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

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Arkansas Memories Project

Bill Harrison Surprise Interviews

Steve Yarbrough

Interviewed by Scott Lunsford

June 11, 2011

Fayetteville, Arkansas

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Objective

Oral history is a collection of an individual's memories and opinions. As such, it is subject to the innate fallibility of memory and is susceptible to inaccuracy. All researchers using these interviews should be aware of this reality and are encouraged to seek corroborating documentation when using any oral history interview.

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

Transcript Methodology

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

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

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

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

Citation Information

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

Scott Lunsford interviewed Steve Yarbrough 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, Steve, my name is Scott Lunsford. We're—uh—from the Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History. We're from University of Arkansas here in Fayetteville. Uh—today's date is June the eleventh. The year is 2011. We are at Laurie Harrison's residence in Fayetteville, Arkansas. [*Camera clicks*] And today and yesterday we are and have been recording interviews of former M.F.A. students, friends of the M.F.A. program—um—spouses of the M.F.A. program, and—uh—these interviews are part of our Bill Harrison project. We've already gotten an interview with Bill, and these are just kind of—uh—expansions of that interview. We record in high definition. It will be gorgeous. It'll look great. We're very particular about that. We will preserve these recordings forever, and—uh—there'll be an

archive at the Pryor Center. There'll be an offsite archive elsewhere.

Steve Yarbrough: Mh-hmm.

[00:01:02] SL: There'll also be a DVD copy of this material housed in the Special Collections Department at the University of Arkansas Mullins Library, Fayetteville campus. Um—if you are—we will also provide you a transcript of this interview . . .

SY: M'kay.

SL: . . . and a DVD [*camera clicks*] of the raw footage. And when you . . .

SY: Right.

SL: . . . get those materials, we'll ask you to take some time and read and look at this stuff.

SY: Right.

SL: And if you find anything in the transcript that's wrong . . .

SY: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . or if you find—and there will be some—probably some areas that we may want some clarification . . .

SY: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . or if you find something in the transcript or the video that is objectionable to you . . .

SY: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . and you have any reservations about sharing with the rest of the world, you will need to tell us . . .

SY: Okay.

SL: . . . and we will fix that for you. We feel like this is your interview, and we're privileged to have you in front of us. So we want to make sure that you are pleased. And when that process is done, we will then post this stuff on the web, and we'll probably take highlight clips—what we call highlight clips—videowise—out of . . .

SY: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . this interview. Those will be seen on the—on the website.

SY: M'kay.

[00:02:13] SL: We'll take the approved transcript in its entirety, and that will be posted and available for download. The entire audio of the approved transcript will be placed on the website, and that will be downloadable . . .

SY: M'kay.

SL: . . . so people can put it on a MP3 player or a CD and they can drive around in their car or work out in the gym—whatever they wanna do with it. We will encourage people to come to the website to gather . . .

Kris Katrosh: Trey, is the door closed to the kitchen? I can clearly

hear the voices.

SL: . . . these materials—documentarians—um—uh—researchers, students of Arkansas history, both in higher education and public schools.

SY: Mh-hmm.

[00:02:47] SL: Um—it will be there for—really, for the taking. We'll—we'll monitor some of this. We won't let anyone try to abuse it any way or—or take advantage of us. But—um—this is all about—uh—Arkansas history. It's all about, in this case, the university's role and Bill Harrison's [*door squeaks*] and Jim Whitehead's role . . .

KK: Is the door to the kitchen closed?

Trey Marley: Yes.

SL: Yeah.

KK: I can clearly hear them, so . . .

SL: Yeah, that's okay.

TM: Okay. Yeah.

SL: Um [*door squeaks*] . . .

TM: Hey, Kris?

KK: Yeah.

TM: I—I do hear you on those break-ins.

KK: Yeah, I know.

TM: It goes to tape.

KK: Well, it wasn't real yet, from my perspective.

TM: Yeah. [*Door squeaks*]

SY: Okay.

SL: So—um—I guess the bottom line is, if you're comfortable with all of that, we're gonna keep goin' with this interview.

SY: That's fine.

SL: Okay, great. Thank you.

SY: Sure.

[00:03:35] SL: That's a great answer. Um—so we usually start with the interview stating their name and if they're—if it's unusual spelling, we ask you to spell the name, and then we need to know when and where you were born.

SY: Okay. My name is Steve Yarbrough. *Y-A-R-B-R-O-U-G-H*. And I was born in Indianola, Mississippi, on August 29, 1956.

SL: Indianola, Mississippi. One of my favorite albums—B. B. King albums—*Indianola Mississippi Seeds*.

SY: *Indianola Mississippi Seeds*.

