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

University of Arkansas
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Arkansas Memories Project

Bill Harrison Surprise Interviews

Pat O'Connor

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 Pat O'Connor 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. Uh—th—Pat, my name is Scott Lunsford. We are [*camera clicks*] with the—uh—David and Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History. And—um—we—uh—today's date is June the eleventh. Um—uh—the year is 2011. We are at Laurie Lewis's residence here in Fayetteville, Arkansas. [*Camera clicks*] And we are doing a series of interviews—uh—from participants of a gathering—uh—to honor—uh—[*camera clicks*] Bill and—and Jim and the creative writing program. Um—and it's part of a—uh—project, a Bill Harrison project. We've already done an interview with Bill. And—uh—thank you.

Pat O'Connnor: Mh-hmm.

SL: And—um—uh—this stuff is all high-def. It's high-end, and it looks great. It can play anywhere. We will preserve it forever.

PO: Mh-hmm.

SL: Uh—that's our job, really, is to keep these stories preserved. Um—we will send you a transcript of this interview, and we'll send you the raw footage of this interview. And we'll ask that you look and that you read. And if you find something in those materials that you're uncomfortable with, you just tell us, and we'll take care of it. We'll take it out. Uh—we don't want you to feel . . .

PO: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . threatened in any way.

PO: Right.

SL: We don't want you to feel like we're puttin' something out there that you don't want out there.

PO: Mh-hmm.

SL: It's your interview.

PO: Mh-hmm.

SL: We want you to take ownership.

PO: Okay.

[00:01:28] SL: Uh—when all that's resolved, if there is any—it's rare when we take—have . . .

PO: Right.

SL: . . . people ask us to take anything out.

PO: Right.

SL: But if we have to, if we need to, and—uh—once that meets your approval, we'll then post this stuff on the web.

PO: Okay.

SL: And—uh—this . . .

PO: All the raw footage, the whole thing?

SL: No.

PO: Oh, okay.

SL: Uh—well, it could be all the raw footage.

PO: Right.

SL: Uh—but usually what we do is we take segments, clips, from the interview. What we call highlights . . .

PO: Right.

SL: . . . of the interview—uh—videowise.

PO: Right.

SL: But we do post all of the transcript of the interview. And we do post all of the audio.

PO: Right.

[00:02:05] SL: And those things are downloadable.

PO: Right.

SL: So people can have them, and you can actually have kind of an audiobook in your car if you want to . . .

PO: Right.

SL: . . . o—of the event.

PO: Right.

SL: And we—we will provide the raw footage.

PO: Right.

SL: You—you will get a DVD.

PO: Okay.

SL: A finished DVD.

PO: Okay.

SL: That it—that will include the finished transcript and all the raw footage, and it'll be chaptered. It'll be like a commercial DVD.

PO: Right.

SL: Can go right to things.

PO: Yeah.

[00:02:28] SL: Um—we will—uh—the—on—one of the preservations—uh—will be at the Pryor Center. Uh—there'll be another one somewhere off-site. We haven't really determined exactly where our backup storage is gonna be.

PO: Mh-hmm.

SL: But there'll also be DVD of—a finished DVD of this—uh—stuff, of your interview, housed in the Special Collections Department at the University of Arkansas here at Mullins Library.

PO: Okay.

SL: So if all of that's okay with you, [*PO laughs*] you need to tell me yes. It's . . .

PO: Proceed.

SL: Okay, great. [*PO laughs*] Great answer. Um—we always start with—uh—the interviewee giving us their full name . . .

PO: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . and where and when they were born.

[00:03:08] PO: Okay. My name is Patrick Joseph O'Connor. I was born in Chicago, Illinois, or a suburb called Harvey, Illinois, in 1963. March 17, St. Patrick's Day.

SL: Good, good. Um—and what were your parents' names?

PO: My father was Raymond O'Connor, and my mother was Mary Jane O'Connor.

SL: And her maiden name?

PO: Kampwirth.

SL: And how is it . . .

PO: Kampwirth. *K-A-M-P-W-I-R-T-H*.

SL: Okay, great. And—uh—what did they do for a living?

PO: My father was a—worked in advertising at Sears Roebuck in Chicago. He was in their catalog department. He was a art—his—his title was an art buyer. He was the guy who—uh—or one of the guys who chose which photographs went in, like, the

Christmas catalog that—the Wish Book thing. And my mother—um—she was—she had several different things that she did, but for the longes—the longest period, she was a bookkeeper for our local newspaper in the town where I grew up called Downers Grove, Illinois. Yeah.

SL: Um—so I have to tell you, as a kid growing up, I pored over the Sears catalogs, and I looked at all those pictures that . . .

[00:04:23] PO: It was a huge part of our lives that—I mean, when I was a kid, everything I owned came from Sears. [*SL laughs*] Um—you know, the buckskin jeans or whatever those things were called and . . .

SL: Chaps.

PO: Yeah, [*laughs*] and my—uh—uh—my—my first bicycle that was my own bicycle—by—I'm the youngest of five kids—was the bicycle that was used in the studio to shoot for the photograph for the catalog. So a lot of the stuff that we got in our house was props from [*laughs*] the Wish Book shoots. Like, our first color television, I think, was from, you know, the catalog. I don't think it was ever stolen, but you know, it somehow got to our house. [*Laughs*]

SL: My first electric guitar was a Sears Airline . . .

