those days you could smoke. Remember you could smoke in class?

SL: Sure. Yes.

[00:24:36] JD: And I didn't smoke. I had quit when I—before I came here. And so it'd be Whitehead, and everybody's smoking.

Whitehead's up there. Yarbrough didn't smoke either, but—and Lee Martin was allergic to smoke, and I didn't smoke. We're the two of us in the workshop that time. And he said, "All right. Tell you what you do. You two sit down the end." [*Laughs*] We sat down at the other end. That was his—and then . . .

SL: Solution.

JD: . . . he got more—I think it was maybe the second workshop I had with him. He would—when he smoked, he would light his cigarette, and he would walk to the door. The door open, and blow the smoke out into the hall, but he'd still smoke. [00:25:17] And then he'd walk back in, and the cigarette—he would get up two or three times during the workshop. And Whitehead was just a sweetheart. I mean, he was just—he was gruff, and he was, "This is how it is, and this is what it's gonna be." And ya, da, da, da, da. And I soon realized, "Just call his bluff." Just say, "No, Jim, it's not like that." And he, "Yeah, okay, it's not like that, but"—[*SL laughs*] but he was so well read, and he was so willing to share. He was very generous with the students. And I took a poetry independent study with him. I stayed in the summers. So I took classes so I could get out quicker 'cause I'm older. I need to go get a job, so I stayed here, and I met at his house. I'd go over to his house, and we'd

sit out on the porch. And we'd start every class—we'd look up at his ceiling, and he had a Vermeer poster, *Lady with a Pearl Earring*, up here.

SL: Is that right?

JD: *Girl with the Pearl Earring*. And we'd look at it, and he'd talk about the light. And then we'd come down, and we're doin' poetry, and we're doing Philip Larkin. [00:26:19] And he was reading "This Be the Verse"—"They fuck you up, your mum and dad," right? We're reading that stuff. And he says, "Well, you know, but it's like Schopenhauer," he said. And I said, "Schopenhauer?" He said, "You've read Schopenhauer, haven't you?" And I said, "I've heard of him." [*Laughter*] He picked up the phone. He called Dickson Street Books. He said, "You got a copy of *Being and Nothingness*?" "Right, yeah, we do." "Okay, Dufresne will be right down for it." Well, and he said, "Read it, and you can come back." [*SL laughs*] So he's [*laughter*]—said, "You can't understand the twentieth century if you haven't read this stuff." "Oh, okay." So there I dutifully went off and did it. Came back, said, "I"—you know, I don't think I was any wiser when I came back. But he would do—just do stuff like that. And he would make pronouncements like "The great—the smartest man I ever met in my life was Tom T. Hall." I'd say, "The

country singer?" "Yeah, he's the smartest man I ever met." "Okay." [*Laughs*] "I invented the Bloody Maria," he told me. The drink at a bar, he told—and the bartender already knew how to make it, and he told the bartender he invented it. Bartender said, "Okay. [*Laughter*] I hope you like it." So he was funny to be around. Now he wouldn't—you know, "The greatest"—"Al Green has the greatest voice in history." It's just—he was wonderful. So he was very nurturing—also tough. He didn't take any bullshit. And it was—you'd do the work, and he got mad at me 'cause I didn't want to memorize poems in some poetry class. He gave you a choice, and I said, "I don't wanna do it." He was so disappointed. It almost broke my heart. I said, "Oh God. [*Laughter*] I should have memorized one for him." And I wish I had, of course, but—I'm tryin' to think of—and that may have been [*sighs*] . . .

[00:27:58] SL: Miller? Was Miller . . .

JD: I—Miller was around, but I didn't take—the only poetry I took was from Whitehead, actually.

SL: Okay, okay.

JD: He had a Form and Theory of Poetry, and I took that, and . . .

SL: Did you get a chance to see Tom T. Hall when he came to town for the . . .

JD: No, no.

SL: Yeah.

JD: And you know, later on I knew why he said it 'cause he did a song of his and all that stuff, but at the time . . .

SL: Right.

