

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

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**Arkansas Memories Project**

Sonny Payne  
Interviewed by Scott Lunsford  
July 19, 2011  
Helena-West Helena, 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 <http://pryorcenter.uark.edu>. The Pryor Center recommends that researchers utilize the audio recordings and highlight clips, in addition to the transcripts, to enhance their connection with the interviewee.

## Transcript Methodology

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

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

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

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

### **Citation Information**

See the Citation Guide at <http://pryorcenter.uark.edu/about.php>.

**Scott Lunsford interviewed Sonny Payne on July 19, 2011, in Helena-West Helena, Arkansas.**

[00:00:00]

Scott Lunsford: Sonny—uh—today's date is July 19. The year is 2011. And my name's Scott Lunsford, and you're Sonny Payne, and we are at the Delta Cultural Center here. And now, I've always been confused. Is it Helena? West Helena?

Sonny Payne: They're all one.

SL: Okay.

SP: It's Helena-West Helena in that order.

SL: Okay.

SP: They don't say "the twin cities" or "Helena" and then separate the two.

SL: Ah—it's—yeah, it looks like you're in West Helena when you're in Helena and you're in Helena when you're in West Helena on the map. It's kinda confusing. So anyway, we're in Helena-West Helena, Arkansas. And—um—we are the Pryor Center. We're here to—uh—do—uh—an interview with you, Sonny, and we're gonna try to cover from your earliest memory all the way up to today, and we're gonna try and do it in one day. So you're in for a long day. We'll take as many breaks as you want to, and there

are no mistakes here. Uh—we'll send you a DVD of everything that we do of this whole recording, and we'll sen—and we'll also give you a CD or a DVD o—of the images that we—the pictures that you brought us to scan. We will also transcribe this interview, and we're gonna send you that transcription and that video, and we're gonna ask that you look and read that stuff, and if there's anything in this interview that you don't like or you are uncomfortable with or you want us to take away, we'll take it away for you because this is about you, Sonny, and it's about your story the way you want it told. No one else is gonna tell this story but you. And we want you to be happy with it.

[00:01:48] When all that's done, when you're happy with the material—uh—we will then take some highlights, video highlights—uh—and we will post those highlights on the Pryor Center website. And we will post the entire transcript, and we'll post the entire audio of this interview. And we will encourage the kids in the public schools in Arkansas, researchers, documentarians, people that are working on their Ph.D.s in Arkansas history—we'll encourage them to look at this material and use it for educational purposes. We'll kinda safeguard it and make sure no one abuses it and all that stuff. But I just want you to know that what we're doin' here today, a lot of it's gonna

end up out there for the whole world to see. And if you're comfortable with all of that, then we'll just keep goin', and if you're not, then we'll stop. But—uh—I need to kinda hear from you now if this is okay that we're recording this on audio and video and that we'll eventually put it on the web.

SP: Just keep passin' the biscuits.

SL: [*Laughs*] Great answer.

[00:03:01] SP: No, I—I—I'm very flattered that anybody would wanna do this. Uh—yes, you have my permission to do this. I—if I can be a help to some kid or even kids or whatever, I—I—I'm very grateful. I'm very blessed anyway, and I've had the blessings of the Almighty, and I'm very grateful for that. I'd like to pass and cherish some of that with the kids because—uh—uh—I—I—I wasn't exactly born with a silver spoon in my mouth at all. And I—I'm very grateful to do this.

SL: Well, thank you very much. We feel very honored to—uh—be sitting across from you. You have—uh—you exemplify many of the best things that this country has to offer and—uh—you have affected many lives. And—uh—that's the kind of stuff that we want Arkansas to be known for and—uh—uh—Barbara and David Pryor felt like it was time for the folks of Arkansas to tell their own stories instead of someone else makin' 'em up for 'em. So

that—that's what we're about. And it's a great honor to be sitting across from you. Thank you so much . . .

SP Thank you.

SL: . . . for letting us do this. You know—uh—first of all, I need to ha—I need to hear your full name. What—what is—what is your name?

[00:04:26] SP: Uh—it's—it's very odd. My mother asked my sisters one time when I was about five or six years old—uh—uh—I heard one of the girls said, "Mama, what are we gonna call him?" [Laughter] She said, "J. W. or John William." My—the real name they pinned on me was John William Payne. And my sisters and my mother never called me that. Uh—my mother used to call me "Sonny," and my father used to call me "Runt." [SL laughs] I was so little, and my sisters were all a little taller than I am. And it was—it's so odd—uh—my father was six five and about two eighty. Big dude. My mother, she wasn't—uh—maybe—uh—almost five feet. A very little person and one of the best friends I ever had. Uh—most wonderful lady in the world. Uh—I think everybody should think that about their mom. If you don't, you're in trouble.

SL: [Laughs] When—when exactly—when and where were you born, Sonny?

[00:05:47] SP: I was born November the twenty-ninth, 1925, across from the old Helena High School. Out on Biscoe Street, right on the corner—the—they have the buses—school buses parked there now. Out on Biscoe Street here. And—uh—my father—uh—worked at a gas station at that time. And all the doctors were at the Arkansas-Alabama football game. [SL laughs] Yeah, down in Alabama.

SL: Uh-huh.

SP: Uh—I—I'm pretty sure I'm right on that, 1925. So—uh—my dad didn't have a car, so he borrowed—uh—he got a lift—uh—or he borrowed a car, and he drove down to Elaine, Arkansas, twenty-five miles from here. And the only doctor available was old Dr. Parker. And—uh—he went down to Elaine. It's about, in those days, forty-five minutes to an hour. Now it's twenty or thirty minutes to get there. An ol' A-Model Ford—he—he picked him up and brought him into town and my—I—I'm the baby and—uh—my three sisters were there. And one of 'em was too little at that time—she's maybe three or four years older than me. The others are way on up there. And mother said, "Well, if they don't get here soon—uh—you're going to have to help me." And my oldest sister, Becky, she said, "I want you down at the head of my legs, and you're gonna have to help me." And the other



girl—uh—Elga Fay—she was the middle sister—and she said, "I want you to stand by with a wet towel, and we—we're gonna have to be brave about this." And the little one started crying, and she said, "You sit down and behave, [*SL laughs*] and we'll get through it." Now this is a true story. It was told to me by my—all my sisters when they were alive. I still have one living. And—uh—it couldn't have been more—uh—it was like it was written for a movie. The minute she said, "Okay, now be careful with his head. Don't squeeze it. Just gently hold on." And they gradually pulled me out, and 'bout three-quarters of the way out, who should walk in but the doctor. He said, "All right, girls. Now just hold it right there. Don't move." He came over and he said, "Now gently let me have it." [00:08:49] And I came into the world, and he hit me on my backside. To this day, my rear is still sore. [*SL laughs*] And I started crying, and that's when I was born.

SL: That's a good story. That's a really good story. I—at this point we probably oughta—um—let's get your mom and dad's names. What—what was your mother's name?

SP: My mother's name was Gladys Swope, *S-W-O-P-E*. And my father's name was Bill Payne.

SL: And—um—were they . . .

[00:09:20] SP: They were born in Paragould, Arkansas.

SL: Okay. Uh-huh.

SP: And my father came here—uh—from what I remember—uh—well, I don't remember it. I wasn't even born then. My—he came here in 1923 and—uh—he had a job with Vineyard Truck Lines. He drove a truck from here to Elaine, Arkansas, and Mellwood—smaller towns—delivering—uh—groceries to the smaller grocery stores. And—uh—at that time, we lived about a block from where I was born—right on the corner where I was born, almost, and next to a bakery. God knows we had all the baked goods we wanted for absolutely nothing. They were so kind to us. Back in those days, we were pre—pretty—pretty poor. We were rich. We just didn't know it. Not financially or moneywise, but we were—we were wealthy.

SL: Blessings.

SP: We had blessings. And—uh—so they decided to make their home here. My grandfather moved here eventually.

SL: Is that on your father's side?

SP: That's on my mother's side.

SL: Mother's side.

SP: On my father's side, they all passed away . . .

SL: Okay.

SP: . . . when I was five years old. Uh—both grandfather and a grandmother. The only one who was living was my grandmother or my—uh—my mother and my grandmother and my grandfather. He moved down below here a—as a sarecrop—sharecropper.

SL: Mh-hmm.

SP: Up against the levee.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:11:06] SP: And we say against the levee—uh—believe it or not, that was the only dry spot you had. And during the spring months, that water used to splash over. That old man never would come to town, anyway. He was—he had part Italian, part Indian in him. What a heck of a combination.

SL: Swope [pronounced Swohp].

SP: Yeah. Swope. Swope [pronounced Swo-PAY] is what the Indians call it.

SL: Uh-huh. And do you know what—what his name was? Do you—did you know your . . .

SP: Charlie Swope [pronounced Swohp].

SL: Charlie, okay.

SP: And he was about six five like daddy.

SL: Mh-hmm.



SP: And—although they weren't related, but—uh—he used to hunt and seine. A lot of people don't know what seining is. I don't know if you do or not.

SL: I think you should tell us.

[00:11:57] SP: Uh—seining is—uh—you put out fishing nets, and you try to catch all the fish you can at once rather than take an old-fashioned cane pole, and you can't do it. Uh—you can, but you're at an all-day deal. Well, when you're living off the land . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

SP: . . . now, mind you, my grandfather would—never would come to town one—once, twice a year to buy flour and stuff. We had fried rabbit, fried squirrels, fried everything. Chicken. And, course, he was married to my step-grandmother at that time. And my real grandmother died—his—his wife. And—uh—he lived off the land. Uh—sometime he would harvest a little wheat and make flour out of it. Yeah. And did his own thing.

SL: Mh-hmm.

SP: And he'd go hunting twice a week. Bring in squirrels, rabbits, whatever he could find. They could take that—my grandmother could—and clean those animals, and we never knew what we were eating, really. We could never realize what we were

eating. And, finally, one day I—uh—I said, "Grandma, what am I eating? Anyway, it sure is good." She said, "You see those little squirrels runnin' out in the yard?" That wasn't them. These were wild out in the woods, you know. She said, "You're eating squirrel, and part of that's rabbit." And I got to thinkin', "Yuck, am I eating that?" You know, that was the best food I ever put in my mouth. She made her own biscuits, her own cornbread, everything. Gravy. Uh—people today, they fuss about my diet, my fat—um—I'm eating too much fat, cholesterol.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:14:00] SP: Son, back in those days, we ate sorghum molasses over biscuits and cornbread and biscuits, gravy over biscuits. Fatback, as they call it now. Grandmother'd take salt meat and boil it in water and then dip it in flour and fry it. Tastes like ham.

SL: Yeah.

SP: You get all that salt out of there and then fry that stuff. Lean. Grandpa would kill a hog every year. Get some of the tenderloin off of that, and durin' the fall months, we'd make hominy.

SL: Mh-hmm.

SP: And take some of that tenderloin, fry it, and make red-eye

gravy. That—now that's good.

SL: Did you ever get to watch 'em—uh—slaughter the hog?

SP: Oh yeah. Yeah.

SL: That's a big deal.

SP: Yeah. Well, down there durin' the fall—uh—course, the girls had to go to school, but we go down on the weekends.

SL: Mh-hmm.

SP: And Grandma would take some of the corn. We couldn't figure out why we were gathering corn again. 'Cause she never cooked it on—off the cob, except occasionally. She was makin' hominy out of it.

SL: I don't know how you make hominy.

[00:15:14] SP: I have no idea. [*SL laughs*] All I—I saw her put it in a big pot, and I said, "How come it turned white?" Well, whatever way they did it, that's—it turned white.