SL: "Nobody Loves Me But My Mother."

SY: Yeah, with Carole King on piano.

SL: Unbelievable recording.

SY: It's a great record, yeah.

SL: You know, it was one of those records that—uh—kinda raised the bar on the quality of his recordings, I felt.

SY: Mh-hmm.

SL: I mean, it was really . . .

SY: It's a special one.

SL: . . . a masterpiece.

SY: Yeah.

SL: Yeah, I love that—I think I've got it on my iPhone right now. Uh . . .

SY: I've got it on my ringtone, some of it.

SL: [*Laughter*] That's good. Um—so were you—um—uh—we—and your mother and your father's names were . . .

SY: John Yarbrough and Earlene Yarbrough.

SL: And your mother's maiden name was . . .

SY: Beam.

SL: *B-E-A-M*?

SY: Right.

[00:04:49] SL: And—uh—what did they do for a living, Steve?

SY: Um—my dad, for much of his life, was a cotton farmer, and—uh—then at some point, he got himself trying to run television transmitters. And for the last twenty or so years of his working life, he ran a station for Mississippi Educational Television. And

my mother was a clerk in various stores and offices around town.

[00:05:18] SL: So were you raised in Indianola?

SY: I was, yes.

SL: Pretty much all your life or all your—uh . . .

SY: Yeah.

SL: . . . childhood?

SY: Yeah.

SL: Public schools? You went to public schools there?

SY: Uh—no, I—well, I went to public school through about fourth grade, and then I was sent to—um—what is euphemistically called a segregation academy, which was an all-white private school.

SL: Mh-hmm.

SY: They sprang up all over the Delta and all over the state as a result of—um—*Brown v. Board of Education*.

SL: Absolutely. So—uh—you really were affected by that in . . .

SY: Absolutely.

SL: . . . a very real and personal way.

SY: Mh-hmm.

SL: Um—I guess—um—we ought to talk about that just a little bit.

SY: Sure.

SL: Um—so—uh—were you witness to—uh—any of the—um—troubles that occurred during that time?

SY: Oh, the civil rights—uh—the civil rights era was up close and personal for me. Um—I saw Martin Luther King when he came to my hometown. Um—I remember vividly some of the—you know, the events in Greenwood—uh—nearby, and my most recent novel deals with the integration of Ole Miss by James Meredith in 1962. So—uh—yeah, it . . .

SL: It . . .

SY: . . . was goin' on around me when I was a child.

SL: This is something that you can write about from personal experience.

SY: Sure. Yes.

[00:06:49] SL: Wow. How—how were your—how was your family on that? I mean, were they . . .

SY: Oh, well . . .

SL: . . . were they—I guess they were segregationists if they . . .

SY: Of course.

SL: Yeah.

SY: Yeah, my father was—uh—an—a fairly early member. How early, I don't know. Um—but he was a member of the Citizens' Council, and if you've spent much time in Arkansas, and I

assume you have, you will know what the . . .

SL: Yes.

SY: . . . Citizens' Council was . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

SY: . . . all about.

SL: Sure.

SY: Um—so yeah. And at a certain point in my life—um—maybe—I would guess around the age of, say, fourteen or so, I began to question a lot of what I was being told, and it began to bother me a lot. And by the time I left my hometown to go to college—um—I was—I was feeling like an outsider in the place that I'd grown up and pretty much have kept that feeling for the rest of my life.

SL: Yeah, I don't see how you could avoid it.

SY: Yeah.

[00:07:46] SL: Um—so—um—you know, some of the interviews we've done—um—uh—the white folk that, you know, as children maybe played with—with African Americans . . .

SY: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . before school. Before . . .

SY: Up till about . . .

SL: Up to the school age.

SY: . . . up to about the age of five.

SL: And then all of a sudden . . .

SY: Everything changed.

SL: . . . every change—everything changed.

SY: Yep.

SL: And that's your experience too?

SY: That was my experience.

[00:08:19] SL: Uh—you—now, you said your father was a cotton farmer. He . . .

SY: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . was he sharecropping, or was he . . .

SY: His family had been sharecroppers. I think to—to call him a sharecropper would be misleading. He did own a small amount of land. Most of the land he farmed he rented from the county.

SL: Uh-huh.

SY: Um—and it was—it was—you know, they were basically always just a step ahead of—of absolute financial destruction—uh—both he and my grandfather. So they weren't doing well financially. Um—they were—they were as far away from Delta planters as you could possibly be.

SL: Yeah. So once you—once you started school—um—and you say you went—uh—to just the public school through fourth grade. Is

that—fourth or fifth . . .

SY: Uh—through third grade.

SL: Third grade.