JD: . . . I'm thinking, "Tom T. Hall?" [*SL laughs*] And I wasn't conversant with—other than Willie Nelson, I really didn't know a lot of country music at the time—and Hank Williams. But—so that's one thing, you know, I got—I listened to more country music when I came here, I guess . . .

SL: Yeah.

JD: . . . and grew to love it. [00:28:31] And what—it just—it was just a—yeah, I didn't know what fraternities were. You know, I lived over in Gregg in that—all the fraternity houses were up there—up over there. And I was teaching a seven thirty class in the morning, and I would come in, and I'd say—one day I said, "You know," I said, "I'm sorry I'm little slow today. There was all this screaming and yelling. I couldn't sleep." And they said, "Oh, that was rush." And I said, "What is rush?" They told me what rush is, and I said, "Fraternities?" I said, "You guys are in fraternities?" One guy said, "Why else would we come to college?" [*Laughter*] This was their reasoning. "Oh," I said,

"fraternities?" I said, "You mean you have to, like, buy your friends? You can't even make friends?" And so I did this antifraternity thing. It was so shocking to me that there was—I—because there were none in New England that I knew of.

SL: Right.

JD: Then they told me, "Oh, that's where they all started." I said, "Yeah, but they got over it." [*SL laughs*] And you know, anyway. So I—you know, they disabused me of my snobbery. But there would always be kids in a fraternity who would come with a sergeant at arms and ask you to change their grade or somethin' like that. Meet in a Laundromat, and I'd say "I'm not gonna change your grade." "Well, then I won't be able to get into the fraternity. I need a 2.1" or something. I said, "Well, evidentially it's not my class only that is keeping you from [*laughter*] this." And one guy said, "All right. I'm gonna tell 'em you gave me an A." I said, "You tell 'em anything you want. I'm not going to tell—say anything, but if they ask me, I'm gonna tell 'em whatever the grade was that I gave you." So they did. He got in—he told 'em he got an A. [*Laughs*]

SL: He lied and got in. [*Laughs*]

JD: He lied about it, and he got in. But he was with the sergeant at arms, who was in on it. You know, so I figured he was gonna

make it anyway. But—so that kinda . . .

[00:30:11] SL: That's the kind of material they were . . .

JD: Yeah.

SL: . . . looking for, I'm sure. [*Laughs*]

JD: Yeah. And that, you know, that kind of—the world of a—like, you know, this was the college you saw in the movies, that kind of thing. So it was like—I felt—"Well, this"—I felt good about myself bein' here. And we did the poetry in the schools, so we drove—we went all over the state, goin' to the—all the little towns we stayed in. And so I got to see a lot of Arkansas. And I really liked, especially, the Delta. Over that way—West Helena, Forrest City, and even El Dorado, down that way. And had some great trips, stayed in some really crummy motels and—but saw a lot of the state. Ate some good food, good barbecue—best barbecue I've ever had in my life, Craig's in DeValls Bluff.

SL: Yeah.

JD: Man, that's the [*unclear word*]. [*SL laughs*] I wanna drive through there again. But—so yeah—so I got to see a lot of the state, and I really liked it, yeah.

[00:31:06] SL: So you were here for how long?

JD: I was here only for two years. I excelled. I went—stayed right through the summers, took out loans so I could just keep taking

classes and 'cause, again, you know, I had been working. I had no money. I had—so I had to—I took out loans while I was here. Made it through all right. I mean, I wasn't suffering. But then I needed—I know I needed to get a job, so—Cindy graduated a year before I did, and she was—waited around for me a year. And then we both got jobs in the same place. And so we took off. Went to Louisiana. So yeah.

SL: You ended up in Louisiana?

JD: Monroe, Louisiana.

SL: Okay.

JD: Guy named **David Jeffrey** ran the program. And then he ended up hiring more people from Arkansas after that, Pat Grant, who was in a workshop, and her partner, Elisabeth Grant-Gibson, who was an M.A. here. They went down there. They opened a bookstore after they taught. I'm trying to think. Jo McDougall taught there for a year or two. And I think—Pete Miller? No—I think there are one or two others who went through Monroe. He was really happy to hire people—writers—to teach composition, actual—so it was a good place.

