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

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Arkansas Memories Project

Bill Harrison Surprise Interviews

Otis Haschemeyer

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 Otis Haschemeyer 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, Otis. Uh—I'm Scott Lunsford. We're the—uh—we're from the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History. Uh—we're here today—uh—June 11. The year is [*camera clicks*] 2011. We're at Laurie Harrison's house. Um—and we're doing a series of interviews that will become a part of the Bill Harrison project at the Center.

Otis Haschemeyer: Awesome.

SL: Um—we record in—uh—high-def audio and [*camera clicks*] video. We preserve these recordings forever. Um—copies of them will be available at—uh—the Special Collections Department in Mullins Library . . .

OH: Oh, wow. Great.

SL: . . . at the University of Arkansas. [*OH sniffs*] Um—we will transcribe this interview. Uh—we will provide that transcription to you along with your raw footage of your interview. And I'll ask you to look and lis—and read both of those, and—and—uh—

if there's anything that you find that you're uncomfortable with in the raw footage or in the transcript, you let us know. And we will redact it for you. This is all about . . .

OH: Oh, if only life could be like that. [*Trey Marley laughs*]

[00:01:06] SL: It's all—it's all about your story. We're not here to catch you off guard or—you know, any—anything that you're uncomfortable with . . .

OH: Bill O'Reilly.

SL: . . . we'll get rid of. When you approve those changes, if there are changes, we will then post this stuff, and we'll probably not—uh—it's not our usual method to post all of the video . . .

OH: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . but we'll take segments of the video and highlights—what we call highlight clips—and people will be able to see and hear you talk on the web. We also post—but we will post all of the transcript. And we will post all of the audio. And we will encourage documentarians, researchers, Arkansas historians, students of Arkansas history—we'll encourage them to use this to help tell Arkansas's story.

OH: Okay.

SL: That's really what this is about. It's Arkansas folks or people that have had Arkansas in their—in their history in some way—

that it made a difference in their lives. That's what this is about. And—um—if you're comfortable with all of that, you need to tell me now, and if you're not, we'll stop, so are . . .

OH: Okay.

SL: . . . is that all okay with you?

OH: That sounds great. Let's—let's—let's roll with it.

SL: Okay, that's good.

OH: We'll—we'll see how it goes . . .

SL: Oh . . .

OH: . . . and redact the whole thing.

[00:02:19] SL: Otis, the first thing that we do is we ask for your—uh—full name and any unusual spellings and when and where you were born.

OH: Okay—um—full name's Andrew Otis Haschemeyer. I go by Otis. Um—I was born ninet—[*laughs*] eleven. November 13, 1963. Uh—Boston, Massachusetts.

SL: And how do you spell your last name?

OH: It's *H-A-S-C-H-E-M-E-Y-E-R.*

SL: Okay. And Boston, Mass?

OH: Mm-hmm.

SL: Excellent. And—uh . . .

OH: I'm a Yankeean, so . . .

SL: Good. [*Laughter*] That's fine. Um—and what were your parents' names?

OH: Um—my father is—uh—Rudolph Haschemeyer, and my mother is Audrey Haschemeyer.

SL: And her maiden name?

OH: Veazie. *V-E-A-Z-I-E*. You're gonna get me on spelling. I've never been a good speller.

SL: That's okay. [*Laughs*] Me either. Um—so—uh—you—uh—were—you grew up in all your—uh—childhood life in Boston or . . .

OH: Um—no, that was just a couple years. Um—my mother and father divorced when I was very young, and he—he moved to New York City, and he was a professor at Cornell Medical School. And then my mother also then moved to New York City later—um—and was a professor at Hunter College. So I actually—I grew up in New York City.

[00:03:43] SL: And went to New York City public schools or private schools?

OH: Went to—um—well, I went to a school at—in Hunter College [*laughs*]—uh—for what—you know, like, you know, the elementary. Then I went to a Catholic school. I'm not a Catholic, so I was an outsider. And then—uh—then my mother

had a sabbatical in England, so we were in England for a year. And you know, that was kind of a *Tom Brown's School Days* thing for me with beatings and, you know, punishment runs and things like that, and—um—then a little New York public school, and then—then I went to a boarding school for high school. Yeah, then back to state school.

SL: So let's see. Is—is that basically a series of private schools that you . . .

OH: Um—well—well, there was the—you know, Catholic schools are pretty—you know—uh—I guess that's a private school. Was, you know, a pretty—uh—accessible private school in—in the New York City area. And—uh—so there was there. Then there was—well, Wagner Junior High was a public school on Seventieth Street and Second, between Second and Third, so little public school.

[00:04:46] SL: Do you—uh—do you have any—uh—did you have any contact—or did you ever know either set of your grandparents?

OH: I did. I—on—on my father's side, not very well. They were farmers from Illinois. Both my parents were from Illinois, from the Midwest. And—uh—my mother from Chicago. And—uh—I knew my mother's parents, you know, fairly well.

SL: Mh-hmm.

OH: And then my father—on my father's side, not so well. I think I met them maybe once. They're—they, you know, were—well, they—they—they emigrated from Germany probably in 1890s, but in the home, they still spoke German. They spoke German in the—in that town, Golden, Illinois. Very small town.

SL: Uh-huh.

OH: Very predominantly German from one area of Germany, and they—they spoke Plattdeutsch. And—uh—and so when my father—uh—he was an unusual person who—who left and then got a Ph.D. in—in biochemistry.

[00:05:40] SL: Uh-huh. So—uh—you grew up in a—a fairly healthy—uh—amount of academia surrounding you.

OH: Lotta science. So I turned to writing.

SL: Yeah.

OH: Lotta science. I go—I just went to English. [*SL laughs*] [*Unclear word*].

SL: What—uh—what prompted you to go to English?

OH: Um—I think that a little bit. You know, I—I mean, I did grow up with a lotta—there was a lotta science, a lot of—a lotta logic, and there's a lotta logic in writing, actually.

SL: Sure.