SY: Yeah.

[00:09:15] SL: Um—what was the—uh—I guess—and I hate to let this—uh—segregation thing go—uh—but were there—uh—in your town in Indianola, were there signs of segregation? Were there . . .

SY: Sure, ev—ev—everything.

SL: Everything. All . . .

SY: The doctor's . . .

SL: The whole nightmare.

SY: Yeah, the doctor's office—um—had two waiting rooms. The waiting room that I went to, where all the other white people were—it had nice overstuffed chairs. It had—um—you know, a television—a color television that—when that became common. Um—and the other waiting room, where all of the Black people went, just had, you know, very hard wooden benches. Um—it was always terribly overcrowded. There were two water fountains—um—one marked "colored," one marked "white." Um—you know, these were two worlds that just existed side by side. The—uh—the grocery store, by the way, that I used to

shop at—they took it a step farther—the—because you think about it, a lot of people were not able to read. And so labeling the fountains "colored" and "white" might not have worked for all of the white people or all of the Black people, either, so they were color-coded. One fountain was painted white, and the other one was painted Black. And that was the world I grew up in.

[00:10:45] SL: So did you ever—uh—attend any of the Citizens' Council gatherings?

SY: No—um—I—I don't think I did. It's—it's not impossible that my dad may have taken me to one when I was three or four years old and I—you know, I wouldn't remember it. But—uh—essentially, all the white people—all the white men in town were members. I—I—if there were any who weren't, I'd be surprised. And—um—they did eventually get to the point where, in my hometown at least, they were holding those meetings in—um—you know, municipally owned venues. Like, I think they had one—um—at least one or two in the courthouse. So—um—that was goin' on all the time.

SL: Wow. So when you got to your—uh—segregated school . . .

SY: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . uh—uh—I guess, through high school you . . .

SY: Yeah.

SL: Um—was it just a—a—was it a—a school that was built for that purpose, or was it just repurposed school?

SY: Uh—it was . . .

SL: I mean, was . . .

SY: . . . it was built for that purpose, but that's not what people would say. Uh—people would say that they were providing a, you know, a much-needed alternative form of education to that which was otherwise available. So did they stand up and say, "We have built this school to keep Black people out"? No, they didn't say that. But [*laughter*]—but you know, everybody knew what it was there for.

[00:12:30] SL: Mh-hmm. The African Americans—um—you know, this was a way of life . . .

SY: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . before *Brown v. Board*. Um—were they the least bit activist in—in their roles once this . . .

SY: Oh, in my . . .

SL: . . . turmoil started?

SY: Yeah, in my hometown, sure. Um—some of the major activists were working out of Indianola. One of them was a man named Charles McLaurin who, if you read histories of the civil rights

movement—um—Charlie is always presented as a—as an absolute firebrand. And probably I would have encountered him on streets downtown when I was a child, but I only officially met him a few years ago—uh—on the—on the Delta Literary Tour. Uh—he and I spoke together at the library, and—uh—you know, he—it surprised me just what a sweet, gentle man he was. And I asked him, "You know—um—you seem very different from the way you're always depicted." And he said, "Well, those were times when I was very angry, you know. How could you not be?" Carver Randle was a major activist who worked out of Indianola, and Fannie Lou Hamer, who was an absolute giant of the civil rights movement, was just from a few miles north of my hometown. So she operated out of Sunflower County. It was—it was really the epicenter. And I heard Charles McLaurin say that at—at one point Medgar Evers took him aside, and Charles was really angry, and he said, "Charles, I want you to look at something." And he ran his hand over a map of Mississippi that he had on the walls, and he—he stopped on the Delta, and he just said, "There it is. There's the prize. That's where the numbers add up." And—um—you know, that's—that's really where the numbers have added up. And finally, in—throughout most of the Delta—um—African Americans are, you know, finally

in charge of city councils. Uh—they're the mayors. They're the police chiefs. Uh—it took a long time.

SL: Well, the old system was ensconced for . . .

SY: Yes.

SL: . . . a long time.

SY: For a long time.

[00:14:53] SL: Um—so when you got to the—uh—newly built—uh—serviceable—uh—school—um—and your classmates—did you—did you get a sense that there was some—uh—movement—uh—and thoughts similar to the doubts that you had started having at fourteen?

SY: Well, that—by the time I got to high school, there were definitely other students in the school—um—who—who had already decided that as soon as they could, they were getting out of there. They didn't wanna be part of that system, and they couldn't imagine it changing anytime soon. Um—the laws had changed, but changing peoples' hearts has—has always been a—you know, a much more difficult matter. And a lot of us left. Um—but—um—you know, that's got its plus and its minus. I . . .

