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

University of Arkansas
1 East Center
Fayetteville, AR 72701
(479) 575-6829

Arkansas Memories

Rex Nelson

Interviewed by John C. Davis

April 5, 2023

Fayetteville, Arkansas

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 five 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 five 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 17th 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; and
  - annotations for clarification and identification.
- 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.

John C. Davis interviewed Rex Nelson on April 5, 2023, in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

[00:00:00]

John Davis: Today is Wednesday, April 5, 2023. I'm John Davis, and here with me is Rex Nelson. We're conducting this oral history in the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History in—in our vault in our—uh—location on the square in Fayetteville, Arkansas. Uh—Rex, on—on behalf of the Pryor Center, I wanna thank you for sitting down with us today.

Rex Nelson: Thank you very much. I'm honored to be asked. Uh—Barbara and David Pryor are two of my favorite Arkansans, so to do anything at the Pryor Center is a great honor.

JD: Well, we—we're certainly inspired by—um—the love the Pryors have for Arkansas and Arkansans. And—uh—as you know, the Pryor Center's mission is to collect Arkansas stories and preserve 'em for posterity and connect 'em to the public. Uh—and over the next two days, you and I plan to discuss topics ranging from family, childhood, growin' up in Arkansas, and memorable moments in your life and work in order to capture your specific Arkansas story. So we'll start from the beginning.

RN: [*Laughs*] All right.

[00:00:58] JD: You were born on September 2, 1959, in Arkadelphia. Is that . . .

RN: That is correct.

JD: . . . correct? Uh—you were the youngest of three children to Robert "Red" Nelson and Carolyn Caskey Nelson. Um—first, tell me about your parents. Uh—where are they originally from?

[00:01:12] RN: They're—they're both Arkansans. Uh—we were—we were a true Arkansas family. My mother grew up over in East Arkansas on the grand prairie. She grew up in Des Arc, where my grandfather had the hardware store, had the funeral home, and also was a county official, and both of his businesses were right across the street from the Prairie County Courthouse, so he could walk from his office over there when he was sheriff or county judge back and forth to his businesses. So I have East Arkansas roots on that side. And then on my dad's side, I have Central Arkansas roots. My dad hailed from Benton. And—uh—my parents met when they were both in college at what's now Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia.

JD: Wow, that's wonderful. And we'll get back to your—your love of the—of the Delta and your advocacy . . .

RN: Yeah.

JD: . . . for it, but maybe some of those seeds were planted through your family connections . . .

RN: Oh, I think so.

JD: . . . over there.

RN: Both of my grandparents—um—actually all four of my grandparents, but I was gonna say both in Des Arc—uh—lived into their nineties, so I would spend large parts of my summer in Des Arc, so I—I grew up with a real love of East Arkansas and that culture and that history. Uh—it's such a fascinating lower White River town, and that's probably is where that came from, spending time hanging out at the fish market on Main Street and things such as that in Des Arc as a boy.

JD: That's great. Well, you could'nt've foreseen the—the active role in government you'd play for economic development down the road with the Delta Regional Authority, which we'll get to later, but that's—it's always fun to see where those—where those roots were planted.

RN: Yeah.

[00:02:46] JD: Uh—and if I'm—correct me if I'm wrong. Your—your father coached athletics for a time?

RN: He did. He—uh—served for two years in what was then the Army Air Corps after his freshman year at Ouachita, and then he

came back to Ouachita, finished up in the spring of [19]48, and was hired as the head coach for all sports [*laughs*] then, football, basketball, baseball, track—uh—at Newport High School. And so my parents moved to East Arkansas after graduation. My mother had graduated a year earlier—uh—because she got ahead of him while he was—uh—in—in World War II. [00:03:28] Uh—I have an older sister who's nine years older than I am who was actually born in Newport. But I—I was born in Arkadelphia, as you mentioned. Uh—after three years coaching at Newport, my dad went back to the town where he had gone to college and went into business with his brother in a sporting-goods business. Uh—they had a retail portion, which was everything. Hunting supplies, fishing supplies, in addition to football, basketball. They even sold boats. Sold Evinrude motors. Uh—had all of that. But the bulk of their sales were actually to schools. They sold athletic supplies to schools all over the state, high schools and colleges, even parts of Louisiana and Texas. So my dad and my uncle spent their careers—uh—on the road traveling to schools selling athletic goods.

JD: And this was Southwest Sporting Goods.

RN: Southwest Sporting Goods Company, which is still in business.

JD: Mm-hmm.

RN: We don't have any family ownership anymore. Uh—my dad ended up—uh—buying out his brother and then selling the business to a longtime employ named Reggie Speights, and Reggie's two sons now own Southwest Sporting Goods and, again, still sell athletic supplies all over the state, so it's still going strong.

JD: That's great. That's great. So you'd mentioned Ouachita Baptist, and we—we'll talk later about the . . .

RN: Mm-hmm.

JD: . . . strong ties that you have to the institution there in Arkadelphia and—uh—do you know which—do you recall what your parents majored in, by chance?

RN: Yeah.

JD: What they studied?

[00:04:54] RN: My mother was a—was an education major. She taught fifth grade at Newport—uh—and I think she minored in business. My dad majored in business. And—uh—so again, they were both teachers—uh—coming out of college, and then after Dad went into business, my mom also went to work—uh—at a time when you didn't always hear of women working full time. But my mom did. She—uh—worked full time as the business manager for Southwest Sporting Goods . . .

JD: Ah.

RN: . . . for many years.

JD: So it's truly a family operation.

RN: It was a family operation, right.

JD: Your mom, your dad, your uncle.

RN: My uncle. Right.

[End verbatim transcription]

[00:05:28] JD: That's g—and you at times, as we'll get to in a little while.

RN: Oh, yeah. As a boy, yeah.

JD: As a little boy.

RN: I spent many a summer down there, yeah, [*JD laughs*] in the basement packing up football supplies to ship 'em out so they would be at schools in time for two-a-days when they started each August.

[00:05:43] JD: So tell me a little bit a—you mentioned your sister was—is—who's older . . .

RN: Uh-huh.

JD: . . . was born in Newport.

RN: Right.

JD: And then you and your brother were born in Arkadelphia?

RN: Both born in Arkadelphia. We sure were. We were four years

apart. My brother was killed in an accident, actually, in Pine Bluff when he was nine and I was four, so actually five years apart. This would've been in February of 1964. And so then I grew up with my sister, but again, she was nine years older, so by the time I was nine or ten years old, she was already off to college. So a lot of it was my mother and me at that point because Dad would travel so much. Many a week I can remember my father would let me off at school on a Monday morning, tell me goodbye, and I'd see him again on Friday afternoon 'cause he was on the road a lot calling on schools. But always had weekends with him, which was great. But I can remember Mom and I, you know, occasionally—you didn't go out to eat as much as people do in those days, but Friday nights my dad officiated high-school football and basketball, so that was kind of our night to go out and eat in a restaurant, which was always a big deal to me growin' up.

[00:07:04] JD: You member any of your favorites at the time?

RN: Yeah, there was a place that was actually—the building still exists. Anybody that's familiar with driving in from Interstate 30 at the Caddo Valley exit into Arkadelphia—and you can tell it used to be a Stuckey's on the left, the way the building is built. There's still a business in there, actually. But that became the

first Mexican restaurant I ever went to. It was called the Spanish Kitchen. And I loved Mexican food from an early age, which, talkin' about precursors, may be a precursor to the fact I would end up marryin' a Mexican American [*JD laughs*] named Garcia. Because I loved Mexican food, and they weren't as common back then, but we had one in Arkadelphia. And that was probably my favorite outta—at Caddo Valley, where there's a restaurant now called Fat Boys, there used to be a restaurant called the Pig Pit Bar-B-Q that was famous in that part of the state, so sometimes it would be at the Pig Pit. And I can also remember the first pizza places, actually, when it was kind of new in Arkadelphia, too. [*JD laughs*] Very, very unusual. So yeah, I've always loved to eat, and so I can remember those restaurants we used to go to.

JD: I love how our memories can bring us back to things.

RN: Yeah.

JD: You know, smells, tastes . . .

RN: Oh, absolutely.

JD: . . . things like that.

RN: Absolutely.

[00:08:21] JD: As we'll get to in more detail later, you're a prolific writer and have been for decades. You've written about the year

you spent joining your father on the road in Arkansas prior to the beginning of your elementary school.

RN: Yeah.

JD: Which would have been not long after the tragic loss of your brother, Bob.

RN: Mh-hmm.

JD: And apart from his need, I'm sure, to be with you during that very difficult time, it must have been an important time for you to bond with him.

RN: Oh, it was wonder . . .

JD: 'Cause you said he was on the road . . .

RN: It was a wonderful year. And you know, obviously, I had to be an adult and look back to see that, you know, he did it as much for himself as he did for me, but my birthday's on September 2. So had I gone on after kindergarten and started the first grade, I'd've been about the youngest person in my class. So my dad would joke as an old coach that I redshirted him. [*JD laughs*] I redshirted him in kindergarten for another year of kindergarten. And my joke was that I flunked kindergarten and had to go back and do a second year. [00:09:28] But I didn't go to class much that second year of kindergarten. Basically on days that Dad was on the road, he took me with him. And as an adult I look

back, and now I have this wonderful job where I get to travel Arkansas and write about it, and I thought, "Where did my love of traveling come from?" And I think it came from that year when I was five and six years old, that school year, that I traveled all over the state with my dad. And I can remember those Holiday Inns and other motels we would stay in, and early in the fall and late in the spring when it was warm enough, you know, letting me swim in the pool, and it was like being on vacation to me for nine months, and it was just a wonderful experience for me, and that's where I got my love for traveling Arkansas. But having lost his older son, you know, looking back as an adult, I can see where, yeah, maybe it was therapy for my dad to have his younger son there in the car next to him that year. It was very special year in my life.

[00:10:30] JD: Yeah. Well, and I would think, too, back to your love of Arkansas—and a lot of times you write and speak on I would say sort of the back roads of Arkansas, which haven't changed all that much as far as routes . . .

RN: Yeah.

JD: . . . from the [19]60s.

RN: Oh, yeah.

JD: You know, there's probably a lot of landmarks even that you

recognize from those trips.

RN: Oh, yeah.

JD: You know, more recently from back when you were . . .

RN: Yeah.

JD: . . . a little kid.

[00:10:54] RN: I remember my dad telling me where he was on the road when he heard that John F. Kennedy had been shot on the radio. And I still think of it every time I go down that highway now, which I still travel in traveling Arkansas. So things like that, yeah. Yeah. Brings back memories. And there—you know, I was very young, but there're little clips of things I can remember. I can remember in Shirley, Arkansas, in an old WPA-built gym that they had a woodstove actually in the coach's office. I mean, we're still in the mid-[19]60s in Arkansas, so it was probably a lot closer to the [19]20s and [19]30s in the way those places appeared than they would appear now. And I can remember that wood stove. I can remember at Magazine, Arkansas, sitting in the parking lot—just these little memories that pop up—watching deer run across the parking lot before we went into the gym to make a sales call. I can remember Delight, Arkansas, a little cafe that so many of the students—they had an open campus, I guess—would go to that they would have

hamburgers already lined up and cooked, and I thought that was the coolest thing that your hamburger was already ready. I can still remember that. So a lot of little flashes come back from that year from time to time as I drive through various small towns in Arkansas.

[00:12:21] JD: Well, one thing I imagine that you and your dad both shared is you would have to enjoy people.

RN: Yeah.

JD: In his line of work and in the work that you've done through the years.

RN: Oh, Dad was very much a people person. I used to love it—Bobby New, who was a former superintendent here in Fayetteville, used to tell the story—he said, you know, "I was a young, junior-high coach in Conway." And said, "The great Red Nelson, the famous sporting-goods salesman, would come in, and he would know my name, and I was always so impressed by that." And he said, "Then they told me once, 'Well, he carries'"—and I would always laugh when he would tell—when Bobby would tell me this. "'He carries an Arkansas Activities Association guide in his car.'" And Dad did, and he would write, like, people's wife's names or whether they liked to bass fish or crappie fish, little information he had all in that book. And when

we would pull up at a school, he would study, you know, the listing for that school so he made sure he didn't forget any names of coaches or whatnot before he went in, and I can remember that very clearly. But yeah, there was probably a point when my dad would have been on a first-name basis with virtually every public-school coach in the state of Arkansas.

[00:13:39] JD: Wow. So goin' back to Arkadelphia during those work weeks, your mother's managing the office . . .

RN: Right.

JD: . . . sounds like, at Southwest Sporting Goods, and . . .

RN: Right.

JD: . . . spending a lot of quality time with you, I would imagine, after work.

RN: Yeah. Yeah. She was—you know, and I have written about this, too, because times have so changed. But like a lot of Southern families, we had a African American maid that helped raise me since my mother was working full time. Not that uncommon. Her name was Lucille Balch, and I can not talk about my childhood without talking about Lucille. Just a wonderful lady. [00:14:21] And my mom was working, so Lucille was the one that was home to greet me when I would get home from school every day. And she worked for our family and was almost like a

member of the family. And you know, you go into things like movie, *The Help,* and so forth, and we could get into a whole nother discussion on that. But she really was like a member of our family, and I like to think it went two ways. In fact, when she passed away, we were asked to sit with the family at Lucille's funeral. Now in the summer, when Dad was not on the road, we did the old-fashion, Southern version of dinner, which was in the middle of the day, you know, and then you had a light supper at night 'cause Lucille was there to cook. And one of the problems that restaurants have in Arkansas is I judge all Southern cooking now against Lucille's, and nothing ever quite measures up, you know. [*JD laughs*] Her fried chicken, her pork chops, her turnip greens—oh, just wonderful. And Dad and Mom would come home from the store, and we would eat about one o'clock, have a great big meal, and then I can always remember—and I've never been one that's been able to take a nap. I wake uh—if I try to nap for thirty minutes, I wake up feeling mean and groggier than when I did. But Dad was one of those that could. He would take about a thirty-minute nap on the couch, and then he'd go back to work. And then they would go back to work. But that was the great thing about summer. I got to enjoy Lucille's cooking. But during the school year, she

would often cook the evening meal and have it ready, and then my mom would take her home then. She did not drive. But yeah, I have to mention Lucille Balch as, really, a member of our family growing up in many ways.

[00:16:15] JD: So all these years you've been writing about Arkansas food, but really what you've been trying to do is discover Lucille Balch's cooking again.

RN: Yeah, and nobody quite makes it. There's some great [*JD laughs*] restaurants in Arkansas, but they have an awfully high standard because she was a wonderful Southern cook. And I love writing about food, as you know, and foodways now, and you know, in an era in Arkansas when the state was still segregated and we were divided in so many ways, I think probably food brought us together more than anything. I mean, we had separate schools when I was a young child. We still tend to have separate funeral homes, even. There are white funeral homes; there are Black funeral homes, as you know. We have separate churches, still, for all things. But one thing I think that did bring us together is food 'cause Black or white, it seems to me if you grew up in Arkansas in that era, you all like the same things. Yams, greens, you name it. I call it Southern cooking, some call it soul food, whatever you wanna call it. Arkansas

cooking really was one thing that brought us together as a people at a time when we were divided in so many different ways.