SL: Yeah.

SP: And that is good.

SL: Now did—uh—some stories, you know, when it was hog day there'd be neighbors that come around, and, you know, different neighbors would do hogs at different times and they . . .

SP: Well, now—uh—in the cities—you had a lotta people in the cities—even here—that did that occasionally. But not very—not

very much.

SL: Uh-huh.

SP: Grandpa's neighbors were, like, a mile and a half away, two miles. And—uh—most of them did the same thing. So the only thing he ever saved was skins off the squirrels and rabbits and try to sell 'em. And things like that. No, they—they used to do that, but—uh—not down there.

SL: Do you remember ever havin' any conversations with your grandfather and your step-grandmother?

SP: No.

SL: No stories?

[00:16:31] SP: Uh—at that time, you were so little—uh—you didn't carry on a conversation . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

SP: . . . because if you start talkin' or somethin', be, "Boy, be quiet. Quit talkin'." [*SL laughs*] You know, everything is "Shut up and be quiet."

SL: Yeah.

SP: Not "Shut up." They loved you—they loved me dearly, and I loved them. Uh—one time I went hunting with him, and they had an old T-Model Ford, and that's when you had the clutch. You had a brake and a clutch and—uh—another—there was

three . . .

SL: Pedals.

SP: Pedals.

SL: Uh-huh.

[00:17:09] SP: The middle one was for rears, and it got stuck in the mud, and my father was with him at the time, and they went hunting. And so they said, "Well, Bill." My father told my daddy, said, "I want to get Sonny and put him in the middle there and tell him to put his foot on that middle brake, that clutch, and to go in reverse. That's the way you did reverse back then. So I—I put my foot on the thing, and I didn't know it was gonna move, and man, I jerked back, and that thing spun out of that hole. I said, "What'd I do, Grandpa?" And he said, "Hit the brake." And I said, "Which one?" [*Laughter*] Oh, that was funny.

SL: Your first drivin' lesson right there.

SP: I got—I got us stopped.

SL: Yeah.

SP: And so he said, "Big boy, I'm proud of you."

SL: How old do you think you were then?

SP: Uh—five.

SL: That's young.



SP: Maybe five, I guess. I know I hadn't started school.

SL: Yeah.

[00:18:08] SP: But—uh—it's funny how you remember those things.

Here I'm an old man right now, and I can't remember what I did yesterday. But—uh—there was one other episode that was—pertained to my oldest sister, Becky. She's still living in Southhaven, Mississippi. She's just turned ninety-three years old. Had a birthday a week ago. And when she was—uh—we were all down there one summer when school was out, especially stay down there a week at a time, slept in an old feather bed. The girls in one bed, all three of 'em, and me in a little one there. Feather bed. You sink, the windows are open, no flies. Flies didn't bother you. Now think about that, right up against the levee, all that water, very seldom would you see flies. He had some kind of a sticker—uh—paper or something, and those flies would dry in, stick on there, and they—they didn't bother you too much. Mosquitos didn't bother us.

SL: Hmm.

SP: We—we didn't know about all that. But, nevertheless—uh—in the hot summertime, you ?sucked down and low?, wake up in a puddle of water, reminded me of being in New Guinea one time—" [*Unclear word*]. Oh, what? Water!" But, nevertheless—

uh—uh—the very—uh—I remember the very next day we got up, and—and we were all—it was on Sunday morning, as a matter of fact, and the girls were out playing, and course, girls are gonna play with the girls themselves, you know.

SL: Sure.

SP: And they were playing hopscotch, and so I wanted to go with Daddy and Grandpa, and they were goin' fishing, but they decided not to. So they stuck around. They were working on one of the—uh—wheels of the car, I guess. And—uh—they came back about maybe sometime up in the morning. "Big boy, where's your sister, Becky?" I said, "I don't know." Well, their house was built up high because of the water. Sometime it would flood. They were—they stayed dry. It was up high.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:20:27] SP: Not two feet. Way up there. Yes. And I said, "I don't know, Grandpa." So they heard somebody. "There's that baby. Be good." She was under the house, had a snake in—pulled up right on her lap, and she was pettin' that thing on the head. My grandmother was tellin' me all about it. [*SL laughs*] And I saw it, but I don't remember seeing that far ahead, but she was pettin' that snake on the head. Grandpa, she said,

"Becky? Honey, let—don't touch him anymore, and he'll go on and leave you alone." "Aw, Grandpa, he's my baby." "Becky, do what you're told." Son, I'm—this is one of those bad ones, one of those bad moccasins. They stay near the water, and then they do anything. But that was one of those bad dudes. She pet it, and do you know, believe it or not, God was watchin' over that kid. That snake rolled off her legs and went on out. And then my grandpa shot him with his shotgun. And my sister started cryin'. "Shot my pet. You shot my pet."

SL: Wow.

[00:21:58] SP: After she got grown, she thought about that. She said, "I do kinda remember that—me pattin' him on the head, but he didn't bother me.

SL: Man. Someone was lookin' over her.

SP: Oh, you better believe it. Back in those days, I—you don't bring up the past, present, or future or whatever, but I don't know why more families couldn't be that close and understanding with each other. The way I was always taught—my mother taught me this a long time ago. If you're goin' to be acquainted with a lady, man, or whatever, you gotta like 'em and be nice to 'em. I never understood what she meant by that until—well, I'll put it this way because it worked for me, but she always told me—I



had a friend of mine going to get married, and I told him—I said, "Do you like her?" He said, "I'm gonna marry her." I said, "Do you like her?" "Well, I've offered to marry her." [SL laughs] I said, "You're not understanding what I mean." He said, "Well, I guess I do, or I wouldn't be marryin' her if I didn't." I said, "No, you don't understand. You gotta like somebody before you love 'em." [00:23:42] Now you think about that. I don't care who your friends are. If you're—got a friend, you don't love him like you do a woman or anything like that. But if you got a true friend and you like him, then you love that guy. You'd do anything in the world for him. I've always taught you like somebody before you love 'em. That goes for friends, people. People today—"Oh, yeah, man. Sonny's a good ol' boy. I got this guy, he's nice." No, don't ever say anything to me unless you mean it. I don't ever tell anybody, "Hey, you're a wonderful person. Thanks for being on my show." I mean that when I say it. If I didn't, I don't say it. I just said, "Thank you. Appreciate it." You never tell anybody that "oh, you're the greatest" and all that. You don't say anything if you're friends and you like 'em. You say, "Hey, man, it's been good to see you again." You're friends. The most important thing, in my opinion, in life today, people don't like each other enough. "Oh, I love her. Man, I

shacked up with that girl," you know, like some of the blues artists do. Pardon my language, but—"Yeah, man, I made out with that old broad last week when I was playin' in juke joints." I'm not bringing out the blues artists. I'm just telling you—life in general, that's the way it was in the old days. "Hey man, I got a good-lookin' chick." No, you don't have a good-lookin' chick. You got a good-lookin' lady. Treat her as a lady and like her as a lady. The rest comes later if you get married. That's the way I've been brought up. That doesn't mean I'm Billy Graham or anybody. Oh man, I don't even get into that. *[SL laughs]* I've been there. I've done that. I know.

SL: Yeah.

[00:25:48] SP: When you learn from experience, you learn to shut up, behave yourself, and be honest with yourself. If you're not honest with yourself, you're not gonna be honest with anybody else. And if you don't like somebody, you don't love 'em either. And you'll never like 'em. People don't know how to like. "Well, he's so mean all the time." No, he isn't. He might be better, or she might be better if you treat 'em right and talk to 'em like they're an adult person. You don't talk to a little eight-year-old kid, "Now be kind. Be a good, good little girl." You don't do that. You talk to 'em like an adult. That sticks in their mind.

They start understanding at an early age what you're talkin' about. I'm gettin' into how to raise children, I guess, but . . .

SL: Yeah, I know, but you know . . .

SP: I shouldn't do that.

SL: . . . that kinda stuff could certainly be applied today's politics, couldn't it? [*Laughs*]

[00:26:47] SP: Well, everybody has faults.

SL: Yeah.

SP: The only one problem with that—and that includes every human being, includin' me. Sometime you really don't take time enough to learn how to correct those faults. Correct your faults, then take it from there. I have been blessed. You know why I've been blessed? I've done what God told me to do. What my people have told me to do, my mother, my father. You do what you're told to do in life. You may not do it then, but you will down the road.

SL: Yeah.

SP: Do what you're told to do. Be honest with yourself. Be honest with other people. Don't ever tell a man, "Hey, you're a good friend. I like you," unless you mean it.

[00:27:42] SL: Let's get back to family. Now your oldest sister, Becky, is still alive. What's her last name now?

SP: She married a gentleman from Helena here [*clears throat*]—pardon me. Gene Winfield. He used to be with Maybe Furniture Company here. And—for years and years, and he had a job offer in Memphis, and—let's see, I came home on furlough, I think, in [19]46, and they had moved—were moving to Memphis in Mississippi Valley Furniture Company. And my brother-in-law has since had Alzheimer's and passed away. And my sister had twin girls, another girl accidentally, and another boy accidentally. And my brother-in-law got to see all of 'em. He was so happy for 'em. Three girls and a boy, just like in our family. I—my mother had three girls and me. [00:28:42] And so he was in the furniture business, and there's what you call—I think there—girls would probably say a dream guy. [*SL laughs*] This guy never griped about his food. He never griped to Becky. I never once ever in my life ever heard him say fuss. He might raise his voice—"Well, let me think about it, and I'll try." But to really get low down and mean—that man didn't have a mean streak in him. Whatever she put on the table, he didn't say, "Is this the best you can do?" [*SL laughs*] He ate it and said, "Honey, thank you. I'm goin' back to work." Whenever he got home that night, what he ate, that's what he ate. When my mother died—my mother died, I think, I was eleven or twelve.

[Nineteen] thirty-eight or . . .

[00:29:40] SL: [Nineteen] thirty-eight. Mh-hmm.

SP: . . . [19]39, yeah. And I—my father and I lived with Becky. We lived in the house behind my—Becky, my sister. But she took us in until Daddy got another apartment somewhere. And then we moved, and then from then on, it was dog eat dog. I did a lotta things. At thirteen, I started delivering papers. Stuff like that.

SL: What about your other sisters? What were their names?

SP: Fay and Teen. *T-double E-N*. The little sister—she would be—let's see, she would be eighty-eight. And the other sister would be ninety. And Becky's ninety-three. She was the oldest. Middle sister married a gentleman from Elaine, Arkansas, Vernon Vogel. He worked for my present boss, Chick Howe—Jim Howe's father, Howe Lumber Company down in Elaine, Arkansas, in Wabash. And he worked for them for a lotta years, then he went with Chicago Mill and Lumber Company here, and then he got transferred to Rockmart, Georgia, a little place near Atlanta. And with 'em all these years, thirty, forty years, until he passed away twenty years ago, maybe twenty-five. And my sister—she passed away three years ago, I believe it was. I've forgotten. And they had one, two, three girls, too.

[00:31:30] SL: And that was your middle . . .



SP: Two girls.

SL: . . . middle sister?

SP: Middle sister. And a boy. Yeah, two girls and a boy.

SL: And then what about your younger sister?

[00:31:40] SP: The young one—that's another story. I came home on furlough, and she wasn't here. She was—run off with one of the Aero Tech—that was where they took air force training out here locally at our local airport. Airports—yeah, they had a little deal out here. And she married him and successful marriage. They stayed married for a long time. And then ten years ago, maybe, he died. [*Unclear words*] ten years ago, he passed away. And then three years ago, she passed away.

SL: So you lost both sisters . . .

