

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

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Arkansas Memories

Rex Nelson

Interviewed by John C. Davis

April 6, 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

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John C. Davis interviewed Rex Nelson on April 6, 2023, in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

[00:00:00]

John Davis: Here with me after a break—uh—again, is Rex Nelson. It's now April 6, 2023 at the Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History in our Story Vault—um—on the—uh—square location. Um—we left off talking about your—um—presidential appointment to the DRA, and we've covered a lot of ground yesterday in regards to your—your background in—in journalism.

RN: Mm-hmm.

JD: We've talked a little bit about—about family—uh—and childhood and Arkadelphia and growin' up in small-town Arkansas, attending Ouachita Baptist University and what that's meant to you and your family. Uh—before we move forward—uh—there were a few things we wanted to fill in.

RN: Mm-hmm.

JD: Uh—so we've talked a little bit about the—um—your—your—your involvement in Governor Mike Huckabee's gubernatorial—uh—tenure. Um—one thing we haven't talked about in great detail but I would like us to explore is Governor Huckabee's first day . . .

Rex Nelson: Yeah.

JD: . . . as governor. Uh—and I know you have some key insights in that. Would you—would you share those?

[00:01:06] RN: I tell you, there's a whole book somewhere—I don't have time to write it—but in that day. It was an amazing day. Um—Governor Tucker, of course, had said he would resign as governor on July 15, so all of the ceremony was—um—set for the swearing in of Mike Huckabee as he moved up automatically from lieutenant governor to governor. Uh—I had literally flown back the day before from Washington, DC. So it was—I wasn't involved in the transition. It was literally my first day of work, and we didn't know we would be the biggest news [*laughs*] story in the nation that day. Nobody could see that coming.

[00:01:46] The day started well. We had a—um—uh—religious service to start the day that morning. Uh—I rode with the—uh—incoming governor, at that point Lieutenant Governor Huckabee—um—to the service—uh—set behind his family at the service. It all went well. Uh—we went, then, to the capitol, and we practiced what was going to be a fifteen-minute address to the state that we had scheduled for five fifteen [*clears throat*]—excuse me—that afternoon. Five fifteen that afternoon, he was—uh—uh—would've been sworn in at two o'clock, and—uh—

we had a prepared address. We had it on a teleprompter. We had it timed to the second for five fifteen so he'd be out by five thirty in the network newscast. But basically all the network affiliates in the state had agreed to run this. A message from the new governor. So I remember we practiced that extensively. They brought lunch into the lieutenant governor's office. And we were all set for the delegation of House and Senators, the formal delegation that always walks a new governor down to the House chamber to be sworn in by the chief justice of the supreme court. Ah—we were ready for that when the phone rang at ten till two. And I've—um—I've got a whole box at home where I saved everything from that day, a lot of still photos people had given me, some behind-the-scenes video. Um—I've—I've got a notepad with all my notes on it, so I know it was ten to two. And—uh—the governor's secretary, Dawn Cook, said—uh—"Governor, it is Governor Tucker calling you." And we thought he was calling to say good luck and—uh—best of luck. [00:03:49] And I was listening to Mike Huckabee—obviously just his side of the phone call, but immediately you could tell something was wrong. And he points at the phone, and he says, "He's not"—he mouths, "He's not resigning." And so I moved up and—and started kinda taking notes as he talked,

and he said, "Governor Tucker, I don't think this is a good idea. Um—you know, we have—people have moved their families to Little Rock to work for me. We're all set." Um—what had happened is that Governor Tucker—uh—had thought that the jury pool was tainted—uh—when he was convicted in federal court and thought he—that would be overturned on appeal. It never was. But that was his thinking at that point. So what he said is, "I will give up the powers of the governorship, but I'm gonna remain as governor. You can exercise the powers." And we're sayin', "No, that—that won't work." And—ah—he said, "Well—uh—let me talk to somebody, and I will call you back."

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:05:00] RN: So we wait for him to call back. The clock has now gone past two o'clock. The governor's supposed to be in the House chamber. It's getting restless down there, we hear, as people are saying, "Man, we got a new Clinton on our hands." You know, he was always late, Bill Clinton. Mike Huckabee's late for his own swearing in. They had no idea. Governor Tucker made a second phone call that was very short here and said, "I'm not changing my mind. I'm stayin' as governor." And then he left the capitol. There's some dramatic tape of that, of people screaming at him as he left the capitol. His whole staff left the

capitol. And so there's nobody really to answer questions on the part of the governor's office. So I said, "Governor, we're gonna at least have to provide what we know, some information of what we know." And so we set up a rope line in front of the lieutenant governor's office in the hall there at the state capitol, have a podium brought over, set it up. I go over and say, "We're gonna offer you briefings as much as we can." Mike Huckabee comes out, gives briefings. "Here's what we know. Here's what we're doing." We get three letters over the course of that day. The first letter is typed. It's on Governor's Office stationery, and it's Governor Jim Guy Tucker officially informing us that he is not resigning, he is giving up the powers of the office for the time being until his conviction is overturned. Pending appeal, he's givin' up the powers, but he's not resigning from office. Mike Huckabee comes out and says, "That is unacceptable. That is totally unacceptable. He said he was resigning today. He needs to resign unconditionally."

[00:07:01] In the interim, we get the Democratic—remember Arkansas had a heavily Democratic legislature at that time—the Democratic speaker of the house, Bobby Hogue, and the senate president pro tem. And we get them to—Stanley Russ from Conway is senate president pro tem. We get them to come to

the lieutenant governor's office. And in an old vault there, there was a little private office. And Lieutenant Governor Huckabee and the two of them go in there and meet, and what he gets them to agree to—'cause these two Democratic leaders realize, you know, they're martyring Mike Huckabee, and it's gonna be the worst thing that has ever happened to the Democratic Party in our careers, certainly. And so they agree that we will call a special session of the legislature, and we will impeach Jim Guy Tucker. So we go out, we announce that we are going to do this. [00:08:17] Meanwhile, we're nearing five fifteen. And there is no way to craft a new address. Our new director of media operations was a guy named Gary Underwood. When Mike Huckabee was a pastor at Beech Street Baptist Church in Texarkana, he had started a television station, and Gary ran that station. And one of the things that they did live every week was the Sunday morning service. And Gary would have a clock that counted backwards. Fifteen, fourteen fifty-nine, on down. And Mike Huckabee says, "Gary, just put fifteen minutes and do the backward clock on there." So I think in one of the most important addresses in modern Arkansas history—most people don't realize 'cause he was so good at it, Mike Huckabee did that extemporaneously. The only thing he was looking at is that

clock counting down to zero. And he told the people of Arkansas at that point that he would be calling a special session 'cause he has the power, remember, of the governor's office. He's not the governor, but he's got the power. So a governor can call a special session. And that the leadership in both the house and senate has agreed that we will impeach Jim Guy Tucker. We announced that to the state. Then we go back out to that podium outside the office shortly after five thirty, and we announce that here's what we're doing, we think the special session can begin in two or three days, we're gonna do this very quickly, when all of a sudden I see this letter, this envelope coming, and it is passed to me. And I look, and this envelope is not on the formal Governor's Office stationery. Somebody had just put "Office of the Governor" on a piece of white paper. And letter number two informs us, "I rescind my earlier giving up the powers of governor officially—effective immediately." Think about it. A lieutenant governor cannot call a special session. So Tucker claims to have taken back the powers of the office. And at that point, where are we? [00:11:09] Real constitutional crisis. The legal advisor to the Huckabee transition had been a Democrat, Jack Holt, former chief justice who just recently passed away, of the Arkansas Supreme Court. I get this letter,

and I see it, and I literally have to stop up and—step up as Mike Huckabee is doing this briefing, and say, "We've got a new development. We've gotta stop. We need to go back inside." And so we go back inside for another meeting, and Judge Holt, I remember very vividly, says, "In that first letter, Tucker said he was giving up the powers of office. And you need to go back out and say you simply do not recognize this second letter, that the first letter was on formal stationery. It still stands. You don't recognize this second letter." And so we [*laughs*] go back out for another briefing. And there is a reporter from KARN AM radio, which is a news talk station at the time in Little Rock, named Michael Hibblen, who went on to a long career at the NPR affiliate in Little Rock, KUAR, and is now at Arkansas PBS. And I'll never forget. Michael's talking on a cell phone. Cell phones were big, of course, in [*laughs*] 1996. Not small like they are now. We didn't have smart phones, but we had great big cell phones with antennas that come out of 'em, so it was pretty obvious. And Michael's kneeling in front of the podium, and I'm thinkin', "Why is this guy talking on the phone in front of him?" [00:12:56] And Michael interrupts and says, "Lieutenant Governor Huckabee, excuse me, but my newsroom informs me that they just got a call from Max Parker," who was Governor