SL: Sure.

SY: . . . I would not be able to live there, but the fact that most

people who were bothered by the things that they were seeing—uh—chose to—to get out and go somewhere else—um—you know, that kind of has its drawbacks as well.

SL: Talent drain.

SY: Sure. Yeah.

SL: And just—uh—brain drain, really.

SY: Yeah.

[00:16:17] SL: So—um—do you feel like you got a decent education out of that school?

SY: I feel like I got a decent education. I got a skewed education because there were—um—some teachers in that school who would—who would routinely use the *N* word in class. Um—that was—that was very common. It was just thrown around all over the place. You—um—you got a sanitized version of history, you know. Um—when you studied the Civil War, you mostly studied about Southern valor. You got a—just a completely wrong version of Reconstruction. That's—that was really—um—I would say, the worst teaching that went on there, was the version of Reconstruction that was presented.

SL: How—how did they present that? It . . .

SY: Um—that here you just had these incompetent Black people like Hiram Revels—uh—Blanche K. Bruce—I can't even remember if

they told us the names or if I learned the names later—that they couldn't do anything—they didn't have the education—they—um—were absolute disasters. That's completely untrue. That's not who those men were. They were very different from that. And you know, when you're sixteen years old and people you respect are telling you something, the tendency is to believe it.

SL: Sure.

SY: After all, when they told you that if you put your hand in the fire you get burned, they were right.

SL: Yeah, sure.

SY: Um—and so I—it was a lot of soul-searching for me.

SL: You know—uh—I have to say, and I'm sad to say this, but—uh—some of that old attitude remains.

SY: Of course.

SL: I mean, I know it does in Arkansas.

SY: And it's not just limited to the South, either . . .

SL: Yeah, that's true.

SY: . . . you know.

SL: Yeah, it's amazing that could still hold on like that.

SY: Mh-hmm.

[00:18:14] SL: Okay. So you graduate from high school, and you get the heck out of Indianola?

SY: Um—initially, I went all of twenty-eight miles away to Delta State University to play football. And I played football for two years and decided this was not for me.

SL: Uh-huh.

SY: And I transferred to Ole Miss and—uh—got a B.A. in English and philosophy and a—and then a master's in literature. And—uh—after that I came over here.

[00:18:44] SL: So—uh—you were already—uh—uh—I mean, did you feel like you had a proclivity for literature and English—uh . . .

SY: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . when you were in high school? You enjoyed the . . .

SY: Yeah, I did. Um—I think by the time I was about nineteen, if somebody asked me what I was goin' to be, I would say, "A writer," and usually that would produce a laugh. Um . . .

SL: Yeah, sure.

SY: . . . you know.

SL: Yeah.

SY: But that's what I wanted. And the—the only three things that had ever really interested me were football, music, and writing. Um—by the time I was nineteen, I knew—even though I had been a really good football player in high school—that there was only so far that could take you. I was a pretty good musician,

but I think I already knew—um—there was something I didn't have.

SL: Yeah.

SY: And—uh—that left writing. You know, I'd always loved books, and I decided I wanted to make them myself.

[00:19:46] SL: So how did you—um—pick University of Arkansas over other programs?

SY: Um—well, the—I had fallen in love with the work of a writer named Andre Dubus.

SL: Okay.

SY: Um—and he was originally from Louisiana, but he lived in Massachusetts. And I had dec—I had decided I wanted to write my master's thesis on his work, and I—I wrote to him, and we began to exchange letters. And when I told him I wanted to be a writer, he said, "Then you need to apply to graduate school immediately at the University of New Hampshire, the University of Iowa, and the University of Arkansas. And if one of those places lets you in, you go there." And—um—you know, I did some investigating. I wanted to see who else had been to all those places, and I discovered Barry Hannah had gone to Arkansas [*SL laughs*], and I was a big fan of his.

SL: Yeah.

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:20:44] SY: And Lee Abbott, who was—whose work I also liked—and you know, they had been taught by Jim Whitehead and Bill Harrison. And I knew a little bit about Whitehead because he was from Mississippi, so I read his work.

SL: *Joiner*. Uh-huh.

SY: I read *Joiner*. And then I read Bill Harrison's work, and somethin' just clicked for me. And I could not have explained what it was, but I learned it while I was here—that I actually had an aesthetic that was really close to Bill Harrison's aesthetic. And so I remember I did my applications piecemeal 'cause I didn't have enough money to apply to all those places at once. I did Arkansas first, and they accepted me. In about two weeks, I got a [*SL laughs*] letter from Harrison.

SL: Yeah.

SY: And that was it. I was in there, so I didn't bother to finish applying to the other places. And it was just a—it was a great moment when I got that letter.