OH: You know, so . . .

SL: Ma—there's actually quite a bit of math.

OH: Yeah, so you know, logical thinking was a big part of it, but I—I don't know—I turned to English. You know, I was—I—I grew up in New York City, and—and I had a—I did have a teacher in seventh grade in public school—Mr. Goff, actually. I remember his name, and he taught—I think it was—what's that—that Jack London—you know, it might have been *White Fang* or one of them. You know for—for seventh graders. And I was just—you know, I read that, and I was like, "What is this?" You know, I grew up in concrete. You know, I thought nature was Central Park. I thought trees were ginkgo trees. I thought wildlife was a rat, you know.

SL: Uh-huh.

OH: Joke—I'm joking about that a little bit. [*Laughter*] Um—but—uh—but you know, I read this book, and I . . .

SL: That's what you knew and . . .

[00:06:51] OH: Yeah, I read this book, and it just, you know, it just transports you to this other—this other world, you know. And I think not only just—not only another world, but also into the—into the—uh—consciousness of other things. You know, into animals and, you know, wherever. You can go anywhere you

want. And—uh—I don't know. That—that got me kind of excited about English.

SL: So you gradated high school in 1980 . . .

OH: [Nineteen] eighty-one.

SL: [Nineteen] eighty-one.

OH: That was a—I did go to a boarding school for three years. And that was in Williamstown, Massachusetts. And I went to state school and then back to New York for a little while, and then I went to teach at that school. So I taught at that boarding school for seven years also.

[00:07:34] SL: So—but you—you got an undergraduate degree from . . .

OH: SUNY-Binghamton.

SL: Uh-huh. And you went back and taught English?

OH: Then I went back and taught English in—at this high school, yeah. I taught sophomore English.

SL: Uh-huh.

OH: Lotta Dostoevsky. That was one of my—*Heart of Darkness.*

SL: Yes.

OH: Did *Heart of Darkness* a lot of times. [*SL laughs*] Um—taught a little American history, which I was not very good at, actually.

SL: Yeah.

OH: Becau—well, I just didn't know it. The first ye—the first time I taught American history, I taught it backwards, figuring that I could learn the stuff before they learned it. [*SL laughs*] But I was told later that that was kind of a confusing way to do it. [*Laughter*]

SL: Flashback—uh . . .

OH: Yeah, right.

SL: . . . probably not the best—uh—method.

OH: Yeah. Th—right. "Th—in the last election, this person won, and then"—[*SL laughs*] you know. I was just tryin' to keep one page ahead. "Who, what? What was before that?"

[00:08:20] SL: Well, were you—uh—messing with—uh—doing any writing through any of that?

OH: I did. You know, I—I—uh—during—you know, I—I—I wrote my first short story—um—you know, seriously, as a sophomore in high school. And—um—and I even had a little—you know, it was like—you know, in high school, I got a little success. The teacher read it, and I was like, "Oh, I like that," you know. It made me feel embarrassed and a lot of other things. But—um—and really from that point on, I was—you know, writing was in my mind. And I remember in college I had a paper to write, and instead of writing the paper, I—I wrote a story and handed that

in, and—and that—you know, the professor said it was—it was funny. It was in an American humor class, and it was kind of in the style of Mark Twain and—and—uh—you know, kind of bigger than life, and—and—uh—he read that in class, and everybody had a good laugh at it. But then he said, "You know, you still gotta write the paper." [*SL laughs*] I was like, "Shit. I meant—I meant that to be for the paper," you know. So—so I always had it on my mind, and I was typing here and there, but I—you know, when I was teaching, you know, the reality was I wasn't writing regularly, you know, and I—and I still wanted that. So at some point—well, I had taught there for seven years—at some point, I was just like, "You know, it's time for a change. I really wanna do this."

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:09:36] OH: And—uh—and then I also thought to myself—I mean, really, pretty purposefully, I was like, "I wanna go somewhere else. I wanna go and"—kind of, I mean, for what it's worth, I—I was like, "I wanna experience a different culture." And—um—I think I probably had it on my mind that—um—you know, that the South has this storytelling tradition, and I can joke that, like, you know, my parents came from the Midwest, where they don't really tell stories, you know. You know, I—I

ask my mother, you know, to tell me something, and she's like, "Oh yeah, that was a tough year." You know [*SL laughs*], that's—that's how—that's how Midwesterners tell stories, and—and—uh—you know, so I had this idea that the South was gonna be this place where I would learn to tell stories. And—um—I applied here, and I—you know, they have a great—I mean, I think that they have a model for applying to the program here. Just send a story, and they'll tell you whether they accept you. And then they're like, "Well, then you're gonna have to take the test and stuff like that." And I talked to Skip, and he's like, "But if you can't pass that—if you can't pass that fuckin' test, you know—uh—it's okay. [*Laughs*] You know, you—we—we're still gonna take you. Don't worry about it, you know." So they—they had that—they had that policy. So I sent 'em a story that I—uh—well, I—I mean, I had the connection. I took a—I took a class with Barry Hannah at Bennington College, which was very close to my school.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:10:51] OH: So—so I got a little grant from the school to take this writing class, and I went up there, and I had Barry Hannah. And—uh—I thought I had written a really great story. And—uh—I thought it was, you know, a masterpiece.

SL: Right.

OH: And I gave it to Barry Hannah, and Barry Hannah said, "This meanders like a drunk on a bender." [*SL laughs*] I was like, "I guess you would know." I didn't really know Barry at that point but . . .

SL: Right.

OH: [*Laughter*] And—uh—and that made me mad, and—uh [*laughs*]—I'd—actually, I talked to him, you know, because I wasn't gonna take any shit, you know. I didn't even know who Barry Hannah was, you know.

SL: Right.