Tucker's press secretary, "and she informed them that Governor Tucker has resigned unconditionally effective immediately." So we stop another briefing, just as we had when letter number two had arrived. We go back inside, and it is at that point that Sharon Priest, who was the Secretary of State at that time, delivers letter number three. This one is hand written. So three different styles: Typed on Governor's Office stationery, one that was just made up on a computer, typed, and then a hand-written letter saying, "I resign effective immediately. Jim Guy Tucker." And I remember Mike Huckabee saying, "Let's get me sworn in as quickly as we can before he changes his mind again." And somebody said, "We can't find the chief justice. We don't know where he's gone." And I remember very clearly Mike Huckabee saying, "Any judge can swear me in. I don't care if it's the Little Rock traffic court judge. Let's get it done." Well, they did find the chief justice, so we went up to the chamber, and shortly after seven o'clock, what was supposed to be a two o'clock swearing in took place shortly after seven o'clock that night. And a five-hour version of the Brooks-Baxter war with no shooting, thankfully, came to an end. Although it was a dangerous afternoon in that the—Little Rock television stations just went to wall-to-wall coverage of this. And so people were

watching TV, and there were a lot of Huckabee supporters who were very angry. So the crowd continued to grow at the capitol as the day went on. The halls were just packed with people. And when we would do those briefings, there were not only the reporters up front, there were hundreds of people standing behind. [00:15:11] It was July 15. It was a hot, humid day. I can remember just—I had sweated all the way through my suit. And I can remember thinking, "You've got this crisis going on, you've got the media there, you've got people coming into the capitol mad. It's hot, everybody's sweating." And I can remember thinking at one point, "This is like a scene out of, you know, All the King's Men. This is like something out of the Huey Long era in Louisiana almost." Almost a Southern gothic feel to it what was going on. And luckily we got that settled. I remember my wife calling at one point in tears and saying "Are you going to have a job tomorrow?" and I said, "I have no idea. [Laughs] This may be a one-day deal if Jim Guy Tucker is not going to resign." But of course, over the course of three letters, he finally did, and that was solved. But it was quite a historic five hours in twentieth-century Arkansas history.

[00:16:24] JD: So how do you advise then-Governor Huckabee for the first full day? I mean, you've had this crisis, you've had all

this—I mean, there must've been a plan and a transition, but some elements of it must've been rattled a bit to say the least.

RN: Oh, absolutely. And . . .

JD: So the next day, how do you regroup, and do you remember that next day and sort of how you were feeling and trying to have a little bit of normality . . .

RN: Yeah.

JD: . . . at the beginning of his tenure as governor.

RN: I tell you, Mike Huckabee had a lot of high moments during his ten and a half years as governor, but I think that first day was his best day. Because again, extemporaneously, he came on at five fifteen, he calmed the state down at a time when people were very upset. And like I said, people were mad when they were comin' to the capitol, so that was a tinderbox, let me tell you. That was a volatile situation. [00:17:14] In fact, at one point—this is funny in retrospect. At the time it wasn't so funny, but one of the people on the governor's security detail that's assigned to the governor, came up to me at one point—Mark Allen, who's since retired from the state police—and said, "Who are we working for? [*Laughs*] Like are we workin' for Jim Guy Tucker or Mike Huckabee?" And I can remember sayin', "Mark, if you're asking me, we're workin'—the guys with the guns are

workin' for us. [JD laughs] Yeah, if you're askin' for my advice, you're workin' for us." But it was a crazy, confused five hours. And then of course, you're coming in in the middle of a term, so that's unusual. And I had mentioned earlier, we were doin' those seven a.m. meetings five days a week, and we started those the very next morning, and it was basically—I'm pullin' out that cliché again, but you know, eating the elephant one bite at a time. It was basically how do we get through today? And our senior management team would gather early in the morning out at the state capitol and get around a table and say, "What are the big issues we're facing today, and how do we make it through it?" And those—gosh the session didn't start till—legislative session didn't start till January. But those first six months, I've gotta tell you, with those early-morning meetings every morning, those first six months are almost a blur in my mind. 'Cause it was so intense every day just to get things up and running and get ready for that first session.

[00:18:59] JD: And, Rex, you were with the governor and his—you were a key part of his advisory group for most of his ten plus years. And we talked a little bit about, yesterday, about how there were moments where you were particularly proud of Governor Huckabee and the administration. And I know it's hard

for you to talk about yourself sometimes. Is there something that—is there a maybe a key policy, something where you felt like you played an integral role in that you're particularly proud of?

RN: You know, I was the liaison—I did policy and communications, but I was the liaison to all of the media. And I think most any elected official is going to be somewhat distrustful of the media. And I've gotta tell you, I always thought that I was probably playing my role if both the governor and the media were both a little mad at me. I, you know, always wanted to keep my credibility, and you never keep your credibility if you lie to the media. So what I would always tell them, and I think since I had come from the media, I'd been the political editor of the largest newspaper in the state, so since I was in essence one of them, I think they understood when I told them, "I can't always tell you all you wanna know. There are times when I have to say, you know, 'That's still being worked on. We can't talk about that.' But I will never knowingly lie to you. Now if I give you a wrong fact or figure by mistake and I figure out later it's wrong, I'm gonna get back with you quickly and correct that." And I think that's how I maintained credibility. So there was that balancing act between the public's need to know, transparency, what the

governor wanted, and like I said, I think it—at times they were both mad at me. [00:21:06] I think if there were any advantage for me, it was the fact that I had come—been hired on a professional basis, not as someone who was a key supporter who had worked on the campaign. I covered the campaigns of Mike Huckabee, the [19]92 loss to Dale Bumpers for the senate, the special election in [19]93 when he beat Nate Coulter to become lieutenant governor, [19]94 when he won a full, four-year term as lieutenant governor, [19]96 when he was running for the senate before dropping out of those races. I had covered all of those. I was the editor supervising the statewide paper's coverage of those races. So I was hired as a professional. And I don't say this to pat myself on the back, but I had had a very good and rich career before I went to the governor's office. I knew I would be fine after I left the governor's office, and I think that made me—as opposed to somebody who had worked or volunteered or worked full time on the campaign, had gone into the governor's office, and probably weren't comfortable, sometimes, to speak the truth. And the reason I stayed with Mike Huckabee as long as I did is because he always listened. And he didn't always agree, but he did always listen, and I could not ask for any more. [00:22:38]

And I—my opinion was asked for. It ge—I gave it. It wasn't always welcome. It [*laughs*] wasn't always what he wanted to hear, but I thought as a former reporter, I could tell him what I was hearing out there, what I thought people were thinking, what I thought would be on the front page the next day and how it would look to voters, on and on. And he did listen to that. So that was, I think, my main role as that liaison between, you know, the media, nonprofit organizations, all these business associations, people that knew they could trust me and would come to them. And then to deliver messages to the governor, some of which he really didn't want to hear, but he needed to hear. And he was always willing to listen. Now I would also tell people, because I would get asked during those years—'cause I'd been a reporter so, you know, I used to be on Arkansas Week every week se—tellin' what I thought, so people'd say, "Well, what do you think?" And I would always use the line, "What I think ceased to matter on July 15 of [19]96." I tell Mike Huckabee what I think in private. But once that decision was made, that was the position of the governor's office, and my job at that point was to go out and defend that position, and what I personally thought really didn't matter at that point. My job was to defend the decision the governor had made.