JD: Well, you remind us of another one of the reasons—the importance for good food, right . . .

RN: Yeah.

JD: . . . are those traditions in cultural sharing and . . .

RN: Absolutely.

JD: . . . it's—there's a great value there.

RN: Absolutely.

[00:17:42] JD: Going back a little bit from you—from when you were talking about your grandparents, you've written some as well and discussed this. You spent a lot of summers and holidays with grandparents.

RN: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I had four great grandparents. And like I said, I was blessed. They all lived into their nineties. And so I had 'em until I was in college, all four of 'em, which was . . .

JD: What were their names?

RN: . . . a wonderful—well, on mother's side was W. J. Caskey, and he was the former county judge of Prairie County. And Bess Caskey, Bess Rex Caskey. Her maiden name, last name, was Rex, so I'm named after my maternal grandmother. So Bess

Rex Caskey and W. J. Caskey. And then we had—and I love this name 'cause he was born in the late 1800s, and this is so 1800s sounding. Ernest Ezra, *E-Z-R-A,* Nelson. He went by E. E. Nelson. And Liana Nelson. And my country family in Saline County tend to pronounce it as Lianar, [*laughs*] instead of Liana. They put *R*s on the end of everything. So you had Ernest and Lianar in Benton and W. J. Caskey or—people would still—I love the fact people still called him Judge Caskey many years after he was county judge. You know, once a judge, always a judge. And Judge Caskey and Bess Rex Caskey there in Des Arc.

[00:19:10] JD: Well, as you know, the county judge, especially back then but even now, they play such an integral part in the county. I mean . . .

RN: Oh, huge . . .

JD: . . . as administrators . . .

RN: . . . huge part.

JD: Absolutely.

[00:19:20] RN: My mother—pulas—Prairie County is a very large country geographically. Goes almost to Stuttgart to the south, Des Arc in the north part. There is actually a second courthouse at De Vall's Bluff in the south because it's so big. But my mother has these very clear memories of going to Slovak, which of

course was an immigrant community with that name, when she was a child, so this would've been in the 1930s. My mother was born in 1925, so probably the early [19]30s—her memories of that. But she remembers a woman with a very thick European accent, and she was down there with my grandfather, who was kind of Mr. First Baptist Church of Des Arc, a hardcore Baptist, and this Catholic Slovakian lady saying, "Would little girl like a glass of wine?" [*Laughs*] And my grandfather saying, "No, no!" And my mother said she thought, "Yeah, I might try that," but they began drinkin' the wine very young at Slovak in those days, I can tell you.

JD: Well, that, and of course, they host the oyster supper.

RN: Oh, yeah, annual oyster supper, which I tend to go to every year. That's one way I stay in touch with my Prairie County roots. I try to go to the oyster supper every year.

[00:20:36] JD: Do you—and I'm sure you have dozens if not more memories of these special times with your grandparents, but is there something that pops to mind as we're talking here? A fond memory, an activity, something that you did in the summer or holidays that comes back?

RN: You know, my grandparents—I'll give you one for each. My grandparents in Des Arc lived on Erwin Street, which was a block

off of Main Street. And on Main Street, there was a fish market. And I loved to go up there in the morning—like I said, I was always fascinated by that lower White River culture—and watch the commercial fishermen bring in these huge catfish and buffalo fish that they had caught that morning in the White River and unload 'em and sell 'em to the fish market. And they knew my name, and I'd hang around out back and watch 'em unload all these fish and weigh 'em and so forth. I just loved doing that. Plus they had photos, old black-and-white photos, inside of all the big alligator gar that'd been caught out of the White River through the years. Those were just like prehistoric monsters to me, and I can remember spending time staring at those. So I would love to hang out at the fish market. And then my grandad would make his rounds. From my earliest memories he was already retired. And I'm the youngest of three children. My mother was the youngest of five children, so my grandfather was much older. He was born, actually, in 1886. So he was older, but he would—had a routine. He would cross the street. Post office was directly across the street. Had an old-fashion mailbox—and check his mail every day. Then he would go to the Merchants and Farmers Bank, where he'd been a director for many years, and just kinda walk through and say hi to

everybody. And then even though he had sold his funeral home and his hardware store, he kept an old rolltop desk. And we would go through the back door, and he would sit at his desk for a while and do paperwork or send a letter or whatever he needed to do that day before lunch and then go back home, where my grandmother would've prepared a big lunch. And then he would take a nap then. Kind of like my father. My grandfather, I remember, would always take a nap after lunch. So I'd go to the fish market, then I'd make his rounds with him late morning. [00:23:00] Now my grandparents in Benton actually had this little cabin, un-air-conditioned, but I just—I thought it was Eden—on Lake Norrell, which was the Benton City water supply lake. And I would beg them, "Let's go to the lake." Sometimes we'd spend the night, sometimes we'd just go for the day. But there was no better meal, outside of Lucille's meals, when I was a boy than when I would sit on the dock of their little cabin on Lake Norrell, catch bream with a cane pole, little cane that my grandfather had caught, and then my grandfather would clean everything we caught, and my grandmother would fry it up. And you knew it was fresh 'cause we'd just caught it a few minutes before. And have, you know, fried fish and fried potatoes and, you know, that's probably still my favorite

summer meal to this day. And I don't care if it's crappie or bass or catfish, I just love fried fish and fried potatoes, and those memories go back to Lake Norrell in Saline County.

[00:24:08] JD: That's wonderful. And you touched on something there that is lost. I—you know, farm-raised catfish is what we're accustomed to now.

RN: Absolutely.

JD: And so you're talkin' about the lower White River and that whole—there's a culture. There's a . . .

RN: There was. I mean . . .

JD: Generations.

RN: . . . restaurants all over Arkansas used to advertise white-water catfish. Because the White River, of course, came out of the mountains, and it was a much cleaner stream than the Mississippi. If you think of the other Delta streams, the Mississippi, the St. Francis, they see—they were muddy rivers. And they had—the catfish, it was said, had a muddier taste in those. White River catfish were cleaner and better fish. Now to this day, when I go to Murry's Restaurant—which used to be in De Valls Bluff. It's between Hazen and Carlisle now. My friend Stanley Young, he and his wife Becky own that restaurant. Becky's dad was Olden Murry, the original owner of Murry's. But

to this day, Stanley will always say, "If you know you're coming, call me in a couple of days in advance." And he will buy some flathead catfish from a commercial fisherman, and he'll also buy buffalo fish. He knows I like buffalo ribs—and cook them up just for me. So I can still get the wild-caught stuff if I let Stanley know in advance I'm comin' to Murry's.

[00:25:27] JD: One of the rare few in Arkansas.

RN: Yeah. Yeah.

JD: You can call 'em up and get those.

RN: Exactly.

JD: So we've learned a little bit about your grandparents and their neighborhoods and their communities. Let's go back to Arkadelphia. Tell me about your childhood home and your neighborhood in Arkadelphia.

[00:25:42] RN: I lived in a neighborhood called Ouachita Hills, which is right behind the Ouachita football stadium. And again, I look back and see how blessed I was as a child. Ouachita at that time actually—they still have the land. It's never really been developed. Now they've got soccer fields on it, cross country and so forth 'cause it floods, so no big buildings on it, but it was a working farm, still, at the time. You know, they had dairy cattle out there that supplied milk to the school. They had beef

cattle and a barn with hay in it. So we were in the city limits, barely, but it was like being in the country 'cause I could go right across the street from our house, across a bob-wire fence. That's how I learned to climb a barbed-wire fence is there was one right across the street and I got good at it. And there was a fishing pond out there. And then we were only two blocks from the Ouachita River, so I could go down to the river, too. So it was just a wonderful neighborhood. Meanwhile, you could go a couple blocks the other way, and there's the Ouachita football field and the football practice fields where I would hang out as a water boy as a child. There were the baseball field, where I could watch the baseball team. There was the track, where I could watch track and field. And so I had sports, college sports I could go to on one side of the house. I had all this nature on the other side of the house I could go to. And again, looking back, I look at how blessed I was. [00:27:14] The other way I was blessed—and you will appreciate this, having worked in academics at the college level. You know, there's a special vibe to college towns. And again, these were things I took for granted as a child, but I'm thinking of some of our best friends that either lived in the neighborhood or we went to the First Baptist Church of Arkadelphia with. I mean, there was a world-

famous composer. There was a well-known playwright in my neighborhood. There was a nationally recognized pianist. There was a hall of fame basketball coach. And I look back now, and I say, "Kids growin' up in similar-sized towns either side of me, Hope over here, Malvern over here, didn't have that, but I was in a town with two four-year colleges, and so we did have that." So I was blessed in that respect, too, 'cause you had these amazing people that were your neighbors because it was a college town.

[00:28:14] JD: That is something that we don't often think about.

RN: No.

JD: So you know, as we've discussed—you're in Arkadelphia, a small but vibrant Southwest Arkansas town probably—perhaps best known because of the unique status that you've just mentioned. You have two . . .

RN: Right. It's a two-college town.

JD: . . . two colleges.

RN: Yeah.

JD: A small community. You've done this a little bit, but paint a picture of what it was like to grow up in Arkadelphia in the [19]60s and [19]70s.

[00:28:41] RN: And I realize—and obviously we had tragedy in our

family with the loss of my brother, but again, I realize how lucky I was, again, because of all of the opportunities that those colleges brought to us. I mean, the lectures we went and heard, the concerts we went and heard. I mean, I can pull things out of the air. I remember my older sister taking me to hear Three Dog Night when they were big, but they were playing in Arkadelphia as part of a college concert series. I can remember when the theme from *Rocky* was huge, and Maynard Ferguson brought his whole jazz band to Arkadelphia. And still one of the greatest concerts I ever attended in my own town 'cause I like jazz and Maynard Ferguson, you know, with his great playing. Lectures I can remember hearing. After the book *Helter Skelter* came out, the author of that book, Vincent Bugliosi, who of course had been the prosecutor in the Charles Manson case, spoke there. Those are things you weren't gonna get in non-college towns of that size. So we'd offer that, the concerts, the lectures that we took advantage of, the plays. My acting debut and about the end of my acting career all—I was later in my senior [*laughs*] high-school play, but my acting debut I remember was in a Ouachita presentation of the famous Thornton Wilder *Our Town*. I was one of the kids in *Our Town* when I was in the third grade. And I can remember how

exciting that was because my mother allowed me to stay up on the night the show closed and go to the cast party, even though it was a school night. You know, that's like ten o'clock, and I'm still up on a school night as a third grader. How cool am I? So opportunities like that. [00:30:42] I was, for lack of a better term, I was a water boy for the Ouachita football team. I walked the sideline from, I guess—I have no memory of not being on the sideline or in the press box at a Ouachita football game. I walked the sideline probably from when I was old enough to walk up to high school, and then I became sports editor of the local paper, so I moved to the press box, then I started broadcasting their games as a student. And somehow, I am still broadcasting their play-by-play. So I'm honest when I tell you I was probably in the stands as a baby, but I have no memory of ever actually being in the stands at a Ouachita football game. I've either been on the sidelines or up in the press box my entire life. So just interesting experiences that would not have come in a non-college town.

[00:31:35] JD: And Arkadelphia strikes me, even today, as a community that is—draws from all of the pleasantness you would expect in a smaller community. So you had that and . . .

RN: Yeah.

JD: . . . all these other wonderful opportunities.

RN: Yeah. Exactly. We had the small-town experiences but the cultural opportunities that usually you would have to be in a much larger city. And my dad was a great sportsman, so we also hunted and fished on the weekend, so I got that same experience that I would've gotten if I'd've grown up out in a rural area because—thank goodness we still had wild quail, almost a thing of the past in Arkansas, but we were big bird hunters, and we always had at least two bird dogs, sometimes up to three. And during quail season, my dad and I would spend most Saturdays—after football season—most Saturdays, Sunday afternoons after church—church, of course, was required in our family, so Sunday afternoon after church and then holidays, we would be quail hunting always, and then fishing in the spring.

[00:32:41] JD: And obviously, sports has played—it's been a constant in your life in one form or fashion. But I remember once in an earlier conversation we had, you played center in high school. Is that right . . .

RN: I did.

JD: . . . in Arkadelphia?

RN: I did. I was number 53 for the Arkadelphia Badgers. And we were in a great conference. All of the towns of, you know, really

10,000 and above in south Arkansas were in this same conference, and I'm talkin' about from southwest over to southeast 'cause we had Malvern, Arkadelphia, Hope, Ashdown, all the way over to Crossett, so you can see goin'—Crossett was in our conference. And Camden was large enough then. It had two high schools, Camden and Camden Fairview, and as you can imagine, that was quite a football conference in those days.

JD: Absolutely. And a lot of ground covered.

RN: Yeah. Lot of ground.

JD: It's a big district.

RN: Lot of ground. It was long yellow bus ride from Arkadelphia to Crossett, believe me.

JD: It was a big conference.

RN: Yeah. Lot of woods to drive through.

JD: Well you—you know, as at this point was a family tradition—and it had to have felt almost like an extension of some sort of familial experience that you attended Ouachita Baptist. So you went the long walk, I guess, commute . . .

RN: Yeah.

JD: . . . from your childhood neighborhood to OBU.

[00:34:02] RN: And I actually lived in a dorm, believe it or not.

JD: I was gonna ask that.

RN: Again, best of both worlds. I thought it wouldn't be like college if I lived at home, but I lived in the dorm. But I was right down the street from my house, so I could take my dirty laundry home, and if I didn't like what was in the cafeteria, I could go home and see if there were any leftovers from supper. So that really was the best of both worlds. Now I had, until late in my senior year, I had my mind set on I was gonna be different. Dad had graduated from Ouachita, Mom had graduated from Ouachita, my sister, Linda, had graduated from Ouachita, and I just thought, "I'm gonna be different." So at first I set out to win a national scholarship sponsored by the Thoroughbred Racing Association, of all things, called the Grantland Rice Scholarship to Vanderbilt. It's a full, four-year ride to Vanderbilt. Past winners of that, some names that people who watch sports might recognize. Skip Bayless went to Vanderbilt on that scholarship. Roy Blount Jr., the writer, went to Vanderbilt on that scholarship. And so I went all out for it. Charles Cella, the owner of Oaklawn, wrote a letter on my behalf to the Thoroughbred Racing Association. Members of the racing commission, I remember, wrote a letter. And I can remember very clearly getting a call at my house. And I answered the phone on a Saturday afternoon, and it was somebody who

identified himself as the dean of Vanderbilt and said, "You are to be very honored. Out of well over 100 applications, you are our national first runner-up." And I was pretty pragmatic even at eighteen, so I asked, "How much money does that get you?" "Well, it doesn't get you any money." Now the winner was a full, four-year ride. And my parents were good enough that they said, "If you have your heart set on Vanderbilt, we'll send you." But I had academic scholarships to a couple of other places, and I was not gonna do that. [00:36:15] So my fallback—still "I'm gonna be different"—was Ole Miss. Then I'm thinkin', "All right, I'm gonna go to Ole Miss." I'd gone down there and had a great experience visiting and really loved the people in their journalism department, which I knew I wanted to do. [00:36:30] But then I got offered the job as the sports editor of what was then a five-day-a-week afternoon newspaper in Arkadelphia called the *Daily Siftings Herald*. And I got offered the job as the sports director of the two radio stations in Arkadelphia. Did both at the same time. And I thought, "You know"—and at the time I thought I wanted to be a sportscaster or a sports writer my whole life. And I thought the practical experience in being at a real newspaper and a real radio station as opposed to a student station or student newspaper's gonna be more valuable. So I

made the decision based on those jobs to stay at Ouachita. And it would've been a big mistake had I not. Ouachita's such a part of our family. My youngest son ended up going there, so he becomes another generation that graduated from Ouachita, and in retrospect, it all worked out for the best for me. But again, till very late in my senior year, I was either gonna go to Vanderbilt or Ole Miss.