PO: Really?

SL . . . electric guitar.

PO: Yeah.

SL: Yeah. It wa—yeah, Sears—uh—that whole Sears catalog thing was a big . . .

PO: Oh yeah, for sure.

SL: Everyone loved that.

PO: Yeah, yeah.

[00:05:14] SL: Um—so—uh—now, you were—you were born in Har . . .

PO: Harvey's a name of the—it's a—it's a—a—a suburb on the far south side of Chicago. Almost in Indiana.

SL: And—but is—is that also where you were raised?

PO: No. We moved to a town called Downers Grove, a western suburb, when I was in—starting first grade.

SL: Still around Chicago.

PO: Yeah, suburb of Chicago about a . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

PO: . . . you know, forty minutes away.

SL: Uh-huh. And—uh—you attended public schools there?

PO: Uh—I attended a Catholic grammar school, public high school.

SL: Okay.

PO: Yeah.

SL: Uh—so—uh—was this town far enough from Chicago where you didn't feel like you were a part of the metro area or . . .

PO: Yes, yes, definitely.

SL: It was a small town.

PO: It's a suburb, yeah.

SL: Suburb?

PO: It's—a—a—a kind of an old suburb, definitely. Yeah, it didn't—not an urban feel at all. But you could be downtown either on the train, you could be there in half an hour or—or on the expressway, you could be there in forty-five minutes.

SL: Mh-hmm.

PO: But it was a, you know, suburban upbringing.

[00:06:15] SL: So—uh—when you were in the—uh—when you were in—uh—um—high school and junior high, did you have any particular interests that you had—you wanted to do with your life? Were you startin' to formulate what it was you liked and . . .

PO: Um—I played a lot of sports. I played tennis—was the kind of thing I did. I learned—I sort of taught myself to play in high school. Um—started playing, like, around eight grade and ended up in a—playing college tennis, and that was one—one of the main things that I did. I was a—uh—a pretty good student. I

thought when I was in high school that I wanted to be an architect, and—uh—uh—I think what sort of steered me away from that was that I wasn't a really strong math student.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:07:01] PO: And I was accepted to the University of Illinois's pre-architecture—preprofessional architectural program and took the placement test and finished in the bottom 10 percent of the math. And I had to, like, start over, and I thought, "I don't think I want to do this." [*Laughs*] Um—so I did not pursue that.

SL: So you graduated high school in [nineteen] eighty . . .

PO: [Nineteen] eighty-one.

SL: . . . one.

PO: Yeah.

SL: And did you go immediately to college even though you decided not to be . . .

PO: Yeah.

SL: . . . architect now?

PO: I went—I went to a junior college first, and the other sort of par—part of this is I became a—a pretty good tennis player by the time I was a senior in high school. And if I had gone to the University of Illinois, which is where I had been accepted and was planning to go, I wasn't quite good enough to play on that

team. They're a very strong Division I team.

SL: Yeah.

[00:07:49] PO: And I still wanted to play.

SL: Yeah.

PO: So I ended up going to a junior college and—uh—near where we lived, College of DuPage, which had a—a very strong tennis program but, you know, the two-year thing.

SL: Mh-hmm.

PO: So I stayed home—uh—got the—the—what's it called? The AA, forgot what it's called—the whatever—associate's degree. Uh—worked on my tennis, got even better. And then—uh—got a scholarship to Santa Clara University in California and went . . .

SL: Santa Clara . . .

PO: . . . and—and went there for my last two years, and I played there.

SL: Is that part of the Claremont Colleges?

PO: No.

SL: No, no that's . . .

PO: Santa Clara University is a . . .

SL: . . . Santa Clara is on the coast.

PO: . . . Jesuit school in northern California.

SL: Okay.

PO: About an hour south of San Francisco in the Silicon Valley.

SL: Jesuit school, so—uh . . .

PO: Yeah.

SL: . . . Thomas Aquinas, I guess.

PO: Yeah, but that had nothing to do with why I went. [*Laughs*]

SL: Yeah.

PO: Yeah, yeah. I—I—I—uh—it—I—I went to play tennis and to get—it—it's a very good school too.

SL: Yeah.

PO: But I'm—I'm not a particularly religious person.

[00:08:48] SL: Right. Um—so what—uh—what did you do there academically that—I mean, how did you end up at the University of Arkansas?

PO: Um—I was an English major at Santa Clara . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

PO: . . . and they had a—uh—a creating—a creative writing emphasis, and that's where I became interested in the idea of being a writer.

SL: Mh-hmm.

PO: Um—so I took all those classes there. There was a professor there named Jim Degnan who was, you know, one of these guys I just sort of fell in love with as a professor. I mean, just, he—

he—he was just a, you know, kind of a classic curmudgeonly writing teacher.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:09:27] PO: And—uh—he and I connected really well, and—uh—so kind of what happened there was I—when I finished at Santa Clara, I went and taught tennis at a club there in—in—in the area called—uh—uh—Courtside Tennis Club in Los Gatos. And I was still writing stories and sending them out to magazines and things, but I didn't really know what I would do—I mean, I kind of thought that I would be a tennis pro for—for a while.

SL: Mh-hmm.