[00:11:23] OH: I was like, "Ugh," you know, and I went to talk to him because it—what made me—what made me upset was not so much that he criticized me, but that he got a good line off at my expense, you know, so—um—and then—uh—then from that, he just kept saying, "Where's the story? Where's the story? Where's the story?" And I felt like I had a little—you know, I think that that's probably Harrison—Barry Hannah—you know, that's—I felt like I had a little Barry Hannah parrot on my shoulder [*SL laughs*], you know, saying, "Where's the story?" You know, and so I sat down and was just, you know, it was at Bennington. It was two weeks or something like that, and I was

spending a lotta time just hangin' out with writers saying, "God, I love this. I love talking about books and stories and trying to do this." And I—I just hammered out something and—in that two weeks. And I gave it to Barry, and he liked it. It was just a simple story. Just tell a story, and I—I just tried to tell one, and with that little Barry Hannah parrot going, "Where's the story? Where's the story?" And uh—and it was good, and it got me into Arkansas. And I didn't apply anywhere else. I—uh—you know, I sent the story, and they said they would take me. I drove two days down here to—to meet with Skip. And—uh—and I mean, you know Skip, so I walked into the office, and he's like, "Well—uh—thanks for comin'—uh—there's not much to tell you. There's—this—we're on this hallway. And—uh—English department's upstairs." And he's like, "That's about it." And—uh—it's like, "So have fun." And I'm like—so I—I walked out, and I was like, "Well, he didn't bullshit me." [*SL laughs*] You know. I—I decided I liked him. You know, and there was no bullshit involved. And—um—so I—I just said, "I'm not gonna apply anywhere else." I'd just come here.

[00:13:00] SL: How did you hear about it? Did you hear about it from Hannah or . . .

OH: From—from Barry, yeah. I mean, I asked him. I didn't—I didn't

know he'd been a student here. I'd—I actually only learned that many years later.

SL: Uh-huh.

[00:13:10] OH: I didn't—I didn't know he'd been the first student or anything like that. I—I didn't really even know his work. You know, I was just, you know, self-obsessed, tryin' to—[laughs] tryin' to write, you know. And—um—so I asked him for a list of places, and—uh—he said—he said here, so that—I just put that on my list. And then he said Ole Miss. And you know, he said a couple places from the South, so maybe that's part of the—what put that, you know, the idea of, like, going into the South and—on my mind—um—but I came here. I did drive to Ole Miss, and I was just—when I was—when I was at Ole Miss, I was just like, "Oh, I don't know. I'm really gonna be [*laughter*] out—I'm really gonna be a fish outta water here." And . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

OH: . . . and—uh—I—I didn't end up applying there, and I—I didn't really learn anything about the program. But I—I liked Skip a lot when I met him, so I just—uh—I decided to make it here. And that was it. I got off the East Coast and was here for seven years.

SL: So—uh—you get here in what year?

OH: Uh—I think [19]94.

SL: Okay.

OH: Mh-hmm. Yep.

[00:14:11] SL: And—uh—what did you think of—uh—what was your first impression of Fayetteville when you got here?

OH: Um—what was my first impression of Fayetteville? Um—I'm not sure. I liked—you know, for me it was a—you know, it was pretty great. I mean, I came from a boarding school, and you know, I was living in the top of a boys' dorm. And I was, you know, whatever I—I was, a role model or something. I don't know. And then I—then I—every other weekend, I'd have a weekend off, and I'd go to New York City and just raise hell. And now I was finally someplace where I could just raise hell all the time. I could just do whatever I wanted in a sense. So that, I think, colored my idea of Fayetteville. I mean, I had a little apartment, and I—I didn't feel like I had anyone watching me anymore, and I didn't [*laughs*], you know, I didn't have to be on good behavior. And—uh—so I just started having a great time. I thought it was a great, great town. Um—I liked JR's, you know. I went there. And I—uh—and I had just got into—I got into the program. I just, you know, I—I mean, I—it was a—it was a great time for me. Um—I—I wrote. I mean, I—I was

trying to write every day and covering whatever little coursework I had to do, and—um—and then I would go out and drink beer, and then the next day, it would start over again. It was just—it was just wonderful.

[00:15:30] SL: Idyllic. So—uh—do you member the first time that you—uh—met Bill?

OH: I do, absolutely. This is—uh—this is one of the things I've—I've always taken with me. And if anyone asks, I mean, I've—I've been to a couple different places since then. I—um—I—I went to Stanford from here. Um—I had a Stegner Fellowship. Um—then my partner and I—I was in France for a little while and then—then came back, and my partner and I wanted to do something, and they gave me some money at—uh—University of Tennessee, and I did a Ph.D. there. And then she's doing her M.F.A. at Oregon. I'd—so I've—and I'm familiar with a lot of writing programs, and—and when I first came here, I tell—I tell this story a lot. You know—uh—Jim and Bill and Skip and—uh—who was the guy—who was the guy that did the grammar? He would . . .

SL: Claude Faulkner.

OH: Claude Faulkner. No, after him.

SL: Oh.

OH: It was—uh . . .

SL: I don't know.

OH: . . . uh—Leo Van Scyoc?

SL: Leo Van Scyoc, yeah.

[00:16:23] OH: I don't think—may—maybe he wasn't there. But anyway, the writing faculty were there, and . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

OH: . . . and—uh—and I think it was the first time we met him. It was kind of a—this meeting, and so, you know, I ended up in a room with these strangers and, you know, these pretty imposing—I mean, let's face it, very imposing [*laughs*], you know, triumvirate are standing there, and—and they're saying—uh—you know, probably it was Bill. He said, you know, "There—there are gonna be a lotta people, you know, asking you to do a lotta things here, you know. A lotta people pulling you this way and that, and I'm here to tell you right now that you're here to write. And screw all the rest of that. You're here to write. That's what you gotta do." And—uh—I—uh—I think that that's—I don't know. I would—I—I'd take that anywhere. I'd say that's—that's the first thing that you should tell anyone coming into a creative writing program, you know. And most places don't. I—I know for a fact that they don't. They don't tell you

anything, so I've—I always taken that—I've taken that with me. "You're here to write." That was it. And so that was just—that was embedded in my mind when I was here. "I'm here to write. That's it. The rest of it doesn't matter." And that's—that—you know, that's proven to be true.