JD: Well, I think the state of Arkansas benefitted with you staying.

RN: Well, thank you. Thank you. I certainly did.

JD: And I know you had a unique experience at OBU, perhaps, in that you probably knew a lot of the people that were already on campus.

[00:37:46] RN: Oh, absolutely. I had practically grown up on campus, as I said, so I had known people who had gone to school there since I was a child, so it was kind of an extension of home. But again, the experience of working at the paper, working at the radio station, starting in on play-by-play, was just invaluable. And I was fortunate enough to get an academic scholarship to Ouachita. So the money I made from working those two jobs—I'm working two full-time jobs. Again, I'm very fortunate that I was able to save that money. So what the *Daily Siftings Herald* would do is it allowed me to get press credentials

to events 'cause I was working for an actual daily newspaper. But I had to pay for it. You know, we're not paying for it. But, you know, I was working and—how else am I gonna use my money? So again, it was a golden period 'cause I would go and—I covered the Kentucky Derby as a college student. I was sitting courtside in Austin in 1981 when U.S. Reed hit the half-court shot to win for Arkansas in the NCAA tournament. I mean, one of the great moments in University of Arkansas history, and I'm sitting courtside as a young sports writer. Again, paying my own way. Cotton Bowl, Sugar Bowl that I would go to. I drove all night to watch Bear Bryant beat om—Amos Alonzo Stagg's record to become the winningest major college coach of all time in the Iron Bowl against Auburn at Legion Field. I was in the press box for that game in [19]81. I also was at the Liberty Bowl a year later when Bear Bryant coached his last game at Alabama. So just wonderful experiences for a young kid from Arkadelphia, Arkansas. So again, I was very fortunate that I stayed put and did what I did because I got to experience a lot of great things by the time I was twenty-two or twenty-three.

[00:39:50] JD: When did you know you wanted to write? I mean, you've touched on how you had aspirations when you were in college, but it sounds like it may have predated . . .

RN: [*Laughs*] You're gonna think I'm makin' this up, and it's—we're packrats. So I've got it in a box—maybe my sister has it in a box, but my mother saved it. But this is a true story. Not makin' it up. In the first grade, they made us color this little thing, and it was one of these, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" And I've got this little stick man sitting at a desk. And behind him, I guess 'cause ABC was easy at that age to me, I've got ABC News as opposed to CBS or NBC—ABC News with a stick man and a little microphone, and it says, "I want to be a reporter." Now this is first grade. [*Laughs*] So my mother found that years later and had it framed. Be careful what you wish for [*JD laughs*], you might end up there. That—true story. True story. I wrote that I wanna be a reporter in the first grade.

JD: So how—most students . . .

RN: Loved media as a kid. And . . .

[00:40:57] JD: Most students go to, you know, college, and you hope to land that first job after college, but you had landed the job in some ways before college.

RN: Yeah. I, you know . . .

JD: How did that happen?

RN: . . . I already had been coverin' major sports events. I'd already been a reporter. And so Wally Hall, who had been just a

columnist for the *Democrat* before—and I'd gotten to know Wally. We had traveled to see the Dallas Cowboy preseason game. We traveled to Austin for the Arkansas/Texas opener on Labor Day weekend in 1980, for instance, together. And I'd gotten to know Wally pretty well. So Wally said, "The day you graduate"—you know, he became sports editor then. And I think I was the third person he hired. And he's still writing, of course, but I think I was the third person Wally hired. Bob Holt was the first, who's still on the Razorback beat here in Fayetteville. Bless Bob Holt. And then a guy named Mark Potash was the second. I think I was probably the third person that Wally hired. So I had a job waiting at one of the Little Rock newspapers as soon as I came out of college. And that was a great thing. And that was—you know, even though I'd covered a lot of stuff, suddenly, for the first time in my life, I'm living away from Arkadelphia. And I can remember the Sunday—I finished in December of [19]81, so it was a December move right before Christmas. And I got a furnished apartment down in Riverdale at the bottom of Cantrell Hill, for those that know Little Rock, in the old Riverdale Apartments. And I can remember that Sunday my parents moved me in. And there was a Steak and Ale there on campus that a lot of Arkansas old timers will remember. And I

remember my dad said, "Let's go eat at Steak and Ale." And then they left to drive back to Arkadelphia. Now only an hour away, but also I can remember thinkin', "I'm alone in the big city in Little Rock." But that's where I went right after college. Went from bein' sports editor at Arkadelphia to bein' a sports writer at the *Arkansas Democrat*.

[00:43:04] JD: We'll go back just a bit about bein' the voice of the OBU Tigers football team. You've touched on it, and you've been doing it for quite some time. What does that mean to you? I mean, OBU and OBU Tigers has been some—a consistent, you know, thread in your life.

RN: Oh, yeah.

JD: And so I—if you would, take a moment. What does it mean to you? What does it bring back to you? What does it mean to you on a Saturday in the fall today?

[00:43:31] RN: We are such a Ouachita family, but there's another tie there that makes this more important as I get older. About a block from my house, the Root family lived. Paul Root, professor at Ouachita, had been one of Bill Clinton's teachers at Hot Springs High School. Later worked for then-governor Clinton. But Bill Clinton would later say in interviews, "Paul Root was the single best teacher I ever had." This guy was a Rhodes Scholar.

He had Oxford dons teachin' him, but he said Paul Root. But Paul Root had two sons, Larry and Jeff. Jeff Root and I began working Ouachita games on the radio more than forty years ago. Jeff is now the dean of humanities at Ouachita. And we still work the games together. And that tie is so strong. And we have talked about it. We—I said, "Jeff, did you ever dream that we would still be doin' this in our sixties that we were doing as college students?" And he pointed out, "No, but it's become more important than it was when we were kids." Because it's just such a part of our lives and something we so look forward to. So good Lord willing, as we tape this, if I do this next fall, this'll be—that'll be my fortieth season of play-by-play, and Jeff has been sittin' right to my right side—we're creatures of habit. He's always to my right, not to my left. He's been at my right side for almost all of those forty seasons now.

[00:45:05] JD: Well, the chemistry's obvious to anybody who's listened. I've had opportunities—I've caught—before I knew you, I got to hear games growin' up of Ouachita Baptist games, and just the chemistry there—I mean, you all know exactly when someone's gonna . . .

RN: Oh, I tell people—so you know . . .

JD: . . . stop or start.

RN: . . . you talk about the old married couple . . .

JD: Yep.

RN: . . . that finishes each other's sentences. That's Jeff and me on the air. You know, you—there's a broadcast term, stepping on somebody when they're still talking. We never step on each other 'cause we know each other's in—I mean, it's automatic. Intonations. I know when he needs to say something, he knows when I need to go back to play-by-play. And it's just great. [00:45:39] And we went through, now, a lot of bad seasons. So Ouachita's on this incredible run now. As we tape this, we are 51–4 in the last five regular seasons combined. So we're havin' more fun than ever now. And I [*laughs*]—and I've told Jeff. I said, "Now if we ever win a Division 2 national championship, we have to retire 'cause you can't top that." Jeff said, "Oh, no, we'll wanna see if they [*laughs*] can do it twice, if they can repeat." So hopefully we stay healthy and we can do it a while longer. It is a big part of my life.

[00:46:17] JD: Well, before we move on from that, so Arkadelphia and your alma mater, OBU, can claim, in my opinion, you know, to be one of not only the longest standing football rivalries in America but one of just the best . . .

RN: Oh.

JD: . . . most storied, most exciting, most exhilarating, called the Battle of the Ravine. And if someone came to you today, let's say they were from another state, and they said, you know, "Rex, I can go to one football game this next fall, and I've heard about the Battle of the Ravine. Why should that be the one game I attend this season?"

RN: 'Cause it is the only football game in America—think about this for a second—where the visiting team doesn't fly to a road game. It doesn't even bus to a road game. It walks to a road game. The stadiums are right across Highway 67 from each other. So when the game's at Ouachita, Henderson dresses in its dressing room. State troopers stop traffic. They walk across to Ouachita's field. They play. Then they walk back to their dressing room to shower, win or lose. Vice versa. When it's at Henderson, Ouachita makes that walk across the highway and then back home again. It's just totally unique. [00:47:28] One of these days before I'm gone, I'm gonna get ESPN *GameDay* there 'cause there's nothin' else quite like it, and they need to be there for a Battle of the Ravine day. We did get *Sports Illustrated* there in 2019, and they ended up doing an eight-page spread, which was just wonderful because I never remember *Sports Illustrated* devoting eight pages to anything in Arkansas.

I mean, you look back to the big shootout in [19]69. That was probably four pages in *SI*. So to have that was really neat for such a small college rivalry. But it has obviously become known nationally.

[00:48:05] JD: It's a wonderful tradition.

RN: It's fun. It—in my family—and people who know my family know I'm tellin' the truth when I say this, but I always—when—I devote my Wednesday column, every year the Wednesday before that game, to the Battle of the Ravine so people around the state can read about it. That's just one of my traditions. But I have written in there before, but it's true. Battle of the Ravine Day in my family was kinda Christmas, New Year's, Easter, Valentine's, Halloween all rolled into one. It was the biggest day of the year in my family. My dad had been a Ouachita quarterback in the 1947 Battle of the Ravine, so it was that big to us. It is—I tell people, it is the small college version of Alabama/Auburn. Because Alabama/Auburn you live with each other 365 days a year, you know, and you—anybody who listens to Paul Finebaum knows you fight that battle every day of the year back and forth. And in Arkadelphia, that's the way it is 'cause you're right with those people. You're goin' to school with 'em, you're goin' the church with 'em, you're goin' to the grocery

store, seein' 'em in the grocery store. So that game is talked about there every day of the year.

[00:49:22] JD: We'll move a little bit into journalism. We've talked about your early journalism experience in sports that predates college, and then through college, and then your early days with Wally Hall there at the *Arkansas Democrat*. Before we move on to sort of this next phase of politics, are there some memorable events that you covered during those early *Democrat* years that come to mind, in the early [19]80s?

RN: You know, I was young, and I didn't know any better. I have this vivid memory of driving all the way up to far Northeast Arkansas, up to Wilson, in December of [19]82, late November, I guess it was, or early December, of [19]82 to cover the state championship game between Stuttgart and River Crest. Poured rain that night. Unbelievable rains. And that was—we had both the *Gazette* and the *Democrat*. There was only one phone at the field house there, and the *Gazette* beat me to it. So I drove to downtown Wilson, and there was an outdoor payphone, one of the old ones for old timers with the little blue cover over it, and that's all I knew to get. So I used the lights of my car and dictated a story, had my notes in one hand, had the phone crouched in my ear. I think I had a roster in the other hand.

Pouring wet, so I didn't have a hand left to hold a umbrella as the ink ran, and I dictated that story soaking wet. Long drive back to Little Rock. Slept maybe two hours because I was also covering the Arkansas Intercollegiate Conference, and Ouachita was in the old NAIA playoffs in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, so I'd gone east to River Crest, now I had to go west to Oklahoma. And so got up after like a two-hour nap and drove all the way to Tahlequah and covered that Ouachita playoff game that afternoon. [00:51:41] And I look back on it, you know, I think now, "There's no way I could do this at my age." And comin' back soakin' wet all the way from past West Memphis to Little Rock on that Friday night. And I think back, though—I was havin' fun. I was in heaven. This was a great job. You know, I was at the big paper in Little Rock, one of the big papers, and was having fun there. So again, a very good period. I started thinking then, though, that I didn't just want to be in sports. I wanted to branch out into other ways of journalism. So I was offered the job as editor of my old paper where I'd been sports editor, the *Daily Siftings Herald*. So I moved back to Arkadelphia for a time as editor, and as far as I know I was the youngest daily newspaper editor in the state. I was twenty-three years old and went back as the editor of the paper for a

while. So that's when I started branching out of sports at that point.

[00:52:52] JD: And so talking about the *Siftings Herald*, so it's a daily commun—you know, community oriented, I imagine, paper. You're, of course, young. I imagine you've got a pretty small group of people.

RN: Yeah.

JD: What's your staff at a small paper like that?

RN: I had a full-time sports editor. He was a student at Henderson I hired, and he's become very well known in the state now, named Steve Eddington, who's director of communications for Arkansas Farm Bureau Federation now, but when I was editor, Steve was my sports editor. I had two other reporters, and I had this wonderful full-time photographer named Carol King who could've been at any big paper in the country, like the singer, but that was her name, Carol King. Carol could've been at any large paper in American, but she chose to stay there in Arkadelphia, and she was just wonderful. So unlike a lot of little papers where writers are havin' to take their own pictures, I never did, which was great 'cause we had Carol to go to everything. But I guess there were five of us on the editorial staff.

[00:54:03] JD: Do you member the circulation at the time?

RN: And that's puttin' out—probably between three and four thousand people. And in fact—this is a old guy talkin' about modern technology now, but I still amaze myself now. I'm—you know, I thought that was a big deal bein' the editor of the paper, and I look now, and I've got more Facebook friends than that. So I'm thinkin' [*laughs*] I'm reaching more people on social media than I reached when I was editor of a daily newspaper now. The modern technology. But it was a good experience. I—an interesting thing, a very good friend of mine who was a political science professor at Ouachita at the time named Hal Bass when I went back—and had been one of my favorite professors—asked me to come over, and Hal said, "You've gotta make me a promise," and I said, "What's that?" And he said, "You have got to promise me you won't stay at this for more than two years." And I said, "What are you talking about?" I am—remember this very vividly. And he said, "This is your home town. It would be very easy to get comfortable here. And you've got too much potential to be a small-town newspaper editor the rest of your life." And I took that to heart. We won some awards. It was good experience. But I was back in Little Rock within two years.

[00:55:40] JD: So you've worked—we'll get to that here in a minute.

You've worked at a—you know, as the state paper of record. You've worked in DC as bureau chief of that paper. You've been a sports writer and editor of a community-oriented daily. So you have a lot of different experience here. Just focusing on the *Siftings Herald*—we know we're in a time period where circulation of small dailies are—is almost nonexistent.

RN: Oh, it's tragic.

JD: Weeklies are struggling.

RN: Yeah.

JD: What are we losin'? What are we losin' in a state like Arkansas?