[00:24:16] JD: One thing we discussed also yesterday was your time as bureau chief in DC for the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette covering, obviously, President Clinton at the time . . .

RN: Yeah.

JD: . . . but also the congressional delegation . . .

RN: Right.

JD: . . . including Senators Pryor and Bumpers and . . .

RN: You know, this was the late [19]80s, so it was pre-President Clinton. But we called him the seventh member of our congressional delegation 'cause he already had national ambitions, and I saw him more than I did, I think, some [*laughs*] members of our delegation. He was always in Washington, and in fact, once we thought he was gonna run for president in [19]88, any time he was on the East Coast, and I'm talkin' from New Hampshire down to Florida, I covered him. I would fly out of Washington and cover him at events all up and down the East Coast. So you know, I was—like you said, mainly the congressional delegation, but I was kinda their East Coast person. So I would cover things. Which was fun 'cause it broke it up. I covered—you're gonna laugh—I covered the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City three straight years 'cause I was close and I could drive over. And it was a nice change of

pace from covering Congress. I covered Arkansas State at Delaware in a—back they were a what's now called FCS with playoffs team in a national playoff game, for instance. So I covered a football game. I covered Washington Redskins training camp one year when Congress was in its August recess 'cause there were a lot of Arkansans associated with the Redskins at that point, so that broke it up and allowed me to cover stuff all up and down the East Coast.

[00:25:58] JD: Well, another unique story is a state that is as small as ours at one point really had two people with relatively well-known ambitions for the White House.

RN: Yeah.

JD: It had, of course, Governor Clinton.

RN: Yep.

JD: But you also had Senator Dale Bumpers.

[00:26:16] RN: Before that, we thought Dale Bumpers was gonna run. I can remember he was giving, at Columbia University in New York, what was billed as a major foreign-policy address. Now why do you give a major foreign-policy address at Columbia if you aren't gonna run for president, right? And I took the train up, I remember. I love trains, and the East Coast—it's—you know, they're often enough that it's a viable means of

transportation. And his press secretary at the time named Matt James—I took the train up with Matt to cover that. And so we were convinced that Dale Bumpers was gonna run for president. I'd already talked to my editor, John Robert Starr, who said, "We're gonna put you on the campaign full time," so I was excited. I was still in my twenties, and I was gonna be one of the boys on the bus, you know, as the campaign coverage was known. [00:27:16] And so what happened in the spring of [19]87 as candidates were starting to line up for [19]88, late one Friday afternoon, Dale Bumpers was on his way out of the office and puts down a handwritten note on Matt James, his press secretary's desk that says, "I have decided not to seek the Democratic presidential nomination." It was in March of 1987. Matt was an actor. It was opening night of a play he was in in a community theater production, so he was frantic, but he gets this out. Well, long story short, John Robert Starr, my editor, was in a seminar at an institution called the American Press Institute, API, across the river in Western Virginia. Starr loved Mexican food, and he knew that I knew restaurants and said, "Do you know a good Mexican place over in Northern Virginia?" And I said, "As a matter of fact, I do." And he said, "Well, pick me up about five o'clock Friday afternoon. I'll buy you dinner."

[00:28:25] So no cell phones at that time. And so I go pick up Starr. After we have dinner, there's a group of my friends who were Arkansas state bank examiners. They'd been sent to Washington for several weeks to do training, and they had an apartment out in Northern Virginia. And why I remember it was March is I went over there, and I started watching the NCAA basketball tournament with them. They brought in pizza. I'd already had Mexican food, but I ate pizza. Full, sleepy, fall asleep on the couch. Well, I get up the next morning, and I go back to my place on Capitol Hill. And I—again, 1987. We got an old-fashion answering machine. The light's blinking, and I've got message after message from that previous evening. "Rex, call the newsroom." "Rex, where are you? We need you." "Rex, call us as soon as possible." I think, "Well, whatever happened, it's too late now. It's Saturday." So I had picked up my—I got the *Washington Post*. I—a subscription. I'd picked up my *Post*, and I threw it on the bed. Didn't even open the paper. Went and took a shower, and I'm getting out of the shower, and I had two phones. I worked outta where I lived. So I had a *Democrat* phone and a personal phone. The *Democrat* phone rings on a Saturday morning. And I answer, and it was our Sunday editor, a guy named Don Johnson. And Don says, "Rex, are you gonna

do a follow-up story?" And I said, "A follow on what?" [Laughs] I was so clueless. And he says, "You're kiddin'." I said, "No," and he says, "Bumpers announced last night that he's not gonna run for president." I thought, "Oh my gosh, what am I gonna do?" And he said, "Well, we did the story outta Little Rock. Meredith Oakley wrote the story. Her byline's on it. It's all the way across the top of the front page. We couldn't find you." And I said, "Well, I've got a good excuse. I was with Starr, so I know I wasn't gonna get in any trouble." But he says, "We gotta have a follow-up story for Sunday's paper." I said, "Well, let me see if I can do something." [00:30:30] I had Senator Bumpers' home number, and so I called, and his wife, Betty Bumpers, answers. I said, "Mrs. Bumpers, Rex Nelson with the *Arkansas Democrat*. You know, I have got to talk to the senator." "Well, he left about twenty minutes ago." "Do you know where he was goin'?" "No, he may have gone to the office." "Mrs. Bumpers, do you know when he's gonna be home?" "I have no idea. He didn't tell me." I said, "Well, thank you." So I hung up the phone. I lived about twelve blocks from the US Capitol. I'm a lot younger and lot thinner then, so I basically jog all the way to the Capitol. I had credentials, press credentials, with my picture on 'em that you'd wear around your neck like dog tags. In those

days, pre 9-11, you could get in basically any building, any door, with those dog tags, so I go in the Dirksen Senate Office Building where his offices were. I knew the door that led directly out of his office. And I began beating on that door, hoping he's in the office and will see me and talk to me for a follow-up story. Nothing. I'm so desperate I get on my stomach, and I look under the crack of the door just to see if I see feet or anybody in there. Holler again, "Senator Bumpers! Rex Nelson. Can I see you a minute?" Nothing. He not in the office. So I jog back twelve blocks to my place, and I call the house again. Gettin' later in the afternoon now. We had early deadlines in those days for our Sunday paper. And I said, "Mrs. Bumpers, has the senator come home?" "No." I said, "Well, do you know when he's gonna be home?" "No. He didn't tell me. I have no idea." [00:32:13] And out of pure desperation, I said, "Mrs. Bumpers, may I ask you a few questions?" And it's as if she were waiting for somebody to give her opinion, and she gives me this beautiful outline of how he would toss and turn at night, sleepless, trying to make this decision, and how she had finally said, "Dale, you have got to quit bein' Hamlet, here, and come to a decision one way or another. You're about to drive me crazy." And he had made his decision not to run for president. It was a

great angle, one our competitor, the *Arkansas Gazette*, certainly didn't have. We lead the Sunday paper with that story on the front page. Starr sends me a note, "Great thinking, you know, to get the Betty angle. Nobody else would've thought of that. Kudos." Not that I thought of it. I was desperate to get anything. [Laughs] I stumbled in to what had ended up bein' a great story. So thank you, Betty Bumpers. That was—that ended up saving me. So Bumpers decides not to run. Then we start getting word that Bill Clinton is going to run in [19]88. [00:33:33] So that's when they really had me goin' up and down the East Coast. In fact I remember my parents were coming up. They would come up every year and visit me on Memorial Day. And the night they were arriving I had been sent to New Hampshire to cover a Bill Clinton speech up there. And I said, "Look, I'm gonna take a very early flight outta Boston. I'll be there in time for breakfast. I'm sorry I won't be there to greet you at the hotel or whatever." So it was during that period that we thought Clinton was going to run. Now this is well known in Arkansas political history, and that is that Clinton brought in all of his advisors, brought in all of his supporters, called a news conference at the governor's mansion, and then stepped to the podium and said, "I won't be seeking the

nomination." I'm one of those that really thinks, John—I think he changed his mind on the way to the podium. I mean, think about it. You don't call a news conference, you don't bring political strategists in from across the country to say you're not gonna run, right.