SL: Yeah. Well, it kinda gave you a—a—an immediate champion if anyone challenged—uh—you to do something else or tried to bend your will . . .

OH: Yep, we had . . .

SL: . . . you'd say, "No. That's not what I'm here for."

[00:17:39] OH: Well, they had, you know, they had a new—you know, they had a new guy, who was—you know, it—they had these composition programs—we all had to teach composition, so—and I understand that that's kind of important, you know [*laughs*], I guess. Um—and—uh—th—you know, they have all these ideas about how that should be done. They wanna—you know, they want good teachers, and—and—uh—and I think probably, generally, the creative writing students have been some of the best teachers that they've had . . .

SL: Yeah.

OH: . . . in the composition program, you know, because the creative writing program gets people from everywhere, you know. It's a

top-ranked program, you know.

SL: Yeah.

OH: Um—but—uh—uh—yeah, it was good to know you had that champion. And I think, you know, someone said, probably Skip—you know, he said, you know, "If you—uh—if you end up in jail, we—you know, call us. We'll bail you out." I mean, I remember that. That was the second [*SL laughs*] great thing I put in—put it—put in the back of my mind. I'm sure a lotta people'll tell you that, but I mean . . .

SL: Yeah.

OH: . . . my memory is like, "You call us. We'll bail you out." And—uh—during my stint here, I don't think any of us were in jail. Jay Prefontaine was here a little bit before me, and I got to know him as he came back. I think he—I think he's probably the inspiration for that—um—[*SL laughs*] that comment.

SL: The case study.

[00:18:45] OH: I'm not positive about that, but I'm pretty sure he was the inspiration for that because I think he ended up in jail and Skip bailed him out, but . . .

SL: Yeah.

OH: . . . um—but—uh—to know that, you know, these guys would, you know, back you up. And not—no judgment. Hey, you know,

sometimes you end up in jail. You know, sometimes it goes this way and that way, you end—you end up in jail, and—and we'll bail you out. That's not . . .

SL: Part of your story.

OH: Yep. You're not—you're not a bad person because you're in jail. Just get out and keep writing. You're—you're away from your typewriter. That's the problem.

[00:19:15] SL: What about Jim Whitehead?

OH: Uh—well, he—he was there, so you know, he's quite a—an imposing figure. Um—I remember—uh—just going to [*laughs*]—going to some parties, you know, Jim would be on one side. You know, he had this, you know, outdoor furniture. I think he just sat out there most of the time and smoked cigarettes, and Skip would be smoking cigarettes. And they would just, you know, just go at it. Just arguing. Or you'd just turn around, someone would say something. I mean, it was just—it was—he—he was intimidating, you know.

SL: This is on his deck at his home?

OH: Yeah.

SL: Yeah.

OH: You know, a block from—block from Skip's house, where—between which Skip famously fell into a ditch. I'm sure you'll get

that story a couple times.

SL: Well, you can tell me that story.

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:20:00] OH: I wasn't there, but I don't—I might have been there at the party, but [*laughs*] I—you know, I heard it in hearsay, but he said—he's like, "Oh, I gotta walk home." He walked home. He didn't make it. It's only a block away. [*Laughter*] But he ended up waking up in a ditch between the two houses. I think he's—he said it was lucky it didn't rain, he woulda drowned to death. So—and so—anyway, that was probably a famous party. But Jim was intimidating, you know. I mean, he's a big guy, had very strong opinions. Yeah. Was well read. He would—you know, he would turn—you know, you'd say something, and it would be like, "Jesus Christ, Otis." Sorry if I do the voices. I tend to do the voices. "Jesus Christ, Otis. You gotta read Thomas Aquinas." I'm like, "I don't even know who Thomas Aquinas is." "God, you don't know who Thomas Aquinas is?" You know, he was like—he would—it's like he would explode if you hadn't read Thomas Aquinas. I don't know how many people have gotten out of this program reading Thomas Aquinas, but many more than would have otherwise, you know.

SL: Right. Well . . .

OH: Like, "Jesus Christ" . . .

SL: . . . it's important work.

OH: . . . "Otis, get a hawk in this story," Jim would say.

[00:21:06] SL: Well you know, don't you think that [*TM coughs*] Jim was, in a way, baiting for argument? I mean, he had this persona of being absolutely positive that he was right and that this is the way it is and this is why, and he's just kind of waiting for someone to say, "Well, wait a minute."

OH: You had to earn your place with Jim.

SL: Yeah.

OH: Yeah, yeah. He definitely—you know, he had strong opinions, and I agree. I don't think he wanted you just to take his opinions. He wanted you to grapple with him. But that was a difficult thing to do. I mean, I mainly keep my—kept my mouth shut, you know. For me, it's—you know, if I'm gonna argue with someone, I sort of—you know, I'll go like, "Well, can I take 'em in a fight?" [*Laughter*] And with Jim, the answer was no. So I just kept my mouth shut. But I actually—I had a friend here. He was an architect. He was in the architecture program. And the architecture program is good here, too. And he came over to a party, and it was kind of a good moment because, I mean, Jim knew about everything and had an opinion about anything

anyway, if he knew about it or not. He would just, you know, this and that. And my friend is a pretty big guy, you know, too, and a tall guy. And they started arguing about architecture, and I was proud of my friend that I brought him over, and he did hold his own, anyway, with Jim for a little while and gained the esteem of everyone sitting around him, like, "Not bad," you know. [*SL laughs*] My friend Mason, but—yeah, that was—those were really something sitting around there. I mean, you'd just listen, and you'd just be like—well, Jim always made it—you know, what I liked about Jim in the workshop—I mean, he would ramble and would go all over the place. I mean, he wasn't as focused. Bill was the most focused. You know, he'd be—you know, he'd just hit you with something, you know. "This arena's good," or, you know. One workshop he just said—he had a paper, and he said, "Who would like to comment on this?" And someone, you know, maybe went [*clears throat*], and he said, "No, I will." It's like, "Why is this story so bad?" [*Laughter*] I thought it was a real question. I was thin—trying to think of it—think of the answer. But it wasn't really a question. [00:23:34] But Jim would take a story and like—you—you know, you just—you thought it was a story about a dog or something like that, and you just wrote it. [*Laughs*] And it's like—and he would