RN: We are losing our sense of community. You hear that term now called news deserts, and it's real. Newspapers would hold communities together. That's where you read about your local high-school football team. That's where you saw pictures of the high-school choir performing, and you bought extra copies to put in your kid's scrapbooks. That's where you saw the community calendar and knew when Mama's PTO club was meeting or whatever. I mean, it held communities together. And Gatehouse, which is one of the worst—the company since bought out by Gannett, one of the worst things to ever happen to journalism in Arkadelphia. They shut down papers in Arkadelphia, Hope, and then weeklies in Gurdon and Prescott all

at the same time. They wiped out a whole swath of Southwest Arkansas from newspaper journalists at once, and you're left this giant news desert where people basically are relying on social media for news, and we all know how unreliable social media is. [00:57:26] It's—it is—and I know I sound like the old, aging newspaper man, which I am, but it is one of the worst things across the country that we have seen happen to American democracy. Because you no longer have that watchdog at the local level. We're lucky to have a great statewide newspaper. I'm biased, obviously. But we have a great statewide newspaper. But we can't cover seventy-five quorum courts in seventy-five counties. We can't cover all those city councils. We can't cover hundreds of school boards. And that's what you've lost, that watchdog. So many communities now there's nobody covering the quorum court, nobody covering the city council, nobody covering the school board, no independent watchdog, and you got me on my [*laughs*] soapbox now. Excuse me. But that's not good for democracy.

[00:58:15] JD: Yeah. Yeah. So after the *Siftings Herald*, you take Hal Bass's sage advice, and you go back to the *Arkansas Democrat*.

RN: Yeah, before that, though I worked in a political campaign full

time for the first time. Judy Petty was the Republican nominee in the Second Congressional District of Arkansas against the mercurial sheriff of Pulaski County, Tommy Robinson, who was already a folk hero by 1984. But Judy Petty hired me as her communications director. I would end up working three times full time in Republican campaigns in my career, and that was the first one, so that gave me my first campaign experience then. And it was after that that I went back to the *Democrat* as their assistant sports editor at that point.

JD: So you work on Judy Petty's Republican campaign . . .

RN: In [19]84.

JD: . . . against . . .

RN: Right. She loses to Robinson.

JD: Later, rather famously, Robinson switches parties, but at the time . . .

RN: Switches parties.

JD: . . . he's a . . .

[00:59:31] RN: And the interesting thing is, and I know you probably wanna get into this more later, not to get too far ahead, but it's funny how life works. So I worked for Judy Petty against Tommy Robinson, get to know Tommy Robinson, though, 'cause we're—we did a lot of joint events in those days. So I get to know

Tommy through that. Tommy switches parties when I'm Washington correspondent of the *Democrat*. I had the exclusive—he gave me the day before that he was gonna switch. I'm at the White House when President George H. W. Bush announces his switch. So I covered that as a reporter, and then I'm hired on Robinson's campaign. So when it comes to TR, I have worked against him full time, I have covered him as a journalist, and [*laughs*] I have worked for him full time. So I guess I covered the bases with him.

JD: So in Judy Petty's, that race, there in [19]84, you know, you're working on a campaign—it's an uphill battle . . .

RN: Yes.

JD: . . . to say the least. She would certainly be the underdog. She—not only was she goin' against this incredible, just character, right, this charismatic figure in Tommy Robinson, a famous personality, but she's also a Republican in a overwhelmingly Democratic state.

[01:00:58] RN: Yeah. My—I can remember—and I guess I've got a love for the underdog 'cause I can remember my dad pointing out once, you know, even though the *Democrat* ends up winning the great newspaper war in [19]91, when I went to work for the *Democrat* in [19]81, they were by far the smaller of the two

Little Rock newspapers. The *Gazette* was the giant. And then course the Democratic Party controlled Arkansas, and I worked for a Republican. So I can remember my dad sayin, "I guess you just like underdogs [*laughter*] 'cause you went to the *Democrat*, the number two, you go to the Republican Party, the number two party. *Democrat* wins, we become a Republican state. Who could've seen that coming at the time, any of that?" But yeah, kind of interesting how that worked out. And we knew that was an uphill race, but we thought because of all the controversies surrounding Robinson and the fact we could get more of the urban vote out of Little Rock, who may have been embarrassed by those controversies, we thought we stood a chance. And certainly Robinson thought we stood a chance because they actually paid a guy named Jim Taylor, who had been a waiter at The Oyster Bar in Little Rock—interesting story. Very liberal—to enter the race as an Independent because they wanted the real progressives in Little Rock, the far left, to say, "All right, I can't stand Robinson, but I'm sure as heck never gonna vote for a Republican, so I'll go over here and vote for Taylor." So at least they're not voting for Petty. And indeed Taylor ended up with 7—I'll have to go back and check, 7, 8 percent of the vote. And so Robinson won that election with less

than 50 percent of the vote. [Editor's note: After the interview, Jim Taylor disputed the fact that he was paid to run for office. Rex Nelson subsequently stated that Tommy Robinson was the source of the information about Jim Taylor; however, Nelson stated that he has no reason to doubt Mr. Taylor's claim.]

[01:02:53] JD: Were you identifying yourself with—as—with Republican politics growin' up, or was it really that love of the underdog, the out party? Was there something to that?

RN: By then I was identifyin' myself with the Republican politics 'cause I had fallen in love with Ronald Reagan as a college student like a lot of young conservatives did in those days. The first person that really attracted me as a kid, and again I was a weird kid. I told you I wanted to be a reporter from the first grade. I read the *Arkansas Gazette*, which was the paper we got, not the *Democrat*, every day from cover to cover. And so I was first fascinated when I was a kid by this guy named Winthrop Rockefeller, who was the first Republican governor of Arkansas since Reconstruction. So Rockefeller—reading about him got me interested in politics. So maybe I started identifying a little bit with this underdog Republican party. But when I really started thinkin' about where do I stand politically as a high school student and then as a college student, along comes

Reagan in my college years and wins that 1980 race. And I—1980, I had a Reagan bumper sticker on my Oldsmobile Cutlass, and I had one on my bunk in my dorm room also. [*Laughs*] My roommate was a Democrat. He was for Jimmy Carter. [*JD laughs*] But I had a Reagan bumper sticker on my bed in the room.

[01:04:21] JD: So you return to the *Democrat* after that election.

RN: Right.

JD: But not long after, Robert Starr calls you and wants you to go to DC.

RN: Yeah. And John Robert Starr, who, again, old timers remember—just a very tough character but really saved the *Democrat* during that newspaper war. Wrote seven columns a week in addition to running the newsroom. He was an amazing character. And of course, the staff was just deathly afraid of him, but he took a liking to me for some reason. And he calls me in one day. Now as assistant sports editor—Wally had the sports editor title, but Wally mainly wrote columns and mainly wrote about the Razorbacks in Arkansas. So the assistant sports editor pretty well ran the department on a day-to-day basis. So I'm, again, twenty-six years old. I'm running the sports department of the second-biggest paper in the state. He—to get

out of the office where it wasn't all administrative, he allowed—Wally allowed me to cover all of the Dallas Cowboy home games, and I covered the Super Bowl that year. The Chicago Bears won their one Super Bowl the year I covered it in the Superdome at New Orleans in early [19]86. [01:05:43] And Starr calls me in soon after that Super Bowl and says, "Why haven't you applied for our Washington job that's open?" And I said, "I don't wanna go to Washington, I'm—lived in Arkansas all my life. And I'm lovin' sports right now. I been to the Super Bowl. You know, I'm pretty well running this department at a young age." And this is the way Starr operated. He said, "Well, you need to apply so I don't get sued 'cause I've already decided you're the one going." He did not give me any choice. And I gotta tell you, I was scared to death. I'd done a lot of things covering sports, but suddenly I was covering national politics on Capitol Hill, and the *Gazette* had a veteran correspondent named Carol Matlach at the time, and I was absolutely scared to death. But he said, "You're goin'," and didn't allow me any choice. And looking back—he's gone now, but thank you, Mr. Starr, 'cause again, that's where I met my wife. It was one of the best things that ever happened to me. So here's this ol' sports writer that went off, using the little brown carryall with "Super Bowl XX" on it

they had given me in New Orleans even in the House and Senate press galleries, goin' from sports writer to suddenly covering Capitol Hill in 1986.

[01:07:06] JD: You're—at this point in your career, you're still, I mean, on paper very young, but really you had been reporting—you'd been in sports writing for almost ten years, give or take.

RN: Yeah. I had started early.

JD: So do you think deep down maybe you were ready to get out of sports for a time?

RN: I think so. I think so, and I think, again, Starr did me a favor. And again, I had worked in that one political campaign, so I'd done a little politics there. I'd written some politics, obviously as editor of the Arkadelphia paper there. So I think it was a great opportunity, and like I said, I was scared to death when I went up there. But I remember after I had been there a year or so, Ouachita asked me to write a story for its alumni publication. And I wasn't just blowin' hot air, this is true. I wrote that after a year or so, I began to look around and look at these Capitol Hill reporters who had gone to great journalism schools like Missouri or like Columbia—a lot of Ivy Leaguers cover Capitol Hill, so there are a lot of Ivy League folks up there. But I'm honest when I tell you this. I think my Ouachita education had

prepared me, frankly, just as well, and I also knew I could outwork those people. So you know, scared for the first year, but by the second and third years, I've figured out I'm just as good at this as any of these other people. [01:08:37] And so, you know, again, you know, got to do a lot of great things that if it hadn't've been for this career, you know, that a kid from Arkadelphia, Arkansas, never would've gotten to do. I—State of the Union addresses of both Ronal Reagan and H. W. Bush. I was in Houston on the night that Bush was elected president in [19]88. The paper sent me down there. National political conventions. So I—really was a chance to see the world. We thought Bill Clinton was gonna run for president in [19]88, so in [19]87 any time he was on the East Coast from New Hampshire to Florida, they would sent me to cover the Bill Clinton speeches up and down the East Coast. So a lot of opportunity there.

JD: It strikes me that you love your hometown of Arkadelphia. You love your home state of Arkansas. But it took Hal Bass and John Robert Starr to sort of push you to that next step.

[01:09:35] RN: Yeah. Yeah. I'll tell you a funny anecdote along those lines. When I was editor of the paper there, there was a businessman in Arkadelphia who would later move to Little Rock. Well-known family in that area named Ralph Williams Jr. And

Ralph comes to me at one point, and he said, "Look, here's what we're gonna do. We're gonna buy these two Arkadelphia radio stations. And I'm gonna give you part ownership. You're gonna be my general manager. And then you can, through the years, you know, just slowly buy till you have a controlling interest in 'em." And for whatever reason, his negotiations with the people who owned the stations fell through at that time. [*Laughs*] And a few years ago I ran into Ralph, and I can remember this word for word. He comes up, and he says, "God, aren't you glad we didn't buy those two radio stations back in 1983?" And I said, "Yeah, Ralph, 'cause if we had, I'd still be livin' in Arkadelphia reading the farm report at six a.m. every morning. I'd be doin' farm reports at six. I'd probably be happy. But yeah, it all worked out."

JD: Do we wanna take a little break? Maybe . . .

RN: We can. Drink a little water.

JD: . . . we can get up and stretch our legs.

RN: Okay.

JD: And get some water, coffee.

RN: Okay.

[Recording stopped]

[01:10:48] JD: So to this point, we've talked about you covering

sports and jour—as a journalist, and that you're, at this point, you're getting into the covering of politics. Are there any parallels between the two?

RN: Lot of parallels. I tell people you've got clearly defined winners and losers in both. So much of life is not clearly defined. I mean, it's not black, it's not white, it's grey. But at the end of a sports event, you know who won, and at the end of a campaign, you know who won despite—[*laughs*] in recent American history, the loser claiming he won, but we know who really won. So there's that similarity. And you have big money involved in both. People who have made a lot of money like to dabble in sports, and they like to dabble in politics. And when you have big money involved, you also have big egos involved. So big egos, big money, clearly defined winners and losers. A lot of similarities in my mind between politics and sports.

JD: Different rules and uniforms.

RN: Yeah.

JD: But otherwise very similar.

RN: Yeah. Absolutely. Absolutely. In fact, I have been very lucky in recent cycles going back a number of years now to be asked to do election-night commentary on a Little Rock TV station, and I always say that's my political equivalent to doing play-by-play in

football. It's game night, you know, and you really get up for it, and it's a lot of fun when you sit there doing it. So yeah, that's a game night, election night.

[01:12:33] JD: So in the late 1980s, you're working and living in DC, and you meet your wife, or your soon-to-be wife, Melissa. How did y'all meet?

RN: We met—we tell people we met when we were living in Washington, DC, but we didn't meet in Washington, DC. Believe it or not, we met on the beach in Delaware. Now I'm the most unlikely beach bum you can imagine, you know. I'm a former redhead, I got pale skin. I'm not a guy that lays out on the sand. But I worked outta where I lived in Washington. So it's like I could never get away from work. Had two phones. I lived in the basement of a townhouse on Capitol Hill, so I could walk to the Capitol every day. And I had two phones. I had an *Arkansas Democrat* phone and a home phone. *Democrat* phone would ring seven days a week, editors wanting stuff, so it's like you could never get away from work. And a friend of mine said, "You know, they've got all these group houses over on the beach in Delaware. And people go together, and they rent places from Memorial Day through Labor Day, and then you go every weekend plus Memorial Day, plus the Fourth of July you stay

longer, and Memorial Day. And it's worth it." [01:13:52] And so I was in a beach house. I was one of twelve members, six males, six females. And Melissa was one of the guests of one of our six female members. Now I'm living on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. I live walking distance from old RFK Stadium when the Washington Redskins were playing there. Redskins won a Super Bowl while I was living there. That was the Gibbs era and just great football teams. I would walk down and buy tickets—that's another story—for many games 'cause I loved the NFL. I'd covered the NFL. But you just didn't see Cowboy fans. That's not something you saw much in Washington, DC. Melissa, who's from South Texas—I can remember—it's not the most romantic line. I can remember the first line I ever spoke to her, 'cause she walked in and she had a Dallas Cowboys sweatshirt on. And I said, "Are you a Cowboys fan? 'Cause I used to cover the Cowboys." So it was because of that Cowboys shirt she was wearin' that we first began talkin' to each other.

[01:15:10] JD: What was she doin' . . .

RN: Thanks, Cowboys. [*Laughter*]

JD: What was she doing in DC at the time?

RN: She had gone to work up there. She graduated from what's now Texas State University, was then Southwest Texas State in San

Marcos, Lyndon Johnson's alma mater. She'd been a political science major, which you'll like. She had gone to work for a member of congress from South Texas, who was pretty well known at the time. Kika de la Garza was chairman of the House agriculture committee at one time. She was not on his ag staff, she was on his personal staff. But she'd gone to work for Congressman de la Garza in Washington, but by the time I met her, she was one of the office managers for what was known as JAMA, the Japan Automobile Manufacturers Association, so the Japanese auto lobby, in other words. In fact, I can still member—'cause I'd go over to meet her for lunch—I can still remember the names of her bosses were Mr. **Yano**, Mr. **Miyoshi**, and Mr. **Sawano**, all from Japan, so by the time we met, again, she was working for the Japan Automobile Manufacturers Association.

[01:16:23] JD: That's great. So you meet and—how long do y'all date before you get married?