PO: And I taught this woman who was—I—if my memory serves correct—uh—serves me, was a—uh—she wrote romance novels. And she knew that I was into writing and wanted to pursue this, and she's the one who told me that M.F.A. programs even existed. I didn't even know it was a possibility. And she said, "You should apply to graduate school." So I looked into it and sort of found this world of, you know, graduate programs and—uh—you know, put together my materials and sent—uh—applications to—uh—Arkansas. I think I probably sent one to Iowa, and there was maybe UC Irvine. There were three or four schools I applied to, and—um—Arkansas responded very quickly

and said, "We'd love to have you come here." So you know, that—I—it was—it was really—it felt like an invitation to come to the—to the program. And I did—I wasn't accepted to the other ones unless I'm forgetting something. But I think I decided pretty quickly that I wanted to come here.

[00:10:52] SL: Had you—uh—when you were sending—uh—uh—stories to the magazines, were they—were you getting any accepted?

PO: In sm—in—um—I think that the publications were in really small places and also related to the university—or Santa Clara University.

SL: Mh-hmm.

PO: I think I was still kinda putting stories in the *Santa Clara Review*. They weren't going in, like, in, you know, big literary magazines or anything . . .

SL: Yeah.

PO: . . . like that.

SL: So what—what was it that you sent—uh—to University of Arkansas that got you in?

PO: Oh boy, I don't think I can remember. I don't—I don't remember what I sent 'em, to be honest. I can—I can probably remember a couple of the stories that I wrote while I was there,

but you know, we're talkin' twenty-one, twenty-two years ago.

SL: Yeah.

PO: So I don't remember what they were. They—they were—they were stories. I don't know.

[00:11:39] SL: So they also offered you an assistantship here?

PO: Yeah, yeah.

SL: And you would be teaching grammar?

PO: Yep. Yeah.

SL: Composition?

PO: Yeah.

SL: And—uh—so—um—Fayetteville, Arkansas's quite a bit different than Chicago or Santa Clara.

PO: Mh-hmm.

SL: What did you think when you—uh—how did you get here?

PO: Well, what I did is I—I flew out here for a weekend. And—uh—before I, you know, fully committed to come.

SL: Uh-huh.

PO: And—um—um . . .

SL: What happened?

PO: Oh, just had a really nice time. [*SL laughs*] And it was great. He kept—Mark Burgh was a—um . . .

SL: Mark Burgh.

PO: . . . in that program.

SL: Mh-hmm.

PO: And he sort of—uh—shepherd me around—shepherded me around town. Uh—took me to parties. Um—I met the woman who became my wife that weekend. She had a party at her house. Um . . .

[00:12:26] SL: And who was that?

PO: Margaret McMullan. I don't know if you know Margaret.

SL: Okay. I know that name. Mh-hmm.

PO: She would be here. She's also an M.F.A. graduate, but she's in Paris right now and couldn't—couldn't make . . .

SL: Yeah.

PO: . . . this trip. Um—uh—so I just—you know, I met—uh—you know, the people who were in the program and just thought this—this is a great place. I loved it. I just loved the environment. And like you say, it was completely unlike anything I'd ever experienced before. I mean visually, the way people talk—um—the—uh—just the—the absolute focus on writing. Um—that whole thing just appealed to me a lot. So I left and thought, "Well, this is what I want to do."

SL: Yeah, that's interesting. Mark Burgh—um—I believe he was the author of a script that we produced in one of our—um—things at

continuing ed and—that we had a . . .

PO: How—how long ago?

SL: Oh, it was probably—uh—late [19]80s, I would guess.

PO: Yeah, it—was it—I think it was an adaptation of a—a story, wasn't it?

SL: It may have even been shot in . . .

PO: Of Gail Reg . . .

SL: . . . my house. [*Laughs*]

[00:13:30] PO: Right. Yeah, I think—was it an adaptation of a Gail Regier story?

SL: Maybe.

PO: Yeah, I—I think that was goin' on while I was here.

SL: Wow.

PO: Yeah.

SL: That's spooky.

PO: Yeah. [*SL laughs*]

Robert Ward: Is anybody out here?

SL: Yes.

Unidentified voice: Yes.

RW: Well, then it can't be out here. I'm sorry.

SL: That's okay. [*PO laughs*] [*Door shuts*] Come in anytime. [*Laughs*] Uh—so—um—this weekend visit . . .

PO: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . surely you met—uh—did you meet Claude Faulkner? Probably not.

PO: No, didn't meet Claude. I met—um—I met Bill. Spent some time with Bill and Jim. Um—I'm sure I met Skip. Um—and that's probably it for that weekend.

[00:14:12] SL: And your first impression of—uh—Bill Harrison?

PO: Um—I just thought he was a—uh—uh—what would the word be? Just, you know, a—a—a—a confident, professional writer. You know, and you know, he was a man who you—you know, you—you would respect, but he was friendly and open and—uh—you know, he'd—like I say, one of the things that really impressed me or—or made an impact on me was the fact that you—you felt like they wanted you to come. You know, they—they—they made me feel very comfortable, and—uh—Bill was a big part of that.

SL: And Jim?

PO: Jim—it's the same way, yeah, you know. I met 'em both kind of together, you know. And—um—Jim—he—he—he at one point—I don't remember if it was this weekend, but he—he always referred to me as an ethnic. He would remind me, say, "O'Connor, you're an ethnic." Meaning, you know, I'm an Irish

Catholic from Chicago, which is really an unusual, you know, person to be roamin' around Fayetteville.