bring it up to this level of—you know, it was like—I don't know. It was a requiem—a requiem—how do you say that? Requiem. Yeah, it was a requiem. You know, it was like he would just bring it up to this kind of symphonic level, you know. "This means this, and this is the metaphorical quality here. And get a hawk in there, and that's gonna make it swirl into the gyre that you want it to be." You know, I mean, he would just elevate your work. And that's—I think that's what he brought. Like, he brought that sense that you were producing something that might be like Jim saw it. You know, like, "Really?" [*Laughs*] You know, it was like, "I never thought of it like that, you know. This is—this is real art that you're creating." And he always gave it that quality. It was pretty amazing.

[00:24:35] SL: Yeah, someone said Jim had this habit—this method of wanting to expand and add to a piece, but Bill would oftentimes say, "Well this doesn't work, this doesn't work, this goes. Le—get rid of this." So you had, like, diametrically opposed methods.

OH: I think that's right. I think—yeah, Jim—I mean, I think Jim wanted to bring everything into that swirling gyre, you know. Just bring it all in, you know, and see what comes out of it. And Bill was much more like, "Where's the story? Just tell the story,

for Christ's sake. [*Laughter*] And stop with all this stuff." But I took an amazing class with Jim. It was with Jim and Brian Wilkie where we—was it just Yeats? No, Yeats—we had William Carlos Williams—but I'm not sure what else we read. Yeats, William Carlos Williams, maybe a couple other things, and it was just—it was in Jim's basement. It was one of, you know, the most wonderful classes I ever had. Jim would start quoting lines. I—you probably know Brian Wilkie too, and—who was amazing. I got to take some classes with him. I—you know, I stuck to the creative writing faculty and Brian Wilkie. [*SL laughs*] That's all. I didn't take classes with, you know, the critics or any of those people, I think. And you know, Jim would start quoting lines from a poem, and then Wilkie would go, "Uh—no, I don't think so." And then he would start about twenty lines earlier and go twenty lines further on, you know. [*SL laughs*] They were just like—and it was just like—I don't know—you just recognize something about, I don't know, poetry and writing and just being around—I mean, I think that's—I don't know—we keep talking about that here and, like, why this program is so great. But it's like—part of it is just bein' around, you know, Whitehead and Bill and Skip. You know, this kinda love of telling a story. You know, I think it's more personal. You know, I don't think it

comes down to, like, what happened in a class. I think it was really personal. I mean, I think it was the opportunity to be around these guys, you know, and really care a lot about this stuff, and we're living the life. And that's why I came here. I wanted to learn how to live the life of a writer. And I think I learned that a little bit.

[00:27:06] SL: They made their intellect accessible.

OH: Yeah, yeah. Or just—but it was just part of them. I mean, there wasn't a separation. It was not like, "Oh, here we're doin' this, and here we're doin' that." They were just living the life. They were living the life of, you know, reading and talking and telling stories and quoting lines of poetry and getting into arguments and sometimes getting into fist fights and [*SL laughs*], you know, just—you know, it was just . . .

SL: Burly. Someone said it was burly.

OH: Yeah [*laughs*], it was burly. And you had to get a little burly, you know. [*Laughter*] You had to hold your own, you know.

SL: Yeah.

OH: Or you know, you tried to—it was just—it's an aspiration, you know. When I came here, I didn't think I was a writer. I was just trying to be a writer. And that is another thing that I really took from this program is that they treated you like you were a

writer—that your work—that you had the potential in your work to change something—you know, to really change the world. I don't even know if that's true in literature or not. But they treated you like that—you know, like you had that potential, and they honored that. And it makes you start to believe it in yourself. I mean, I didn't believe that when I got here, and I'm not sure if I totally—you know, I don't think I believed it when I got out. But I had it—I had that in me, and I knew that I'd been treated that way, and that felt good. You know, they brought you into the club. It's a tough club.

[00:28:26] SL: The—you know, what also strikes me about this program was the amount of connections and the relationships outside—you know, all the publishers and editors and other writers that they'd bring in. Seems like to me it was like a—not only were you a part of this community here and this department here, but all of a sudden it was like all across the country there were—people were taking note, and you had a whole series—there was much more available to you than what was just happening in this town. It was like they had all this—they knew everybody and everybody knew them.

OH: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I—you know, but when I was here, I wasn't that aware of—I wasn't really aware of that, you know. Michael

Curtis came in, you know, from the *Atlantic.* And you know, people would come in and you'd meet them, but the center of my time here was really with the people who were here, you know. And I mean, I think that that probably all, you know, bore out. I mean, when I was thinking about coming here, I was sort of like, "Well, you know, I'm gonna write. It doesn't—you know, in a sense it doesn't matter where I write. You know, so if I write something good, then it'll get noticed, you know." I just hoped that that was true. And I think that did turn out to be true, you know. And I think that those connections do help. And I didn't even know that Arkansas was a great program. I just know that I came down here and I liked Skip. You know, I was just goin'—I was just followin' a rabbit into a hole what—you know, it didn't make any—you know, I wasn't [*laughs*] researching anything.

SL: There wasn't any strategy.