RN: We met in June of 1988, and got married in October of 1989. So it was pretty fast. We were married in less than two years after meeting each other.

JD: When you were married, were you in DC still? Were you in Arkansas?

RN: We got married and moved back to Arkansas. I read, I think, somewhere that three of the five highest stressful things you can do in life are getting married, moving, and changing jobs. So I just decided to do three of the five all at the same time. [*Laughter*] I left the Washington Bureau job for the *Democrat*, I moved from Washington back to Little Rock, and I got married all in October of 1989.

JD: So an eventful thirty-one days of the month there.

RN: Oh, it was. We were all over the map. We were livin' in Washington, we were moving to Little Rock, we got married in Corpus Christie, Texas, and we honeymooned in New Orleans.

JD: Oh, that's good.

RN: So we were in all four of those cities within a couple of weeks of each other.

[01:17:26] JD: Was Melissa—I mean, Arkansas gets an unfair bad rap. And maybe even from Texas. Was Melissa hesitant about movin' to Arkansas?

RN: She was a little hesitant because, remember, she's from far south Texas. She was born in the Kingsville area, where the famous King Ranch is. She was [*JD clears throat*]—went to high school in Corpus Christie, so she was much closer to the Mexican border than she was to the Arkansas border. It wasn't like she

was from Texarkana or Dallas or somewhere in between where she would know about Arkansas. She knew next to nothing about Arkansas. So she was a little hesitant. And she jokes she figured it was a close as she'd ever get back to Texas, so she better jump at this opportunity. She was ready to leave Washington by that point after about four years there and get back to this part of the country. But yeah, she was somewhat hesitant about Arkansas. [01:18:20] Now I'll jump ahead again and then we can move back. But my pro-Arkansas story—and this is the God's honest truth. Bill Clinton is elected president in [19]92. By then I'm political editor of the *Democrat-Gazette*, as the two papers had combined. And they said, "You know, our political editor probably oughta be Washington based." Now Mellissa's mother, my mother-in-law, had moved to Washington herself, so I thought Melissa would be excited to go back to where her mother lived, to go back to DC. Melissa was pregnant with our first son at that point, our first child, and I told her—I said, "Looks like we're goin' back to Washington." And she said, true story, "You may be, but it's gonna be a commuter marriage." I said, "What?" She said, "I'm not gonna raise a child in Washington, DC." She'd fallen in love with Arkansas in just those first three years. She found doctors that she liked,

she found a pediatrician she liked, somebody to deliver the baby that she liked. So we worked out a deal where I supervised both the Capitol bureau and the Washington bureau. I was Little Rock based and would average about a week a month in Washington during that Bill Clinton first term. But I jumped ahead on you. But that's—to give the example, even though she was hesitant about moving to Arkansas, she fell in love with it very quickly after we got to Arkansas in the fall of 1989.

[01:19:50] JD: So maybe you have the gift of salesmanship like your dad. [*RN laughs*] You sold Arkansas to her.

RN: I don't know. I don't know. But we have been here ever since. We have lived in Little Rock since 1989.

JD: And you've touched . . .

RN: Raised both of our sons there.

JD: So tell me more about your sons.

RN: Got her brains, luckily. Both did very well in high school. My older son, Austin, graduated from Little Rock Catholic. My younger son, Evan, graduated from Baptist Prep. So they got a little bit of both of us. Melissa's Catholic, I'm Baptist, so [*laughs*]—and then Austin, the older one, got his undergrad at Hendrix. And the—Evan got his undergrad at Ouachita. I mentioned I had another generation of Ouachitonians. And

Austin graduated with a master's degree in government from Baylor, and then graduated last May as we tape this with a J.D. from the University of Texas, is now, you'll like, finishing up his dissertation, so he'll also have Ph.D. from Texas in government. Meanwhile, my younger son is finishing up a J.D. and an M.B.A. at Emory in Atlanta. So they—somehow an old newspaper man [*JD laughs*] produced two lawyers. So they—don't ask me how that happened. [*Laughs*]

[01:21:21] JD: Well, I'm sure they'll have very bright futures.

RN: Yeah.

JD: You must be very proud of them, too.

RN: Yeah. But they got Melissa's brains. [*JD laughs*] That's what happened.

JD: So goin' back a little bit to that . . .

RN: Yeah.

JD: . . . late-[19]80s period, early [19]90s . . .

RN: Late [19]80s.

JD: . . . tell me about Tommy Robinson.

[01:21:37] RN: Well, you know, I already had in my mind, "If I'm gettin' married, I probably would rather raise a family in Arkansas," same as Melissa, so I was looking to go back, and I talked to Starr, and it's like, "Well, you know, in my mind I've

got you plugged in as our Washington correspondent, and I don't really have a Plan B." He would've found something for me to do, but I thought, "I'm not sure, you know, I wanna just be an investigative reporter or whatever he had planned." And I had somebody approach me and said, in essence, would you be willing to meet with Jack Stephens? And again, I'm thirty years old now, but still, you know, that kid from Arkadelphia, and Witt and Jack Stephens, you know, two of the great business titans in Arkansas history, and I said, "Of course." [01:22:38] And so they fly me to Little Rock, and I go to Jack Stephen's office. He had a three-story building across from what's now the *Democrat-Gazette* building where my office is now that has since been torn down, but Witt was on the second floor. Jack was on the third floor. And I went to the third floor, I go to Mr. Stephen's office, and in essence, they tell me, "Tommy Robinson's gonna run for governor. This is off the record in case you stay in journalism. But he's gonna run for governor in 1990, and we want you to help run the campaign. We want you to be his communications director." And it was, you know, again, for a thirty-year-old, that campaign—the Stephens were basically the biggest fund-raiser. Mary Anne Stephens, who was married to Jack at the time—they would divorce after that campaign. Mary

Anne, of course, would marry Don Shula, the famous Miami coach. Coach Shula recently passed away. Mary Anne still lives in Miami. But Mary Anne was gonna be the chairman. And just the chance—because there'd always been this kind of, you know, cloud—secretive—the Stephens organization—and the chance to work inside it and the challenge of working—you know, everybody told me, "Nobody wants to work for Tommy," and that was kind of a, again, a challenge, again, liking the underdog. A challenge to me. And so I said to them—I said, "Well, I'm gonna need at least *x* amount of money. And I'm getting married, so I'm gonna have to have a job for my wife. And I would need full health insurance for both of us." [01:24:31] That's the end of the meeting. They fly me back to lit—Washington. Melissa and I go to dinner that night. So of course, she asked how it went. I said, "Oh, it went great. It was great meeting Jack Stephens. A very nice man. I've always wanted to meet him." I said, "But I'll never hear from him again." And she said, "Why?" and I said, "Well, I've worked in a political campaign back in [19]84, and they don't pay that well. Certainly don't pay all your health insurance, you know." And within a day or two, I got a call. "When can you start?" I thought, "Well, you fool." I was thinkin' of it as a regular

political campaign when it was more of a Stephens subsidiary. [*Laughter*] I should've asked for more. So I go to work. [01:25:19] Long story short, and there are a lot of stories in there if you wanna get into any of 'em, but Tommy Robinson is defeated by Sheffield Nelson, who also switched from bein' a Democrat to a Republican. They both switched at about the same time. In May Tommy is a lame duck at that point 'cause he didn't run for re-election to congress, and they knew that the veteran staffers would be jumping ship, you know, in Washington, so they needed somebody to kinda fly with Tommy every week to Washington, fly back to Little Rock with him every week, just some—a staffer to be with him. So after the May primary, I moved over to his congressional staff for the rest of the year. [01:26:09] And me and a guy, long-time Republican political consultant named J. J. Vigneault—I can tell you—we can—we literally locked the doors on the Robinson office. You hear that, but we finished cleaning out the office. Tommy was back in Little Rock in December of [19]90. The week before Christmas, just dead on Capitol Hill. Locked that office, turned in the keys to that office in the Longworth House Office Building to the House Sergeant at Arms office. So when Tommy Robinson's political career came to an end, I can say I'm the one

that literally locked the doors on it [*laughs*] 'cause we did at that point. But did that from the point that I got married in October of [19]89 through the end of 1990. I was involved with Robinson.

[01:27:04] JD: That had to be a stressful time. Tough hours . . .

RN: Oh my gosh, it was incredibly stressful. It was a great experience for Melissa, though, 'cause remember I had told Mr. Stephens I needed a job for her. Well, Jack Stephens put Melissa on his personal staff. So she was on the third floor, where his basically personal staff all worked. And you know—you wanna meet back in that day everybody who's anybody in the state of Arkansas, try sittin' near Jack Stephens' office, and they're all coming through there at one point or another. Mr. Stephens was very good to both of us. I have very fond memories of him. Again, one of the most famous people in Arkansas history, but he treated us both very well, and I'm glad I got to spend about a year and a half around Jack Stephens. It was a great experience.

JD: Did Marie continue to work with him after the campaign?

[01:28:08] RN: No, actually after the campaign—I thought, "You know, Tommy's so radioactive, you know, and I've worked on this campaign now. I may not be able to get a job in Arkansas,

now. Certainly not in media." So I end up interviewing for a couple of jobs, and turned two jobs down. I interviewed—and people laugh at this, but all my college buddies gave me a hard time for not taking it—but I interviewed as the communications director, Washington based, for the National Beer Wholesaler's Association. I worried about my old Baptist mother. [*JD laughs*] She would've had to tell people I just worked in the beverage industry and hope that they thought Coke or Pepsi, you know, if I had taken that job. Good offer. And then I was flown by the American Farm Bureau Federation to their annual convention in Phoenix, of all places, is where the interview was done 'cause they were all out there for their big annual convention in early January, and was offered a job in the Washington office of American Farm Bureau Federation. [01:29:24] So I had two job offers to go back to Washington, thinking that's what we're going to do, when out of the blue, a guy named Wythe Walker, who was the publisher of *Arkansas Business* at the time, called me up and said, "We need a new editor, and would you have breakfast with me and Alan Leveritt," who was one of the owners at the time of *Arkansas Business*. And Alan Leveritt—love Alan, very far left politically, hated Tommy Robinson, had bumper stickers made up that said, "In your gut, you know he's nuts"

that were—you would see around Little Rock during that 1990 campaign. And I said, "Wythe, there's no way that Alan Leveritt's gonna hire me after working for Tommy Robinson the last year and a half." He said, "No, come to breakfast with us. You'll be surprised. Alan's a really neat guy, and he's not what you think. He's kind of in a class—he likes to surprise people." [01:30:35] So I go to breakfast at the Capital Hotel. I remember it was startin' to snow. Dreary January morning. And Alan says, "Look, *Arkansas Times* is my liberal publication. *Arkansas Business* is mainly business owners and managers, and I need a conservative editorial page there, and Wythe speaks highly of you, and we wanna know if you wanna be the editor." And again, Melissa and I really wanted to stay in this part of the country, so I turned down the two Washington jobs and stayed in Arkansas. So that's how I stayed on here in 1991 after that campaign and didn't end up goin' back to Washington, DC, to work. And I probably could've had a great career in Washington, but I'm glad it worked out that I stayed home in Arkansas.

[01:31:23] JD: So you touched on a few things there where after that election—I think the word you used was maybe toxic or something to that effect, the Tommy Robinson campaign.

RN: Yeah, it had been a very nasty campaign. I mean, you've . . .

JD: Well, talk a little bit that.

RN: . . . studied that extensively, so you know . . .

JD: Yeah.

RN: Well, it was a family feud. You know, Sheffield Nelson—and I later became friends with Sheffield. And that's a great thing about a small state. You later get to know people. But Sheffield had come from a poor, sharecropping family over in the Brinkley area, was a very good student, and when he was at what's now UCA, Arkansas State Teacher's College at the time—Witt Stephens had kinda spotted him early. Said, "You wanna get involved in the management program at Arkla Gas," which Witt Stephens ran at the time, and quickly promoted Sheffield Nelson up through the ranks at Arkla. And Sheffield becomes chairman and becomes CEO of Arkla eventually. [01:32:34] Now Arkla bought a lot of its natural gas from Stephens production company. And Sheffield ended up cutting off many of those contracts, ended up in—I mean, there's a whole book here somewhere, but as you know doing business with Jerry Jones, Jerry Jones becomes rich, is able to buy the Dallas Cowboys, but through what was known as the Arkla-Arkoma deal to sell gas to Arkla. So there's a falling out with the Stephens family. And so they did not want Sheffield Nelson as governor. At the same

time, they were mad at Bill Clinton about some things. They wanted to send him a message, at least with a tough candidate, and they were thinking Robinson could do that. [01:33:30] But goin' back to all of the Arkla Gas related dealings with Mr. Witt and all—I mean, there was a family-feud type feeling among that. And so it was a very heated campaign. Very few people in those years voted in Republican primaries, but it dominated the news coverage of both the *Democrat* and the *Gazette* that year. It obtained—I dealt with national reporters all the time, got a lot of national coverage because you had these two former Democrats who'd both switched to the Republican party, and they were both seeking the same nomination in hopes of knocking off Bill Clinton in November of 1990. So as you can see, it was a great national political story, too.

[01:34:13] JD: But you came out of it, you're at *Arkansas* . . .

RN: I survived.

JD: . . . *Business*.

RN: I survived. And like I said, it was a great experience because I got to see and know and be around and work around Jack Stephens. And you know, you list those great people in Arkansas history—and again, goes back to bein' that lucky kid from Arkadelphia, just what I chose to do. I mean, there've now

been ten governors in my lifetime. I've met all ten. I met Winthrop Rockefeller as a Cub Scout [*laughs*] when our troop came up to the capitol for a Proclamation Day. I also met him when he was campaigning once. But all except for Rockefeller—the other nine I got to know personally. So you know, the next nine governors I've known, all the senators since then, and then people like Jack Stephens, again, just very fortunate to get to work with in some instances and to really know people that will go down as some of the most important people in twentieth-century Arkansas.

[01:35:18] JD: I'm always amazed how Arkansas, to use a sports analogy, punches above its weight.

RN: Always.

JD: Historically.

RN: Always. I mean, as you know . . .

JD: You've been around a lot of these individuals.

RN: . . . Stephens Inc. at one time was the largest investment bank that wasn't headquartered on Wall Street. In Arkansas of all places. These two old boys from Prattsville in the pine woods of Grant County were able to do that. Witt and Jack. I got to—I didn't—I wouldn't say I got to know Mr. Witt like I did Mr. Jack, but I got to be around Mr. Witt some, too, at that point. He was

old, but he was still comin' to the office for half a day every day. He had an old driver named Finley. And that's another story. But got to be around Mr. Witt. And like I said, Melissa got to work in that building. So it was a fascinating experience. Great people.

[01:36:04] JD: You, in [19]92, become politics editor of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. And this is not long after a brutal newspaper war. Did that still linger at that time? I mean, it'd been . . .

RN: Oh, yeah. There was a lot of bitterness . . .

JD: It hadn't been that long. Yeah.