JD: You put a note on your press secretary's desk . . .

RN: Yeah.

JD: . . . like Senator Bumpers did.

RN: Yeah.

JD: Yeah.

[00:34:45] RN: And I think he just decided "I'm not gonna run."

Now we had—the newspaper war had really heated up, so to try to one-up the *Gazette*, we were gonna put an extra, old-fashion extra, on the streets that afternoon. "Extra! Extra! Clinton Announces for President!" And I had written just a ton of copy. I'd talked to J. William Fulbright about when Clinton had met him. I'd done all this talkin' to national political consultants. How will Clinton do and all. And if you're a reporter, people who've worked in journalism will understand when I say this. There's really nothing worse than writing lots of copy that will never see the time of day. You know, you just think, "Those are days of my life I'll never get back, and it was for nothing." And

I'd written multiple stories for this section, and I remember I was sitting in my little office and home that morning, waiting on word on how the news conference had been. And the phone rang, and—guy that's no longer with us, but one of my editors named Ray Hobbs—I answered, "*Arkansas Democrat*." Ray Hobbs—I can remember this word for word—said, "Guess what?" I said, "What," and he said, "The expletive chickened out." [Laughter] And I said, "What?" Said, "He announced he wasn't gonna run," and I'm, "Oh, no!" Well, then I have to scramble around and get, you know, quotes from people in Washington about Clinton not running. So I thought I was gonna cover presidential candidates at two different points going into the [19]88 cycle, and I end up with no candidate from Arkansas at all back then.

[00:36:27] JD: What do you think the reasons were for—well, for both of 'em, really, for Bumpers and for Clinton. I'm sure they were different, but what do you think the reasons were?

RN: You know, a presidential campaign is really a tough thing. I mean, everything is unveiled. People come at you with everything. It's worse now than it was then. But it was already bad by the [19]80s. And I just think it ultimately came down to "We don't have the fire in the belly to do it right now." Course

Clinton did turn around and do it in [19]92 and became the first president from Arkansas. But I think he thought—just decided at the last moment the timing was wrong. I think Senator Bumpers thought the same thing. Now I think, and I'm biased because Dale Bumpers was one of the greatest orators I've ever covered. And we're spoiled in Arkansas. There really must be something in the water. But you think about it—Dale Bumpers, Bill Clinton, Mike Huckabee. Those are all world-class orators. All come from this little, poor state of 3 million people. Really amazing. But Bumpers was so good I think that, had he gotten in, he would have won the nomination that year. Remember they called 'em the seven dwarves 'cause there weren't really anybody of great stature. There were seven candidates. Michael Dukakis comes outta that group as the nominee.

[00:37:55] Now I also think, and of course I'm speculating here, but I think there were still enough good feelings about the eight years of the Reagan administration that I don't know that Dale Bumpers would've beaten George H. W. Bush. Probably wouldn't have. But either way, you would've had a President Bumpers from Arkansas running for reelection, or you would've had a nominee from Arkansas, and there's no way that the Democrats would have come back and nominated somebody else

from Arkansas. So either way, Bill Clinton oughta be happy that Dale Bumpers did not run for president [*JD laughs*] in 1988 'cause there's no way Clinton would've been the nominee in [19]92 had he done so, win or lose. History can be weird that way, as you know.

JD: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

RN: Little things that could've changed the course of world history. And I think, again, had Dale Bumpers run in [19]88, it probably would've changed the course of world history.

JD: We were on the topic of—you're a student of history, you love Arkansas history and political history in particular, it seems, and you've lived a lot of history in the last few decades.

RN: Yeah.

JD: I mean, in very recent short order, you were right there when these significant events occurred. You covered a lot of them. If you can think, what is one of, if not the most important news story that you covered? That you think, looking back.

[00:39:26] RN: The most important story I have ever written would've been Bill Clinton elected president of the United States, November the third of 1992 for the November 4 edition that I know a lot of people still have. That's one of those papers you save with the big Clinton Wins headline, and my byline as

political editor is on the lead story that night. It was obvious Clinton was gonna win, of course, going into that week. We had—our Washington bureau chief, Randy Lilleston, had covered the campaign. He was gonna do the other kinda cold lead story. He was at the Old State House that night with soon-to-be-President-Elect Clinton. We also had reporters in Houston and in Dallas. Walter Hussman was really willing to spend money so the *Democrat-Gazette* was doing this right, and so we had people at George Bush's headquarters. We had people at Ross Perot's headquarters in Dallas, the other candidate. So we had staffers there to do front-page stories. But I was doin' kinda the overview of the election, getting in results, quotes from around the country. And rarely do I think about this, "This is gonna be historic. Somebody's gonna save this." But you knew going in this is gonna be one of those papers that Arkansas—Arkansans were gonna save. It was gonna be one of the most significant events in the history of the state. And so I was a little nervous in writing that story. [00:41:07] Earlier that day, I had gone to the executive editor's office, Griffin Smith, and I said, "I wanna try something out on you, Griffin," 'cause I'd thought about this. And he said, "What's that?" And I collected newspapers as a child, and when man landed on the moon, the *New York Times*

lead story—they had a very famous science writer that covered NASA named John Noble Wilford. Great name. And John Noble Wilford's lead was along the lines of "Man landed on the moon today." Period, new paragraph. I mean, it was such a landmark event in human history that it didn't need any embellishment. So I told Griffin, who was one of the founders of *Texas Monthly Magazine*, a great writer himself—I said, "Griffin," I told him—I said, "I've always loved that old *New York Times*, and this is gonna be one of the most historic moments in the entire history of our state." And I said, "What if my lead paragraph, totally unadorned, is simply "Governor Bill Clinton was elected president of the United States on Tuesday?" And he said, "Let's do it." So [laughter] I already knew what my lead paragraph was, now I had to fill in a lot of stuff going from there. And I'm one that would always try to get stories I wrote in early, but boy, I pushed deadline that night 'cause I wanted every little bit in there. And I remember the aforementioned Ray Hobbs who was gonna be editing this story, hollering—he was at a desk across from mine—hollering, "I've gotta have it. I've gotta have it. I've gotta have it." And I finally sent it to him, and so we get that story in, we put the paper to bed. [00:43:09] Of course, the party in Little Rock is going all night. So I said, "Is everybody

good?" They said, "Yeah. We've got everything in. We've gone to press." I said, "Well, I'm gonna wander downtown just to be part of this." And I go in what is now the Little Rock Marriott but then the Excelsior Hotel where the Clinton people were all headquartered. And we had a very famous editor. She's no longer alive, but Phyllis Brandon of our High Profile section that just knew everybody societywise and all. And Clinton had had a private reception for his biggest donors after he'd given his acceptance speech. And I see Phyllis coming out of that reception. She was the only press person in there 'cause she was taking pictures for the High Profile section. And I saw she had that pass on. I said, "Phyllis, how'd you get in there?" And she said, "Don't even ask." I said, "Are you leavin'?" She said, "Yes." I basically ripped that pass off her neck, and I put it around my own neck. True story. And I can hear a couple of Clinton staffers holler, "Rex, it's closed to the press in there!" [00:44:28] And I quickly blended in with the crowd before they could find me and worked my way into that room at the Excelsior. It's about one a.m., and Clinton was still in there, of course. He'd done like a twenty-four hour rally around the country, so he hadn't slept, could barely talk, but I got to speak with him early that next morning probably at one a.m. or so for

a few seconds and take some notes for a follow-up story that would go in our Thursday paper—since Wednesday was coverage of the Tuesday election, our Thursday paper—in this private reception just because I had ripped the credentials off of Phyllis's neck on the *[laughs]* way in. *[JD laughs]* Well, then I went home, and I slept a few hours, very few hours, went right back to the office, and it didn't slow down for the next four years *[laughter]* from that point on.