SP: Yeah.

SL: . . . almost at the same time.

SP: Almost the same time and . . .

SL: What was your younger sister's married name? Do you remember?

SP: Page.

SL: Page.

SP: [*Unclear word*] Page.

SL: *P-A-G-E*?

SP: *P-A-G-E*. Yeah.

SL: Mh-hmm. Well, they were blessed with good marriages then.  
They . . .

SP: Oh yeah. All those guys were top notch. My grand—my mother used to say, "It's always better to be a young fool than an old fool." [*SL laughs*] Well, those guys, they were young fools but not old fools. In other words, you learn.

SL: They learned. You—it was a shame that you lost your mom when you were so young, but you were talkin' a little bit about her. Let's talk a little bit more about your mom.

[00:33:22] SP: Well, there's only a few things you can say about your mom. She was the best in the world and your best friend and very loveable. When I say loveable, when I was a little kid, I was playin' softball over in the lot with my brother-in-laws. He was married to Becky then. Over in a vacant lot over there, and I went over to play with some of the guys—kids my age. And as I say, we lived in this house in back of Becky then. And my mother had colon cancer. And one of our doctor friends took her to Memphis, and that's how they detected it. They didn't [*unclear word*] too much about it then. So they brought her home, and she was bedridden for so long, in pain all the time. Just eat up with it. And so occasionally my sister Becky would

come over—just out her back door and into our back door and give her a shot, pain shot. She was in so much agony. And so that day I went to play baseball, and she said, "You wanna go say hello to Mama?" I said, "Hey, Mom." And she smiled and grabbed my hand. She said, "You being a good boy?" And I said, "Well, I better tell the truth." "Yes, ma'am." "I believe you." I had to think if I had or not. I wasn't sure myself. So that very moment I looked at her. She had jet-black hair, never wore makeup a day in her life. Not even rouge or powder. The most beautiful complexion you ever saw in your life. No lipstick. She wouldn't have it. [00:35:30] But anyway, I was playing ball, and my brother-in-law, Gene Winfield, Becky's husband, came over. "Sonny?" I looked at him. I said, "Uh-oh. I'm in trouble." 'Cause they didn't whip me, but they scolded me.

SL: Yeah.

SP: And he said, "Come on, go with me." I said, "Where we going?" He said, "Your mama wants to see you." "If my mama wants to see me, I'm in trouble." So he's holdin' my hand, and I looked up at him. I says, "What'd I do?" He said, "Don't worry about it." "Don't worry about it?" I didn't understand. "What do you mean don't worry about it?" I'm sweatin' 'cause my mother would lay it on me. [*SL laughs*] So we got to the room, and she

was just about out of it. And she's lookin' over. She said, "There you are, big boy. I love you." I said, "I love you." And I got the foot of the bed, and my sister Becky was tellin' me this. I did—I couldn't hear what she was saying. And I asked Becky down through the years, last—"What was that she said to you?" She said, "Becky, I don't mind dyin'; I just don't wanna leave my boy." [Pauses] That kind of got to me a little bit.

SL: Yeah. So she could give you the discipline you needed when you needed to have it, couldn't she?

SP: She used to what?

SL: She could give you the discipline. She was a disciplinarian of the family, or was your father?

[00:37:38] SP: When you have three girls and a boy and your father is makin' twelve dollars a week, which is nothing. Well, back then, it was all right but not affordable. And my mother could take—she baked her own bread just like my grandmother and everybody, biscuits and every—the whole nine yards. And sometime we'd get a dozen eggs for a dime, and she'd make scrambled eggs and put a little milk in there and stir it up and feed four of us. We thought we were full. I did.

SL: Yeah.

SP: Buttered biscuits. And she'd make gravy and pour it over there.

Sometime we didn't have salt meat. Sometime we didn't have bacon. So we'd just eat gravy and biscuits and a little scrambled eggs. We didn't know—we walked to school. We didn't have a bike or nothin'. We walked a mile and a quarter to school every day. Every day. The three of us—well, four of us. And, of course, I had just started after they did. I was in the kindergarten—well, first grade—whatever it was. And they'd hold my hand, and we'd walk all the way, a mile. I got a little tired sometimes.

SL: Well, you had the shortest legs. [*Laughs*]

SP: Well.

SL: You had to take two steps to their one.

[00:39:09] SP: Over the levee to the Jefferson School was exactly a mile. And soon as school was out, we walked home. And Mama used to—I don't know this pretty funny, but she used to make gravy, chocolate gravy. Have you ever heard of that?

SL: I have heard of that, but I've never had any.

SP: Let me tell you, you're missing the boat.

SL: Okay. I wanna know about it.

SP: Chocolate gravy looks just like the regular gravy, only it's chocolate. I don't know what she did to it. I have no idea. That was like eating a Sunday meal to me. [*SL laughs*] We loved it.

And when we'd go to school, she'd fix sometime a cold biscuit, and sometime she had some of these large—years ago they used to make crackers real big. Not all that large, but they were big enough. She'd put peanut jelly on 'em and [*claps hands*] 'bout four or five of those and it filled us up . . .

SL: Sure.

[00:40:15] SP: . . . for lunch. We'd take it in a little old paper bag and have lunch, and sometime we'd get together and look down the cafeteria. They had one in the basement, and all those rich kids—now, what I meant by that, the people could afford it, all those kids. Man, look at ol' John over there eating that hot chili, and oh, he—Jerry's got a hamburger. Man, we'd sit there and stick our tongue out at him. [*SL laughs*] We weren't mad or anything. We just said, "Eat you heart out. We got biscuits and jelly."

SL: Yeah. You know, you mentioned cola biscuits. What's a—you mentioned cola. She'd make cola biscuits, is that what you said?

SP: No. Culla? No.

SL: Cola or . . .

SP: No.

SL: No, okay. I misunderstood.

SP: I said chocolate gravy and . . .

SL: Okay.

SP: I don't remember.

SL: Okay.

SP: Maybe I did.

SL: I misspoke. So what about that—le—I wanna talk about the school, and I wanna talk about Helena and the house and all that stuff. But we should say somethin' about your dad now. Let's talk a little bit about your father. What . . .

[00:41:33] SP: I had a very loving father. Never had an education. He got by the best way he could, and he took care of us the best way he could. And, course, when Mama passed away, well, Dad always had time—he always had time for some of his buddies, I'll go that route.

SL: M'kay

SP: We used to have a professional baseball team here. We called them the Helena Sea Porters.

SL: M'kay.

SP: Cotton States League [*clears throat*—pardon me—years ago. And Dad—on certain days at the gas station, he'd open up in the morning and get off early in the afternoon sometime. And they all traded there where he worked. So he'd meet up with some of his buddies and sit out in center field with water and stuff, their

favorite drinks or whatever.

SL: Right. Mh-hmm.

SP: And I never got to see those ball games. So I made up my mind. I told him—I said, "Daddy, I got a job sellin' cushions one day and Cokes the next day." In the summer, naturally, out of school. He said, "Well, they pay you?" And I said, "I don't know. They didn't tell me. They gave me free tickets, all the Cokes I wanted, and man, I ate a buncha hamburgers." [*SL laughs*] But that was paradise.

SL: Yeah, sure.

[00:43:41] SP: And in between innings when they were changing pitchers or gettin' ready to go to the next inning, they'd let me sit there and watch until they started the next inning, and then I'd get to get up and start sellin'. And one of my favorite pitchers was Pete Raymond, a local man here—West Helena. He—well, he wasn't from here. I don't know where he was from. But he married a lady from here, and then Pete passed away about twenty years ago.

SL: Okay.

SP: I remember comin' ho—I remember seein' him and always admired him even to this day, as old as he was. He's pretty old. I'm eighty-five, so you gotta . . .



SL: Yeah, yeah.

SP: . . . figure how old he was.

SL: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:44:26] SP: But, nevertheless, that's—I—my grandpa took me hunting. My grandpa took me fishing, but not my father. I—now don't misunderstand—don't stop loving your father because of that—I just never understood why he never did. Even though he did with his friends—that's—those ball players out there gave him his tickets. Some of the friends bought him drinks. I used to think he spent money on that, but he didn't.

SL: Yeah.

SP: I found that out later. That shows you how you make a mistake. You see something, and it's not . . .

SL: You assume something . . .

SP: . . . what you think you see.

SL: Yeah. Mh-hmm.

SP: In other words, I had a father that loved me dearly and the girls and my mama. Big dude, very loveable. I just never had the privilege of getting to know him like most kids would know their father and mother. And maybe I don't have a right to say this, but the kids today, it's just the opposite. Some of 'em don't have time for their father and mother. And, hey, that's bad.

Always have time for your father and mother. Don't worry about what they do or what they don't do, like I did. I didn't worry about it. I didn't know wha—any better. Later on in years, I often wondered, "I wonder why he didn't do this?" Mainly because he didn't have the money, or I don't know. All I know is we loved each other. That's all I care about. And then down through the years, I was one of those dudes that always had a—I was a dreamer. I always imagined big things of what I wanted to be when I grow up. You know what I left out? I forgot the education. "Oh. Say what?" Well, anyway, I'm building up now to the present.

SL: Okay. But we're gonna go back to school. I wanna talk about the school, the building, and I wanna talk about your house a little bit. But we can—you can—jump forward a little bit if you need to. But I'm gonna hold you back. I'm gonna get you through school before we're done here. So . . .

[00:47:24] SP: I went to the eighth grade. And it was kind of hard. Mama had passed. The girls had gotten married, and nobody but me. So—well, the little one hadn't. She hadn't gotten married yet, but she and I were living with Daddy.

SL: Yeah.

SP: And we saw him when he came in. Sometime I'd go to where he

worked and walk home with him. We always walked, and my mother used to say, "Go get your dad and walk home with him." And I did, but we spent that little time together, but then that was never anymore. Who knows why? All I know is he loved me, and I loved him.

SL: We . . .

[00:48:26] SP: And so I went to the eighth grade. My little sister—oh, by the way, had graduated that year when I went to the eighth grade. The end of the school year, she graduated. And then she, more or less, in some ways went her way. I stayed with Dad and getting little odd jobs. I washed dishes at one of the cafes here because, you know, back then I could get a plate lunch, dessert, and drink for thirty cents. When I washed dishes, I got it for nothin'. Then I fed myself. But it really started to be a hassle, and so I decided I'm goin' to quit school. Biggest mistake I ever made. Not today, but that was the biggest mistake even today, I'll put it that way, that I ever made.

SL: Well . . .

SP: And then . . .

SL: . . . it wasn't unusual for kids to stop goin' to school after eighth grade.

SP: Not really. The war was on or—well, no, war hadn't started yet.  
But I'll get into that in a minute because from there on, I . . .

[00:50:03] SL: Yeah. Well, we can talk about the—your time in the services. But, you know, let's go back a little bit before your mom died. I guess she died when you were probably in fifth grade, maybe, or sixth grade.

SP: Twelve, thirteen. I don't remember.

SL: What was the school like? Was it a two-story brick building or . . .

SP: The first school, the old Jefferson School, was—I think it was three stories.

SL: That's a pretty big school.

SP: First grade, then second, and then upstairs if I were—I'm trying to remember. I think it was. And from there, we went to the Helena High School. It went grades through one through five. Then they put me on to the Helena High School in the sixth grade, I think it was. Sixth—and there we didn't have elevators or a damn thing back then. We—you walked every foot. The funny part about the Helena High School was it had concrete steps and walkways, hallways and walkways, goin' up the steps. When they built that school, that thing was built and you—it's still standing out there, but it's 'bout shot. Outside of—well, still

in town, just past the Catholic church down there.