RN: . . . on the part of the *Gazette* people. And you know, again, I was editor of *Arkansas Business*, and on the day that they announced that the *Gazette* had published its final issue—it was a Friday morning—and that the first issue of the *Democrat-Gazette* would come out, I sent—I had recently hired two former *Gazette* employees named Kane Webb and Tim Taylor, and so I sent both of them to the *Gazette* people to talk to *Gazette* folks. I, being an old *Democrat* guy, went to the *Democrat* offices and went to the newsroom there. And then I walked—as—we ended up doin' my column on this. I walked with John Robert Starr from the *Democrat* building to the Capitol Hotel where they were

gonna have the news conference to announce the newspaper war was over. And again, an interesting experience. And we worked all weekend, and we put together what I thought was just one of the best editions of *Arkansas Business* ever on the end of the newspaper wars. So again, I covered that as the editor of *Arkansas Business*. [01:37:33] Soon after that, Walter Hussman, now with the one statewide newspaper, starts making major hires. And he hires Paul Greenberg, the Pulitzer Prize winning editorial page editor of the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, away. So Greenberg comes to Little Rock. And then he hires a new position called executive editor. Starr had been the managing editor. He was gonna just start writing columns. He hires an executive editor named Griffin Smith. Griffin Smith was a Little Rock attorney, but he had been one of the founders of *Texas Monthly Magazine* soon after he graduated from Rice University. [01:38:17] And so several months after the newspaper war had ended, I get a call in 1992 from Griffin Smith. And he says, "Walter and I would like to take you to lunch at the Little Rock Club." This was a private city club that used to exist at the top of what's now the Regions Building. [*Laughs*] And you know, being a good journalist—never turn down a free lunch, right? [*JD laughs*] So I said, "Sure," thinkin', "What on earth?" And by

then it was becoming more and more apparent that Bill Clinton was probably gonna win the Democratic nomination. And so they said, "We are creating a new position of political editor. And basically to start with it's gonna coordinate all the coverage of this Clinton campaign. And we wanna know if you wanna do that." Now *Arkansas Business*—I had just been to the convention in Washington, DC, of what was known as the Association of Area Business Publications. And we had been named the best business publication in any market of 1 million or smaller. A huge honor. And so I was so happy about that. But you know, the old political guy and havin' covered Washington, and now your governor might become president, and you get to coordinate all that for the statewide paper? There's no way I could say no to that job. So I very sheepishly went into Wythe Walker's office after winning this big award, and said, "I'm leaving," and became the political editor and led all the coverage of the rest of the Clinton campaign for the *Democrat-Gazette* and then supervised the coverage of most of his first term in office. And as I said, also did the state capital bureau, so again, based in Little Rock. We had three full-time people in Washington, and then I'd spend on average a week a month in Washington, DC.

[01:40:29] JD: That had to be an extraordinarily exciting time. You had to know you were living in history . . .

RN: It really was.

JD: . . . as an Arkansas boy covering another Arkansas boy as president of the United States.

RN: I tell people that every Arkansas media person got his or her fifteen minutes of fame [*laughs*] then. Because I was political editor of the largest paper in the state. You all the time had radio stations calling up wanting to do interviews. You had television networks calling. And they would often farm me out. And I got to become kinda semi-regulars with some interesting people. [*Clears throat*] Excuse me. Cog—Colonel Oliver North was doing a syndicated show at that point, and I like became one of his regulars. And he would often have me on. And then when I went to Washington at one time, I ended up going to his studio and doing the show, and then we went to dinner together. So here I am at dinner with Ollie North, you know. Or I did a feature on the John McLaughlin Show, which was huge at that point. And Saturday Night Live, you know, was doin' the old John McLaughlin script—skit. "Wrong!" And well, John McLaughlin got where he would call my house 'cause I became kind of his Little Rock source. And just kind of a surreal time to

be in Little Rock 'cause you had all these big national media names that you were dealing with. [01:41:54] But it was a lot of work because of course Whitewater hits. It's a huge national story, but it's an Arkansas story. And I did not want to be using *New York Times* wire service stories, *Washington Post* wire service stories, *Wall Street Journal* stories. I wanted our own reporters doin' 'em 'cause at base it's an Arkansas story. So we're suddenly competing against the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* with far smaller staff. So I was really, really, as I look back now at the end of that first term—as the end of that first term neared, getting pretty burned out 'cause, John, I'll—I know people use that term sixteen-hour days, but I was literally working many sixteen-hour days to try to keep up with all of that at the time.

[01:42:50] JD: You've had, I think I would say, the unique experience of being a journalist in different, you know, different forms or fashions in a small state with one of its favorite sons goin' to DC.

RN: Yeah.

JD: And this is after you've covered the man in various forms in politics while he was in Arkansas. You write a book about Hilary Clinton . . .

RN: Right. It was the first full-length biography of Hilary.

JD: . . . during that time. And I guess my question is for a journalist, is it hard—and maybe it's harder for someone from a small state to remain objective. You know these people. You know the Stephens.

RN: Yeah.

JD: You know these individuals personally. It's too small a state not to. And now you've got to have that sort of wall where, you know, you need to interact with 'em, but you wanna be professional and objective. How does a reporter do that?

[01:43:45] RN: It's not always easy. You know, we disagreed. I mean, I was certainly, personally, more conservative than Bill Clinton was. I've always gotten along with Bill Clinton personally. He has always been nice to me personally. He could be madder than a hornet at our editorial page, you know. Paul Greenberg's the one that termed—you know, coined the term Slick Willy and—but I was on the news side at that time. Now I'm on opinion side, but news side at that time, so I never really that much saw him hold that against us. We had a pretty good working relationship. So I will credit the president for that. He was generally a professional in dealing with us. But again, it is a small state. You know everybody. [01:44:38] And it was

funny. I'd travel the country, and you know, people would hear I'm from Arkansas and like, "Do you actually know Bill Clinton?" And I'd say, "There's only three million of us. Bill Clinton—pretty much on a first-name basis with everybody in the state [*laughs*] to start with. Yeah, I know Bill Clinton."

JD: So there's objectivity, and then there's objectivity Arkansas style.

RN: Arkansas style.

JD: Which . . .

RN: Yeah, yeah. Absolutely. [*JD laughs*] 'Cause you do know these people. And again, jumping forward, but I don't wanna forget this. And this is so Clinton. [*Clears throat*] 'Scuse me. I—when Clinton comes out with his biography, which is, you know, door stopper, as you know, a huge book. I've tried to get as many of my Arkansas books actually signed, again, bein' a small state, as I possibly can. I mean, I got books signed by Orval Faubus and Sheriff Marlon Hawkins. Glad I got all those people while they were still alive. And so I wanna get the Clinton book signed. And I was out of state, I remember, but Clinton was speaking at Ouachita, my alma mater. And Rex Horne, a dear friend, was president at that time, so I called Dr. Horne, and I said, "I'm gonna bring you this book. Will you get the president

to sign it?" And he said, "Oh, of course I will." So I get back from my trip, and I call him, and I said, "Did Clinton sign my book?" And he said, "Yeah, but I want you to see it in person. I wanna see your face when you read it." Now at the time, I was an appointee in the George W. Bush administration, so the way Dr. Horne explained it to me—he said, "Clinton comes in," and said, "We were about to go speak. I'd about forgotten. Said, 'Oh, no, Rex Nelson needs you to sign this book.'" He says, "Clinton says, 'Rex Nelson? Is he still a Republican?'" [*JD laughs*] And Dr. Horne said, "Well, yeah, he's workin' in the Bush administration right now." And so the book is signed, "Rex, remember we Baptists believe in death-bed conversions. There's still time. –Bill" [*Laughter*] I mean, it's so personal. [01:46:41] And I think only in Arkansas, a small state, would you get that kind of thing. You know, an old political editor who bashed with the president of the United States. Now I'm an ex-political editor, he's an ex-president, and that's the way he signs the book. But . . .

JD: There's still time. [*Laughs*]

RN: That's one of those only-in-Arkansas things. Still time to covert parties, yeah.

JD: Well, and you know, we are the Pryor Center, named after David

and Barbara who is a—at the time when you're in DC and much of your career as a political editor out of Little Rock, you've got not only a president of the United States from Arkansas, but you have in the Senate two very well-regarded . . .

RN: Oh.

JD: . . . respected individuals in . . .

RN: And they were both so good to me.

JD: . . . Dale Bumpers and David Pryor. You—just tell me a little bit about covering them.

[01:47:31] RN: You know, I covered 'em every day. My boys—I might as well be talking about the stone age and chippin' on rocks, you know, 'cause they can't imagine a pre-internet era. But I said, "This is the [19]80s" And the newspaper war is still going on, so both the *Gazette* correspondent and me as the *Democrat* correspondent would literally go in person to all six Arkansas congressional offices every day just to make sure you weren't missing anything. What's happening? What's goin' on today? And so I was in both senators' office every day in addition to the four house members. And Senator Bumpers and Senator Pryor were both very good to me. Again, I'm a guy who had worked on a Republican political campaign in [19]84 by this point but gone back to journalism. And they both trusted me,

they both, I think, felt they could be themselves around me. I will tell you, and I don't wanna sound like I'm patting myself on the back, but I only tell this to say that I considered it a great honor. Now some hardcore journalists might say, "Well, you were too close to this," but I like to think it was an honor. [01:48:46] Dale Bumpers once told me—he said, "Ernie Dumas," the old *Arkansas Gazette* reporter and political editor, who's still around. Ernie—one of the greats in our business in Arkansas history. I had an email exchange with him this week. But he said, "Ernie Dumas and you are the only two reporters I've ever felt I could be myself around." And I took that as a compliment, actually. 'Cause when it was on the record, he knew it was on the record. I would say, "We're on the record, Senator." But other times—David Pryor was the same way, and I've gotta tell you, again, you know, two Arkansas icons, and again, lucky they both became important men in my life because I got to know them well. Some of my greatest afternoons is when I would be makin' my rounds and the administrative assistant who sat right outside Senator Pryor's office was named Leslie Chalmers—and I'd go by, and I'd say, "Just checkin' in, Leslie," and she'd say, "Well, go on in." I said, "Well, I don't have any questions. I'm just seein' if anything's goin' on."

She'd say, "Oh, he's bored, go on in." And you know, there's nothing better, and I'm not just sayin' this 'cause I'm at the Pryor Center, but to get David Pryor tellin' war stories. Every once in a while, he'd say, "Let's go down to the senators' dinin' room and get a whole bowl of ice cream." [*Laughs*] So—and those were great. So we'd go down to the, you know, members dining room, and—great service when you're a senator in the senate dining room—and get a mid-afternoon bowl of ice cream and get David Pryor telling stories. [01:50:27] But when I could get Dale Bumpers and David Pryor storytelling—just a wonderful experience. They were two really, really good guys. Our House members—I got along, I'll say, with three of the four of them. [*Laughs*] Tommy was always good for a quote, of course, the Second District congressman. You knew on a slow day you could always have a story 'cause you'd just simply walk into Tommy Robinson's office and say, "What's goin' on?" and he'd say something outrageous, and you could turn it into a story. But you also, at that time, had John Paul Hammerschmidt. What a gentleman. The one Republican member of the Arkansas delegation at the time, who was also very good to me. And Beryl Anthony Jr. down in South Arkansas in the Fourth District. Bill Alexander in the First District, East

Arkansas at the time—that district keeps growing. But he hated the *Democrat* because its conservative ele—page. So he never really gave me a chance. He would not really return my calls. Really hard to get to. But five of the six members of the delegation during my almost four years in Washington I had really good relationships with.

[01:51:45] JD: We'll move on a bit here in a moment, but you mentioned his name, and so I was wondering if you would—what—Mr. Greenberg, of course, passed away a couple of years ago now. Any—just any memerances of—anything that sticks to mind with Paul Greenberg? Workin' with him and Wythe—anything that comes to mind?

RN: Again, one of those things I'm glad that happened is that—you know, I left the paper in 1996 to go be the communications policy director for the new governor, Mike Huckabee. And I know we'll get to that at another time. But I began somewhere during that period a tradition of having dinner—we used to do it at Bruno's, and then Bruno's closed for a while and we went to another place, but having dinner with Paul Greenberg about once a month. And Paul was such a brilliant guy that those dinners were really special, and I looked forward to 'em, and I was always glad that he was able to do those. [*Laughs*] But you

know, here I am, a Southern Baptist, but I can't think of a better example. Paul Greenberg was kinda my rabbi in a way, I wanna say because he had this deep knowledge, and just to pick Paul's brain and so forth—we did that for a number of years from when I left the paper in 1996 until Paul's health finally started to decline and he could not do that on a regular basis anymore.

[01:53:28] JD: Well, I just—I love his writing. He was just so witty, so . . .

RN: Oh, just one of the . . .

JD: . . . artful.

RN: . . . brilliant writers in Arkansas history . . .

JD: Yeah. Yeah.

RN: . . . of all time. We were lucky to have him in both Pine Bluff and in Little Rock. You know, way back in the days we were talking about earlier when I was editor of the *Daily Siftings Herald*, we were owned by the Freeman family of Pine Bluff, and the Freemans only owned three newspapers. They owned the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, the *Daily Siftings Herald*, and the *Yazoo Daily Herald* in Yazoo City, Mississippi. And so we got all of Greenberg's columns, obviously, since they owned us, the Freemans, and I would fill our editorial page up with Greenberg's writing. And I got so tickled one year because one year at the

Associated Press Managing Editor's contest, the *Daily Siftings Herald* won—this is against the *Gazette* and the *Democrat*, too. There was one category, the Best Editorial Page in the State. [*Laughs*] Well, should've been the Pine Bluff Commercial since [*JD laughs*] I was runnin' all of Greenberg's stuff, but they gave it to us, so we were named best editorial page in the state, and it's mainly because I was fillin' my page up with stuff written by Paul Greenberg.

JD: That's great. [01:54:44] So movin' ahead a bit in a career—in your career, in the mid—I guess it was mid-[19]90s—explain to me how you leave journalism into partisan campaign politics, but then also just as a state employee . . .

RN: Yeah.

JD: . . . of state government for Governor Mike Huckabee.