JD: So to bounce around a little bit, we ended yesterday mainly talkin' about the Arkansas Delta, your advocacy of it, your official role as an advocate for the Delta, you know, more largely speaking, regionally for the Delta Regional Authority. After that for a time, you are involved in the Independent Colleges and Universities.

RN: Yes.

JD: Is there something you'd like to share about that and that time?

[00:45:51] RN: Oh, again, a job that I really loved. After I had been in government—and you know, when Mike Huckabee—and we were talking about him calling me to come over on a Sunday and making me this job offer. And even when I accepted, I thought, "Well, this'll be two or three years, and I'll go back to journalism." And I never would've dreamed that that would've

started a twenty-one-year period that I was out of full-time journalism. Twenty-one years. I was in government for about thirteen to fourteen of those years, with Huckabee for more than nine and the Bush administration for four. I was one of two presidential appointees, so when President Obama came in in 2009, Pete Johnson, the other Bush appointee, and I were out. And for a time, I joined a Little Rock public relations agency called the Communications Group. And my main job at first was to get them the advertising contract when the Arkansas Scholarship Lottery began. And we were successful in that, so that was an interesting project. But I decided advertising and PR was not what I wanted to do long term. [00:47:12] And then I was approached by a couple of college presidents that said, "Our association head, Kearney Dietz," who had been at the job for well over twenty years, "is retiring, and we are looking for somebody, and we think you would be perfect. We think you oughta throw your hat into the ring to be part of Arkansas's Independent Colleges and Universities." Now what that is is we represented the eleven private colleges and universities in the state, Harding being the biggest enrollmentwise, but you got Ouachita, Hendrix, John Brown University, got two HBCUs in Arkansas Baptist and Philander

Smith. And so eleven accredited four-year schools. And you're kinda their guy in Little Rock. None of them are big enough to have a full-time governmental affairs staff, as your state colleges and universities do, so I represented all eleven to the Arkansas legislature, to the Arkansas congressional delegation, communications, even raising some scholar—we had a joint scholarship program we divided up around the schools, fund-raising—it was a little of all of the above. And it was very fulfilling work 'cause I was a Ouachita grad. My oldest son goes to Hendrix, which was one of my AICU schools during that period. So it was a wonderful five years in higher education. [00:48:55] And at the same time I had left the DRA, I'd decided, "All right, I been in government more than thirteen years. I really would like to write under my own name again." I'd done a lot of writing but it was under other people's names, whether it was the governor's weekly radio address, what have you. And I'd called Paul Greenberg. So my current column actually started in 2009 as a freelance column once a week at that time when I left. And I continued to do that through my independent college years and continued to do it during my next stop, which was with Simmons Bank. [00:49:36] Simmons had gone on this tremendous growth spree. And George Makris, the

chairman of their board, had contacted me and said, "Look, we're growing so fast. We need a real corporate communications department." And I loved AICU, but again, it sounded like a challenge starting up something new. Once I got that started after two years, it was not really what I wanted to do running it on a day-to-day basis. Left on good terms with Simmons. I consider George, Bob Fehlman, people over there personal friends. Great institution. Great bank. Good people. But I was fifty-seven years old by then. And I thought, "You know, I wanna end my career where I started it." I'd started it, you remember, right out of college at the *Arkansas Democrat* as a sports writer. And I went back to that same building.

[00:50:39] I had been gone twenty-one years. Hard to believe. Didn't seem that long since I'd been the political editor. And Walter Hussman is nice enough to hire me as a full-time columnist. So I went from doin' one column a week to three columns a week and have been doing that since 2017. So very blessed to kinda have come full circle and ending my career in— hopefully no time soon. As long as the Lord blesses me with good health, I hope to continue to do it for a while, but I think it's probably the last stop. And that would be ending my career where I started it, and that's at the old building on the corner of

Capital and Scott Street in downtown Little Rock.

[00:51:24] JD: During that time, if I'm correct, you also started blogging.

RN: Yes, I did.

JD: So is that with your freelance period? You were also publishing on that?

RN: That was [20]09. Same time that—and the communications group helped me with that. They said, "You know, that's—you need to do—you need to be more modern. We're gonna get you social media accounts. We're gonna get you—you need to start a blog." And unlike most bloggers, I've actually kept it going. So it's called the Southern Fried blog, and it's been around for fourteen years now, which is really old by blog standards, I'm told. That somebody—but I'm stupid enough to keep it goin' after fourteen years. So I began blogging.

JD: It has a wide readership, too. I imagine there's a pretty hefty number of subscribers and people that visit.

[00:52:05] RN: I—we're fortunate that people will check it from time to time. It is a—it—I—it's not anything makes me any money. I don't sell any advertising. It's just something I do on the side. Now originally the communications group was paying for that when they started it. But I'm—I'll be honest, it's a money loser

'cause I pay for the hosting fees and all of that outta my own pocket, frankly. But I've just decided to keep it goin' for whatever reason all these years.

JD: I've always personally loved the high-school picks . . .

RN: Oh, yeah . . .

JD: . . . durin' football season.

RN: Yeah, I do a lot of football stuff . . .

JD: Oh, yeah.

RN: . . . during the football season. I—you know, started as that sports editor and [*JD laughs*] sports broadcaster, small town, and I—so I still keep my finger in the pot, sportswise, that way. Thank you.

JD: It's still in your system.

RN: Yeah.

[00:52:52] JD: All right, so I think we're at a good point in this conversation where I'm really curious—and I think I understand. I think based on our conversation, I can understand your writing process as a, you know, as a political writer, as a sportswriter, because you have events or moments, and then there's challenges with maybe finding angles on things. I think I've got a handle on that. But for the last several years, you've been writing a column that varies widely in terms of topic. It is

anything from Arkansas foodways to people, sometimes lesser known people, sometimes very notable historical figures in the state, general topics, festivals, events, curr—you know, sometimes political events. You're a champion for Arkansas through your column. If you would, run me through the process. I mean, how often do you write these? And then how do you pick a topic? How do you go about writing them?

RN: When I started the freelance column once a week in 2009, I think that Walter Hussman and Paul Greenberg, who at the time was the editorial page editor at the *Democrat-Gazette*, and the people who were nice enough to allow me to do that figured it would be about politics. And that's to be expected. I had been their Washington correspondent. I had been their political editor at one time. I had spent more than thirteen years in a governor's office and a presidential administration after that. So that was obvious to them. I got to looking at that page, though, and saying, "You know, there's way too much politics on that page." And maybe I was a little burned out on politics by that point, to be honest with you. And so I still have the freedom to write about politics. I still do occasionally if it's Arkansas. I don't do national politics at all. [00:54:54] So I made the decision, 'cause they were nice enough to let me write whatever

I wanted to write, I made the decision that this would be an Arkansas column. I grew up reading the *Arkansas Gazette*. And I love the old Arkansas Traveler column that was done by a number of people, started by the legendary Ernie Dean, who would later be a professor here at the University of Arkansas. I also read Richard Allen's Our Town column. Those two columns were on the front of the B section of the *Gazette* every day. I'd grown up with those. And I thought we need—we don't have anything quite like that, getting out and about in Arkansas. So again, more than politics it began to be about Arkansas culture, Arkansas history. Like you said, it might be Arkansas food, it might be Arkansas music another day. But just the things that make Arkansas Arkansas. We're a unique state. And so that became the focus. And when I went back full time, I tripled the number of columns I'm doing from one to three a week, but it's still all Arkansas. Whether it's politics or whether it's food, it's gonna be Arkansas based, not a national-based column. And that's the one thing that ties it together. But I have the best job in Arkansas. And I don't have the best-paying job in Arkansas. I took a huge pay cut when I left the bank. You can imagine goin' from banking to journalism. But I—money has never been something that is what drives me, and I've got a long-suffering,

very understanding spouse. And she understood where my heart was and how I wanted to finish my career. [00:56:45] Funny little anecdote. After I went back to the paper full time in 2017, Melissa was going around telling people I had semi-retired. And I said, "Melissa, I haven't semi-retired. I'm working as much as I ever have." And she said, "Well, your salary certainly did." [Laughter] So I figured out her definition of full employment was different than my definition of full employment.