SL: Uh-huh.

PO: Um—but yeah.

SL: Well, I mean, but—did you not see any striking differences between Bill and Jim immediately, I mean . . .

PO: Um . . .

SL: . . . I mean, just physically?

PO: Yeah, physically for sure. Yeah, I mean, Jim was an imposing person. Um—and just in his size and—uh—um—you know, he just would—he would look at you, and he'd really look at you. Bill was more laid-back. Um—but yeah, I don't know what else to say about that. I don't remember really specifically—um . . .

[00:15:52] SL: Did they have you on—uh—Dickson Street after or before the party?

PO: Um—maybe not—maybe not Bill and Jim by themselves, but definitely with the—uh—with the rest of the M.F.A. students. We went down to Rogers Rec and—and—uh—drank a few beers. And I think I made one of the—uh—my first faux pas here, a—a cultural thing. Where I—where I—with my group of friends, when you go out drinking, you buy rounds of drinks. It's like, I'll get this one, and then the next guy . . .

SL: Yeah.

PO: . . . gets the next one. And by the time the night's over, everyone's sort of shared this thing.

SL: Yeah. Uh-huh.

PO: Well, at Rogers Rec, I—I bought a round of beers, and no one returned the favor. [*Laughter*] And I think a lot of people—I mean, some of these guys who I did not know very well at all kind of thought, "Well, who's this guy comin' in here, you know, showing off, buyin'—buyin' beers?" And I fully expected them all to buy me a beer, but no one did. [*Laughter*] Everyone got up and got their own.

SL: Yeah. That's funny.

PO: Yeah.

[00:16:49] SL: Okay, so one weekend here, and you're sold.

PO: Yeah. Yeah.

SL: So—uh—you go back to Santa Clara, you pack up?

PO: Yeah, probably. I—I don't remember—I came here, it must have been in the late spring because they were still in—in—in class. And—um—I—I think I went back to—to Santa Clara and Los Gatos and taught tennis for the rest of that summer. And then came here probably, you know, in August . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

PO: . . . to start that—uh—Faulkner grammar stuff.

SL: Little bit warmer here then.

PO: Yeah. Yeah, it was very hot. Um—and another, you know, sort of interesting part of that decision is the—the very day that I told my boss at this club—uh—where I was teaching—um—that I was going to be leaving after the summer—I'd been teaching there for, I think, about two years. Maybe two and a half years.

SL: Mh-hmm.

PO: He—um—offered me a job teaching as the—as the head pro at one of their clubs in Los Angeles. Because this—this club where I taught was owned by a big corporation that had clubs in about, you know, ten different places. And—um—so I was—I was walking away from, I think, a guarantee of about sixty-five, seventy grand a year teaching tennis at a club in LA to come to Arkansas and earn seven thousand bucks a year and [*laughs*] go back to school and . . .

SL: Live a totally bohemian life.

PO: Yeah, live a bohemian life—um—[*SL laughs*] I remember tellin' Skip that story, and he was like, "You are just fuckin' crazy. Why would you ever do that?" You know, [*SL laughs*] but I did it.

SL: Well, you know, that kind of stuff lets you know what you're

worth . . .

PO: Oh yeah.

SL: . . . to a corporate entity.

PO: Yeah.

SL: Uh—but . . .

PO: Yeah.

SL: . . . at the same time, you're still owned . . .

PO: Owned.

SL: . . . by that corporate entity in a sense.

[00:18:30] PO: Yeah, and one of the reasons—I mean, by the time—after I'd been teaching tennis for a couple years, and I taught tennis in high school and through college, it was just boring the daylights out of me.

SL: Yeah.

PO: I mean, I would stand on the tennis court and just want to poke myself in the head with a fork, you know, after a while. So I knew it wasn't what I was gonna do. [*SL laughs*] But—it—the—the timing of that offer was, you know, a little odd.

SL: Serendipitous.

PO: Yeah, right.

SL: Yeah.

PO: Yeah, so I turned that down and made the decision to go.

[00:18:58] SL: So—uh—did you have—did you pack up a van? Did you—how did you get here?

PO: I—um—had a—what kinda car was that? Can't remember what kinda car I had at that time. Maybe a Renault Le Car.

SL: Wow.

PO: Um—uh—maybe had a Jeep at that point, but I don't think—I don't think I drove the Jeep here. But yeah, I packed everything up into a car and drove out here.

SL: Mh-hmm.

PO: Yeah.

SL: Um—so—uh—I guess that would have been—uh—Interstate 40 to Fort Smith? You came up . . .

PO: Mh-hmm. Yep. Yeah.

SL: . . . Highway 71?

PO: Ri—probably right. I don't remember exactly.

SL: Yeah. Mh-hmm. And—uh—what you were living accommodations here?

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:19:42] PO: I don't remember exactly where I was for the first couple days. I don't remember how that worked exactly. But my first house—I rented a room in an attic down near the railroad tracks, maybe two or three blocks off of Dickson Street.

I don't remember the address. It was a—it was the attic of a—in a house where the husband was an over-the-road trucker. He was gone a lot. And the wife was kind of around all the time with her dogs. It was kind of a bizarre place. [*SL laughs*] But I was like happy [*cell phone dings*] to have my own place to live, you know . . .