RN: And I gotta tell you, I did not see this one coming at all. I'm political editor of the *Democrat-Gazette*. As I told you, I'm workin' sixteen-hour days, I'm just all into it, but you know, again, livin' the dream for a still-young person in that, you know, I'm appearing on the *McNeil-Laird News Hour* on PBS, and like I said, doin' shows with Ollie North and radio shows. Denny McLain, the old Tiger pitcher, had a show in Detroit at the time. I was on on a regular basis. So you're all over the country

talking about Bill Clinton. And suddenly this other huge story happens. [01:55:45] And it is early 1996. Governor Jim Guy Tucker is indicted on crimes that occurred well before he was governor, not anything he did in the governor's office, related to business dealings he'd had, but it was the Whitewater special prosecutor, of course, that did it, Kenneth Starr. And he's found guilty, which I never thought would happen. I never thought twelve Arkansans would find an Arkansas governor guilty, but they did. And on May the twenty-eighth of 1996—I remember the exact date. That's how big a day that was at our newspaper. First of all, you've already got one huge story, that Jim Guy Tucker found guilty. Then mid-afternoon he calls a news conference and announces—we thought he would hang in there till every appeal was over—but announces he will resign as governor on or before July 15. And so again, one of those probably more than a sixteen hour day that day. Huge day. Then we're busy after that 'cause the lieutenant governor is about to become governor. He's running for the senate, and Mike Huckabee would have won that election. He's well ahead in the polls. But he makes the decision he is gonna drop outta the senate race 'cause Arkansas doesn't need three governors, he felt, in a short period of time. [01:57:14] So Mike Huckabee

makes the decision to stay on as governor. And he calls me, and he's—the campaign headquarters, what had been the senate campaign headquarters over by the capitol, had now turned into a transition headquarters to get ready for his new governorship. And he says, "I need to see you on Sunday afternoon." And I'm thinking he's gonna give me a story, some kind of exclusive story. In fact, I was so convinced of that, I told our Sunday editor, "Save me some space in Monday's paper. I'm gonna have some kind of story." And I walk in with a legal pad, which I've always used, and a pen, thinkin' he's gonna give this—give me a story, and he says, "You can put that away. This is not going to be giving you a story, and it needs to be off the record again if it doesn't work out." I said, "What?" And he starts drawin' these circles, and he said, "I'm gonna have a senior management team. I'm not just gonna have everything goin' through one chief of staff. I'm gonna have a chief of staff, but I want a senior management team of about five people, and I've got you in this circle as director of policy and communications, and I want you to, you know, help me form this new administration. And you can't say n"—I mean, he said, "You can't"—good salesman. "You can't say no 'cause I don't have a Plan B." I said, "Well, Governor, let me think on that."

[01:58:49] So I go back, talk to my wife, and we agree—and I—and part of it is I really liked Mike Huckabee, but another part of it was I did have Clinton fatigue at that time. I mean, I'd been covering Whitewater day and night and the Clinton administration, and I just—I was worn out, and I thought this might be interesting serving only the third Republican governor since Reconstruction after Winthrop Rockefeller and Frank White. And come in in the middle of a term like this in July of [19]96. So we already had a trip planned to visit Melissa's mom in Washington, DC, with our son. So he said "Go on and keep that. You don't need to be a part of the transition." So my last day at the *Democrat* was early July. Went to Washington for a couple weeks of vacation. And then literally my first day with Mike Huckabee was the day he took office, which was July the fifteenth of 1996. So another strange curve in the road that I wasn't looking for, that I didn't see coming.

[02:00:00] JD: You know, you mention Mike Huckabee becomes the—only the, you know, the third . . .

RN: Third, yeah.

JD: . . . Republican in over a century and a half, almost, to govern the state. But also he passes up an opportunity to probably be the first US Senator . . .

RN: Absolutely. He . . .

JD: . . . elected Republican . . .

RN: . . . would've been. I mean, he . . .

JD: . . . in the history of the state. Tim Hutchinson, I think, goes on to win the seat.

RN: Yes, he had a—Winston Bryant was the Democratic nominee. Huckabee had a big lead in the polls. Would have won that race, would have gone to the US Senate, gave that up, and Tim Hutchinson jumps in as the Republican and goes to the Senate. That opens up Tim Hutchinson's Third District seat, and Asa Hutchinson is elected to Congress from there. So you can see the dominos falling at that point.

JD: Absolutely.

RN: Yeah.

JD: So what was it like working for a governor who was not by any means an outsider and unknown, but how do you staff in a state that has, with exception of two years with Frank White, not had a Republican governor since ear—what, [19]70?

[02:01:12] RN: It was very, very difficult. And especially coming in like we did with very little warning in the middle of July. We would have, of our senior management team, we would have meetings at the Governor's Mansion at seven a.m. every

morning, Monday through Friday, and just tryin' to—you know, the old cliché of eatin' the elephant one bite at a time. You know, take it a day at a time. What's comin' up today? What do we need to get through? And he really had hired some veteran state legislators. Dick Barclay from Rogers, Arkansas, Joe Yates, who was also from Northwest Arkansas. That's where most of the Republicans were, then. Jim von Gremp, who was from Northwest Arkansas. Those three were all on the senior management team. I came outta Little Rock. Brenda Turner, the chief of staff, came out of Texarkana where Governor Huckabee had been living. And we would all meet together, and Joe Yates—brilliant, brilliant man. Had this ol' country accent. [02:02:16] And I'll never forget. Governor Huckabee was complaining about what one of our agency directors one morning, and Joe Yates would say, "Well, Governor, just fire the hummers." And I remember Governor Huckabee said, "Joe, you don't understand. I'd like to, but I don't have any hummers to replace him with." And that gets to your point. I mean, there was not a deep Republican field of talent there, so we had to deal with what we had, and of course we were also dealing as a Republican governor with a very heavy Democratic majority in both the Arkansas House of Representatives and the Arkansas

Senate at that point.

[02:02:58] JD: So how do you navigate that?

RN: Through a lot of hard work. And Mike Huckabee had what he called a take-it-to-the-people approach to government, and that is the people supported him. He was so good on the stump that we would take him out around the state. And then these legislators would find their phones would start ringin', people sayin', "We want you to support our new governor." Our first legislative session of course was in early [19]97. That session ended on a Saturday. Mike Huckabee had vetoed a number of bills, and they overrode every bill that he had vetoed. We called it Black Saturday, but it was one of the best things politically that ever happened to Mike Huckabee because he had just—of course was serving out the rest of Governor Tucker's term. He had to turn around and run for a full, four-year term in [19]98. And they martyred Mike Huckabee, basically, there. People saw that as very unfair. And we sensed that. And I know those Democrats in the legislature—we looked out in the parking lot, and they were literally high fiving each other after overriding those vetoes. But I remember we were eatin' pizza on that Saturday in the governor's office and kinda smiling 'cause we sensed that they had martyred us politically. And what we're

gonna do is we're gonna take Mike Huckabee next week on our tour all around Arkansas and talk about what these legislators have just done. And that was kinda the start of the [19]98 campaign actually in April of [19]97 as we took him out there after that legislative session ended, all over the state for the next week, talking about what the legislature had just done. And I think Arkansas people do have a basic sense of fairness, and they saw that this was not fair, this was not right. And it helped insure that Mike Huckabee not only would be elected in [19]98, he would be elected overwhelmingly with almost 60 percent of the vote, which to that point was the highest any Republican candidate had ever gotten in Arkansas.

[02:05:15] JD: So that—the lead-up to that election cycle kinda reminds me of almost a Truman-esque sort of running against, you know, the legislative body . . .

RN: Exactly.

JD: . . . in a way that, you know, to—again, to sort of engender this . . .

RN: Yeah.

JD: . . . this connection with the public.

RN: Yeah.

JD: Mike Huckabee seemed to be very good at that.

[02:05:31] RN: Oh, yeah. The speaker of the house at that time was a gentleman from Jonesboro named Bobby Hogue. And Bobby Hogue in his mind—he never entered the race 'cause he couldn't raise the money. But in his mind, he was gonna be the next governor. They called Mike Huckabee the accidental governor. He's only gonna serve out these final two and a half years of Tucker's term, then it's gonna be back to Democrats again. So Hogue though he was gonna be governor. We ran a ad using private political action committee money, but it was great. Somehow, I'm not gonna say who, but we had gotten the phone number, the direct line, on Bobby Hogue's desk. [*Laughs*] And we put it in a TV ad so he couldn't even answer his own phone because it was like, "Call Speaker Hogue and tell him this is wrong." [*Laughs*] And it was the phone that rang right on his desk, and they had to disconnect it and give him a new number at that point. That was one of my favorite moments of that year. [02:06:33] And they had what was called the General Improvement Fund, which when we had come into office, the legislators would get half, the governor would get about half of it. Well, the legislature took the governor's half and spent all of it on its own. And Bobby Hogue got a big bit of that money to build what is now named, I still think, the Bobby Hogue

Equestrian Center on the Arkansas State University campus at Jonesboro. Well, that next week when we sent Governor Huckabee around the state, he would refer to it as Bobby Hogue's Horse Barn. And we'd say, "And Bobby Hogue took your money to build a horse barn in his hometown," and you'd see people [*laughs*] noddin' at that point. I drive by that facility to this day, and I still think of it as the Bobby Hogue Horse Barn. It's the Equestrian Facility if you wanna be proper at ASU.

[02:07:31] JD: [*Laughs*] So how does someone who's held the positions you've held up to that point, you know, largely asking questions to staff and elected officials—in many ways, now you're in the other position. I would imagine you're now exchanging and answering questions.

RN: It was the weirdest thing ever. Because as you know—and again, one of these things that I could write a whole book of if I had the time, and that is that first day on July the fifteenth when Governor Tucker changed his mind at the last moment and said he wasn't gonna resign after all. I mean, we got that phone call at ten minutes till two. Governor Huckabee was supposed to be sworn in as governor at two o'clock. So Governor Tucker leaves the building, all of his staff leaves the building. There's this giant vacuum. And as you know in the news world, there's

nothing worse than a vacuum 'cause rumors fill a vacuum. So I said, "Governor, we need to start doing news briefings." We set up a podium, put a rope up outside the lieutenant governor's office. He had not yet moved down to the governor's office. And I would do part of the briefings. He came out himself and did part of the briefings. But I went out there, and I had members of the *Democrat-Gazette* State Capitol Bureau, who had been working for me—I had been their editor. I had been their supervisor two weeks before—now screaming questions at me. [*Laughs*] You talk about a weird experience. Paul Greenberg wrote a long editorial—I've still got it from the next day—about the weird experience of suddenly asking questions to the guy that he had just seen a few weeks earlier sittin' across the office at a desk. [02:09:21] And so it was a one-day role reversal. It was a big, national story. You know, front page of the *New York Times*. Front page of the *Washington Post*. I wanna say—I know they were new—I wanna say that was the first week that MSNBC was on the air, and that story dominated their coverage the whole day because one of the Whitewater related trials was going on just down the street at the federal court at that time, so you had a lot of national press in for that. And it was kind of a slow day at the federal courthouse, and

suddenly they get word there's a coup d'état goin' on at the state capitol, so they all race down Capitol Avenue. And so all of a sudden, I'm also seeing in the crowd, as I ask questions, people I had worked alongside in Washington during my Washington years in the House and Senate press gallery. [02:10:26] Now this doesn't necessarily speak well of Arkansas, but it's a funny story now, so I'll tell it in retrospect. There's a guy named Tom Squitieri that worked for *USA Today* at the time. And [*laughs*] Tom Squitieri comes over to me—I'll never forget. I knew him from my Washington years. And he says, "Man, I just got back from covering the elections in Haiti, and this is much better." [*Laughs*] So I guess at least for a day there, we had truly hit third-world status 'cause Tom Squitieri told me it was more exciting than covering the elections in Haiti on July 15, 1996 at the Arkansas capitol.

[02:11:09] JD: I see a lot of the things that Huckabee—Huckabee's administration does that could have—I guess to back up a bit, Winthrop Rockefeller, who you've mentioned, who was someone who, you know, seemed to be a point of inspiration for you politically . . .

RN: Absolute—I think he—and again, we can get into this longer later. But I think Winthrop Rockefeller was the most important

single individual in twentieth-century Arkansas. I think he was that important to our state.

JD: Why so?

[02:11:44] RN: I think he helped save us, and we kinda saved him, and so it's a great story at the same time. You know, Rockefeller, as you know, was kinda the black sheep of his generation. His brother Nelson became vice president and ran for president. David, Laurance, John D. the third becomes head of the Chase Manhattan Bank, the World Bank. Winthrop meanwhile's got the paparazzi chasin' him around sayin' he drinks too much and womanizes, had this brief, failed marriage to a starlet named Bobo Sears, has one son, Winn Paul, who of course goes on to become our lieutenant governor and may have become our governor had he not been stricken down by cancer, as his father tragically was at too young an age. But Rockefeller moves here in 1953. I mean, think about it. Arkansas lost more population per capita from 1940 to 1960 than any other state. We went from seven congressional seats at the first of that period to four at the end of that period. That's how fast we were losin' population. I mean, we kinda the laughingstock of the country. [02:12:56] And a member of America's richest family moves here. Rockefeller, for gosh sakes. What a story. And

people who know the story know that Rockefeller had become good friends with a Little Rock insurance agent named Frank Newell during World War II. And in essence Frank Newell says—Frank—"Winn, you need to get as far away from the New York social scene as you possibly can get." Now what was as far away from the Manhattan social scene as you could get in [19]53? Probably a rural, poor state called Arkansas, right? So he moves here, and he falls in love with the place. That's a great story. Orval Faubus makes him the first head of the Arkansas Industrial Development Commission, now AEDC, the Arkansas Economic Development Commission. He has some success bringing industry to Arkansas but falls out with Faubus over the [19]57 Little Rock Central desegregation crisis, runs against Faubus and loses in [19]64 but wins in [19]66, wins again in [19]68. You know, they had run Justice Jim Johnson, a segregationist, against him in [19]66 and lost. And they had run Marion Crank, a member of the so-called old guard, against him in [19]68 and lost. And I think at that point, our state's dominant party, the Democratic Party, woke up and said, "We've gotta modernize. We've gotta change." So without a Winthrop Rockefeller forcing that party to change, a Dale Bumpers would've never come along, a David Pryor would've never come

along, a Bill Clinton may have never come along. So it took a Republican, Rockefeller, to make those progressive Democrats possible, and in my mind—that's a long answer, but why Rockefeller in my mind's the most important figure in twentieth-century Arkansas history.

[02:14:54] JD: And yet as impactful as he is, he fails to really get a lot of electoral or legislative success, is that right?

RN: Exactly. Again, dealing like we did in the Huckabee administration with a heavily Democratic legislature. But what—and this is not to take anything away from Governor/Senator Bumpers—but what Bumpers basically did when he came in was take a lot of that Rockefeller agenda and pass the Rockefeller agenda. He did a lot of great things on his own. Like I said, if I had to rank—I have told you there were ten governors in my lifetime. If I had to rank those governors, I probably would—I would have Rockefeller first, I would have Bumpers second, and probably Huckabee third on that list. But yeah. He didn't have a lot of success, but he set the stage, and he changed the discussion in this state. It—let's never forget that Winthrop Rockefeller was the first governor to bring really high-level African Americans into his administration. And he just totally changed the conversation. You know, we're taping this the—you

know, right after the fifty-fifth anniversary of Martin Luther King's assassination. The only Southern governor who did an event with civil-rights leaders in the wake of that assassination—and I look back, and I was a kid of course, but I read Arkansas history, and I read that it was an Arkansas governor that was the only Southern governor to do that, and it makes me proud as an Arkansan.

[02:16:44] JD: Did it ever come up that—not to take anything away from Frank White and his two years—his one two-year term there . . .

RN: Yeah, between the—Clinton's years. Yeah.

JD: You know, not to take away from—'cause that was quite an upset victory and . . .

RN: Right.

JD: . . . again, Republicans were not faring well in the state, and he wins a statewide race. But were there any comparisons of Huckabee and Rockefeller in that they both end up in these positions—and they're both initially seen, I would think, as almost flukes.

RN: [*Laughs*] Uh-huh.

JD: And yet Huckabee navigates the legislature in a way that Rockefeller never was able to.

