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

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Arkansas Memories Project

Bill Harrison Surprise Interviews

David Kuhne

Interviewed by Scott Lunsford

June 11, 2011

Fayetteville, Arkansas

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Objective

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

Transcript Methodology

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

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

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

Brackets enclose
    - italicized annotations of nonverbal sounds, such as laughter, and audible sounds, such as a doorbell ringing;
    - annotations for clarification and identification; and
    - standard English spelling of informal words.
- Commas are used in a conventional manner where possible to aid in readability.

Citation Information

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Scott Lunsford interviewed David Kuhne 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: All right, David, today's date is June the eleventh. Uh—the year is 2011. We're at Laurie Harrison's house here in Fayetteville, Arkansas. I'm Scott Lunsford, and we're with the—uh—David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History. Uh [*camera clicks*]—these interviews that we're doing at Laurie's are a part of the Bill Harrison project that we've already started. Um—we'll take these recordings, and we will preserve them forever. And—uh—we will also have copies of this stuff in the Special Collections—uh—Department in Mullins Library at the uni—at the Fayetteville campus, University of Arkansas. Um—we will—uh—provide you a transcript of this interview and the raw footage of this interview. And I will ask you to look at both, and if there's anything in there [*David Kuhne laughs*] that you don't want the rest of the world to see or hear, then you need to tell us.

David Kuhne: That's very considerate.

SL: And—and—and we will—we will—uh—protect you that way, and—uh—we'll let you [*DK laughs*] see the changes and—uh—when you're comfortable, we will post this interview. And that will probably consist of some selected segments videowise, but it will include all the audio and all of the transcript that you've approved. And we will encourage people to look at it and listen and read, and—uh—it'll be in the hands of documentarians—uh—researchers, students of Arkansas history, and we provide this—uh—to them at no charge or at very little cost. So if—uh—you're comfortable with all that, David . . .

DK: Sounds like a wonderful project, Scott.

SL: Okay.

DK: Can't wait to help.

SL: Okay, great. I appreciate you—uh—givin' up some of your time to be here—um . . .

DK: Not a problem. It's a pleasure.

[00:01:48] SL: Thank you. Uh—David, we—we always start with your—uh—you telling us your full name and spelling it—uh—for unusual names, and where and when you were born.

DK: Okay. Well, my name is David Bryce—*B-R-Y-C-E*—Kuhne.

SL: Okay, and what were your parents' names?

DK: Uh—Jesse W. and Esther Kuhne.

SL: And was your father a—a part of the air force or . . .

DK: Um—he was actually in the army . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

DK: . . . in World War II.

SL: Veteran.

DK: Yeah.

[00:02:23] SL: Uh—and—uh—so [*DK clears throat*]—um—what was it that your—uh—mom and dad did for a living?

DK: Well—uh—my father was a petroleum engineer—um—and my mother began her career as a teacher, and then they became small businesspeople in Fort Worth and in Houston and—uh—ended up running a chain of self-serve car washes, so they were entrepreneurial.

SL: Neat. Uh—so—uh—you—you came up through—uh—public schools?

DK: Yes, I did. I'm a graduate of Paschal High School in Fort Worth in 1970, and then I attended and graduated from the University of Texas at Austin in 1974 and worked in private sales, actually, a couple of years before coming to the M.F.A. program here in Fayetteville in 1978. And—uh—did graduate from that program in 1982 and—uh—was very fortunate to have Bill Harrison as one

of my principal professors and mentors throughout my time here.

[00:03:27] SL: So how [*DK clears throat*]—and how did you hear about the M.F.A. program?

DK: Well, I had taken some creative writing classes at the University of Texas in Austin from a fellow—nice fellow—friendly writer—good writer—Michael Mewshaw, who knew Bill. And—uh—through my connection taking classes with Mike Mewshaw, I was encouraged to apply to some M.F.A. programs, and this was an outstanding one, and it still—as it still is, and so I was lucky enough to be accepted into this program, which was—and I believe still is one of the longest M.F.A. programs in—in the United States. And—uh—and the M.F.A. program here was a wonderful experience that helped me in a lotta ways, but one thing that it did that isn't associated really with creative writing is it turned me into a scholar, and I went on and pursued my Ph.D. and—and published my dissertation out of—uh—TCU in 1999—published a book that included a chapter about—uh—Bill Harrison's—uh—African novels.

[00:04:25] SL: Well, you wanna talk about those just for a little bit?

DK: Uh—Harrison's African novels?

SL: Yeah, yeah.