SL: So . . .

SY: He signed it in brown ink. I've never forgotten it. [*Laughs*]

SL: What did you send in?

SY: I sent in three short stories that probably looked like [*laughs*]

they were written by three different people because I hadn't found my voice. And he specifically mentioned liking one of them a lot, which actually was the first story that I went on to publish. I think I did it—I revised it after I got over here—after it went through the workshop—and sent it out, and it was accepted by *Greensboro Review*, which was edited at that time by Lee Zacharias, who had also gone to this program.

[00:22:27] SL: So what year was that when you got here?

SY: Nineteen eighty-one.

SL: [Nineteen] ninety-one.

SY: August of [19]81.

SL: Wow! So Fayetteville was different.

SY: Oh, it was a radically different place then. But it was—you know, it was great then, too. It didn't have a lot of what it's got now, but it was great. And what it did have was that it—you know, it had brought together a pretty large number of people who all wanted the same thing. And those three years were three of the best years of my life. I was unhappy a lot of the time because I couldn't write as well as I wanted to. And Bill was especially not gentle [*SL laughs*] in class. So I—you know, I was often mad at him or mad at my classmates, but I loved 'em as well.

SL: So did you have any courses with Jim?

SY: I had three classes with Jim. I did two workshops with Jim, and I took Form and Theory of Poetry with Jim. And Jim took a special interest in me because I was from Mississippi, and in fact [*laughs*], I'll never forget this—you know, I moved into my apartment. It took about three days to get the phone installed, and about ten minutes after the phone was installed, it rings, and it's Jim Whitehead sayin', "Well, are you comin' over here or not?" [*Laughter*] So I went over to his house that afternoon for the first of many times.

SL: Uh-huh. And got introduced to the back deck.

SY: I did. And the basement.

[00:24:11] SL: [*Laughter*] And the basement. So I guess one of the things that made this program—I believe—forged the program—was Jim and Bill's personal responsibilities they took . . .

SY: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . for each student . . .

SY: Yep.

SL: . . . that they brought in.

SY: Yes.

SL: And so it was like the classroom and academia and real life were

pretty blurred.

[00:24:44] SY: Yeah, everything was—you know, the way I look at it, everything was the classroom. You were here learning all the time, and what actually happened on campus in the classrooms was just a really small part of it. It went on, and it went on, and it went on. My first semester here, I had the workshop with John Clellon Holmes, and John was great. But John was the one who was—he was least likely to ask you out for a beer afterwards. He was a very loving but private man, and he had a—you know, he wanted to go home and be with his wife and be with his books. So I didn't have Bill or Jim in workshop that semester, but at some point—I think it was toward the end of that semester—Bill saw me in the hall, and if you've done enough interviews, I bet you five people at least have told you the same story. He saw me in the hall and said, "Give me a story to read. I need to catch up with what you're doin'." I gave it to him, and he calls me up and says, "Let's go out to dinner." So he takes me out to dinner and gets a couple of drinks in me and then says, "Well, I wish I liked your story, but it's really bad." [*SL laughs*] And then he'd tell me for an [*laughs*]—like, an hour and a half why my story was really bad. And you know, I went home just feeling like a pea. [*SL laughs*] But that's—that

was just the first illustration of how far those guys were gonna go to try to make you learn what they thought you needed to learn. And I went through that with him and Jim many times. Jim would call you up and say, "I read your story. I haven't been gettin' through to you," you know. "Get over here," you know. [*Laughter*] And you'd have to go over to the house right then . . .

SL: Yeah.

SY: . . . you know, so he could [*laughs*] drum on you for an hour or two. But wow, how priceless.

[00:26:46] SL: What an incredible gift . . .

SY: Yeah.

SL: . . . that—well, first of all, you know, any good school—someone will read your work . . .

SY: Sure.

SL: . . . and that may be the first-time experience that someone's actually looking at your work and actually reading it and actually cares about what's in it. But then for them to [*TM coughs*] take you on into their lives . . .

SY: Yeah.

SL: . . . it's almost like you were—yeah, you were in school, but you were more living the life of a writer.

SY: That's right.

SL: You were among writers. You were learning from writers that were still writing, and you were surrounded by students that were—wanted to write.