SL: Yeah.

PO: . . . at that time.

SL: Excuse me. I think I did that. Okay, so you're in. You've got a place to stay, and now the work begins. You—what was your impression of Claude Faulkner?

PO: I never knew Claude.

SL: You never knew him?

PO: Well, I think I probably met him, but he wasn't really involved in anything that I was doin'.

SL: Were you not teaching Faulkner?

PO: Yeah. But he—Claude didn't teach that class. That was—I'm drawing a blank on his name.

SL: Van Scyoc?

[00:21:00] PO: Yeah, Leo taught it. Yeah.

SL: But I mean, you also taught . . .

PO: Oh yeah.

SL: . . . out of that book?

PO: Oh, so yeah . . .

SL: Yeah.

PO: . . . so you're askin' me about the—that system . . .

SL: Yeah.

PO: . . . that program. That was really frightening to me. It was really a scary thing. I don't think I fully understood what I was getting into. This whole sort of notion where you're about a week—that first year, you're about a week ahead of the stuff that you're teaching to the students. And I had never taught. I'd taught a lot of tennis, so I was kind of comfortable just talking to people, you know . . .

SL: Yeah. Mh-hmm.

PO: . . . in groups, but that was because I knew what I was talkin' about. [*SL laughs*] And with the grammar stuff, I remember walkin' into those classes just being absolutely petrified. And one of the things that Bill said that I remember to this day is we were talking about this fear I had, and he said, "Pat," he said, "Whatever you say in that classroom, these kids need to hear it. So just walk in and talk to 'em. And whatever you say is gonna be fine. [*SL laughs*] It'll be more than they're gettin' otherwise." So that gave me some confidence to just go in and

say, "Okay, if I don't do a great job teaching this particular lesson, at least, you know, I'll try to engage the kids and talk." And I actually enjoyed doin' it. But that first, what, about six, eight weeks, when you're still kinda learning that grammar system and teachin' it at the same time was a little hairy.

[00:22:24] SL: It really wasn't—I mean, I also remember those classes, and there was some concern that the TAs, or the graduate students, that were teaching those classes didn't really know the material. I mean, that did become kind of evident early in the program, but—or early in any given semester . . .

PO: Right.

SL: . . . when there was a new crop.

PO: Right.

SL: But then again, it seemed like it was—it ended up being really pretty successful because you were having students that were wanting to be writers teaching students . . .

PO: Yeah.

SL: . . . the basics, the foundations.

[00:23:07] PO: Right. And what I remember about that whole—the Faulkner grammar class was that the, you know, the new students who come in are—and in our case, came in together. You know, we took it really seriously. And you know, we knew

that we had to learn this stuff, and it was tough for me because I was always a, you know, really pretty good English student, and I could write. But I had completely forgotten grammar. I couldn't explain to you why sentences were organized the way they were and what made somethin' work or not work. And it—you know, learning that grammar, for me—it was important for me to understand that 'cause it—I think it made me a better writer. I now—I've forgotten it again since, but it made me really understand the mechanics of how sentences work. But with that group of people—I mean, we studied together. We kind of, you know, competed a little bit over who got the highest grades on the tests, so we really—we took it seriously. So you know, I think most of the time, we did know—by the time we taught it, you know, we kinda knew what we were talkin' about, for the most part. At least I felt that way. But you know, still being—coming into a classroom, a college classroom, when you've never done that before is really tough.

SL: Yeah.

PO: It's a lot to ask someone. But I'm amazed. Everyone seemed to handle it well.

SL: Yeah.

PO: You know.

[00:24:24] SL: Okay, so back over into the actual—the creative writing side of this deal. You came in in the fiction area, didn't you?

PO: Yeah.

SL: Did you stick in the fiction area . . .

PO: Yeah.

SL: . . . the whole time you were here?

PO: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

SL: So you had a lot of Bill.

PO: Yeah. Yep.

SL: And what about the first thing you handed in to Bill? How'd that go?

PO: I'm gonna—I think Skip was the first—I think he taught the first workshop . . .

SL: Oh, okay.

PO: . . . that I took. Again, this is twenty-one or two years ago, so I don't really remember it all. The—my workshop experiences for the most part were pretty positive. And I really don't know what else to say about that. I mean, you know, you're always a little bit worried about what you were doin'. And for the most part, you know, either—whether it was Skip or Bill, you know, whatever they had to say, you wanted to hear it, for the most

part. Because, you know, you're trying to be a professional writer, and you know you have to, you know, take the criticism and do the work and do the revisions. So you know, I always looked forward to the workshop experience. And for the most part, they were positive.

[00:25:45] SL: So you musta had some pretty good chops when you got here, I guess.

PO: I don't really think I did.

SL: Really?

PO: You know. Yeah. I didn't—and when I was talking about confidence, I don't—I didn't think of myself as a very good writer. You know, maybe I had some potential. I don't know. Maybe that's a better way to put it. I'm a pretty good learn—I'm a pretty quick study, I think, you know. I can learn some things.

SL: Well, I know that they were looking for talent or, you know, signs of talent. But they were also looking for diversity. And I think that whole ethnic thing that . . .

PO: Yeah, they . . .

SL . . . Jim laid on you immediately was probably one thing, one aspect.