DK: Yeah, well, they're intriguing books, and—um—I—uh—began reading them as he was writing them. I mean, he was still writing those novels—all five of 'em, I think—and he had just—he had done *Savannah Blue* and had—uh—finished *Burton and Speke* and was working on the screenplay, I think, for *Mountain of the Moons*—of that when I was just finishing up at—uh—I believe in [19]82 or [198]3. I could have my dates a little bit off on those. But I had read those books, and he was also—Bill taught a seminar in African novel by Africans back in, I think, [19]81. I'm—the years are a little bit not exact here, but—uh—that inspired me to start studying—uh—more novels by Americans that had been written in Africa. And from Bill's—uh—seminar, I was able to actually teach a class in African literature at Lamar University in 1985. This eventually developed into my dissertation topic—uh—which was published by Greenwood Press in [19]99—uh—contemporary American—*African Settings in Contemporary American Novels*. There's a chapter of Bill—on Bill's five African novels in that book, so he was very influential in not only helping me as a creative writer, but also inspiring me to pursue a Ph.D. beyond the M.F.A.

[00:05:38] SL: So when you got to Fayetteville—uh . . .

DK: In 1978.

SL: . . . in 1978 . . .

DK: Uh-huh.

SL: . . . what was your first impression—uh . . .

DK: Oh, I was a bit overwhelmed. You know, I was really just a green writer. I'd been outta school four or five years—just a very beginner—and—uh—there were a lotta really good writers in our workshops here. The program was very intense. What a—what amazed me about this particular M.F.A. was it was sorta joined at the hip with a lotta academic studies. We had to take a lot of classes in—that with the M.A. candidates and the Ph.D. candidates—took several classes from Ben Kimpel, for instance, and it was a—really, it was a great education on a lot of fronts. But I remember the competitive workshops and a lot of the helpful insights that I gathered from working with Bill in those workshops, and—uh—at first it was a little overwhelming. But the program gives you enough time to kinda take a deep breath and get on your feet and—because usually it takes three to four years to get this M.F.A. It—I believe it's still a sixty-hour program. And so, you know, fortunately, I had time to sort of feel a little more comfortable after a while, but it—you know, pretty intense.

[00:06:43] SL: So—uh—Jim Whitehead?

DK: Yeah, I had workshops with Jim and—now, he mostly focused on poetry, but he would do a fiction workshop every now and then. Of course, John Clellon Holmes was here at that time, too, and I did a couple of workshops with John and worked as an administrative assistant, actually, for the entire M.F.A. staff—faculty/staff—I can't remember what year. I think it was [19]81 or [198]2. And so I, you know, worked a little more closely with the professors in the program than I might've been if I wasn't helping them with some, you know, paperwork things. Uh—I remember one year—I can't remember what year it was—maybe [19]81—we had a—some sort of grant in the humanities. We were able to bring five guest writers in that year, including Seamus Heaney and two or three others. We also had at—during that time, I believe—uh—several incredibly powerful poets—uh—Richard Wilbur. I just can't even name them all, it's been so long. But that was a really wonderful exposure to 'em, you know, living creative writing every day that I was here.

[00:07:46] SL: Uh—can you tell me—give me a—a story—um—about Bill.

DK: Well, there's a lotta stories about Bill—uh—that I can recall, but one that—you know, that doesn't have anything to do with creative writing that I always enjoyed was the time that he

and—uh—uh—my friend Lynn Risser, who has a Ph.D. from the University of Arkansas—he, Merlee, and Lynn and I went to the White River to go trout fishing and had a great ol' time just floating the White River and—and fishing and actually caught our limit, as I recall, that day, and Bill caught the best ones, of course. But the wonderful thing about bein' around Bill is you'd never get bored because it's one story after another story after another story, and they're all interesting and well told, too. And so—um—it was just a day on the river, but I always remembered that as one of my favorite days with Bill. And—uh—um—and then, again, of course, the academic side was—uh—important too, and I do remember that African seminar as well—seminar on African novel as well as the—the workshops we took. But I—it's just a ordinary day story. We went fishin' on the White River. Bill was quite the outdoors person and—um—was always—uh—interested in fishing and floating rivers and stuff like that, which is still a real appeal up here. Can I drink?

[Tape stopped]

[00:08:59] SL: So—uh—um—what about—uh—your—uh—your academic work within the—within the—uh—program? Was there anything that—um—Bill had to say about your work at any point in time that was [*DK laughs*] kind of a aha moment for you?

DK: Well, I—I—I don't remember him ever tossing a story of mine against the wall or anything, but—but Bill—um—liked what I was doing at the time, which was a novel—uh—at the moment—at that time, which was titled *Sold American*, but it eventually being—ended up being a novella published by Ink Brush Press called *The Road to Roma*. But Bill encouraged me on that story a lot, and it's a story that Brian Moore kinda liked too, and so I—I got some encouragement to keep working on that kinda project from Bill. But—um—just the generally day-to-day—uh—advice about writing that you would get from Bill in a workshop about which scenes would work, what not to write, what—and not to—to avoid over-sentimentality—that kinda thing. These were all the practical sorts of things that you would get from bein' in those workshops and having people do close readings of your—of your efforts.