[00:27:24] SY: Mh-hmm. And I learned—you know, my daughter's just applied—what—last year was applying to M.F.A. programs. And she's actually gonna end up coming to the one that I teach in at Emerson College. But I told her from the very beginning—I said, "You know, what you want to do when you decide, 'I might go to this program or that program,' you ask whoever's directing the program to let you meet some students, because if it's a good program, you're not just going to learn from the writers who teach in it; you're gonna learn a lot from the other students." Skip Hays was a student with me. John Dufresne was a student with me. Lee Martin was a student with me. And I think Skip was a couple years ahead, but I think with Dufresne and Martin and me, we were in at least two or three workshops together, and I think probably the three of us have written around thirty books. It was incredible to be around somebody who was just starting out like we all were and to have gone through life with 'em. It's been thirty years I've been reading their work and they've been reading mine. That's priceless.

[00:28:43] SL: So maybe contrast the differences between Bill and Jim.

SY: As fiction writers, their aesthetics could not possibly have been farther apart. Jim was a novelist, period. If he ever wrote a short story, I never saw it. And he was drawn toward—I don't remember that he and I ever talked about, say, Saul Bellow, but I suspect he would've liked Saul Bellow's fiction. He was drawn toward big, encyclopedic novels. And Bill's aesthetic was more of what I've come to think of as sort of British aesthetic. He liked Graham Greene a lot, and Graham Greene was a writer who meant the world to me. But Bill didn't want any words wasted. And Bill was always saying, "Get to the story. Just get to the story." He believed deeply in narrative, and he believed deeply in economy. Jim was drawn more toward a sort of philosophic novel that was digressive and—you know, and that's fine. And I learned a lot from both of 'em, but I was drawn more toward Bill's aesthetic, and he knew, I think, a little bit better how to deal with me as a fiction writer. Now, Jim just had a great mind, and you know, his reading was encyclopedic. He talked a lot about philosophy, and so I think he deepened my appreciation for just the life of the mind, as I would say. Their personalities could not have been more different [*laughs*], you

know, and [*SL laughs*] I know at various times they probably weren't always too happy with each other, you know. They'd disagree about stories, and in a program, there's a certain kind of student who's not gonna hear what he wants from one and he hears it from the other one. And then he'll run to the other one and say, "Well, so-and-so said"—you know. And they did a pretty good job of not letting that poison the atmosphere around the program and not poison their own relationship with each other, too. They were both great men.

[00:31:12] SL: Well, I think they kind of in some ways counted on that . . .

SY: Yeah.

SL: . . . too. And I think that didactic made the program much stronger. I mean . . .

SY: Yeah.

SL: . . . someone commented earlier today—you know, if they'd been alike, you wouldn't need both of 'em.

SY: You wouldn't need 'em both. Yeah.

SL: So yeah, I think that was a—in some ways, a perfect match . . .

SY: It was.

SL: . . . as opposite as they were.

SY: Yeah.

[00:31:46] SL: So were you ever—have enough courage to take on Jim in an argument?

SY: I did. [*Laughs*]

SL: How'd you do?

SY: I lost. [*Laughter*] I tell you—I was tellin' somebody last night, when my—when I finished my thesis, Bill was my director and Jim was my reader, and I believe Heather Ross Miller was my third reader. She hadn't been here that long, and she had [*SL coughs*] become a good friend of mine. And I'd just been—I think I'd been down at Hugo's eatin' a hamburger or somethin', and I—it was night. I remember that. And I came up, you know, onto the street, and Whitehead was walkin' by, and he said, "I just read your thesis. It's too damn short. I'm not gonna sign it." It was—and it was short, but I think I'd had a beer or two, and I was in the mood to take no crap. And I [*SL laughs*] said, "You know what, Jim? It says in the"—and I had been expecting this reaction from him. I said, "It says in the catalog that the thesis has got to be of publishable quality, and my whole thesis—every story in it has been published in a national magazine. So you don't have any choice but to sign it. I met the requirement." And he stood there [*laughs*], and he kinda began to—you could see a little shaking. And he reached

out, and he grabbed me right around the waist—and, now, people can't see this on camera, but I'm six two and about two twenty, and I may've been even heavier then. And he lifted me up, you know [*laughs*], until my—you know, and—I mean, I was—my feet were probably two feet off the ground, and he held me there for a long time. And he said, "You need to apologize, and I will sign your thesis." And I said, "Man, I am so sorry." [*Laughter*] And he put me back down and turned and walked angrily away. And of course, I went to his office, and actually I apologized every day for about a week, and then he just said, "Oh, quit it!" [*Laughs*] You know?

SL: Well, you kinda won that, in a way.

[00:34:03] SY: Oh, I kinda won it in a way, but . . .

SL: Not the way you probably wanted to win it.

SY: Not the way I wanted . . .

SL: You probably wanted to win it on . . .

SY: . . . to win it. And . . .

SL: Yeah.

SY: . . . you know what he was really sayin' was I should've written more.

SL: Yeah, worked a little harder.

SY: I should've had more good work.