PO: Yeah.

[00:26:28] SL: And you know, a tennis teacher, a tennis pro . . .

PO: Could bring some different stories into the mix.

SL: Yeah.

PO: Yeah.

SL: It's a totally different . . .

PO: Yeah. Yeah, that could be . . .

SL: . . . culture that you were bringing in . . .

PO: Yeah.

SL: . . . to . . .

PO: Yeah. Yeah.

SL: . . . to the program.

PO: Yeah.

SL: So they were very good at keeping things diverse.

PO: Yeah. Yeah, and for the most part, I think I wrote stories from those—you know, from that perspective. I wrote stories that took place in Chicago, and I didn't do much southern stuff. The one time I tried to do—I had just been introduced to Barry Hannah, his work. I never read it before I came here. And I was just blown away by it. I just couldn't believe that, you know, [*SL laughs*] someone could get away with this. You know, this stuff was so crazy.

SL: Yeah.

[00:27:14] PO: And so I tried to write my Barry Hannah kind of story

set here in Fayetteville. And I couldn't even tell you exactly what it was about, but it was set in this house where I'd lived, and it involved this trucker and his wife, and it was just, you know, stupid. And I put it up on the workshop, and you know, before the workshop you kind of get a little bit of, you know, what the other students think. "Oh yeah, I like your story up there. I think it's great. Workshop should go well." And we got [*laughs*]—the workshop starts, and this is with Bill. And he's got—he's at the head of the table, and he's got the story there in front of him. And he says, "So anybody wanna get started? Let's just go around and, you know, tell us what you think." And everyone kinda goes around the room and says, you know, "I liked this part," or "I liked that part." I mean, maybe the ending, this or that. But it was generally positive. And so he lets everybody [*laughs*] go through this. And then he goes, "Well, then someone tell me why I think this is a piece of shit." [*SL laughs*] And I'm like, just like—I just froze. I mean, my blood just went to ice water. [00:28:17] And then he just went on for about fifteen minutes telling me how dumb the thing was and I'm a better writer than this and don't waste my time, and it was just—it just shattered me. It just shattered me. And at this—I think I'm right. I think I had Bill second semester. So I'd

gotten to know him, you know, durin' the fall, and we'd become, you know, sort of, you know, friends, friendly. And we—I couldn't talk to him after this happened. And he kind of avoided me. So a couple of weeks went by where, you know, his office down at the hall, I stayed away from there. We never sort of, you know, talked about what happened. And then he called me into his office a couple weeks later, and he, you know, sits me down, and he says, "Man, that was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. You know, but you needed to hear it." He said, "I"—he said, "When I got home, I had a—I had to have like four whiskeys, you know." [*SL laughs*] And I'm not sure—you know, I'm guessing that this is true. But I'm sure he's had to do this to a lot of writers. But you know, I really appreciated he was essentially telling me, "You're better than this. Don't waste your time imitating." I mean, I'm sure he saw right through what I was trying to do . . .

SL: Sure.

PO: . . . 'cause he'd read other stuff that I'd done. And he just—like, he was just—wasn't gonna let me do it, you know. So you know, I think it was probably hard for him to do because I think we are, you know, we are still very good friends, but I'm glad he did it.

SL: Yeah. He was right.

PO: Yeah. Oh, definitely. Yeah. Bill was pretty much always right [*SL laughs*], you know. I can't give you specific examples of that again. But you know, he knows what he's talkin' about.

[00:29:53] SL: Well now, what about Jim? Did you have any courses with Jim?

PO: Yeah, I had a fiction workshop with him. I did not, unfortunately, get to take Form and Theory of Poetry with him. That's the class that, you know, everyone had said, "You gotta have this class with Jim." Jim's style, for me, was different in the way he talked and approached stories and revision. And I think in Jim's mind, anything is possible in your story. And what he would say, at least to me—he says, "Whatever you're gonna do, just write it with confidence. I don't care if it totally makes sense or if it makes it a beautifully crafted, perfect little story. You know, write what you're gonna write, but you know, just make it as good as you can. And do it with confidence." So he would—you know, his—he wouldn't mind if a story went on for forty-five pages as long as he liked the forty-five pages. Whereas Bill would say, "This thing's got to be fifteen pages." You know, he'd just be kind of ruthless about the cutting and all that kind of stuff. Jim was more, you know, "If that's the story

you want to tell, let's make it work," you know. That's the—just kind of a different approach. He had a more open, you know, I guess, view of what, you know, these stories could be.

[00:31:11] SL: Yeah. It sounds like to me, from what I've heard, that what you just described is pretty much universally acknowledged . . .

PO: Mh-hmm. Yeah.

SL: . . . that Jim was perfectly comfortable and willing to encourage expanding, while Bill was much more ruthless . . .

PO: Yeah.

SL: . . . and laser focused . . .

PO: Yeah.

SL: . . . on getting rid of elements that . . .

PO: Right.

SL: . . . weren't necessary . . .

PO: Yeah.

SL: . . . or didn't work in his mind or . . .

PO: Right. Yeah.

SL: . . . was something that was in the way of the story.

PO: Yeah.

[00:31:42] SL: And so . . .

PO: Yeah.

SL: . . . it's interesting that those two different approaches, and those two different views of what makes literature work . . .

PO: Right.

SL: . . . somehow work together.