[00:32:15] SL: Well, I do under—it is my understanding that the kids in the writing program were actually excellent English teachers.

JD: Yeah. Well, we had the Claude Faulkner background. And then we had . . .

SL: Yeah.

JD: . . . and then we—sentences were important to us and words and all that. So I think we were good teachers. I don't think these days with the way that rhetoric programs—which Cindy, actually, is a co-director of the one at FIU—it's a more sort of rigorous, and I don't—constrained in some ways. This is how we wanna teach. 'Cause they're not teaching creative writing. They're teaching writing for academia and how to—so it's different. And I don't know that we would be so welcomed in that world. You know, to teach the way we did, like, "Let's just"—[*unclear words*].

SL: There was a time—it was kind of a different time.

JD: Oh yeah, yeah. Yeah.

[00:33:12] SL: So the program served you very well.

JD: It was great. Everything—I mean, I was publishing before I left just because of what I learned in that class. Like, okay, I just—I wo—plot, you know, this is it. Start writing it, and write a plot, and you've got something and—so—and that gave me sort of validation, and you know, the support and the—so now I knew once—now I knew people all over the country who wrote and

who were teaching in programs who I went to school with. And they were here and there, and we all—we sort of kept in contact as we could before e-mail and all that stuff and Facebook and all that. But people stayed in touch. You'd see each other every year at an AWP Conference or whatever. And that's how—yeah, so there's kind of that Arkansas network all over the place and . . .

SL: Well, it seems to me that the program also—that was one of the strengths was that it did connect you to publishers and . . .

JD: Yeah.

SL: . . . to editors and there—there was these remarkable vortex of connections . . .

JD: Right.

SL: . . . that were spinning out of . . .

JD: Right.

SL: . . . that department.

[00:34:19] JD: And I'll say, in ev—I did a talk a couple of years ago at AWP, and it was about plot, which, in some programs, is kind of like, old-fashioned. It's considered, like, old-fashioned. Why talk about plot? There's so much else and all this stuff. And I said, "In Arkansas, all we did was talk about plot. That's all we talked about. That's all we were interested in." I said, "We were

interested in stories." Tell me a story, and not showing off, not being clever, nothing. Tell me a story. That's what I learned, to tell me a story. And I—you know, I—it's—when people say I'm a Southern writer, it's 'cause I—some of my stories are set in Louisiana and all that kind of stuff. And I said, "That's the happiest I am, is when I see my book on the Southern literature shelf." Like, I'm up there with my gods, right? That's great by me. It's not—I think it has this idea of Southern, regional writers, you know, local color, that kind of stuff. Every story is regional, whether it's set in Brooklyn or it's set in Fayetteville. It's still a regional story, and that's what you want. You want your story to come out of the earth that—where it took root. So I got to really appreciate the importance of telling the story. The characters are what's important. The author is unimportant. The characters are everything. Tell their story. Do justice to their lives. And that's what I learned here, and I believe it. I'm a convert. This is what—this is what storytelling—writing is to me. And I believe that the story's gonna—hopefully, the story will last longer than I will, right? People . . .

[00:35:58] SL: That's right.

JD: I'll be gone a long—but my character will never die. I'll die, but the characters don't. Like Hamlet's still alive. Shakespeare's

dead, but Hamlet is alive even though he dies every performance. He still lives, you know. And that's what you want for your character. So, yeah. So all of that. Just go tell me a story.

[00:36:17] SL: So the gatherings, the workshops, and then the partying . . .

JD: Yeah.

SL: . . . around the M.F.A. program here is pretty infamous and . . .

JD: Yeah.

SL: . . . and famous.

JD: Yeah, it was—you know, I probably did less partying. I mean, what I did was went to George's, hung out with people. I like talkin' to people. I mean, you know, and I did go to all the parties with the writers and all that stuff. But I don't think—you know, I don't remember anybody going really crazy. Usually, I was probably home already by the time somebody was crawlin' down the street, but [*SL laughs*]—and I think—you know, you could drink and walk home. That was the good thing about being here. You didn't need a car, so . . .