[00:30:04] OH: [*Laughter*] No, I had no strategy whatsoever. I was like, "Well, they"—I knew that I needed to have some money. So I saw that they had some assistantship, you know, and that they would pay me a little, and that was it. So I didn't know that it was a, you know, a program or who came out of it. I didn't know Barry Hannah came out of it. I didn't know who

Barry Hannah was. And when I took the workshop with him, I hadn't read any of his books. So [*laughs*] I wasn't your ideal—you know, this is, you know—but—so for me I didn't notice that too much, but I—but there were people here that, you know, just, you know, that, you know, you—I don't know if it was admire, you just know that they're gonna be your friends, you know, forever, you know. It's like, they're just great people. Tom Franklin was, you know, in my year, and you know, a lot of other great writers. John Reimringer and—you know, they just—everyone's just after it. You know, they were really goin' after writing and took that seriously, and they were, I don't know, professional or whatever—they just—they had big dreams, you know, and maybe romantic dreams about what it was to be a writer, you know. I think I had those. I didn't realize you had to sit at a desk quite so much. I didn't know you had to type so much. I thought you got to go to bullfights, and [*SL laughs*] I didn't know there was so much writing involved. [*Laughter*] So . . .

SL: Or the work.

OH: Yeah, I didn't . . .

SL: That it was so hard.

OH: Yeah, that too. I thought you just got to go out and have a lot

of experiences, but—yeah.

[00:31:32] SL: Well, are there any other moments with Bill or with Jim that were kind of aha moments for you where maybe they said something to you that [*snaps fingers*] made something inside you go, "Oh, yeah."

OH: That was—you know, I had that a lot with Bill. Like, when I came here, even though I taught English for, you know, many years, I actually didn't really know the language or writing very much. You know, I didn't really know what point of view was. I wouldn't have been able to use that term. You know, I looked at books, and I analyzed them and talked about this, that, and the other thing. And I was workin' with kids, and I was tryin' to make it relevant for them, and so I didn't know any of that stuff. And Bill was huge for me because, you know, he'd say things. And he can be glib, and he can be quick, and he can, you know, cut—he cuts to the chase. And I think the one thing that I did that helped me that I think some other students sometimes didn't do, and maybe they didn't pursue writing after that, was I just tried to really say, "Okay, I believe that he knows what he's talking about. I don't understand it, and I'm gonna try and understand what the hell he's talking about." So I would just sit there—you know, he'd say something, and I would take—you

know, it'd be like—and what Bill would do, he would say something short enough that you could kind of—you know, you could take it away with you and be like, "What the hell does that mean? What the hell does that mean?" And I remember there was one story that this woman wrote, and I didn't think it was any good at all. And he said, "This is a great arena." And I didn't even know—I didn't know what that meant, you know, "Great arena?" I thought, "This story sucks." You know, I was like, "This is terrible. What's good at—what is he praising about it, you know?" And I just took that away, and I mean, a lot of the things that he said, I've just, like—I've just kept them on my mind, you know, through the years. I mean, he said things that clearly that I've just continued to grapple with them as I work and try and figure out why they're right, you know, and that's—that served me.

[00:33:29] SL: What did he mean by arena?

OH: Well, the arena is, you know, the environment, the locale. And I do remember that story. That story took place in a prison. I didn't think she knew shit-all about a prison, you know, but that didn't really matter. She didn't know about it yet. But she'd chosen a place that was gonna be dynamic, that was gonna be a like a character in relationship to the other characters. It was

gonna have a dynamic purpose in the story. Whereas I would write a story where everyone's sitting around eating dinner again, you know, in the living room. She's got it taking place in a prison. You know, it's like, have it take place in the Colosseum, you know. And if it's gonna be in the Colosseum, don't have it be in the seats, you know, have it be, you know, on the dirt, where something's really gonna happen.

SL: Yeah.

[00:34:11] OH: And I think—I don't know, I've taken that away with me, and I've been like, "Yeah, if we—you know, a writer has a choice of—you know, you have a choice of characters. You have a choice of where it takes place. You have a choice of a number of things. Why would you make any of those less than great? Make them all as good as you possibly can." He also said—he said, "Make the character as smart as you possibly can. Make the main character as smart as you possibly can." And I always took that away. Make them as smart as you can. Not—you know, he would be like—I mean, he was always sayin', like, you know, "I hate these Bubba stories," you know. [*Laughs*] You know, where you just have some ignoramus. Well, you know, it's like, "Sure, bad shit happens to an ignoramus. You're right. I mean, that's not a story." "Uh—I didn't know that that crane

was gonna hit me." [*Laughter*] You know, it's like—it's not a story, you know. He said that—one of the ones I took away too—he said—how does it go? It goes—about experimental fiction, he would say, "Well, if you invite everyone to watch a football game, and you walk out into the middle of the field and you start juggling, you better be a hell of a juggler. [*Laughter*] And I always took that away. And I've said that to many people, actually, like about experimental fiction. "You better be a hell of a juggler." That's right, you know. They're there to watch a football game [*laughs*], so you start juggling, you better be damn good at it. Yeah, he said a lot that I really took away. I mean, I was reading that there's some list of his kind of—his truisms, but—and I realized some of 'em I've been teaching, and I think that—you know, I think that they're mine. You know, I think I came up with it, but I guess not. [*SL laughs*]

[00:35:58] SL: Well, so what is it that you do now?

OH: What do I do now? Let's see, I—[*laughs*] I'm trying to think. We were drinkin' last night, so I'm still a little more—I most recently taught online for Stanford. So I taught a creative non-fiction class, and we're living—my partner and I are living in Eugene, Oregon. And . . .

SL: That's beautiful.

OH: Yeah. And she just completed her M.F.A. from Oregon. And we have two daughters.

SL: Good.

OH: And taking care of them and raising them and writing a lot.

[00:36:40] SL: So this program has—you have—it changed your life and . . .

OH: Oh.

SL: . . . has given you what you've got.