SL: Okay.

SP: Kinda shot, but it's still there. And we also walked to school there.

SL: Helena was—was it prosperous then? I mean, it—that's a pretty big building then.



[00:52:07] SP: Back in the [19]30s, we had slot machines on every corner. The way that came about—the information I gathered when I was little—I used to hear about it. But at that time, I didn't know what they were talkin' about, but you start askin' enough questions, you'll learn. That's where you get your education. What a—but I had heard talk, some of the bankers and lawyers trade with Daddy down at the gas station. "You mean we don't have any money to build that hospital?" That's where I had my tonsils out. I was nine years old then. We had—I think it was about three- or four- or five-room hospital out there on Poplar Street. Look like a big ol' two-story house is what it looked like. And I never will forget, though, Dr. Rider took my tonsils out, and my mother was sitting on the side of the bed with a big ol' cardboard bocket or whatever it—bucket, or whatever it was that—they were big. She said, "Open wide," and I said, "Mama, my throat's sore. How come my throat's

sore?" She said, "It won't be for long. Open wide." She had some ice cream. Somebody had brought her a big ol' quart of ice cream. She was feedin' it to me, and I said, "My throat ain't sore no more." [*Laughter*] I was eating the heck out that ice cream.

SL: Yeah.

SP You know, back then we didn't have ice cream too much.

Occasionally Mama would get out the old ice cream maker, and we'd go down to the ice house, and you'd pick up a lotta ice down there that's—they didn't put into one block. Gather a whole bunch of ice and put it around that little . . .

SL: Bucket?

SP: . . . three-gallon freezer?

SL: Yeah.

[00:54:10] SP: And we'd all take turns crackin' that dern thing.

And—but that didn't work. Came from some of the ladies—gave her that for me. And, boy, that was the best ice cream I ever had.

SL: [*Laughs*] You bet it was.

SP: It was good. But anyway, they were talkin' about buildin' a hospital. They needed one bad. So they checked with the people in Little Rock and all over that said you can't do that. It's

against the law, gambling.

SL: Oh.

SP: Slot machines. The American Legion Hut and a buncha bankers and stuff went over there. [00:54:54] So some smart dude—he figured out a way to do it. Not legally, still not legally. They went to the sheriff. If the sheriff says okay, it's okay. [*SL laughs*] They found that out. It wouldn't be as such, but he said, "All right, I don't know what y'all are doin', but I'm not looking into that." There was twelve, thirteen restaurants on this very street alone and three or four hotels. And the drugstores—every drugstore had a slot machine in it—quarter machine. Some of the farmers used to come up on a Saturday, some of those that had big money. I know of one farmer. He used to sit by McRee's drugstore and sit on the stool and pull that "one-armed bandit," as we call it, all day long, and nobody else could. It was the only slot machine in there, and everybody'd be waitin' in line. "Well, when are you gonna do—get through doin' that?" And he says, "When I get ready." You know, I used to hear that 'cause I used to run errands down there sometime, and I used to hear 'em do that. But, anyway, they went through that, oh, two, three years. The American Legion looked the other way. The sheriff looked the other way.

That new hospital is way—well, the one they built—it's now a retirement home, and then the back of it's a nursing home. It's where my wife was when she passed away. And the new one—that was the one they built out here. And on the front of that, they had a nursing school where they trained nurses. Yeah. And, man, that was the most awesome thing you ever saw. It was absolutely beautiful. It just shows you what people can do if you—somebody says, "Well, we don't have the money to do this, don't have the money to do that." There's always a way. You gotta find it. They did. They built it. And then, no problem, they built the one out on the highway. They already had the money on 49 bypass. Beautiful. It's outta shape now. They're gettin' ready in another few years build another one, I'm sure. But . . .

SL: Well, you . . .

[00:57:30] SP: That's how I remember them getting money to do something with. People says, "Well"—like our city is broke today. I don't know if we have the leadership or the people, but they will find a way to do something to bring it back. I've seen this—go down on the street back in the [19]30s gambling, and at Mike's Pool Hall, you can go there and get horse racing bets all day long. In the back, they were playin' poker and blackjack



machines—they had machines—and pool. And then when the races run, they had—well, they also did it up here on the Main Street up to Lankerford.

SL: Had a line.

SP: ?That's right?. And then they had a guy sittin' beside him up where this parkin' lot is up there on the other side of the street. And that's where the IC Railroad used to be, and they had these guys in there. "Uh-oh! Strike two. St. Louis Cardinals go down in order. No, the Cardinals and the Browns." And he was—?the laker was gonna?—"Ball one, ball one." Yeah.

SL: Where there's a will, there's a way. [*Laughs*]

[00:58:54] SP: And we'd sit in front of Henry's Drug Store.

Sometime they'd let us sit there no charge. We'd sit there and listen to him. Had a speaker. Go over the loud speaker. "Hey, got it by the third, can you believe that?" It sound just like you were there. No charge. Gettin' all the baseball you ever wanted. That was fun.

SL: That's technology there.

Bruce Perry: Four minutes.

SL: Four minutes? We're gonna wind up this first tape. We're about to get through our first hour. We haven't even got you through grade school yet. [*Laughs*]

SP: Do what?

SL: We have—we're about to finish our first tape, so why don't we just go ahead and take a break now. Stand up, and we'll let them change tapes, and we'll pick up where we left off.

SP: Let them work. I'm not. [*Laughter*]

SL: [*Claps*] All right.

[Tape stopped]

[00:59:45] SL: Sonny, we're on our second tape.

SP: Really?

SL: Yep. And we were talkin' about Helena, the town of Helena. You know, you were born in 1925, so as a child, you were growin' up in the Depression times. And we talked about the difference between—everyone was poor, but you had many blessings growing up. So you never really felt like you were poor, and that's kind of a common theme with folks I've talked with before.

SP: I never felt like it because I didn't know it.

SL: Yeah. Well, and you had a grandfather that hunted and provided some of the . . .

SP: Well, that was just his nature. He said, "Why should I go into town and spend my money for somethin' I can fix myself?" That was his nature from his upbringing, I guess. But he was—oh, that dude was wonderful. He didn't ask anybody for anything.

He always said, "If"—two things. If somebody says, "Would you like to have something to so-and-so and so-and-so?" Like today, they say, "Well, I don't have the money, but I got a credit card." Well, back then they didn't have so much credit cards, but later on in life I was—I've learned from my father and everybody else. Not my father, but friends and so forth. If you gotta have a credit card to buy it, that means you ain't got the money in the first place. I'm not downing the credit cards. But there's no such thing, and this is just me saying, there's no such thing—"I can't buy that. I don't have any money. [01:01:57] I don't have any money"—maybe that's true. You don't. "Where am I gonna get it? Somebody gonna give it to me?" No. If you're hungry enough, you'll do anything in the world. A lotta people say, "I've heard this down through the years." When I was growing up, my father used to say, "Well, if you want it, go out and work for it." So I did. I've done it all. Car hopped for the drugstores. Am I gettin' off base? You know, the drugstores—they used to—the cars would pull up, and you had these trays that had a hook, and you hook it on a window—on the car door. They roll the window down. Even in the wintertime. Yeah. Got their girlfriend, the first date, you know, and all that. "Hey, man, I'm gonna buy you a banana split or a

milkshake." And, oh, man, they're really outdone. "Well, I believe I'll have a ham salad sandwich or—and a shake." That's the way it used to be. Well, I did that. One night I made forty cents, and you know, back in those days you could buy three—that's—I want to get it right. You could buy two vegetables, meat, dessert, and drink for thirty cents. Yeah. Good stuff. I'm not talkin' about junk.

SL: Yeah.

[01:03:35] SP: Pork chop, meat loaf, whatever people's grill or whoever had it. They all had plate lunches. Now some were real expensive. Thirty-five cents. *[SL laughs]* A nickel more than the thirty cents. Well, that fed me a meal. I—when I was doin' all this, I didn't have a mother, and my father, he worked. Nobody fixed breakfast or lunch for me. We did it ourself. My little sister, Teen, she'd fix some hot chocolate in the morning or somethin' and a piece of toast. But that would hold us for a while, but—so I went out and I worked for it, and I got me somethin' to eat that way. At McRee's drugstore, he said, "Now, Little Bill," he said, "I'll tell you what I'll do. Not while you're working, before you start and after you get off, you can have everything you want in here. Have a sandwich and a shake or—and I can't pay you much." But I made forty cents a night. And

I guess what I'm tryin' to harp on, there's no such thing, "I don't have the money. I wish I could, but I don't have any money. I don't know what I'm going to do." Find somethin'. We did back there. It don't matter. I've heard this when I was little, and they were little, too. My mother don't want them people seein' me deliver a paper. My mama don't want them to see me hoppin' cars. I've had that said to me. I'm talkin' 'bout people up there.

SL: Yeah.

[01:05:27] SP: They got dealt a little—had a little money back then.

I said, "Well, my mama ain't livin' anymore, so I'm gonna do what I can. I'm hungry." So that's how you get by in life. I don't care—in this small town—the economies is tough all over. There's something you can do to find a meal today. I don't care who you are or what you are or where you go. You can find a way without beggin' for it. You work for it. I have seen a time, and it was—I wasn't all that desperate, but I almost got that point. I went out, and I was—I asked Dominic Messina one time—I said—the owner of a restaurant here. I said, "Dommie, I don't have any money. Can I wash dishes or somethin'?" He said, "How 'bout tomorrow? Will you do it?" I said, "Well, I'm hungry today." He said, "You go on and eat today." So I eat

that day. I came back the next day and washed dishes and got another meal. There's—I don't know. Maybe I'm wrong. People think things are just gonna come to 'em. It doesn't do that way. You can bang 'em against the head and try to knock some sense I nto 'em. And say, "Hey, if you don't have an education, you wind up doin' this and doin' that." That's the only thing you know. See, I had no education. "Oh, I'm still goin' to school," but I didn't bother to read the fine line and go on to school. They don't stop in the second, third or fourth or fifth grade. It stops when you get out of that school as a senior. Mercy. Somebody have to beat you in the head? So . . .

SL: Let's talk a little bit about . . .

SP: That's it.

SL: . . . about the household that you were growin' up in. Did any—did you bring homework home? Did you do homework at the house?

[01:07:50] SP: No. I did not. And because of it, I still got the scars where my sisters tore me up.

SL: Because they did?

SP: They did. Then I brought it home. And they would help me. My sister, Fay—Elga Fay—she was the first one in high school to take shorthand. Now my sister, Becky, finished junior high, but

she didn't graduate. She got married. Young age but . . .

SL: Sure.

SP: Ninety-three years old, what do you expect now? [*Laughs*]

SL: Yeah, right.

SP: But anyway, the other sister—she graduated with honors. She was this vineyard lady. Her husband—my dad used to work for them. She was a schoolteacher here. She taught shorthand. You ever hear of shorthand?

SL: Sure. Yeah.

SP: Do they teach that anymore?

SL: I don't know if they do. I'm not sure that they do.

[01:08:57] SP: She was one out of eight girls that had that down pat that graduated with it. Speaking of McRee's drugstore. He had a brother up over the Hart Shoe Store who was a broker. And on the weekends, and then durin' the summer, she got a job with him takin' shorthand and typing letters, still in the eleventh grade. Mh-hmm.

SL: Valuable.

SP: She could take a letter and have it typed up in two minutes, maybe three.

SL: That's valuable. [*SP mimics writing in shorthand*] Yeah.