SL: Right.

JD: . . . you could go drink, and you weren't gonna get in trouble with a—with your car, anyway—legal trouble. But the first day I

was—this is first day I was in Fayetteville. I went to Leo Van Scyoc's orientation.

SL: Okay.

[00:37:13] JD: And I'm wa—and I'm saying hi to people, and I leave, and I'm with a guy named **Mike Kimball**, who was a M.A. student.

SL: Okay.

JD: And who was dating an M.F.A. student, and sh—Karen Osborn. They since married and all that. They're—actually, they live in Massachusetts. And Curt Harrell, who was a—from Arkansas, rural Arkansas. Had a motorcycle, lot of tattoos, all that. So they come out, and they say, "Hey, let's go get a six-pack of beer, and we'll go drink. We'll go down to the train depot, and we'll drink." I said, "You can drink in public in Fayetteville. This is fabulous. This is great." So we go down here, and we're sitting, and the bus—the train was closed at that . . .

SL: Yeah.

[00:37:54] JD: It was just a building there. We're standing out front—or sitting out front—drinkin' a beer, and the cops pulled up. And I know I didn't finish my first beer, so it wasn't like we were drunk. So **Mike Kimball** starts saying, "Oh"—he said,

"Oh, you can't drink here? Oh okay, put the beer away, boys," blah, blah, blah. And **Mike Kimball**, who was huge—he started givin' the cop some lip. He got busted. So, hey, I'm first day in Fayetteville, I'm goin' home to get cash to bail him out of the jail. [*SL laughs*] I have to find out where the jail is. So I go down there, and I say, "I'm here to get **Mike Kimball** out of jail." And they said, "We're not lettin' him out till the morning." I said, "Really? Fabulous." [*Laughter*] I don't have to spend my money. I said, "Okay. Tell him I was here." [*Laughter*] I guess he—maybe he had been drinkin' earlier. I don't know. But I—they thought he was drunk. But anyways, that was my first day in Fayetteville.

SL: First experience. [*Laughter*]

JD: "Oh, this is gonna be fun." [*Laughter*]

[00:38:50] SL: Well, is there—you know, it's interesting. I assume that you met Cindy . . .

JD: Met Cindy here.

SL: . . . while in the program.

JD: Right.

SL: So I wonder how many marriages came out of the program.

JD: I don't know, but I know ours did, and I know Tom Franklin and Beth Ann Fennelly met here and married, and there may be

more. You—ask people [*laughter*] that come in.

SL: Yeah, I will.

JD: I know, that's—yeah. And actually I met Cindy because I, as I said, I had stopped smoking, and there was one nonsmoking office in Kimpel Hall for TAs. So we were in the same office. There was Lee Martin, Roger Martens, Jim Naiden, me, Pam Carmell. So we're all in the same office, so that's how we met, anyway. And she was in poetry. And anyway, yeah, so soon after we were here, we started dating. Had our first date at the AQ Chicken House in Springdale.

SL: Chicken House in Springdale. [*JD laughs*] Yeah. Yeah. It was good, wasn't it?

JD: Yeah, it sure was. [*Laughter*]

[00:39:55] SL: Well that's good. So is there anything else that you wanna say about Bill and Jim or the program before I bring Cindy in?

JD: Well, no. I mean, I just—I like—have to thank them for everything good that's happened to me came—happened because I came here and because I was—they paid attention to me. They encouraged me. They also told me where I was going astray. They were very generous, very supportive. They were in—Bill especially just cut through every—just no bullshit