[00:10:10] SL: So the workshops were—they would pick—um—a couple of stories, and the students and the . . .

DK: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . and the teacher that was having the workshop would analyze and . . .

DK: Right.

SL: . . . criticize and . . .

DK: There would probably be eight or so grad students in a workshop, and we'd do, in a three-hour period, maybe three stories. And—uh—Bill or John Clellon Holmes or Jim Whitehead—whoever the director of the workshop was—would, of course, read and have comments about the story. But the most im—function of that group was to have the co—your companion students also bring their insights into the work. And—and so that's generally how it went. They weren't always so kind, though—the student bo—uh—were sometimes kinda competitive and vicious, but you know, it's okay. It was fun.

SL: Well, you came out stronger because of it.

DK: Oh, of course you did, and you need people to tell you that your stuff is—stinks, so [*laughter*]—and they were quite willing to.

[00:11:04] SL: Well—uh—you know, we talk a lot about Bill here in this room, but we also talk a lot about Jim Whitehead as well. So do you have—uh—any—uh—Jim Whitehead—uh—experience—uh—that you can talk about?

DK: Well, you know, I just—uh—I got so much out of—um—just knowing him as an intellectual. It was a—kind of a—almost an overpowering intellect 'cause he knew so much about so many things. I'm a fan, but I actually like his poetry better than I do *Joiner*, and—um—actually still read his poetry sometimes. And—

uh—so—um—my—uh—experiences with Jim were a little more limited than with Bill. I think I had one fiction workshop with Jim. It's hard to recall right now, but he was just a very intriguing person to be around because of the insights he'd bring not only to literature, but just a—generally, everything. He was very—very well read and—and—um—just—um—quite the figure to—to know. And so—um—don't have a good story on him, but—uh—other than just learning as much as I could from him.

[00:12:06] SL: Um—what about John Holmes? I mean, I've—I've heard his name now mentioned . . .

DK: Hmm.

SL: . . . several times, and no one's really talked a whole lot about John. Uh—can you give us any ins . . .

DK: I'd love to tell you everything I can about him. He was a great instructor and a wonderful person and kind—of the—a very kindly man. And—and his wife, Shirley, and he hosted so many receptions for visiting writers and—uh—parties for graduating students, and he was just a wonderful asset while he was here before he retired. He retired, I think, just after I finished my degree in [19]82 or [19]83, but somewhere in the mid-[19]80s, I think, was when he retired. And he brought a different kinda perspective to the workshop and writing experience because—

um—uh—Bill, of course, and Jim and even Miller had a kinda academic background with the Iowa workshop, for instance, or their degrees. But—um—John was the—was a self-made writer—uh—and—uh—his experience was the experience of bein' a successful self-taught writer—a famous writer in the beat generation. He brought a different perspective 'cause he was a little less formulaic about how things would work and a—like a Form and Theory of the Novel class—John would simply tell you the truth. "There is no form or theory. It's what the writer makes of the thing itself." So he brought a kinda different—uh—perspective to the entire project, I think, and a good one too, as a matter of fact. A wonderful writer.

[00:13:31] SL: Um—so I—you know, from all—from the folks that we've talked with so far, it seems to me that this group of—uh—writers and student writers—um—it was a constant—um—intellectual discourse—uh . . .

DK: That's their lives, you know. [*Laughs*] That's . . .

SL: Yeah.

DK: . . . that's what drew the students here, and—um—and that's what the professors live and breathe, you know, at their—at their work. And—and so that—that's half the fun of it, of course, and the other half is tryin' your best to sort of emulate the

success of those who you're learning from and practicing that craft. And it take—it takes me a long time to learn anything, and I'm still learning how to write after trying to write for, I don't know, thirty-somethin' years now, you know.

SL: Uh-huh.

[00:14:24] DK: It's—fresh sentence every day. So—but everything that I learned in this program, including—uh—a very difficult grammar class from Claude Faulkner and Leo Van Scyoc that I still use every day in my profession at—at Texas Christian University, where I'm associate director of our center for writing and editor of the literary journal *Descant*. So these are skills that even though they were learned many years ago [*laughs*], I still look back on those years as very valuable, not only for the interpersonal and friend—relationships and friendships that I was able to make, but just also it was really good things to know in terms of my profession.

SL: So—uh—do you teach as well?

DK: Yeah, I teach at TCU, and—um—and I edit their literary journal, *Descant*.

[00:15:08] SL: So you pass on the stuff . . .

DK: Oh yeah . . .

SL: . . . that . . .