SP: And I looked at it one day, and I said, "Looks like somebody—a

kid drawing straight lines and crooked lines." She just sit up there and read it off right back to him. I used to go—my mother'd make me used to go—years ago, she'd make me go get her and bring her home, too. And she was smart as a whip. And she got the education. And she went there to work for a lady friend of hers in the drugstore down there just to have somethin' to do. And some of the stuff that she was doing on the bookwork required a education. You had to know what you're doin'. She had the education, she did.

SL: She got it.

[01:10:34] SP: That—that's the bottom line. If—without it, forget it.

You know, I don't mean to keep harpin', but kids don't want to hear good things. They wanna hear, "Well, I'm gonna do this, and I'm right what I'm doing." They don't want to hear what you have to advise them to do. But let me tell you somethin', buddy. When you go, "Hey, I want a job here in the bank."

"Oh, okay. You know how to—are you good with figures?"

"What figures? Oh! Arithmetic?" "Arithmetic? That went out with the Dark Ages here in the bank, man. We don't do arithmetic here. Math, calculus." "What's that?" "Sorry, can't use you." That's it on that.

SL: Well, did you have any favorite teachers or subjects when you



were in school?

SP: No.

SL: It was . . .

[01:11:52] SP: . . . I—well, favorite teachers—when I was in the fourth grade, I think, or fifth grade, I used to be a runner. I could run. I didn't know I could run. And I was always larger than most of the kids I was with. Not that I failed in school, but I don't know, I was just bigger than they were. We were little bitty kids back then. And in the fourth grade and fifth grade, I won every year. We—they rewarded us by takin' a class when the circus would come to town or the carnival. Ringling Brothers used to come here. Cole Brothers. They'd reward us that way. And one time I ran a race, and my favorite teacher, Mrs. Curlins, put me in her car. Never been in a car before. And took me home. We only lived a block and a half away from the school. At that time, we had moved from over the levee over on Franklin Street next to Alamo Grocery. And it was just around the corner. And I got to ride in that car. Boy, I thought I was high cotton. [SL laughs] And my mother said, "Bring him on in." And she—I climbed up on her lap, and she started rockin' me, and said, "He'll be all right." I was sick in my stomach.

SL: Oh.

SP: Yeah, that's why they brought me home. I—at the end of the race, I set there to get my breath, and I started upchuckin'.

SL: Pushed yourself hard.

[01:13:33] SP: And so Mama made me—I forgot what she made me. Some hot chocolate or somethin', and I drank that, and then I was okay. She rocked me. I was Mama's boy. She liked to rock me.

SL: What about church and religion growin' up? Did y'all—did you ever attend church? Was church a requirement for you or . . .

SP: My mother was a devout Baptist. And she—my mother was sickly for most of her life, I guess. I mean, not bedridden but didn't have—she always wanted to go to church, and for the most part, she did. But she didn't have any clothes to wear, and sometime she'd say, "Well, I—you know, I don't have a—my—dress to wear." Becky, my sister—older sister—said, "Mama, we got you a dress. Come on." So she'd go when she felt like it. But she was—oh—and Reverend Kirkbride, the Baptist minister here, buried her in [19]37, [19]38 of—whenever. And, you know, it's odd. I didn't shed a tear, but I was so hurt I didn't speak to anybody for about a week. My sister couldn't get me to talk. I don't know what it was. I just didn't wanna talk. But that was—I guess that was the saddest day of my life when I

lost my mom. That was my friend. We were talking about friends a moment ago? That was my friend. I could go to her if I had a problem. See, that's what friends are. Somebody that you can go to, and you trust 'em, and they'll listen to you, and they help you. That's where the likeness comes in.

SL: So . . .

[01:15:47] SP: That was my pride and joy; and the teachers, they were all good. They were very helpful, as much as they could be. And favorites? No, all of 'em were. They all tried to help, but in our day, they did. They bent over backwards for you. And I've learned a great deal down through the years by little remarks they have made, remarks that you wouldn't hear on—nearly on the street. But nothing bad when I'm talkin' about something to cope with later in life. It's just what we were talkin' about a moment ago. Be honest with yourself.

SL: Yeah. So you lived in more than one house here in Helena. I mean, you started out across from the—from where your dad worked, the gas station? Is that—no, that was later or—I'm not—I'm kind of confused. How many houses . . .

SP: One, two, three, four, five houses. Some weeks, daddy didn't have the rent.

SL: Yeah.

SP: And we'd go two weeks and then have to move, maybe. He did the best he could, but that kind of money just . . .

SL: Yeah.

SP: . . . you know. The rent on the house was only—I think it was six dollars a week.

SL: Still if you're making a twelve a week . . .

SP: Pretty good size.

SL: Yeah.

[01:17:30] SP: But we didn't know that. Now strange it may seem, you'd think would have an effect on us. But it didn't. We never thought anything about it. Just—Mama would say, "Okay, you kids wash up. We're in a new pad. Get used to it now. And everything will be fine." That's what kept us together. And next to the last house we lived in—it was next to the Alamo Grocery, and it was near Thanksgiving, and we always had a goose. Somebody always gave Daddy a goose every Thanksgiving or Christmas. The greasiest thing you can eat.

SL: [*Laughs*] Yeah.

SP: But let me tell you, that goose was good. But anyway, something happened. Daddy didn't get it that year. We were on Franklin Street. We had one little bathroom and a washtub, well, take a bath. And I had been out playing somewhere

Thanksgivin' morning. I noticed Mama wasn't in the kitchen cookin'. I mean, she was, but I didn't smell anything. And so I went in there, and she was making some—what we call hoecakes. It's cornbread, and you fry it like a pancake. Fried cornbread pancakes, we call 'em.

SL: Yeah.

SP: We call 'em hoecakes.

SL: Hoecakes.

[01:19:23] SP: Man, those things are good. And about eleven o'clock, Daddy came home, and he brought some stuff. I don't know what it was. [*Yawns*] Excuse me.

SL: That's okay.

SP: We were already eating whatever it was, hoecakes, and so Daddy went outside. I'm trying to recall all this. It was so—to me, it was so sad. Now I didn't—I was sad then when it happened, but we were—like, the living's room here, and the bathroom's there, and my oldest sister, and Fay, my middle sister, standin' there. They were talking. So I'm lookin' up at 'em, and I says, "What's wrong with Mama?" She went in the bathroom and started cryin'. So the older sister, Becky, started cryin' and said, "Mama, what's wrong?" "I'm all right. I'm all right." Daddy had brought some hens, and she was in there

gonna fry 'em instead of baking 'em. It didn't matter what we had. We had food. So when she came out, and my ol—the middle sister, rather, said, "Mama, what's wrong?" "Nothing. I'm so happy it's Thanksgivin', but I don't have anything to feed y'all." That's true. She didn't have anything to feed us. We had this ?gold back there?, eating fried chicken and hoecakes instead of the goose.

SL: Yeah.

SP: But everybody else turkey, ham, and ice cream.

SL: Yeah.

SP: She—well, she did make a sweet potato pie. Shoot, man, that was as good as any of 'em.

SL: It is good. So did all the houses that you lived in—did they have electricity and running water?

SP: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

SL: Because that's . . .

[01:21:49] SP: Now the one over the levee, we got water out of the back, and what she did over there, we didn't have—we had a bathroom. It had runnin' water and the essentials there but not in the bathtub. And just an old shotgun house, and Mama—we had a big washtub that she would wash clothes out in. We had a washboard—old, man, P&G soap, Procter & Gamble soap. Burn



you to death.

SL: Lye.

SP: She'd scrub that—those clothes and rinse 'em off and then hang 'em up and then put 'em in a big old pot and get the fire under that and boil that water a little bit, clean 'em and then hang 'em up. Man, that old soap was strong. Lye soap, P&G soap. And that—and we also took a bath in that tub. On Fridays, the girls. One at a time. She'd take a big bucket of warm water after heatin' it up on the stove with a wood stove. We had to chop kindlin' wood to build a little fire in there. And the—she'd take one girl at a time. When she was through, she didn't dump it out because it was too hard to warm that water up, so she'd pour a little warm water in with it, get the next one, dry 'em off, and then they'd go get dressed. Then I was last. "I'm gonna get in there after them girls in there?" "Get in the tub." [SL *laughs*] "Yes, ma'am." Everything was "Yes, ma'am," "No, ma'am" and "Yes, sir" and "No, sir."

SL: Yep.

[01:23:47] SP: You know, a lot of people today think that's gross. Yes, ma'am; no, ma'am; no, sir; and yes, sir. And, you know, you're revertin' back too much on integration and stuff. No, that was brought up before we ever thought about all that . . .

SL: Oh yeah.

SP: . . . stuff.

SL: Yeah. It's respect.

SP: But that's what I . . .

SL: So . . .

SP: . . . remember most about her.

[01:24:11] SL: So there wasn't—there was electricity and some running water. But there wasn't natural gas? There was a wood-burning stove there . . .

SP: [*Laughs*] Oh, no.

SL: . . . on the levee, yeah.

SP: Build a fire, and Hawkin's coal wagon would come by. Buy a bucket of coal for—I think it was a dime. And it'd last you that night and the next morning.

SL: Yeah.

SP: Put some in the kitchen stove. Not too much in the kitchen stove. Always use wood there. But in the middle bedroom where we just—well, middle bedroom, one bedroom. Put the heating stove in there, and man, that thing get red hot sometime. We stayed warm. And I don't know. I was comfortable.

[01:25:00] SL: So that held true all through your mom's life that it



was always a wood-burning stove . . .

SP: Oh yeah.

SL: . . . or a coal-burning stove she cooked on and heated the house with?

SP: That poor lady had never had the luxury of anybody. And then she wasn't able to do anything after we moved in back of my sister Becky's. We had everything there. They did have gas heat.

SL: Oh, okay.

SP: Near as I can remember I think there was. I'm not sure. Some kinda gas. And, yeah. Yeah, electric stove—that's what it was. I don't remember any more than that. I think it was heated, but I don't know. I honestly can't remember.

SL: Yeah.

[01:25:58] SP: And I was older than I was when I was little. I just—I really don't recall that detail. I know we took a bath, and we didn't know how act. And we were warm, and, course, Mama, like I said, was able to get in there and cook every day. Every now and then, she'd get in there and cook up a storm. Then she'd have to go lay back down. She was hurtin'. That's when we didn't know what was wrong with her.

SL: Yeah. So did you—did your mom ever take you to church? Did

you ever go to church growin' up?

SP: I honestly don't remember if she did or not. The girls, Becky and Teen—I think she was with us one time. I'm not sure. I don't remember.

SL: Uh-huh. But . . .

SP: I know we got acquainted with Reverend Kirkbride, one of our favorite people. If you're listening, Mom, don't kill me, but, see, I go to Saint Mary's Catholic Church now.

SL: [*Laughs*] Well, that's okay.

SP: It doesn't matter what church you go to.

SL: That's right.

SP: There's only one God anyway.

SL: Yeah. Well, so—but you did go to church as a child?

SP: Yes.

SL: But not always with your mom. I mean, the girls would go.

SP: Oh yeah.

SL: And did your father ever go to church with you at all or . . .

SP: Yeah. He—not with us, but I guess he went.

[01:27:32] SL: Yeah. So what about the—were there ever any musical instruments in the household?

SP: No.

SL: And what about . . .

SP: There was an old piano one time that you put roll paper or something in there, and it played.

SL: Player piano?

SP: Yeah. And I come home one day, and daddy was in there doin' this [mimics playing the piano]. I told him, I said there, "Where'd he learn to play that?" [SL laughs] She said, "He's not. Don't let him fool you." It was in the house when we moved there. And the people we rented from just left it there. They didn't care. They didn't want it.

SL: Yeah.