JD: You were semi-paid.

RN: Yeah. Yeah, her definition of full employment was how much I was bringin' home. My definition was how much I was working. But it's not work. That's the thing. I get to travel around the state and talk to interesting people like you, and you know, I give a lot of speeches. One of the things Mr. Hussman had said to me when he hired me—he said, "You're giving a lot of speeches, aren't you?" and I said, "Yeah, I do." And he said, "I want you to keep doing that. We don't have anybody out there that's really kind of the public face of the *Democrat-Gazette* doing a lot of public speaking." So in addition to writing, I do a lot of public speaking, radio appearances, TV appearances, what not. And then always identify myself as what I am, and that's a

senior editor of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. [00:57:53]

But wonderful because I never grow tired of traveling this state, and that's what I get to do now, go all over Arkansas. I consider all seventy-five counties my beat. I take a very good look at my columns and try not to be too heavily Little Rock, too heavily Northwest Arkansas, try to spread it around and make sure that I'm spreading what I write all over Arkansas 'cause I think that's the beauty of a statewide paper. I think it ties us together as a people. I think it's good that all of these new people moving here into Northwest Arkansas can pick up that paper and read columns about the Delta or read columns about the pine woods of far south Arkansas and perhaps learn a little something, I hope, that they didn't know about the state before. And I think that's the finest compliment I ever get from a reader is when a reader says to me, "I learned something today." That's my favorite column—compliment. I've done my job then if they learned something about Arkansas that they didn't know before.

[00:59:02] JD: How do you go about pickin' a topic?

RN: It's not a problem. I mean there's so—like I said, because I'm broad ranging and I write about a little bit of everything, I never run out. I've got a list of stuff on my desk. I could go back, seclude myself in my office, not make a single phone call, not

make—and I'm serious about this. With the research I've already done, stuff I've got, books that I've read and wanna do reviews on about Arkansas, on and on, I could probably write columns that would cover the next six months without gathering anything new. There just—there's so much out there. If I had the time, and I don't really have the time to research 'em properly and write 'em, but I've got enough subjects to do more than three columns a week, I can assure you.

JD: That's one thing that's always struck me, though, in your columns is they're so well researched. And you may say, "Oh, I—maybe I don't do as much as I'd like," or something. But really, they're so well researched that they're, you know, they're essays on a topic or a person or an event or an idea, but they're researched by someone you can tell who has for decades been, you know, a beat reporter and probably in an arena where, you know, you had to get it right.

RN: Yeah.

JD: And you had to have a source, and you had to have, you know, credibility. And you had to be able to cite your work, right.

RN: Oh, yeah. I—well . . .

JD: And you still do that today, and I think that's another unique wrinkle in the work that you do.

[01:00:37] RN: It is what I consider a reported column. You've got a lot of opinion columnists who really never leave the office and that are very good at it. I mean, John Brummet is as fine, in my mind—I'm soundin' like the company man, but John's a friend. He's as fine in my mind of any political opinion columnist in America. We're lucky to have him in Arkansas. But what I do is different. Our editorial writers are—the unsigned editorials are very good, but they're in an office. Mine is a reporting column. It's as if I were doing a byline news story almost, although in a column I can start puttin' my opinion. It's a different spin when I write it. But I'm still out in the state, I'm at events, I've got a pad, I've got a pen, and I'm taking notes. That's the difference in a reported column and what I consider an ivory-tower type opinion column. And I don't do an ivory-tower opinion column 'cause I figure most people don't really care what I think [laughs] about most things. But if I can teach 'em something about Arkansas, I've done my job

[01:01:48] JD: Well, I think we've touched on this a little bit, but I'd really like to dig deeper and ask you a question about this. As you said, a lot of your work and a lot of your interests seem to go well beyond Little Rock and Pulaski County and Northwest Arkansas and seem to focus a great deal on the lesser-known

stories, smaller communities.

RN: Yeah.

JD: Why is that so important to you?

RN: Because it takes everything for Arkansas to be Arkansas. And here's what I mean by that. We are a very diverse state. The Ozarks are different from the Ouachitas. The Ouachitas are certainly different than the pine woods of the Gulf coastal plain. The Gulf coastal plain's different from those row-crop agriculture areas over in the Delta. The Delta's different than Crowley's Ridge, even though Crowley's Ridge runs back through it. They're different than the Arkansas River Valley. I mean, we've got six geographic regions, and they are all very different from each other, and I love getting into each region. An example I use sometimes when I speak—I live in far west Little Rock. I can come down the hill from my house to Cantrell Road, which is Highway 10 West, and I can take a right and drive for thirty minutes, or I can take a left and drive for thirty minutes. Think about this for a second. In thirty minutes from my house either direction, I can be in two entirely different cultures. I go to the right and head west, and I'm in Perryville, which is an upland culture. No African Americans to speak of live there. There's no row-crop agriculture. There's a national forest. There's forestry.

Even the accents, if you had somebody who was good at that, are a little bit different. [01:03:43] Or I can turn to the left and go just outside the North Little Rock city limits and be in Scott. And I might as well be in Greenville, Mississippi, at that point. I'm in the deep Delta. Scott, home of the Plantation Agriculture Museum the state does. Row-crop agriculture. Large African American population. Think about that. Two entirely different cultures thirty minutes from my house either way. And that's what makes Arkansas fascinating. So I think it's important that we understand it takes all of that to make Arkansas a state. I used to get so frustrated—and it's probably one of the ideas—I needed something else to do in the governor's office about like I needed a hole in the head. But one of the reasons I told Mike Huckabee, when the Delta Regional Authority started, that I wanted to be his alternate on the board—and he was nice enough to let me do that—because I got so tired sometimes of legislators from the Little Rock area or from prosperous Northwest Arkansas, who would say somethin' like, "Boy, if we could just saw off ten or twelve counties over there near the Mississippi River, we'd be so much higher in all the national rankings." And I would wanna scream at 'em, "If you sawed off the Delta, you wouldn't be Arkansas anymore. It takes all of

that mix to create this unique place called Arkansas."

[01:05:05] And I used to use this in speeches when I was with DRA. I said, "What I really want to tell those legislators is a hundred years ago when the state capitol building was new, the Delta was the most prosperous area in the state. We were a cotton-based economy. And don't you bet there were legislators from east Arkansas at that time sayin', "Boy, if we could just saw off ten or twelve counties up there in Northwest Arkansas, in those poor Ozarks, we'd be so much better off as a state. You know, those hillbillies. You can't grow cotton up there. All they can grow is rocks and cedar trees in those mountains." So things change. Times change, but it takes all of it to be Arkansas. So I love the fact that somebody can sit down in Bentonville and read a column that I do from Eudora, and I hope they do read it because we're a fascinating state, and they can learn about a place that they may never go. So yeah, I write a lot of columns out of the Delta, I write a lot of columns out of south Arkansas, too, and I love doing that. Probably one of the greatest awards I've ever gotten is Governor Asa Hutchinson and the Arkansas Rural Development Commission named me the Arkansas Rural Advocate of the Year in 2016, and that meant a whole lot to me. I love rural Arkansas, and I love its people.

[01:06:36] JD: As someone who's written about, lived in, and even, in your stint in the DRA, been an economic developer or advocate in that realm on small towns, rural, particularly Arkansas, what do we need to do? I mean what—if you're in Northwest Arkansas, if you're in Little Rock or Jonesboro, one of these other areas that's experiencing growth . . .

RN: Yeah.

JD: . . . other than acknowledging that the state is bigger and greater than your area alone, what do we need to do to keep these places alive, to keep these places that are unique, that help Arkansas be Arkansas . . .

RN: Yeah.

JD: . . . going for the next hundred years?