OH: Absolutely. I wrote—you know, probably [*laughs*] most would say my most successful piece in Bill Harrison's nonfiction workshop. I wrote a piece about a Desert Storm sniper who I met here in Arkansas. And I interviewed him extensively and wrote a piece, and that's the piece that got me into Stanford. You know, I remember I was here—when I finished the program, I just worked at Dickson Street Bookshop for two years. And you know, I was just trying to write. You know, I was ha—I was completely content. I wanna write, and you know, I work in the bookshop, and that's it. That was completely fine. And you know, I guess I must have managed to send out that application to Stanford. And I remember the day that—I came home, and I had—you know, I had a answering machine that would tell you, like, three on it. And I listened to—the first two messages was

that I was, you know, late with my rent. [*Laughs*] And then the third one was Stanford calling me to—telling me that I got into the Stegner program. And I wrote that piece, you know, in Bill's workshop. You know, it took me about a year, you know, to really get it right. But you know, that's the—I think I learned that from Bill too. Like, I mean, sometimes people'll say—you know, they'll say, "Well, how did"—you know, they were like, you know, "How do you get into Stanford?" They think there's some kind of trick. And I'm like, "You gotta write something that someone picks up and they cannot put down. That's it. That's how you get in," you know. And that's—that—I think that was always the standard here, you know. And I would tell that to students too. It's like, you know, "Writing is a great thing. You know, if someone doesn't wanna read it, they just toss it to the side. So you better make it good, you know."

[00:38:39] SL: Anything else you wanna say about Bill or Jim?

OH: Bill or Jim? Let's see. What to tell.

SL: Or John.

OH: I didn't know John very well.

SL: Okay.

OH: I beat Bill at snooker regularly.

SL: That's good.

OH: He . . .

SL: That must have been hard for him.

OH: It was very hard for him. Okay, I'm lying. [*Laughter*] No, I wanna put that on. I was—I—he was jealous of me for a number of reasons. I was a better snooker player than him [*SL laughs*] was primary among them. I was better read than Jim. No [*laughs*], I'm kidding. I'm kidding. [*SL laughs*] You know, I don't know. I don't know how to—you know, I look at the people that come, and I think that it must go, you know, a little bit up and down, you know, how, you know, in terms of—I think the place is always great, and they're always doin' good work. And those guys were always doin' good work. And they put the pressure on. You know, like, I think—you know, Jim was—he was ex—he wanted everything to be that swirling gyre, and he—you know, he was accepting of a lot of things. And he would give you—he would argue with you, but it was benevolent. And Bill was putting the coals to your feet, you know, and saying that you—you know, "Sharpen up and make this good. You don't have to do this." [00:40:0] You know, I learned from him too that, you know, whatever he's gonna say, if you quit writing, you weren't ever gonna be a writer. Because no—nothing's gonna make someone who's meant to be a writer quit writing. That's

something I have taken away. You know, I'll tell that to people, you know, and I feel that way when I teach too. Not that—I don't know if you got the story about Bill once said—and he's lookin' at a manuscript, and he said, "I would have rather cut off my hands at the wrist than write this paragraph." [*Laughter*] I don't think that happened in my workshop. I think I heard that from the outside. [*Laughter*] But that might have been the year before or something. I was like, "Ooh." [*Laughter*] So you better write a good paragraph. And I wish—I would like to say that to a few people. I usually say it to myself. "Write a better paragraph than that."

[00:41:01] SL: There is something about gettin' to know these guys outside the classroom that reinforces the attitude or the condition that you really don't wanna disappoint them.

OH: Yeah.

SL: It's a personal thing that—inside people. They respect those guys—respected those guys so much.

OH: Well, it . . .

SL: They didn't wanna waste their time, and they didn't wanna disappoint them, and they—and I don't know that it was so much the wrath or, you know . . .

OH: Yeah, yeah. We didn't—no, it wasn't wrath. It was like, you

know, the expectation is that you're here to write. You're making art. You know, and that's your—what did Jim Whitehead say? I'm not gonna get this quote right but, you know—oh, Skip and—you know, it's the story that Skip and Jim are writing. And Skip had given someone some advice, "Just do this," and you know, it's like—Jim—I don't know exactly how it went back and forth, and he says, "Well, don't you know, they're writing for God." [*SL laughs*] You know, and it had that attitude. You know, it's bigger than—it's bigger than you. You know, the standard is pretty high. It's not just here. It's not even in the workshop. I mean, that's the other thing. You know, it's like, "Well, we're writing in the workshop, you know." You sometimes see people that are like—they're worried about what someone else is doing in a workshop and whether someone likes their story or not. It's like, "What the fuck does that matter, you know? You know, that's not the standard. You know, you're here to publish it. You're here to"—you know, I mean, I don't know about immortalize, but it's like, "That's your standard. You know, your standard is to literature and to art, not to, you know, these little petty concerns." [00:42:40] But the way they had their houses open, you know, the way—I mean, you just—it was a life, you know. Oh, but that's what I was gonna say before—I

mean, I don't know about the ebb and flow. You know, it's always a good program, but when I was here, it was just, you know, remarkable, you know, the people I was able to be with. And you know, still know a number of them, but it was just great. Tom Franklin would, you know, go over to Skip's with a bottle of Bushmills, and I mean, he would just have—it wasn't—you know, it wasn't like an extra class or anything. It was—class was almost the immaterial part of it, you know. Getting there in the workshop and what you said in the workshop here and there, that was the least of it, you know. That was the smallest portion. The bigger portion was, you know, being writers and talking and drinking and telling toward—telling stories and sitting around lying and [*laughter*] you know.

SL: Who could tell the biggest lie.

[00:43:35] OH: Oh my God. Well, David Gavin has gotta be—he's got a lot of the blarney. But Skip—you know, the other thing, I mean, and you'll know this, is like, I mean, I came here to—because I thought that I was like—th—I need to learn to love the stories. I mean, I came here for that, and I don't know how I lucked out and got that, but that's what I got. You know, I got a place where they love telling stories. And you hear 'em. We love telling stories about each other. You know [*laughs*], we tell

the same stories over and over. I mean, I don't think that there's any story that I haven't heard, you know, thirty times. You know, sometimes you're lucky not to hear it three times in one night.

SL: Right.