SP: Outside of that, there wasn't anything.

SL: Well, that's a pretty big deal, though, to have a piano in the home.

SP: Oh man. What you talkin' 'bout? No radio.

[01:28:25] SL: Yeah, I was gonna ask you. You never had a radio growin' up in the . . .

SP: No, never did. In that particular—when we were—moved in back in Becky's, I used to go over to her house on Saturday morning. She, as I say, lived in back of us. She had a radio. Her husband worked for a furniture store and, aw, man. I used to listen to a Western outfit outta Missouri. I've forgotten who they were, but later on through the years I started listening to the Swift Jewel

Cowboys out of Memphis. Swift and Company sponsored 'em. I knew every name in there, and I met 'em all after being grown, after growin' up. Jose Cortes, Slim Hall, all those guys. And they were just what I thought they'd be—just big cowboys, real nice people, family people. Oh, they were awesome. And—but I'd go over every Saturday morning, and then when the middle sister got married in Wabash, sometime I'd hitchhike down there and hear hers when they weren't at home or not gonna be there or somethin'. And my sister, Becky—when they were gone or doin' somethin', well, I'd hitchhike down there. Take me a couple hours, but get down there and listen to the radio. Man, that was awesome.

SL: That was big doings to be . . .

SP: Oh, great.

SL: . . . able to sit in front of a radio. Well, I'd like to, you know, I would guess that we're gonna get you into the war here in a little bit, but growin' up, the schools were segregated, of course. When you were . . .

SP: Yes, they were.

SL: And I don't know. Helena has kind of a history of racial violence, doesn't it? I mean, it's—it was kind of a . . .



[01:30:47] SP: Lemme put it to you this way. I'm goin' back to

when I was living over the levee. I didn't know anything about that. A lot of colored over there, and there used to be a little church and a little buddy of mine next—well, across the street, whatever. On a Sunday night durin' the summer, we'd go there, and they had the windows open in this church. No air-conditioning, no fans, just old cardboard fans [*unclear words*]. And at that age—I'm young there now—I wasn't too sure. I heard some of the most beautiful stuff I ever heard in my life. Beautiful. Now, I knew how to say "beautiful," and I knew what it meant. I heard my mama talk about "This is pretty, that's beautiful." And I got that word. I didn't know if it was right or wrong at the time. But—so the Afro American ministers—he came out of there. We all knew him. Daddy knew him. And get to that later on how I met Robert. But I said, "Reverend Martin," I said, "What is that they're singing?" He said, "That's called Afro American gospel blues." I said, "What's blues?" He said, "When you get old enough, I'll explain to you, Little Bill." They called me after Daddy. I was so little. He was so big. I said, "Okay." That's the last I heard of that. I used to do that on Sunday nights. We'd do that several times. God, that was beautiful. They were singing gospel blues.

SL: When you were . . .

[01:32:50] SP: And, of course, now getting back to this other—what you're saying about Helena? I could—I didn't know because over there, I had little friends that were black.



SL: Sure.

[01:33:08] SP: And sometime I'd go to school—"Hey, J. W. There he is. Look at ol' J. W. out there playin' with those blackies." "What? What's wrong with that?" I didn't know. I ain't got nobody else—no friends to play with. They were my friends. I didn't know what was goin' on. "Hey, Sonny, you gonna eat with 'em tonight?" Crap like that. I put up with that for a long time until finally, and I got a whipping for it, I beat up on one of my buddies for makin' fun of me. And sometime I had to get in a fight to get my way home. [*Clears throat*] Because I'd—"You mean you're gonna fight me on account of them?" And I said, "Well, you gonna fight me. I'm gonna fight you back." And at that time—I look like crap now—I looked like Tarzan. [*SL laughs*] I was pretty well stacked . . .

SL: Yeah.

SP: . . . as the saying goes, but I won most of my fights and beat up on 'em. And so everybody says, "What is it you like about those people?" Years later—even years later, before I went in the service. Because sometime you're walkin' down on Cherry

Street, sometime they'd walk on the other side, so they don't have to walk on the same side. And if you are on the same side, they'd get over for you to pass. And at that time, I just thought, "What's wrong?" And they're fussin' at me 'cause I'm talkin' to, well, Robert Jr. Lockwood, when I first met him in 1937 at my father's gas station. His mother used to drive an old pickup, and they lived out in Turkey Scratch out here on the other side of Marvell. And they'd come in and get the truck serviced, and that's when I first met Robert, and I saw that guitar. I said, "What is that?" "That's a guitar." I said, "You know, I've never seen one." I'd heard it on the air but didn't know what it was. And so he said, "That's a guitar." I said, "What are you gonna do with that?" Said, "Well, I'm playing at ri—Russell's or somebody around the corner over here in the back of ?us?." And I said, "Oh really?" And so Mama's gettin' the truck serviced. He said, "Next time I come in, I'll show you what it is." So they came in 'bout two weeks later, maybe three. I said, "Hey, Robert." "Yeah, Mr. Sonny." I thought, "What? He called me Mr. Sonny. I ain't no man yet." I didn't know what that was all about. [01:36:19] He said, "Come on. I'll show you what [*unclear words*]." I said, "We got to go around here in the back of the station"—the gas station. The white people all out in front

there gettin' their car serviced didn't want us—they couldn't see us back there. Sort of like fenced-in, closed a little bit, not all the way, but they couldn't see us. So he's playin' up a storm, and, man, I'm sittin' there diggin' the heck out of it.

SL: You bet.

SP: That's how I met Robert Jr. Lockwood. And I said, "Man." And I just said—I didn't know what else to say. I couldn't go into clubs. Sometime I'd sneak in the back and listen to 'em before it got dark and then leave. They didn't know I was there. I was outside. But you could hear it. And he and I became friends, and I met this—and I always get this feedback. I saw this guy the second time Robert came to town. I said, "Who's the guy with your mama?" He said, "That's her boyfriend. He lives over in Mississippi." It was Robert Johnson.

SL: Yes.

[01:37:30] SP: Well, I didn't talk to him or anything, but he waved, "Hey, you, Mr. Bill." Robert said that to me. I don't know that man. I ain't never seen him. And that was the last time I saw him. He said, "He dates my mama. He's gonna teach me how to play guitar." I said, "You already know how." He said, "Well, you'd learn a few extra licks." He always says that Robert Johnson taught him. Robert Jr. was playing guitar, I'm sure, as



well as Robert Johnson was when he started as well.

SL: Well, you know, there's all that myth . . .

SP: But, anyway . . .

SL: Yeah.

SP: . . . that racial thing—that always used to bug me, and I've never figured that out. Now always—not all the time, but just every now and then—"How's your black buddies?" I said, "Well." And daddy never would explain it. He said—I said, "I wish I was big enough, I'd fight 'em." Daddy said, "No, just keep your mouth shut. Don't say nothin'." He said, "You don't say a word to those people. They're adult people. You leave 'em alone. Don't you even—you just say 'Yes, sir' and 'No, sir.' Go on about your business." And, you know, I had a time with that for a while even after I came home. Well, no, not really, but . . .

SL: We can talk about it after you . . .

[01:39:01] SP: I got a little bit ribbed about it. But not much. I don't ever hear that anymore. Now they want to meet all my friends.

SL: You bet.

SP: James Cotton. And James is still livin'. He'll be here at our festival this year. He was from Tunica. He and his wife moved to Austin. Pinetop Perkins did, too. Pinetop died. We were over

at the funeral last year, I think, or this year. No, it was this year.

SL: It was this year.

SP: Yeah.

SL: It was just a few months ago.

SP: I had to stop and think.

SL: That's all right.

[01:39:35] SP: I'm older than dirt, and I can't remember. [*SL laughs*] But, yeah, this year I was a pallbearer. I drove over there, and Pat, his manager, she asked me, she said, "Some of 'em aren't showin' up. Do you mind?" I said, "Pat, I've got stent in my legs." I said, "I don't feel like walkin' to the cemetery now." I said, "I can walk all right, but they—I can walk from here to my car, and they get real tired and I have to sit down." And—not that bad yet, but they—durin' the end of the day, man, I've had it. So there's nothing to do about all that. But anyway, she said, "All I want you to do is sit up front." So little Carla, one of our directors here, she was with me. She says, "Sonny, sit with me." And I said, "Well"—in the front there, I was the only white guy there.

SL: Yeah.

SP: And I thought that was odd. Robert had a lot of white friends. I

mean, honest . . .

SL: Yeah.

SP: . . . white friends, not so-called white friends. You got so-called, and you got real . . .

SL: Real.

SP: . . . real white friends.

SL: Yeah.

SP: And I said, "Well, I ain't gonna worry about it." And so it was over, and I ran into a lot of Afro American people I hadn't seen in a while and had a little visit. I didn't go the plantation Sunday. They were havin' a party. They always celebrate, you know, like that.

SL: Yeah, sure.

SP: And I didn't go. I didn't want to. That's—I get enough entertaining. I like to remember the way he was.

SL: Yeah.

[01:41:22] SP: But anyway, I don't know. I am so glad a lotta people aren't—a lotta people still hold it against desegregation today. And—but I don't know, our town's kind of grown up a little bit. And we're not all the way there yet. I probably get a lotta flack on that, but I don't think so. We still got a long way to go yet.

SL: Well, a lot of places still have a long way to go.

SP: I mean, it's not a matter of saying, "Hey" . . .

SL: Yeah.

SP: . . . "you're my friend now. I treat you right, and you treat me right." Huh-uh. It's not that way anymore. Son, if you don't mean it, don't talk to anybody that way. If—racism is a dirty word to me. I don't mean to bring churches or anybody into it, but my opinion, I thought God created the heavens and the earth and everything in it. Right?

SL: Right.

SP: Didn't he?

SL: Yeah.

[01:42:40] SP: He created you, me, black people, Chinese, Japanese. I don't even hate Japanese people anymore. I know that's corny but . . .

SL: No, that was real . . .

SP: When you come—well, I won't get into that. If you make fun of a person, well, no matter what he is, I have been taught—now, I don't think they would lie to me, you make fun of God's creations.

SL: That's a good way.

SP: And I'm guilty of that. I have been guilty of that. Robert used

to stay at my house sometime when he would come here—he and Annie. He's since married again, and now they're both gone. But Robert'd say, "Hey, white boy, you gonna mix me a drink like yours?" He's drinkin' this heavy bourbon, you know, good stuff. Expensive, too. And he drinks it down the hatch—and scotch. He loves his scotch. No, I had my one martini and forget it.

SL: Yeah. [*Laughter*]

SP: But there's no sense for the word racism to be in our books anymore. I'm—maybe I'm gettin' on a high horse and don't know what I'm sayin', but I believe what I'm sayin', hat I believe, I'll put it that way. What y'all believe, that's your business.

SL: Yeah.

SP: You're the one's gotta answer when you go to heaven.

SL: Let's pause just for a second. Let's pause tape.

[Tape stopped]

[01:44:24] SL: We were talkin' about the racial elements growin' up when you were a kid. And it's not an uncommon thing with the folks that I interview.

SP: No.

SL: You know, you get friendships, preschool friendships that are

mixed race. And then all of a sudden when it comes time to go to school, the friends that you grew up with are goin' over to this school, and you're goin' over to that school, and those relationships start to kind of fade and just that public split . . .

SP: You know why . . .

SL: . . . kind of perpetuates.

SP: You know what that is? Hadn't been brought up right.

SL: Yeah.

[01:45:04] SP: You haven't been taught. This is a different era.