[01:07:20] RN: Get out and visit 'em, for one thing. I love to come here to Northwest Arkansas, and thank God for what's happening in the economy here. It helps fuel our whole state, the boom here. But so many of our new arrivals, and I'm so glad they've become Arkansans now, but they're not originally from Arkansas, and so many of 'em don't know that there's a big, vast, interesting world south of that Bobby Hopper Tunnel, that you can go south of that tunnel. And I hope Arkansans would—the old theme that the Parks and Tourism Department

used to have of "Travel Arkansas." I hope they would do that. Travel Arkansas. Spend your travel money in Arkansas 'cause it's endlessly fascinating. If you—send me an email if you don't—if you're goin' to a certain county and don't know what to do, and I'll tell you what's interesting to do and where to go eat in that county. But travel Arkansas, spend your money in Arkansas, help out some of these areas that are struggling a bit economically. [01:08:24] As we talked about yesterday, you know, even though the Delta's losing population, the land's worth more than it's ever been worth. Agriculture remains the largest part of our economy, so it's absolutely essential to Arkansas, the Delta. And understand that. Don't say, "Boy I wish this wasn't a part of the state." We've got a very unique blend of lowlands and woodlands and mountains that come together, and I think Arkansas's best days are still ahead. I love the vision that my friends just up the road in Bentonville, Tom and Steuart Walton, have, and that is—obviously, those two guys could live anywhere in the world, right, and do anything they wanted to do. And their whole focus is on proving the—improving the quality of life in Arkansas, whether it's making us the mountain-biking capital of the world, whether it's through the great restaurants they've started through their Ropeswing,

it's quality of life. And what states, other small states, certainly, wouldn't give to have some multi-billionaires whose whole focus was on making this a better state? [01:09:43] And we've got some other younger generations from well-known Arkansas families that I think have that same vision. And back to—I'm not doing an ad for Tom and Steuart, but back to them again, understand it's not just Northwest Arkansas. Walton Family Foundation made a \$20 million contribution to finish the Delta Heritage Trail in east Arkansas, which is gonna be huge. They put millions of dollars into the Northwoods Trails System in Hot Springs, which is our leading tourism draw still in Arkansas, so I think it is a statewide vision. And as we come out of the pandemic, we're still too close to it to fully understand how it has affected American life, but we know it will drastically change American life, just like the flu pandemic of 1918 did. And one sense we're getting is that a lot of Americans figured out they don't have to be in that high-rise, glass tower in downtown Chicago or downtown Houston, even, to do their work. As long as they've got broadband access, they can do it from anywhere. And so more and more are wantin' to go to a place where there's not so much traffic that they're spending two hours going to work every morning. They wanna go where the cost of living is

far cheaper than it is now. They wanna go where people are friendly, will actually speak to 'em when they pass 'em on the sidewalk. They wanna go to a place where's there's less crime. And they wanna go to a place where there're rich outdoor recreational attributes very close. [01:11:27] Now we've also— or we've always promoted our hunting and fishing, and we've got both at world-class levels in Arkansas. But also—and in each of these areas, I can point to places where we're world class. Cycling I mentioned. Hiking. Rock climbing. Over here in Newton County, people come from all over the world to go to Horseshoe Canyon and rock climb. Hang gliding. Freshwater scuba diving. Canoeing. Kayaking. I mean, world class in all those areas. So and that's what Tom and Steuart Walton had seen, and what—the vision they kinda outlined for me—they said, "We oughta be to the central one-third of America what Colorado has kinda become to the western one third," and that's where people are getting out of coastal areas, getting out of crowded, expensive cities and coming where they can live more cheaply and have these wonderful outdoor recreational attributes. And I think Arkansas, if we play our cards right, really could be that for the central one-third of America.

[01:12:37] JD: Hmm. Exciting future.

RN: I think it could be. And we have to play our cards right. I also give a speech—in fact I'm givin' a version to the Arkansas Historical Association annual meeting soon called "A State of Disaster," and it is that about two hundred years of our history were defined by natural disasters and man-made disasters. We've often been our own worst enemy, whether it was voting to secede from the Union in 1861 or a governor deciding to refuse nine Black children entrance into Little Rock Central in 1957. Both events have set this state back by decades. So we haven't always played our cards right. But if we do now, I think Arkansas could have a very bright future, and I love writing about that also and some of the things that are happening around the state 'cause there is a lot happening in Arkansas right now, and I think it's exciting.

[01:13:38] JD: One of the elements that you write about as well—and really, if I could offer honorary doctorates, you would be, you know, the professor of Arkansas cuisine. [RN laughs] You—it's—your columns are wonderful about it. Some of your stories we've already discussed talk about how central to life and culture and understanding is food. Tell me a little bit about some of your favorite places to eat in Arkansas.

RN: Oh, wow. That's hard because I have so many.

JD: Well, we'll narrow it down. Let's say you had one day—you have, you know, three . . .

RN: Okay.

JD: . . . you could go—you could fly.

RN: Yeah.

JD: You could be there in half an hour. So you've got breakfast, lunch, and dinner and maybe a snack or two along the way.

[01:14:20] RN: Yeah. You know, I'm gonna start talking cuisine now. Probably if I had to go to one barbecue place—and I admit I was raised on it. We talked about early in the interview how my grandparents lived in Des Arc, and we were always goin' down to De Vall's Bluff and pickin' up barbecue at Craig's Bar-B-Q. African American owned restaurant. Been around for decades. That would probably be top of my list. Jones BBQ, which has won a James Beard American Classics Award, near Marianna is on that list. I've got several that are close to each other. I do a Delta barbecue tour. Just down Highway 1 between Marianna and Walnut Corner is a place called Cypress Corner that's near the top of my list. And then you go up to northeast Arkansas, and I've declared Blytheville, per capita, the barbecue capital of Arkansas, and it's got classics like the Cream Castle and the Dixie Pig there. Of course that classic, McClard's,

and Stubby's has been around a long time over at Hot Springs. So those are all high on the barbecue list. [01:15:31] Catfish is probably right down the road from my favorite barbecue, Craig's. In fact, Murray's used to be at De Vall's Bluff. Murray's is now on old US Highway 70 between Hazen and Carlisle. That would probably be my favorite catfish. I would come up here to Northwest Arkansas to Monte Ne Inn for my favorite fried chicken along with goin' out to Tontitown to Venesian or Mama Z's where I can get that great combination of spaghetti with my fried chicken. That's—you know, combining Italian and Arkansas. I just love that—at either of those places. Or classic meat-and-three in this part of the state, Neal's Cafe, which we put in Arkansas Food Hall of Fame, in the pink building there on Old US 70 in Springdale are all great places. And I can keep goin', but there's a start right there for you. [Laughter]

JD: That's great. We've talked about, you know, the Waltons and others who have oftentimes come back or stayed in Arkansas. Why do you? Why have you, throughout your career and life, chosen to stay in Arkansas?

[01:16:52] RN: You know, I spent about four years in Washington and really enjoyed it. Met my wife there. But it never felt like home. And my parents were getting older at the time. Come

from a very close family. And like of ar—a lot of Arkansans, that pull of home is awfully strong. One of my favorite novelists, of course, was an Arkansan, the late Charles Buddy Portis, and you know, he had that famous line that Arkansans never can quite achieve escape velocity. I love that quote.

JD: Yeah.

RN: And I'm one of those. You know, I tried in Washington for four years. I couldn't get the escape velocity. Buddy Portis worked on the then-famous *New York Herald Tribune*, you know, and then wound up back in Arkansas writing novels. And thank God he did 'cause some of the best novels ever written were written by Portis. [01:17:57] But escape velocity—I couldn't achieve it. And it's home, and it's just a fascinating place to me, and I feel comfortable in every part of Arkansas. I've traveled the state enough that I can spend the night here in Fayetteville, or I can spend the night down in Monticello, or I can spend the night over in Jonesboro, and I feel equally at home. I'm runnin' into people I know. And in a busy, fast-paced world there—just to me there's somethin' very comforting about that. I don't do much out-of-state travel anymore. It's all in-state. I'm home on all of those roads 'cause I know them well, so I'm comfortable, I'm home, and again, hopefully, you know, I'm letting some people

maybe learn a little bit about Arkansas, at least I hope so, along the way. But I have—I gotta tell you, I—once I got back from Washington—I was still young. I was thirty years old when I came back to Arkansas thirty-three-plus years ago. And I have never been seriously tempted to leave the state again since then. There has not been anything out there that I found seriously tempting to leave. I enjoy traveling from time to time outside the state, but I'm ready to—always ready to come home at the end of those travels. It's just a good place. We've got our problems, God knows, but I think there's a bright future. And I'd at least like to keep writing a few more years and kinda chronicle that future and who the good guys and the bad guys are [*laughs*] as we move forward as a state.