RN: Yeah. Huckabee—Mike Huckabee—amazing politician and a real ability to bring legislators in, to sit them down and, through his speaking abilities, his reasoning abilities—I watched it time after time—win people over. And so yeah, Mike Huckabee had some really good legislative sessions without ever having a Republican majority in either house for ten and half years. I mean, he's not the accidental governor. The Democrats thought he was only gonna be around two and half years. He ends up bein' around ten and a half, the third-longest-serving governor behind Faubus and Clinton in Arkansas history. And he did have a lot of legislative success. And again, I think that a lot of that comes from just his personal communications ability to communicate one-on-one with those legislators and bring 'em aboard.

[02:18:32] JD: One thing you've touched on already is that sports and politics are similar, and there's winners and losers. And much like a season, I would imagine a term in office or a legislative session has its own wins and losses. Just comes to mind—and what is something that you're particularly proud of in your time working for the Huckabee administration? Per—you know, your personal professional experience there.

[02:18:59] RN: You know, I can think of a couple. Personally, one when I went and told him I was very, very proud of him is—my

wife—now she's not an immigrant. She's born and raised in Texas. Her family goes back generations in Texas. But she's Mexican American. Garcia is her middle name. And I watched Mike Huckabee, a Republican, stand with Joyce Elliott, the most liberal, at the time, member of the Arkansas legislature. And we hear a lot about the Dreamers now, but that was early on in that debate on Arkansas Academic Challenge Scholarships. And we said, "You know, a lot of these kids were raised here in Arkansas from the first grade on, and they need to be eligible for those scholarships after the twelfth grade if they've succeeded whether their parents came here legally or not." And I watched a Republican governor say that and believe that, and that made me—I member goin' to him personally and sayin', "I'm—I've never been more proud of a stand you've made." [02:20:11] Another big-picture thing, of course, is right after he was reelected to his final four-year term in November of 2002, the Arkansas Supreme Court came down with the so-called Lakeview ruling, which ruled our entire system of funding public education to be unconstitutional. They said it was inadequate and inequitable were the two key words. Rather than demagoguing, beating on, you know, liberal judges like he could have, Mike Huckabee said, "All right, we're gonna tackle this program

and"—answering that Lakeview ruling and improving public schools dominated his final four years in office day and night, and I think that's one of the things that—why he will go down in history as one of our better governors because he helped lead the Arkansas legislature to do the right thing in the wake of the Lakeview ruling.

JD: With the inadequacy—funding formula and . . .

RN: Exactly. I mean, we had to rai . . .

JD: . . . school consolidation.

RN: . . . we had to consolidate schools, we had to raise taxes, the kind of things you don't expect a Republican to have to do. But we had a supreme court gun to our heads, so to speak, and had to answer, and he was up to the task those next four years in doing that.

[02:21:28] JD: I'm just hearing this from you: It sounds like you're quite proud of your time working with him.

RN: Very proud. I wouldn't—if that had not been a fulfilling experience, I wouldn't've stayed with him as long as I did. And had I not gotten a presidential appointment, I think I probably would have been there, along with Brenda Turner who was there every day, the chief of staff, I think I would've been there from the day we opened the door to the day we closed the door. He

was governor for ten and a half years. I was with him for more than nine of those years. [02:21:59] Funny little side note to that is kinda late in my tenure there, like ni—years seven, eight, and nine, the National Governor's Association was always inviting me to these events to speak to other communications directors, governor's press people, and so forth. And I asked 'em once—I said, "Why are you using me? Don't you have some other people? I mean, I like it you fly me to pretty places, you know, resorts around the country where you're havin' these meetings and pay for it, so that's nice. But feel free to use somebody else." They said, "Well, don't you know you're by far the senior governor's communications person in the country? Because of the demands of those jobs, the burnout rate is generally two to three years is all anybody can take it." [*Laughs*] And I remember sayin', "Well, that shows you how stupid I am. I've been burned out for six years, I guess, and I'm too dumb to even realize it, 'cause I've been at it nine years now."

JD: Well, it—and I would . . .

RN: It was—and it was pretty much 24/7, seven days a week, but like I said, I got to do it for more than nine years.

JD: And you just read my mind because my next questions was—it's

apparent to me that you really enjoyed those years. But you also have a family.

RN: Yeah.

JD: And so how . . .

RN: And it was a young family at that time, yeah.

JD: How do you do that? How—lookin' back, how did you . . .

[02:23:25] RN: It was tough. I—well, I have a saint for a wife, for one thing, 'cause I was gone a lot. The phone was always ringing. My older son used to love to answer the phone. He was born in [19]93, so he would've been three years old when I took that office—went to work in that office. He would've been thirteen when I left. So his formative years, you know, I worked in the governor's office. That's all he knew during those years. And again, there was always something, you know, a media story breaking or whatever. So the governor was calling the house personally more often than not at night. And Austin, my son, loved to answer the phone. He'd rush every time the phone rang to answer it. [02:24:12] And this happened one day. He was just talking on and on, and Governor Huckabee was so nice. He would ask Austin how his school day was, how this went, how that went. And Austin was just talkin' away. And I said, "Austin, who are you talkin' to?" And he said, "The governor."

[*Laughter*] And after the phone call, I told him—I said, "You know, one of these days, you're gonna grow up and realize you had a very unusual childhood. 'Cause most kindergarten kids in Little Rock aren't speaking on the phone [*laughs*] with the governor of the state every night." But he was. It was just normal for him, you know. "It's the governor."

JD: So . . .

RN: But he—yeah, those were the formative years. Maybe that's why they both became so interested in governor—government and law and what have you at this point.

[02:25:03] JD: So you leave the Huckabee administration with an appointment to the Delta Federal Regional Authority as federal co-chairman. And it's a new—newer agency.

RN: Right.

JD: And . . .

RN: It was one of the last . . .

JD: . . . George W. Bush appoints you.

RN: . . . bills that Bill Clinton signed. Signed it late in 2000 right before he left office. So it really didn't get up and running until George W. Bush had taken office. I'm sitting in the governor's office one day, and I get a phone call from a friend of mine in Mississippi. You know, one thing about working in governor's

office, you get to know political people from other states, especially from your party. You know surrounding states pretty well. And I'd made some friends from other Southern states, and this friend called me and said, "Is Governor Huckabee pushing anybody for these federal appointments to the DRA?" And I said, "I'm not aware of it. I'll check with him." And they said, "Well, we've got this guy named Pete Johnson in Clarksdale, Mississippi, that really wants the job. He's our former state auditor. He ran for governor, and we want you to come meet him." So I drove over to Clarksdale, Mississippi, one day, remember meetin' Pete Johnson in his office. And the way DRA is set up, it's a federal-state partnership. So the president makes an appointment, the eight governors are on the board. They elect a state co-chairman, and then each of the eight governors appoints what's called an alternate that really does his work on the board. So Mike Huckabee is elected the first state co-chairman of DRA. I'm his alternate, so I'm doin' the day-to-day work on this. I feel like I kinda gave birth—one of the people that gave birth to the office 'cause we started it on Pete Johnson's cell phone, basically, before we had an office or anything. [02:27:11] And the irony in this is going back to my Washington years. Dale Bumpers had sponsored something

called the Lower Mississippi Development Act. And it was to do a study of the Delta region and make recommendations back in the late [19]80s. I covered that story a lot. Went to hearings on it. And one of the things we did—because one of the recommendations was form a regional commission along the lines of the Appalachian Regional Commission, which had been around since the [19]60s, since LBJ's Great Society in the [19]60s in Appalachia to do the same type of work against rural poverty in the Delta. So I went with Kevin Smith, who was later a state senator, later the mayor of Helena, who was then on Dale Bumpers' staff—we went all over West Virginia and Eastern Kentucky for a week, and I did a series of stories, on "Here's what ARC does, and if we had a Delta Commission, this is the kind of work it would done—it would do." Now I'd done that back in [19]88. [02:28:22] So here we are a dozen years later. One of those strange things in life, again. And sure enough, the thing that had been recommended by this commission back in the [19]80s has happened, the DRA, and I'm helping get it up and running. And as the alternate for the state co-chairman, I am hosting a meeting of our board in 2004 at the Red Apple Inn outside of Heber Springs. And Pete says—and I had never—I'll admit the bill—you know, it's one of those long, federal bills.

And Pete say, "Look, they're—actually the president gets two appointments. And you know, I don't think the Bush administration," he said, "even realized they got a second appoint 'cause they never filled the second slot in their first term. But they're gonna fill it in their second term. And so if you know anybody in your state that might be interested, let me know." Well, I go back to Little Rock, go in to see Mike Huckabee. He's term limited. So I know he's gonna be leaving office at the end of 2006. And I said, "I'd be interested." So he said, "Well, I'll certainly make a call on your behalf," and long story short, I ended up with the second presidential appointment. Pete was still there because there were two of us, so I ended up with that second presidential appointment and did it during Bush's second term, George W. Bush's second term. [02:30:06] So I had studied, you know, the Appalachian Regional Commission back in the [19]80s, and then I had been the alternate for the sate co-chairman as we were up and running, and then I was the alternate federal co-chairman. So did it from both the state level and federal. And it was often frustrating, but in the end very fulfilling work because you felt like you were at least helping some in some of the poorest areas of America.

[02:30:32] JD: So what did the job entail?

RN: Basically, you did community and economic development in parts of eight states, Arkansas and seven other states. We had a full-time staff. They're civil service. They get to stay. Pete and I were out when Obama came in 'cause we were political appointees. But as one of the presidential appointees, basically you're the face, you're the spokesman. So of course, this was right up my alley. I got to drive around eight states and expand my repertoire of country restaurants, you know, discover all kinds of new places, which was great. I told people it was like the federal government was paying me to get a Ph.D. in Deltaology. You're learning more and more about the Delta. [02:31:17] But we were kinda the face of the organization. We had a chief operating officer that ran the day-to-day office in Clarksdale. Had an office in Little Rock, a small office where I had one assistant at the time. But I was on the road, again, a great deal, giving a lot of speeches and attending a lot of meetings with a lot of good people in rural America that were tryin' to help out their areas. But we went all the way from southern Illinois to Western Kentucky, western Tennessee, bootheel Missouri, large parts of Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi, and then even the black belt of Alabama was tacked

on as part of our region. So I went all the way east to Tuskegee, Alabama.

JD: And you—again, I'm assuming you had a home office in Clarksdale.

RN: I did. I did.

JD: And then did you work outta Little Rock too?

[02:32:05] RN: We had the old federal courts. With the loss in population in the Delta, they had ended up moving all of those offices to Oxford, but they had this great space on the top floor of the federal building in Clarksdale. And so I continued to live in Little Rock. You know, our boys were in school. We weren't gonna up and move at that point. And I could live anywhere I wanted in the region, which was great. But again, I averaged about two nights a week in Clarksdale, so I actually had a larger office over there than I had in Little Rock. But mainly my office was my GMC Envoy that [*laughs*] I drove in those day 'cause I was all over the region, and goin' to these rural towns it was a lot easier to drive than fly, so I was usually driving all over the region. Thank goodness for XM Radio. [*JD laughs*] I had satellite radio to keep me company on all those long drives.

[02:33:00] JD: And before then, really because your time in the Huckabee administration—I know that was something that you

all were very keen on was the Delta, the Arkansas Delta. Then your time with the DRA and really since, you've been a consistent champion of the Arkansas Delta, an advocate for the Arkansas Delta. What is it about the Delta in Arkansas that matters to you?

RN: You know, and I'm basically—you've got me going back and giving my old DRA speech at this point, but we are becoming rapidly urbanized as a state. We still think of ourselves as a rural state, and in many ways we are compared to most states. But consider the fact that from 2010 to 2020, we gained population as a state, but only twenty-two counties gained population. Fifty-three counties lost population. So we're becoming urbanized. They're settling here in Northwest Arkansas, Central Arkansas, and the Jonesboro-Paragould area. Our only three real multicounty growth areas. The rest are losing population. But what I remind people of is let's never forget that agriculture remains the largest segment of the Arkansas economy. Our farmers are so good at what they do. We have some of the best row-crop farmers in the world in Arkansas—that it takes very little manpower these days. So yes, the Delta is losing population, but that land is worth more than it's ever been worth. And so it is absolutely vital to the Arkansas

economy that agriculture in the Delta do well. And I have to remind urban audiences, "Before you just start shakin' your head and say, 'Poor old Delta,' you better hope the Delta does well 'cause it's the largest agriculture—which includes, obviously, lots of other parts of the state, but that's the breadbasket for row-crop agriculture—is the largest segment of the Arkansas economy to this day."

[02:35:06] JD: The DRA strikes me as another really hard job with very long hours. So how throughout your career—I mean, going back before college, you're working two full-time jobs while you're in college, to the DRA where your office, as you said, is essentially an SUV, runnin' all over . . .

RN: Yeah.

JD: . . . almost half the—well more than half a dozen states. How do you get that energy? I mean, what is it about—are you inspired, are you sort of mission driven? Are you just energetic anyway? What is it about . . .

RN: I like it. It's fun, and I—and it's fulfilling. I guess one reason I didn't take over ownership of my dad's store is I spent those summers in the basement packing boxes full of football helmets and balls and so forth, and you know, it paid me a little bit of money I needed, but it wasn't that fulfilling to me. And for

whatever reason, business was—I probably wouldn't've been that good at it. I've never been that good at [*laughs*] making money. I know how to give it away [*JD laughs*], but never that good at making it. But all of the work I have done, whether in politics, whether in journalism, it's been fulfilling to me. I love to speak, I love to write, I love to travel, I love to meet interesting people, talk to them, get to know them. So the fact that it's fulfilling, the fact that it's fun, I think that has kept me going. I have been very fortunate in that respect. [02:36:40] You know, I look back at some things. I remember part of one summer I spent pulling off roofing on a roof [*laughs*] in the summer with one of my high-school friends. Now that kinda job would be real work, and I gotta tell you I have the utmost respect for people who work with their hands. I mean, thank God for the mechanic that works on my car. Thank God for the HVAC man that comes to my house. Thank God for the exterminator that comes and keeps the termites from eating up 'cause I don't know what I'm doing on any of that. And they're specialists, and they take pride in their work, and I've got good ones, and I have the utmost respect with 'em. I'm terrible with my hands. I can type. I can type real fast. But I can't do much. My wife's—I'm lucky that she lets me change a light bulb.

I'm really uncoordinated. So thank God—I have the greatest respect for people who work with their hands, for people who work in industry and manufacturing, skilled crafts—we need to pay those people more. We need to make sure they're worth more to society. That's not what I do. It's not what I can do, it's not what I've ever wanted to do. And I'm real lucky that for the most part in my career I've been able to do things that I actually enjoy at the same time. So you don't really notice the hours when you're havin' fun. Now when you're on that roof pullin' off black tiles, you are noticing the clock, and it's moving awfully slowly. At least it did for me. But doin' this kind of stuff, no. Clock moves real quickly then. And it's fun.

[02:38:25] JD: That might be a good time to take a break.

RN: That's fine with me.

JD: Talkin' about the clock movin' . . .

RN: Yeah. Okay.

JD: . . . it's already four o'clock.

RN: All right. [*JD laughs*] All right. Good. Well, I'm enjoyin' it still.

[End of interview 02:38:33]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]