And I don't mean to sound like a minister or somethin'. I'm just tryin' to tell you, "Can't you see the light? You're makin' fun of people." Now maybe I'm wrong. The good Almighty is tryin' to bring us together to learn to live together, to work together, to love together. Now, one thing the Afro American people and the white people do—they don't believe in it as much. They just don't believe in it. Now, I've been told this by all of my Afro American friends. And Cotton's one of 'em. Cotton's married to—Janet is—I forget her name—Jackie is a white girl. Cotton says, "Well, I had my own. But I wasn't happy, and she's had her own, and she wasn't happy." That's a different story. It didn't mean you're supposed to go out and interracial marriage. That's a thing of the past. They do it today. You have to learn

to live with the present people and love 'em just like you would if you were their age again. You have to learn to be sociable, loving, and kind. That's it. You have to do that. [*Pounding sound*] I mean, nobody's holdin' a gun to your head, sayin', "Well, I don't know, my grandfather this, my grandfather that—told me no—I got some of my best friends that are black." Yeah, you sure have. You think you have. You ain't nothing but an idiot to him when you talk like that. Why can't you just say you got a friend? I want you to meet my friend. You don't have to say whether he's white, black, or whatever. I'm gettin' on my damn high horse now, but . . .

[01:47:24] SL: Well, that's all right. You've earned it. You're—it's fine to do that. That's okay. Listen, so the—when your mom passed, I just get the impression she was kind of the glue that held your family together. That—I mean, everyone was around her, and when she passed, and you ended up livin' with one of your—your youngest sister and your father.

SP: Right.

SL: That didn't last a long time because, I mean, obviously your dad didn't have the skill set that your mom had for holding a family together and doing all the things that she did. So it wasn't—I mean, at a fairly early age, I think you may have been fifteen

years old or so, you kinda went your own way.

SP: I was fifteen. And dad says, "I think you can get a job at the grocery store uptown." I told him I was lookin' for work.

Because he—there was no way he could handle it. You know, we ?fiend? for ourselves. But we stuck together, but he was kinda gun shy about that we love each other. He didn't have to be gun shy. We knew he loved us. We knew he was havin' a tough time. Well, anyway, to make a long story short, I went to work with him one—shortly after that when I told him I wanted to get a job. And he told me about this grocery store. I said, "Well, I'll look into it." And I hadn't. I was still in school in the eighth grade, and I had failed a year or two. Sometime when you don't get somethin' to eat, it's hard to go to school.

SL: Yeah.

[01:49:32] SP: Keep your sanity. You're hungry, and you don't know it. But you see all the other kids eating, and your mind isn't working. But any—that's neither here nor there right now, and so I overheard Mr. Appling, Mr.—oh, I can't think of these names. Some of the people in the banks, Francis Thompson and a bunch of 'em. I don't remember their names, but they were all talking in the station one day. And I heard, "You mean Sam and his brother-in-law?" "Yeah. Goin' to open a radio station." So I





said, "A radio station?" So I asked Daddy about that later. He said, "Well, you know, we don't have a radio station here. They're gonna open up one over the Floyd Truck Line buildings." I'll get to that in moment.

SL: Okay.

SP: Tell you about that.

SL: Okay.

SP: And I said, "Hmm, I love radio." Used to hear the Swift Jewel Cowboys, and even back then I told my father—I said, "You know, someday I want to be in radio and all that good stuff." He said, "You'll never make it. You don't know anythin' about all that. All they do is talk and play music." But anyway, I found out who—what it was. They had applied—what it was—Floyd, Franklin, and Anderson. Sam Anderson was a superintendent of the schools at Nettleton and also locally out here at Barton, I think. And his brother-in-law owned the furniture store in West Helena—John Franklin. And then Quinn Floyd owned a truck line business, and his name was Quinn Floyd. So . . .

SL: FFA.

[01:51:35] SP: So they all got together talkin' about it, and they were—decided to call it—see, anything east of the Mississippi—or west of the Mississippi is K, and anything east of there is W, you

know. Or in that area. So they decided to call it Floyd, Franklin, Anderson, KFFA radio. Now, then I think it was 1210 or whatever it—somethin' on the air. And I heard about that. I hadn't—it hadn't quite soaked in yet. So time went on. This was, like, in May.

SL: [Nineteen] forty, [19]41?

SP: No. [Nineteen] forty-one. No, [19]40.

SL: Okay.

[01:52:25] SP: They were talking. Then the following August in [19]41, I heard 'em sayin' they were gonna open this. So, well, I was almost—not grown, but I had plenty of sense, so to speak, so I went over to the Floyd Truck Line buildin'. It's on the second floor, and Mr. Anderson—I knew him as—I knew his face. He didn't know who I was. I told him who I was, and he said, "Well, Sonny, what can I do for you?" I told him Sonny Payne. I don't go by Bill, you know. And I said, "Well, I've always liked radio, listening to it. But I've always—it made me happy. I just wanted to do somethin' in it, talk on it or whatever." He said, "Well, you got your homework?" And I said, "No, sir." He said, "Why don't you do this? You bring me your homework"—and now they're on the second floor, and you had to climb a flight of steps to the first floor—to their office. Everything was in that

one floor. Control room, everything. Beautiful. That's part of it over there. [Points to his right]

SL: Yeah.

SP: And—but anyway, soundproof studio, the whole works. So anyway, I showed up. I said, "Here I am, Mr. Anderson." That was the day before they had the grand opening. People there and everything. And he said, "This is your homework?" I said, "Yes, sir." "That's it?" And I said, "Yes, sir." "Well, okay." He said, "Now you asked me for a job." And I said, "Yes, sir." And he said, "I can't pay you very much." Well, I didn't know what pay was anyway. [01:54:33] I really didn't. That's stupid, but I didn't. I said, "I don't care." I just wanted a job. So he said, "Wait here just a minute." And I was at the door going up three more steps and into the main office. And he come back out the door, and he says, "Come on up here." So I went and opened the door, and he had this broom and a mop and, I guess, scooper—whatever the thing is. And he said, "Now I want you to take this." And I said, "What's that?" He said, "You never seen a broom or mop before?" And I said, "Well, yes, sir. My mama had one." He said, "You got one, too." I said, "What do I do with that? When do I go on the air?" He said, "You'll go on the air when I tell you." I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "Come on, and

I'll show you." He said, "The first thing you do is sweep under the AP machines, Associated Press. And offices, under the desk. And then you mop. Beautiful floor, hardwood, you know, with the whatever—carpet. Not carpet, but linoleum. And so I did, and he said, "Now you need to rinse that mop out." He was telling me how to do that. Well, he showed me how because I didn't know. He said, "Now when you're through, you come back and see me." I said, "Yes, sir." So I went back and saw him, and he said, "Let's see, you've been here, what, two hours cleanin' that up." He said, "Have you gotta be anywhere?" I said, "No." Daddy and I were livin' out on Cherry Street at that time in this apartment, and my little sister had left then. And I told him I had a job. They want me to come back in tonight. He said, "Well." He said, "Well, go ahead." He said, "You're not in school." I said, "Yeah, I am. I had to do my homework." "You had to—has she got you in partial summer school now?" I didn't tell him that. I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "What'd you skip?" And I said, "I didn't skip anything." He said, "Well, you didn't—must have done something." He said, "Well, I guess that's all right." Now, mind you, now, this is like August. We hadn't even opened yet.

SL: Yeah.

[01:57:22] SP: And so he said to come—when I came back, he said to come on in the control room. "What's the control room?" I didn't know. I went in and all this stuff like that [points to his left]. And he brought back [raises hand over his head to suggest width] two boxes of 78 recordings.

SL: Wow.

SP: Records. He said, "You take this bottle, and you squirt a little liquid on there, and you wipe it off." We had a special cloth, sort of like a smooth . . .

SL: Lint-free . . .

SP: . . . silk.

SL: . . . cloth, yeah.

SP: Little wool in there.

SL: Yeah.

[01:58:02] SP: He said, "You clean those records with that." "Huh." "And then you change the needles," and he said, "When the announcers come on duty when we start up," said they'll change 'em every hour or so. Just—you get those needles about a hundred of 'em for fifty cents, maybe a dollar. And so that's how that started. And so I didn't go back. He told me not to come back until first part of November. I said, "November?" He said, "Well, we're not open yet. But we're goin' to be, and we're

gonna have our grand opening." I didn't know what that was. [SL laughs] So then I went back upstairs, and he said, "Now I've gotta stand out here with the ribbon cuttin'" or whatever that was. And I didn't know anything. And he said, "You stay in here, and then we'll open." So they had the big ado, blah, blah, blah. And everybody looked around the station. They all left. He said, "Now clean up after them." And then we were on the air. And we had John Paul Jones, Herb Langston, that kid up there [points to his right]—Smith, and two or three other guys. I forget their names. But they were all working in there. Hugh went to school at night because our—because the engineer was teaching us how to operate the board and how to talk. So that's how that came about. And so at nighttime three nights a week, he would teach us how to operate the control board, how to talk, and when not to talk. "If you didn't hear any sounds, don't say a word. There's a mic open."

SL: There we go. Okay, we're gonna—we've gotta change tapes again?

BP: Yeah.

SL: Is that right?

BP: Yes, sir.

SL: Okay.

SP: He went like that [points with two fingers to his right]. I thought it meant for us [*SL claps*] to get off.

SL: Three minutes. He was givin' us the two- and three-minute warning we're about to run out of tape. [*Claps*]

[Tape stopped]

[02:00:34] SL: Sonny, we've done your show. We've had lunch. We're not takin' a nap. We're gonna move forward on to tape three.

SP: You mean I don't get a nap?

SL: Not yet.

SP: Go ahead. I'll put up with you.

SL: I appreciate that.

SP: If you can put up with me, I'll put up with you.

SL: I can do that. I can do that. Well, if I remember correctly, we had gotten you hired at the radio station. You're probably fif . . .

SP: I hadn't had a raise in that place in twenty years. What do you mean hire? [*Laughs*] Go ahead. I'm teasing.

SL: But you had to be all of what? Fifteen, sixteen years old?

[02:01:14] SP: As a matter of fact, I was sixteen the day it opened.

SL: You'd actually pushed the broom, though . . .

SP: Well, yeah . . .

SL: . . . and mopped the floor . . .

SP: . . . I pushed the broom before that.

SL: . . . a little bit before that.

SP: November 29 is my birthday. And I had been there since November the fourteen, two weeks. It was a lot of fun.

SL: Now, you know, the—Mr. Anderson was sayin', well, he'll put you on the air when he decides to put you on.

SP: When he's ready.

SL: When you're ready. And . . .

SP: But I asked him—I said, "Why? What I got to do?" [*SL laughs*]



When that engineer—he said, "I'm holdin' classes twice a"—three—started out twice a week and then three times—Monday, Wednesday, and Friday nights. Hour and a half, two hours. And the engineer'd teach you how to talk. I said, "I already know how to talk." "No, you don't. [*SL laughs*] I'm talkin' about on the radio." He said, "How 'bout that newscast?" I said, "So I read it." He said, "You don't read a newscast." "What do you mean, don't read it? It's there." He said, "Sunshine, let me tell you. Just cool it and listen to the old man here. You wanna go work for me, you do as I tell you." I said, "Yes, sir." I got the meaning. You don't horse around with him. Well, what he means by that you're being taught to read. You don't read a newscast. You tell it. Well, we didn't even have TV then.



SL: Yeah.