JD: Well, you mention your family, and we're nearing the end of this conversation, and I'm thinking back to our discussions yesterday about your family, about your sister, your brother, your mom, and your dad. We discussed, also, and there's—the pictures'll be shared, of course, on display—the trench coat that your parents gave you [*RN laughs*] and—if you would share . . .

RN: When I went to the big city.

JD: . . . that for just a moment.

[01:20:13] RN: When I went to the big city of Washington, DC—and

we talked about how John Robert Starr really didn't give me any choice. Now my dad had sold athletic supplies all over the state. He had officiated sports, you know. And so he thought I'd been demoted. You know, I was runnin' the sports department. I'd covered the Super Bowl that year. You know, "You're goin' to Washington?" Dad was apolitical. He thought I'd been demoted. But I hope they were proud. And I remember they bought me this trench coat. And boy, as I told you, I walked in twelve blocks to the Capitol every day, and there're a lot of cold days in DC, so it came in handy. I still have it in my front closet at home in Little Rock. But bought me a trench coat to—so I could look like the big-time Washington reporter. [*Laughs*] It came in handy many a cold day in Washington, DC, and like I said, they would come up Memorial Day every year. That was just kinda their thing, Memorial Day weekend, and spend with me, and we had a lot of fun showin' them around and showin' 'em some of the sights up in that part of the country. But even then I knew I would eventually come home.

[01:21:26] JD: And they must've been so proud.

RD: Well, I hope so. They're gone now, but I hope they will be.

My—here's how strange I am. We had talked about my football broadcasting some yesterday, and hopefully it's a long time from

now because I'm havin' too much fun. I hope this is a long ride. But I've let my two sons know that once I'm gone—[laughs] and you'll laugh at this, but it's my true request. I want my ashes scattered in the end zone at Cliff Harris Stadium at Ouachita where I spent so many fun Saturday afternoons. And I—it's a Baptist school, so kinda my trademark—I refer to that as the promised land or . . .

JD: Yep.

RN: . . . the land of milk and honey when a touchdown is scored. So one of these days, that's where the ashes'll be scattered, in the promised land, which happens to [laughs] be Cliff Harris Stadium in Arkadelphia, in case you're wondering.

JD: Which would only be, what, a few hundred yards from . . .

RN: Yeah. From where . . .

JD: . . . where it all began . . .

RN: . . . I grew up.

JD: . . . for you.

RN: Where I grew up. I can sit—it's really neat. I can sit in the press box at Cliff Harris Stadium to call a game, and I can look at the house I was raised in. Which to me is neat.

JD: Yeah.

RN: To some people it's to go to the big city and see the world. I—

my favorite afternoons are to be back in Arkadelphia callin' a football game.

JD: Well, they had to be so proud. You have two wonderful sons and a loving wife and a supportive family. And you've traveled the same roads that your dad traveled.

[01:23:08] RN: Yeah, that he did. And you know, I look back now at—and I, as I said, I had a blessed childhood. But I look back now, and I look at when I was born in September of 1959. Now think about this. We talked about yesterday how we lost population faster than any other state from [19]40 to [19]60. So I was kinda born in a low point in Arkansas history. I mean we'd been losing population faster than any other state. The scars of the [19]57 crisis were still very deep, very real. The Little Rock public schools had shut down the entire 1958–59 school year. I'm born in the fall of [19]59, so I'm kinda born at a low point. We've been gaining population ever since then, most of my lifetime. And so the Arkansas story's kind of an amazing turnaround story, and I like to talk about it sometimes. I mean, it—we had this powerful congressional delegation at the time. You know, we had the chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the House Ways and Means Committee. We had this

good run of moderate, pragmatic governors, starting with Winthrop Rockefeller when I was a child in [19]67. We had these amazing entrepreneurs, whether it was John and then Don Tyson or Sam Walton or J. B. Hunt, Bill Dillard down in Southwest Arkansas who came from Mineral Springs.

[01:24:40] The Murphy family of El Dorado, who were home grown. Just amazing. And then two guys we talked about earlier in the interview, Jack and Witt Stephens, who had the Wall Street knowledge to take an idea like a Walmart, take it public, and take it to the next level. So my lifetime has kinda been the Arkansas renaissance, if you will, how we have grown from kind of the hillbilly—this—the Beverly Hillbillies came from Arkansas for a reason. [*Laughs*] From this hillbilly, backward, poor state to a place where I can look you straight in the eye and you not laugh at me when I quote Tom and Steuart Walton and say, "We can be to the middle third of the country what Colorado is to the western third." That is now possible.

[01:25:31] An example I use is when I was a child, the biggest attraction here in the Ozarks was an amusement park called Dogpatch USA based on the hillbilly image of Arkansas. Pappy Yokum, corncob pipes, so forth. Now the biggest tourist attraction in the Ozarks is one of the world's great art museums.

Truly one of the world's great art museums, Crystal Bridges. How far have we come as a state? So I'm, you know, lucky, as I'm not only born to good parents, but I was born in a period when Arkansas finally began turning it around. And it's taken us, from that low point, about sixty years to get where we are now, but I think the state is propelled, with the right decisions, to take off like a rocket in the next ten to twenty years, and I hope I'm around to watch it for another twenty or thirty years.

[01:26:35] JD: We've covered a lot of ground. Is there anything we've missed?

RN: No. Just that not only do I have a good job, I've got an easy job 'cause Arkansans are easy to talk to. They're willin' to tell their stories, and there's no shortage of stories out there, and there's no shortage of things going on in Arkansas. So you know, the industry is really changing. We still call it a newspaper, but what we really are now is a [laughs] digital news product more than anything. Twenty-four-hour-a-day digital product. But hopefully the *Democrat-Gazette* will be along. We've really—again, one of the things I think we can be proud of in Arkansas is we've really got about the last true statewide newspaper in Arkansas. I knew there's a separate edition here in Northwest Arkansas, the *Northwest Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, but it's still using the

stories, it's still running my column, for instance, all those from around the state, so I consider it kinda one big statewide newspaper. And you're not gonna find that in most places.

[01:27:43] My friend John Brummet likes to joke—he said "I'm convinced that Walter Hussman will put out the last [*laughs*] printed newspaper put out in America, and you and I will both have columns in it." So you know, I hope it's not the last one, but I hope John and I both keep—get to—we're both in our sixties, now. I hope we both get to keep writing for quite a while. As long as my health's good. That's the great thing is, you know, typing is not real strenuous physically as long as your mind's good and your health's good, so hopefully I can keep it up because the Hussman family is still putting out this great statewide newspaper. So to those out there who subscribe, I'll say thank you. We need you right now.

[01:28:29] JD: Well, Rex, on behalf of the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History, I wanna thank you. You're a storyteller, and it means a great deal to us that you were willin' to sit down and tell your story.

RN: Well, the greatest Arkansas storyteller of my lifetime is David Pryor, so that is why it is such a great honor to be asked to do this, John, on something that's named after David and Barbara

because there's nothin' I'd rather do than to sit around and hear David Pryor talk about the old Camden days and old Dooley Womack and on and on and on. It's just wonderful stuff. So to be at the Pryor Center, something named for two people I so respect, is a great honor to me just to be asked.

JD: Thank you, Rex.

RN: Thank you.

[End of interview 01:29:21]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]