SL: Yeah.

SY: And he was right.

[00:34:19] SL: Of course. Of course. Well you know, I just get the feeling from all the stories I've heard that Jim really liked to argue. I mean, he . . .

SY: He thought that was wonderful. It was the most wonderful thing that two people could do with each other was to argue. [*Laughs*]

SL: Yeah. And whereas Bill, on the other hand—I—probably the word I heard most often as opposed to that is that Bill was much more cool.

SY: Yes. Yeah, he was.

SL: Maybe . . .

SY: And Bill was—Jim was not going to let you not hear him, and I think Bill was gonna say what he had to say to you, and he was gonna let you mull it over for a little while. And if you didn't appear to get through, or if it didn't appear to get through to you, he was gonna say it again. And he'd say it again, but he wasn't gonna holler and stomp around and turn red in the face like Jim would. But I will tell you what Bill did to me once. [*Laughs*]

SL: Okay.

[00:35:27] SY: And I've told many people—I think this—if I had to pick one moment when I really became a writer, this'd be it. I turned in a story to him, and he had never—you know, he had been hard on everything of mine he had seen. So workshop was Wednesday afternoon. On Monday afternoon I go to my mailbox, and there's a little handwritten note in there from Bill saying, "Just read your story. Don't worry. It's got a lot goin' for it." So I felt great. So I go into class on Wednesday afternoon. I'd been down to the Bull's Head Pub and eaten a sandwich and had a beer. For two and a half hours, Bill just drove nails into that story, that this was wrong, that was wrong, and it was bad stuff. And I walked out of the class just about ready to cry, and I think I did cry when I got home after I'd had a few beers. And I called Bill at about midnight, and I said, "Bill, I wanna see you in the morning." And he was asleep. He said, "Why?" I said, "I just—I gotta talk to you about what you did." And he said, "Why?" I said, "Just be in the snack bar in the morning." [*SL laughs*] And so I walked into the snack bar the next morning. I was just mad as I could be. And he was sitting all the way across the room, and he looks at me and is just grinning. And I got over to the table—I said, "Why are you grinning like that?" He said, "I know you're mad, but I think you

may have finally heard me last night." And you know, that story became a story in my first book three or four years later, and not one line of the original story was left [*SL laughs*]—just the concept—because he had gotten me—I guess he had finally decided, "I'm just not gettin' through to him. I've gotta do somethin' a little more dramatic and get his defenses down." And I could still—right now, I could probably sit here and quote a lot of what he said in that workshop. And it's been in my mind for almost thirty years, and it was the single most important day in my development as a writer. I know it.

[00:37:38] SL: So it's like a guidepost . . .

SY: Yeah.

SL: . . . for what you do now.

SY: Absolutely. Now, can you imagine what it takes out of a writing professor to go that far for somebody? I'm a good teacher, and there are plenty of students from California to Massachusetts who will tell you I'm a good teacher. And a lot of 'em have had a lot of success, but I don't think I ever worked as hard for any student as he decided he had to work for me. It takes a special kind of person to do that. And I love him. I'd walk through a wall for him right now.

SL: [*Sighs*] Yeah, that kind of stuff would have to take a toll on him.

SY: Mh-hmm. And that's—I'm just one.

SL: Yeah.

SY: Think of how many have come through, you know.

SL: Yeah. [*Door opens*] Sounds like we've got a visitor.

TM: [*Clears throat*] It's Bill.

SY: It's Bill.

SL: Oh, Bill! [*Laughter*]

Bill Harrison: Who's in here?

SY: It's me.

SL: Come on in, Bill. How you doin'?

BH: What have you got to say? [*Laughter*]

SL: Oh, we're havin' a good time.

BH: Well, we wondered who was in here so long, but it's . . .

SL: Well, I'm bout to let him get out of the seat, and we'll drag [*SY laughs*] Skip in here next.

BH: Well, they all want to come.

[00:39:13] SL: Okay, that's good news. I love that. Thank you. So yeah, I don't think there's any question that that kind of attention, first of all, is really not heard of.

SY: It's not heard of.

SL: I've never heard of any of that kind of stuff. Now, I've heard of . . .

SY: Yeah.

SL: . . . people being hard on students . . .

SY: Yeah.

SL: . . . to make them stronger.

SY: Yeah.

SL: But showin' . . .

SY: This was . . .

SL: . . . up at the snack bar . . .

SY: Yeah.

SL: . . . the next morning . . .

SY: This was—it was close to twenty-four hours a day for these guys. You—we were at their houses at night—you know, we're—when I look back on it, I just—I can't imagine how they could've gotten their own work done with as much of themselves as they gave to us. One—the—a program like that just doesn't come along, you know.