allowed. This was just like "Goddamn it, do this." [*Laughter*] He was exasperated half the time. One time he said, "I don't know if any you will ever—you just don't get it. You just don't." [*Laughter*] And he'd do that. [*Laughter*] So no, they were just—this—there aren't many people like that. The fact that they ended up at the same place. They started this program. They had such great heart. And I was never—you know, I don't know how they accept guys into the program and women into the program, but I know they have some kind of just knowing. Looking—from reading the story, I'm sure they get it. Like, "This is a person we want. They may not have the skills yet, but we want a person like this around because they're gonna be good for the program and good—you know, good citizens of the program" and all of that kind of stuff. And I've sent a few people their way, and the people I've sent their way are kind of people who get in trouble when they get here, you know. And I'd say, "Oh my God, they beat up somebody? Oh really? He did?" [*Laughter*] Or one guy last year got thrown out because he's bringing beer into Kimpel Hall, and it's the guy I sent from Miami. He's still here, thank God. [*SL laughs*] But he had—Skip had to like sort of go to bat for him 'cause they were gonna just thrown him right out of the program. And that—in our day,

it would have been—oh, beer in Kimpel Hall? [*Laughter*] What kind?

SL: Write about it.

JD: Yeah. Yeah. Give me some of that beer. And yeah, the days with—you know, academia has changed. It's become more corporate than it used to be, I think. I don't think that probably happened here in the creative writing program very much. But it was just a great place to be, and I would also say or, I guess, emphasize that the students here were very serious students and were here, and I learned as much from just sitting around listening to them talk about stories and say, you know, just, "This is how you read. This is what you read. This is how you talk about it." And everybody just respected Jim and Bill so much that, I mean, there was just like this—they were, you know. You would never wanna disappoint them. You would never wanna get on their bad side. You would never—you'd—I don't know what the hell you'd have to do to get on their bad side, you know, 'cause they still liked you anyway.

[00:42:50] SL: Not work, I would guess.

JD: [*Laughs*] Yeah, not work, that would be it. Like . . .

SL: Yeah. Mh-hmm.

JD: Yeah. Yeah. You know, so anyway, it was just a—it was a great

place. And it still is. I mean the tradition—you know, Skip was a student when I was there. And he had his book taken when we were there. It was like the first—a student had a book accepted. And I went like, "This can happen! This could happen!" Skip, who's read more than anyone in the world as far as I know—he's got more—he's the most well-read person I've ever met. Still. Anything you mention, he's read it a couple of times and talks about it. [*SL laughs*] So there were that—there were those guys who were around, and he carried that tradition on at least, you know—so it's still, yeah, great place.

SL: All right, great.

Trey Marley: Hey, real quick, let me get a still shot that I neglected to get at the beginning. So if you guys could just continue talking for a second, I'll grab . . .

JD: Okay.

TM: . . . a still.

[00:43:45] SL: So someone said that [*camera clicks*] Bill taught them how to see literature rather than read it.

JD: Yeah, I think that's right. It was, like, stories happen to people who tell them, and so if you're tellin' them and you're thinkin' about plots and shape all the time, you can see it out in the world. Here's another thing that was a difference between the

two of them. And which—Bill was always saying, "Take things out, take things out." And Whitehead was saying, "Put things in."

SL: "Put things in." [*Laughter*]

JD: So if you had a problem, Harrison would say, "Well, take this out, take that out. Get rid of this character and build a shape." And Jim would say, "All right, a cousin comes from Illinois." [*Laughter*] And it keeps gettin' bigger and bigger, and Bill's were getting shorter and shorter, so—and I think for me, probably—although, you know, I have a tendency to write like Jim, which was keep putting things in, putting things in, but then at the end it was like, okay, here comes Bill. All right, get rid of the stuff that didn't work, you know. So that's kind of what—I still do it that way. So I indulge myself in the drafts, and then I kind of tighten everything up later. So yeah. So how could you go wrong with that kind of a voice telling you two different things, and you go, "Oh, okay. Negative capability here." [*SL laughs*] I've gotta develop that. So yeah, I agree. [*Camera clicks*]

SL: All right.

JD: How many people you gonna . . .

TM: Great.

JD: . . . talk to today?

SL: I have—as many as we . . .

JD: Just that come in . . .

SL: . . . run through here.

JD: Let me get . . .

SL: Yeah.

[00:45:07 End of interview]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]