PO: Yeah.

SL: And I don't know . . .

PO: Yeah.

SL: . . . how that happened . . .

PO: Right.

SL: . . . but apparently . . .

PO: Yeah.

SL: . . . everyone was stronger because of that combination.

PO: Yeah, I mean, if you think about it if you had these two strong, you know, teachers who had the exact same vision of what it should be, it's like you wouldn't need one of 'em.

SL: Right.

PO: You know.

SL: That's a good point.

PO: So I think having these two different sort of perspectives on things also allowed them to appeal to, and improve, different kinds of writers. I mean, I never felt like I was, like, a Bill writer or a Jim writer. You know, I respected them both equally and

never really felt like I was kinda gonna write this story for Jim's sort of mentality and this one for Bill's. I think there are some people who just respond to one or the other better—responded to one or the other better. And you know, they wrote stories that, you know, they were looking for Jim's, you know, take on it. Or they were looking for Bill's take on it. And I think that that's probably a good thing because, you know, for the program I mean, that it allows more versatility.

[00:33:04] SL: Okay, so we're kind of still—I feel like we're still kind of in Kimpel Hall, I guess. We're in Kimpel Hall here during all this, but another aspect of this program that I think made it unique was that these guys took on personal responsibility for each student. And part of the program was the social aspect. Not all in the classroom . . .

PO: Right.

SL: . . . and not just what's on the paper.

PO: Right.

SL: But the faces and the stories that you see and hear in front of you among those in the program. And so I think, to my knowledge, it's pretty rare that if a student were to throw a party that the faculty would come and kind of be expected . . .

PO: Rare that they would—rare that they would or wouldn't come?

SL: Would come. That, yeah, rare that they would not . . .

PO: Right, yeah.

SL: . . . rare that you would actually get someone of that intellect of those two, and they would be at a student's apartment party.

PO: Completely true. Completely true.

[00:34:23] SL: And also that those guys would, particularly Jim, would open his door . . .

PO: Yep.

SL: . . . to . . .

PO: Yeah.

SL: . . . the students.

PO: Yeah.

SL: And you'd be in the kitchen, or you'd be on the deck or . . .

PO: Yeah.

SL: And . . .

PO: Yeah.

SL: . . . everyone was engaged . . .

PO: Right.

SL: . . . with everyone.

PO: Right.

SL: And it almost became a way of life rather than life out here . . .

PO: Yeah.

SL: . . . and class over here.

PO: Yeah, yeah.

SL: It's like there . . .

PO: Right.

SL: . . . it really blurred.

PO: Yeah, yeah.

[00:34:50] SL: And not really sure where the learning was . . .

PO: It took place all over.

SL: . . . taking place. It took place all the time.

PO: It took place all over the place. Yeah, yeah. I think part of that is—I think both—and I include Skip in this as well—these people, Jim and Bill and Skip and the other teachers who've been there over the years—they really, really want these writers to succeed. And I think part of getting people to do their best work is to get them to feel comfortable and to trust you and to feel that you understand each other. And I think when you spend, you know, that kinda time outside the classroom, whether it's, you know, gettin' a few beers or gettin' lunch or havin' dinner and just bein' friends, it, I think, it allows the writer to take more chances and just feel better about being here and working on this stuff. I mean, I think it would be miserable if—it'd be a miserable experience if you came here and you did this kind of work and

didn't really get the added benefit of feeling like these people really cared about you.

[00:35:55] SL: Well . . .

PO: And it'd be lonely.

SL: . . . don't you think it's also the interaction between the [*TM coughs*] students as well, I mean . . .

PO: Oh, for sure, yeah.

SL: . . . I mean, the students were—it was like the teachers and the students were all colleagues together . . .

PO: Yeah. Yeah.

SL: . . . in a way.

PO: Definitely.

SL: And that these social gatherings were not so much about being entertained as they were expanding the writing experience. It's like living like writers.

PO: Yeah, right. Yeah, yeah.

SL: Instead of living like a student . . .

PO: Right. Yeah.

SL: . . . approaching a teacher. It was like you were . . .

PO: Yeah. And you got to see how writers lived and with really good examples with Skip and Bill and Jim. You go to Skip's house, and it's a writer's house. I mean, it's wall to wall books, and you

see his workspace. And you go to Jim's place, and you see his workspace and Bill's office, you know. And they're all totally different kinds of places. And that, you know, is a good thing for a writer to see. You know, to have an example of, you know, professional working writers. How do they—how do these guys live? What do they do?

[00:36:58] SL: You know, we haven't really—in these interviews so far, I haven't really talked—we haven't really talked too much about Skip. Do you wanna say some things about Skip . . .

PO: Sure.

SL: . . . Hays? I mean, we've talked a lot about Bill, and we've talked a lot . . .

PO: Yeah.

SL: . . . about Jim.

PO: Yeah.

SL: But you know, Skip has kind of carried on the program.

PO: Yeah.

SL: I mean, he's continued what . . .

PO: Right.

SL: . . . what Bill and Jim had started. So . . .

PO: Yeah.

SL: . . . maybe we oughta spend a little bit of time on Skip.

PO: M'kay. If . . .

[00:37:27] SL: How did you first—you—I guess you were with Skip the first . . .

PO: Yeah, I'm . . .

PO: . . . weekend.