[00:40:15] SL: You know, I'll let you go in just a moment, but I do want you to say a few things about Fayetteville at that time and the community. You know, of course, that the creative writing program was not—it was amazing in a number of ways. Not only the quality of teaching and the—but their idea of bringing writers and editors and publishers in and throwing parties where

the students could meet these folks . . .

SY: Yeah.

SL: . . . and in some cases, these guys would read the students' work . . .

SY: Yeah.

SL: . . . and give them feedback. And so it was like there was this vortex of connections . . .

SY: Yeah.

SL: . . . in the literary community that was across the whole country . . .

SY: Yeah.

SL: . . . that was converging here in this little town in the Boston Mountains.

[00:41:13] SY: Sure, they did that editors and agents conference, and you would get to go in and sit down—I remember I had lunch with the agent Sterling Lord. Well, Sterling Lord had been Jack Kerouac's agent. He's still active in the business. He has done incredible things for writers. He didn't become my agent, but just having access to somebody who, you know, was operating at that level who was one of the more successful agents in the business is an amazing thing to have when you're a young writer. They brought in a—as I recall, one year they

brought in an editor from Knopf. They brought in the editor of the *New England Review*. They brought somebody from the University of Missouri Press. And they'd bring 'em in, and they would just turn 'em over to us. They would send you out to lunch with 'em. You'd get to hang around with them at parties, and you learned a lot like that. Some people would say, "Oh, that's just schmoozing," but it really wasn't. We would—you know, I had questions, for instance, that—this will sound stupid now—but I thought, "Well, *New England Review*—would they publish something by a Southern writer?" [00:42:32] And I remember asking Sydney Lea that, and he said, "Yeah, if I loved it. Sure. I don't care where the writer's from." It was important to me to know that because at that time in the early [19]80s, all of the—you know, there was a boom in Southern writing shortly thereafter. But at that time, you weren't seeing a lot of books coming out of New York by writers from the South. You know, Welty was no longer really active. Elizabeth Spencer wasn't writing about the South. Faulkner had been long dead. So there just wasn't that much, and it was important to hear somebody say, "All I care about is if the work's good," you know. And as far as what Fayetteville was like at that time, it's like one—my recollection is one long beer over which we're arguing

about, you know, writers. You know, who we were reading. People would get really passionate about—"Well, I don't know what you see in him." [*SL laughs*] Richard Yates, who I happen to love—I had a couple of friends who just could not see it. But these arguments would rage for hours—three or four hours, you know. So it was like a—it was an incredible gift that they gave us that time, for that to matter more than anything else—right when we needed it.

[00:44:01] SL: I wanna say that all that activity around this program and what you guys were doing also created a buzz in the Fayetteville community.

SY: Sure.

SL: There was—something was happening, and as a Fayetteville resident, born and raised, I can tell you . . .

SY: Yeah.

SL: . . . that you guys were happening. I may—we may have not have known all the players, but . . .

SY: Yeah.

SL: . . . it was almost a—you—there was almost a cult of creativity that was happening right at our doorstep, and that—it was—people were taking note. I mean, it was a phenomenon.

SY: Well, I've been asked about the program all over the country,

you know. And I have never—and you know, it's been thirty years since I first came to this town. I have never said anything but good things about the program, and if I had something bad to say, I wouldn't hesitate to say it. But it was everything. And I told Bill when I came here for the reunion three years ago, I literally cannot imagine myself having the life I've got if I had not come here. And I've got a great life. I've—you know, I've had good jobs for all of my adult life. I've had good publishers. I've got a great family. I just can't imagine any of it happening if I hadn't come here when I did.

[00:45:32] SL: That's great. Is there anything else you wanna say about Bill or Jim or any of your classmates? Is there . . .

SY: Well, I think you're a lucky person if you get to meet one great human being in your life, and I met several great human beings here. And not just great because they were really great writers or great teachers, but they were great people. They love life. They're bigger than life—Jim and Bill. John Holmes was an amazing man, and he taught me a lot about nineteenth-century Russian fiction, which is where I think the novel flowered like it never has anywhere else. Skip Hays was my best friend at that time, and you know, sometimes I might go two years without talkin' to Skip or hearing from Skip. And—like I know a few

years ago, he and his wife came to Kraków, and it was like—where my wife and I have an apartment—it was like no time had passed. You just take right up where you left off. [*SL laughs*] That's rare in life. So it was great.

SL: Okay, man.

SY: Thank you.

SL: Thank you for all your time.

SY: My pleasure.

SL: I really appreciate that.

SY: I enjoyed it.

SL: It's an honor.

[00:46:55 End of interview]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]