DK: . . . absolutely. The things that I learned from Whitehead and Harrison and Holmes and—you know, amazingly enough, Miller Williams—even though I was not a poetry—uh—writer, we were required to take Form and Theory of Poetry. And I took it from Miller, and at the time, I said, "Miller, I don't wanna do poetry. I'm tryin' to write a short story or a novel. Why do I have to do this?" And Miller simply said, "You may have to teach poetry someday." Little did I know later that I would get a Ph.D. in English and have to teach poetry, you know, every semester. So—uh—it all—even—this is—the wonderful thing about this program is it's—it was a sixty-hour program, so they had time to have a workshop section of fifteen hours, I think it was—academic coursework with the Ph.D. candidates or students at the time—you know, another fifteen to thirty hours. So you got so much different exposure that you were able to develop your skills, I think, a lot better than in a program that—a studio-type program that might only have, like, a thirty-hour requirement for the M.F.A. But this is still one of the longest M.F.A. programs in the na—in the nation.

SL: So it's kinda like the marine corps of M.F.A. programs.

DK: I would think so, and you know, it's a terminal degree. I mean, that's supposed to be the end of it for you, and it is in the M.F.A.

world. But this was one of the more difficult and lengthy ones, but it—it was so inter—uh—webbed with the English Department and academic studies that I appreciated that aspect of it more now than I might've realized at the time.

[00:16:35] SL: Um—you know, the—the—uh—uh—informal—the—the socializing and the—uh—the parties are kind of legendary as far as—uh . . .

DK: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . uh—whenever the students and the teachers'd get together. [*TM coughs*] And it was, like, the teachers would—would—would—would host a party, but the students would host parties.

DK: Mh-hmm.

SL: And the teachers would come to the student parties and . . .

DK: Yes, they would.

SL: . . . and—uh—uh—you know, it sounds like it was just a further—an extension of . . .

DK: Yeah, it was really a community. That's just the best way, I think, to describe it. And I—I remember a lot of old friends from that community, some of whom are not with us any longer, like Otto Salassi, who—who—a fine writer I learned a lot from just by listening to him talk—always had a good story—was a—a—a friend of Bill's too, and—uh—we still miss him. And yeah, it was.

It was a—a wonderful—uh—experience because it kinda never stopped and—uh—the—you know, the—a lot of important learning went on at those so-called parties, you know. They were—a lot of 'em were receptions for visiting writers where we got to network with people we might eventually get to work with in the future, and editors, perhaps, agents sometimes. A lot of good fiction writers and poets came through. And—and then there were just events—social events. So—but—but even though they were fun, I think everybody was still learning from those events in a number of ways. So sometimes the out-of-classroom learning is just as important—I suppose I'm trying to say that ol' cliché . . .

SL: Yeah.

DK: . . . as the [*telephone rings*] in-classroom learning.

[00:18:03] SL: Sure. And you know, the—um—it seems to me [*telephone rings*] that not only was it, you know, the program itself.

TM: Scott, can we stop for one second? And can you go ahead and take your handkerchief again, please . . .

DK: I'm sorry.

TM: Yeah. No, it's fine. It—it happens to everybody.

DK: I'm a big sweater. [*TM laughs*]

SL: Well, it's a—kind of a hot room. It seems to me that—um—besides the—the—the coursework and the camaraderie—um—which I take as kind of unusual—uh—that professors and—and students were so close socially.

DK: Uh—I think it is. Yeah.

SL: Uh—besides all of that [*DK clears throat*], it seems to me that Bill and—and—um—um—Jim created this—um—uh—connections. It—it became a—all of a sudden—uh—all the connections that spawned outside of the program and the—other writers and . . .

DK: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . editors and publishers—it—that it was an amazing spinning of—uh—connecting to the real world.

[00:19:01] DK: Yeah, I agree. It's like after a few years there was sort of a critical mass of graduates that were kinda semi-networked together by their experience here. And still, I think, you know, as you can tell by the number of people that have come for this event, for this reunion, and this project, that, you know, they still have a lotta loyalty to the place and to the faculty, and—and—and there's still connections from all of this. And—uh—uh—I just recently got a—uh—story from one of Skip Hays's students for submission to the journal I edit. So it's intergenerational even, you know. And—um—it is an important

thing to have happen. And—and I think the type of just relations and—and experience that you had with the faculty and with each other in those workshops and in those classes—it built kinda career network for a lotta people too.

[00:19:50] SL: [*Sighs*] Anything else you wanna say . . .

DK: I can't really . . .

SL: . . . about Bill or Jim or John?

DK: You know, just God bless him. I'm so happy I was able to study with Bill and can count him as a mentor and a friend. And—uh—I'm still influenced by the lessons I learned from him, and I try to pass 'em on to the younger, better writers behind me. Thanks so much for talkin' with me this afternoon.

SL: You were great.

DK: [*Sighs*] Thanks. [*Unclear words*].

TM: Very good.

SL: Thank you, David.

[00:20:13 End of interview]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]