SL: . . . pretty sure he was—and I'm pretty sure he was the first. I think he ran the workshop my first semester. I could be wrong about that. But I'm pretty sure he was. And I also took a class, I think, that first semester that he taught called the Form and Theory of the Novel, which—I mean, Skip's just a great teacher. He really is. And that Form and Theory of Novel class—I had never really done anything like it before. There were maybe, you know, eight, ten students in the class, and he would assign the—he'd assign the novel that was—I think it was Form and Theory of Novel, or the American novel. I forget which one it was. It was form and theory. And you would just sit there and talk about how the book worked, you know, kinda page by page, passage by passage. He'd read somethin', and you know, you could spend half an hour just discussing, you know, what that, you know, what's that—what that's doin' there and what function that's servin'. And he's just a really, really good teacher.

[00:38:30] SL: How was he different from Bill and Jim?

PO: I think he kind of falls in between them in a way in that he's not as—what would the word be? [Pause] He's open to any way a story can work as well. He's got a little bit of Bill, I think, in him in his teaching style, a little bit of Jim. But not quite so much of either of 'em, in a way. I don't know if that makes any sense.

SL: Sure it does. He's a product of . . .

PO: I was gonna say he's not as—I was gonna use the word didactic, but that's just not the right word. It's—he's in the middle of there. He's—of those two. He's got a little bit of each of 'em in there. And I think that also makes him a great teacher 'cause he can go—he can do it both ways. You know, he can have that, you know, sharp approach, but he can also go the other way that Jim would do it too.

SL: Did you ever—well, it makes sense . . .

PO: Mh-hmm. Yeah, sure.

SL: . . . that he's a product of . . .

PO: Right.

SL: . . . these two guys' . . .

PO: Yeah.

SL: . . . collaborations.

PO: Right.

[00:39:41] SL: That kind of makes sense. Did you ever—were you

ever brave enough to engage in an argument with Jim?

PO: I don't think so. [*SL laughs*] I don't remember ever arguing, really, with either of—or with any of them over things.

SL: Well, I mean, I—it may not have anything to do with work, but . . .

PO: Yeah.

SL: . . . I'm talkin' politics or philosophy . . .

PO: No, I'm . . .

SL: . . . art . . .

PO: Yeah.

SL: . . . or . . .

PO: No, I think politicswise—I mean, I don't think I fully know any of their politics, but I line up with them pretty well, I think. You know, we, you know, love the same books. I don't ever remember having any sort of philosophical or political or just arguments of any kind with those guys.

[00:40:33] SL: That's interesting, you know, because Jim in particular, I think, was pretty noted for taking a stand and almost baiting—waiting for someone to take an opposite stand . . .

PO: Yeah.

SL: . . . for the sake of argument.

PO: Mh-hmm. Yeah.

SL: That he was a great . . .

PO: Yeah.

SL: . . . at argument.

PO: Yeah.

SL: And . . .

PO: Right.

SL: And . . .

PO: I don't think I ever—he either never baited me, or I don't think I ever took the bait, one or the other. [*Laughter*]

SL: Well, I don't know if bait's the right word.

PO: Right.

SL: But it seemed like to me he enjoyed . . .

PO: Yeah.

SL: . . . a good argument.

PO: Yeah, definitely. Definitely.

[00:41:08] SL: Well, if—so what is it that you do now?

PO: I run a marketing communications business that—my own business. And I write and produce TV commercials, do web development. Anything that goes through my business, I do all the writing for it. So I'm kind of a—I work in that industry as a writer. I also still write also, you know, creatively as well. But

it's not as big a part of my life as it used to be. And I've got a fourteen-year-old son and a wife and a, you know, sort of life, you know, back in Evansville.

SL: Evansville, Illinois?

PO: Evansville, Indiana.

SL: Indiana.

PO: Yeah.

SL: Okay.

PO: Yeah.

SL: So if you had one or two things that you felt you took away with you from the creative writing program at the University of Arkansas, what would that be?

PO: I think something to do with being professional about your writing and takin' it seriously and puttin' the time in and doin' the work and being ambitious with your writing. I think that's something that I left here with. And really, that's kinda it, I think. It's just the professionalism. It's like if you want to be a writer, this is what you've got to do. You got to take it seriously.

SL: You have to do the work.

PO: Yeah. Yeah.

SL: Yeah.

[00:42:51] SL: Is there anything else you want to say about the

program or Jim or Bill or Skip before I let you off the seat here?

PO: No, I don't think so. I think that's it. I mean, it was a—I was here for, I think, two and a half, three years, and it was just a wonderful, wonderful time in my life. Being with other writers and being able to focus and having the freedom to work on your art with really no other distractions was a real privilege. Working with all these people was great too.

SL: And you met your wife.

PO: I did. It impacted my life in a lotta ways, lotta ways. That's true.

SL: Well, okay.

PO: All right.

SL: You did some good stuff. Now Joy's gonna come in and . . .

PO: Okay.

SL: . . . maybe ask you some questions, spellings, places, names and . . .

PO: Okay.

SL: . . . stuff . . .

PO: Okay.

SL: That'll help speed up the transcription process.

PO: Sure. Okay.

SL: Is there anything else?

TM: No.

SL: Trey?

TM: That's good job.

PO: Okay.

[00:43:52 End of interview]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]