[00:44:13] OH: But we love it. We'll tell it, you know, again and again until we get it right. You know, you gotta tell it. We love hearing them, but they gotta be told right. [*SL laughs*] You know. You tell it right, and everyone'll listen. They'll just sit happily, you know, drinkin' their beer. You get these guys going out—you know, we [*laughs*] would go out. Wherever we went, we didn't talk to anyone, you know. [*Laughs*] We didn't, you know, play this game or listen to the music. We'd just sit around talking. You know, it's just like, talk, talk, talk. Tellin' stories. Not ta—you know—yeah, just telling stories. "This person did that. Oh, I remember. Oh gee." I was like [*SL laughs*]—Skip would always say—Jay Prefontaine, he was a great guy. And he—I guess he played hockey. And I forget where he was from, maybe Maine. And you know, he was a tough guy, you know, and he had some tough-guy stories. Came in through a window, and he beat up this person. Got in this fight or whatever [*SL laughs*] in jail and stabbed or something. And Skip

would always be like—he's like, "Jay Prefontaine, he's the kind of guy if you threw a bottle at his head, he'd go [*makes clicking sound*] catch it." And you know, finally, I just said, "Skip, you know, sometime he's gonna get hit with a bottle on his head, and you're gonna be the one responsible." [*Laughter*] 'Cause someone's gonna throw it at him just to see if . . .

SL: Gonna test it.

OH: . . . he catches it.

SL: Yeah. [*Laughter*]

[00:45:29] OH: But we just loved tellin' those stories, you know. So—and then you come in, you wanna be a little bit of a character. You know, you want some people to tell a story about you, you know.

SL: Make your mark.

OH: Yeah, yeah. And just tell these goddamn stories. Tom Franklin did this. Jay Prefontaine did that. The time Skip had a glass of water. [*Laughs*] Oh my God. One of—I mean, there's another thing. I mean, you just—I mean, you know, they're lifelong friends, you know. I mean, I feel that way. Skip and Patty—I was in Paris. Through Stanford they have a place at this Cité Internationale des Arts, and I was there for a year, and I invited them. We had Tom and Beth Ann, and Skip and Patty came

over, and we just—you know, we just had a time in Paris. [*Laughs*] Some of the best food I ever had, you know. I mean, they all knew Paris. Beth Ann knew Paris. And Skip knew Paris really well, so we'd go to the old haunts, and I knew some things, and we just—you know, I mean, it's just—it just carries on. It's not—I don't know, it's . . .

[00:46:32] SL: Story's never done sort of thing?

OH: Yeah. I mean, it's like I don't—you know, I see some of these other places—I don't wanna go on too long about this stuff—but it's like it was never—I—when I came here, it was never a school. You know, like, I wasn't going to school. I don't give a shit about getting an M.F.A., you know. I don't need it for something. And as it turns out, it's damn hard to get a job with an M.F.A. [*laughs*] anyway, so—but I mean, I wasn't coming to go to school. I mean, I was an adult. I was thirty years old. I was coming to write, you know, and I want to deal with people as people—as human beings. And that's what we always did. It wasn't a bunch of grades and a bunch of bureaucracy, and I've seen that other places. And English departments, I think, are probably maybe the worst places on earth, you know [*laughs*], in general. And I—there was none of that here. You know, it was about living life. Skip would—you gotta [*laughs*] ask David

Gavin about taking Skip's quizzes. He didn't like it. But—you know, and I didn't like it either. You know, sometimes there'd be something like that. Skip would give a quiz, and it's like, "Give a quiz? I mean, of course I read the book. [*SL laughs*] I mean, what are you talking about? I mean, I'm here to be a writer. I'm not here to get a goddamn grade from you or anyone. I'm—you know, I'm reading a book. I'm here to learn. I wanna learn everything I can." They taught some great classes. Skip taught some great classes in Form and Theory. Oh, Jim taught a great class in Form and Theory of Poetry. I took that. He gave me a fuckin' B, but [*SL laughs*] whatever. I'm not a poet. [*Laughter*] I couldn't—he said, "Otis," he said—on one of my—on my final paper with that big B on it, he said, "You have a tin ear, but a great heart." [*Laughter*] Because I couldn't, you know, scan the poems. I was like, "What? This is up, this is down." I had no idea. I had no idea. I just made marks. I think I made the right kinds of marks. I'm not for sure. Just, like [*SL laughs*], shook his head. I was lucky to get that, probably. [00:48:25] But yeah, I mean, I never saw it. It didn't seem like a school. I mean, that—even that idea seems ridiculous to me. You know, we're at Oregon, and the people are bastards and, you know, do this that and the other thing and—

to, you know, my partner, and it makes me mad. And they act like grades matter and all these things matter. And it's like, "What?" I just don't get it at all, you know. I went to Tennessee, and it's an English department. Make you jump through hoops, and you know, apparently I can translate Spanish and French now. You know, I don't understand Foucault in English. I don't understand him in French, you know, so that's equal. [*Laughs*] But here, it wasn't like that. You came here to live and write. And luckily, you know, they gave you $8,000 a year that's—so that you could . . .

SL: To do that.

OH: Yeah. Luckily they gave you a little bit of structure. But basically, you were coming down here to live and write with these—you know, they're mentors, you know. I'm—I don't—not—I don't know if I'm a fan of that word, but that—they were in the biggest sense.

[00:49:29] SL: That's good. Well, maybe you should get back here.

OH: Yeah, yeah. I—when I—after I was at Stanford—you know, the Stanford workshop was good. And there are a lot of real great writers. I met a lot of great writers there, and I sort of—I said afterwards that I learned everything I learned about writing here. And I learned how to work my ass off there [*laughs*], you

know. Because they really, truly worked our ass off. So I did learn that. I mean, I just work, work, work, work. But here I learned my writing. I learned my skills here. So.

SL: Anything else?

OH: I don't think so.

SL: Man, you've been great.

OH: Thanks. Appreciate it.

SL: This wasn't so painful, was it?

OH: Not so bad once you got me goin' and [*SL laughs*] buh da bloo bla doo.

[00:50:23 End of interview]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]