[02:03:01] SP: And so I didn't know what he was talkin' about. Now that I see TV in this day and age, I know what he was talking about. They look at you and talk about it, and they got a monitor up there, but they'll get the start of a story, and then sorta in between the lines remember most of it and the tail end of it. That's how you present a newscast. In other words, it's like me talkin' to you, saying, "Hey, there's, you know, there's a house on fire down here. Did you know that?" "No, I didn't know that." Well, you don't really say that, but it's like you're talkin' to somebody. And—so then—"Scott, today at three thirty, there was a house fire on Sycamore Street. A four-alarm deal, one of the worst in the history of Helena." [02:03:57] You're lookin' at that, but you're telling about it. "So far, nobody has been hurt," and blah, blah, blah. That's the way you have to do a newscast, and same way with a commercial on the radio. You don't read the darn thing. You tell 'em about it. Like the only one that I—I don't even do that one right anymore. It was the Shack Up Inn. I was tellin' about it. I didn't have it written. I just had some notes there. But I knew what I wanted to say. When you first come to Helena, they all wanna know about the blues. Well, good place to start is here because, as I said, a

percentage of 'em are born and raised here. You learn a lot here. But over at this farm, the Shack Up Inn, they have a little hot—mini-hotel type of thing—motel. And when you first look at it, it's redone out of shotgun houses. That's what we used to call old, run-down places. And, anyway, that's what he was trying to get through my head. "You're talking about a newscast. You're talkin' about a plate that's on sale over at the Henry's Drug Store or somethin'." He said, "That's what we need. And that's what I meant." I said, "Yes, sir." From then on, you get the hang of the story, and one time I had a hour newscast at nine o'clock at night. And we had an engineer on the board, and he was switchin' to me. Not straight. We had pauses in between for commercials and a weather forecast for the guy next to me—things of that nature. They had to teach you how to read. And I'm in the eighth grade. And I welcomed that because I still wasn't all that sharp. Every time you run across a word, you look that sucker up, and you find out the meaning of it and see if it incorporates into the news story. If it does, use it. If it doesn't, forget it. Find another way. [02:06:15] There's a lot to radio than most people realize. When you—well, I sell airtime, and when you sell airtime, you have to know what would be good for your customer. Here, I got a furniture store.

It doesn't have a sale every day or every week, but he has to have a reason for people wanting to shop there. First thing comes to your mind is service. That's the first thing that comes to your—quality, delivery. Then you think, "Well, maybe I got a weather available. That would be excellent for him." Now, here's a guy that wants to be on the air every day without paying an enormous price. Well, when you get a monthly weather, a monthly news, they're very reasonable. So he's on every day that way, except Saturday and Sunday. You got your customer. You got it made. You have to know what that man needs and what he wants. And if he says, "I don't like this, I don't like that," you have to find a way to soothe him over and find somethin' he does like. And if you talk to him long enough, it'll come out what he does like.

SL: Yeah.

[02:07:47] SP: Now if you don't talk to him long enough, you're not gonna find out anything. When I had people on the show, I had to feel 'em out a little bit. When that lady was from Kentucky, the only thing I thought of—"How'd you get mixed up with these?"

SL: Yeah.

SP: So I put it in such a way that it sounded like you've known each

other, and we're all from the same church.

SL: Yeah.

SP: See, so that gave me . . .

SL: Comfortable.

SP: . . . somethin' to go on. This is what radio is all about. That's what I've had to learn.

SL: Okay, now, you know, one thing that we hadn't talked about so far, and I think it's a part of your life at this age, was music. Now you had—we talked a little about meeting Robert Jr. But—and Robert Johnson. But didn't you—weren't you playing an instrument at some point in time?

[02:08:52] SP: That all started after I'd joined the radio station.

Saturday mornings from Wabash, Arkansas, Old Man Copeland had the Copeland Cowboys, and they played around town. One of 'em was Joe Bragdon, a painter.

SL: Okay.

SP: Professional painter.

SL: All right.

SP: And he was a bass player, and that's how I got interested in playing the bass. And one thing led to another, and I began to like music, and I liked that bass. He showed me a few odds and ends. And down through the years, I took lessons, and then the

rest was history. I went on my own. But, anyway, the music part was part of it. I've loved music. I used to hear it on my sister's radio, several others back then when we were on the air. Other stations. And one night from the hotel Peabody and the skyway, you'd hear big bands like—we'll just say Roger Maltby or somebody—bandleader.

SL: Yeah.

SP: They were callin' 'em hotel bands. Mickey Finn. That means little eight- or ten-piece band, and they played strictly for balls and dancing.

SL: Yeah.

SP: You know, tippy-toe stuff. [*SL laughs*] Pardon me. And that used to fascinate the stew out of me. I loved it.

SL: Well, now, of course, we're talkin' upright bass.

[02:10:39] SP: And, well, back in those days, most of those bands used tuba. Not a big marching-band tuba. I forgot what they call 'em now. A little—about half that size. And Guy Lombardo used it. Freddy Martin's orchestra out at California used it. Freddy used it a long time. Then he switched over to bass. And Guy Lombardo's band always had one. And then they switched over, too, and then the bass started takin' notice. The bass plays the same as a piano. The same notes, same everything. I

didn't read a note of music. Not one note. But the arranger of the band—when I was playing in bands, the arranger would arrange charts. Pick the same thing that the piano player's playin'. A flat, D minor, C sharp—when you knew all those chords, you knew everything. And that—then you didn't need any music. C sharp? You know where that is on your instrument. Hit it. Do your thing. Then the rest is ad-libbing mostly. Some of the bands I played with—some of 'em didn't have music. Can you believe that? Twelve-, fifteen-piece band, no music. They had the name of the songs, and it did have where trumpets come in, trombones come in, where their part of it. But they got so used to each other playin' the same thing every night, they knew what everybody else was supposed to do. But for the most—90 percent of 'em all had music, but some of 'em didn't. But they knew what the other had. "You can take the next solo. I'll take this one." They just look at you, you know what they were talkin' about.

SL: So did you learn to play—hear—read music?

SP: No.

SL: Never did?

SP: Never did.

SL: Now so this didn't start . . .

[02:12:44] SP: Played by ear—you can—when you hear the piano picker after I learned, that's how you learned. He's got the same positions, hundred and twenty positions on an upright bass. Well, he's got that many on a piano, but I bet he don't use half of those in a song. You don't use that many. You don't use that many playing bass. The rest of it you can play by ear as long as you're in the right key. And you can get away with it.

SL: So—but that didn't—that side of your life didn't really start until you started workin' at the radio station, is that right?

SP: It didn't start then, no.

SL: So now you didn't—once you started at the radio station, you didn't stay there. You—how long did your work there before you . . .

[02:13:35] SP: I went—I worked there until 1942, December. Sam Anderson and I were doing a remote outta West Helena Furniture Company. And in the back of that company was a mini-deal of what we call—now call Phillips County County Fair. Now it's tri-county fair, and back then it was just called little Phillips County Fair being held in Helena, Arkansas. And it was a—used to be a Bobbie Brooks factory, a little bit of everything—clothes and so forth. So anyway, durin' that period of time when they were havin' this little fair, county fair, they booked the Swift

Jewel Cowboys.

SL: Okay.

SP: Yes. My favorite . . .

SL: Your favorite radio band. Yeah.

SP: And I got to meet all my folks. Meet 'em all, and so I was operatin' the controls. And all I had to do was switch mics when—on the stage mic for Sam when he wanted to talk, so—that's when he came over to me, and we had a good crowd comin' in. He said, "Gimme the floor mic." I said, "They're not through, boss." He said, "Gimme the floor mic now." "Why?" Switch it over to him, and that place was packed, packed with people. So even the Cowboys was—"What? He's interrupting us?" You know, didn't know what was goin' on. He said, "I want everybody to stay calm, but the Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor and we're at war." That place, as I told you, was packed. Now we didn't have streetcars. Well, in the old days, they had a few buses, but they didn't run that regular. Everybody had cars. I kid you not. In less than a half hour, that place was completely empty when he made that announcement.

[02:15:59] The Cowboys played one more song, and then they said everybody would be comfortable goin' home. People are cryin'. I said, "Where the hell is Pearl Harbor?" He said, "I'll tell



you when we get to the station." He said, "You're goin' back with me." And I had to—went out there with him, so I went back with him, and that was four thirty or five in the afternoon. And he beamed it in on the console and Mutual network—that's who we were affiliated with having. And I said, "Damn, what's goin' on?" I had no earthly idea where it was. He said, "You've heard of Hawaii?" He said, "That's in Pearl Harbor right there." And I said, "What'd they do that for?" Well, I'm goin' down a sink here, but in the [19]30s, you know, the United States was sellin' all kinds of steel and contraband and everything to the Japanese. You know what they were doin' with that steel? They were told this before the war broke out. I can prove that. I mean, the networks even brought it over. They were sellin' the steel, and they were takin' it to make warships out of. In fact, some Englishmen—they're not gonna admit it, you know that now, but he told them, he says—he was over there—he said, "I have gotten word through the grapevine they're getting ready to bomb somebody, but who, we don't know." "Oh." Well, naturally, everybody's tryin' to blame everybody else. Well, when that happened, well, we went back to station, stayed up, I got home about midnight. We signed off at ten o'clock.

SL: Yeah.

[02:17:55] SP: We stayed on a little past midnight. I went home, went to bed. And so I learned a whole lot more the next morning. Then I had some idea of what I was talkin' about when somebody asked me. I had no earthly idea what I was talkin' about in the first place.

SL: Right.

SP: But nevertheless, we went on and on. And I couldn't get a raise. Sam told me—he says, "You know, I'm in the Navy Reserve. I'm gonna have to go in. I wish you'd stay." He said, "You're not old enough to get in the army, anyway." I said—well, I had the idea in my mind, if I went in and volunteered—I was worried about my dad. My mother had already passed away, but I worried about my dad. I didn't—I said, "If I go in, he won't have to." He said, "Whoever told you that?" I said, "I don't know. They said that the sons go, and the father can be exempt." I had heard all this garbage.

SL: Yeah.

[02:19:09] SP: Where I had heard it, I didn't know. But I had heard something to that effect. He said, "You can't do it. You're not old enough. You have to be eighteen. Had to be eighteen years old. Not seventeen, eighteen." So the draft board was up—this is 1942 I'm talkin' about now. The draft board was in the bank

buildin', the Solomon Building. Mr. Walter Lucy was the head of it, and Sam says, "What are your intention?" I said, "I'm gonna get Mr. Lucy to give me some papers. I'm goin' to have Daddy to sign 'em." He said, "You know your daddy's not gonna sign those papers." I said, "I think so." And I won't go into specific details, but I got the old man feelin' good, and he signed it. [*SL laughs*] And Mr. Lucy said, "Bill, you know I can turn you down because I know that you're not old enough." I said, "He just signed those papers." He said, "But I've known you all your life. You forget that." I said, "I'm goin' in." Well, he got me in. I told Sam I was leavin'. This was on a Monday, and I was leavin' on Thursday to go to Little Rock by bus. They notified me. Sent me everything. They—this bus was—they had all of us on there that were going. And some of 'em weren't from here. Most of 'em were from around towns elsewhere. So we—on the ?lay? I left, and mind you, now, all my sisters are gone.

SL: Yeah.

[02:21:02] SP: Nobody but Pop. Got about twenty miles out of Helena, and I start—I cried all the way to Little Rock. I'd never been away from home.

SL: Oh.

SP: I didn't know—had no . . .

SL: That's a big trip.

SP: . . . idea what I was gettin' into. Big shot. "I'm gonna play it big. I'm gonna be a solider." You think you're so darn smart. You're not as smart as you think you are. That was my conception of life. That's what I had in the back of my mind. "I'll show 'em." When I got to training camp—shoo. I got to Little Rock. They put me on KP. I hadn't even had time to see where I was sleepin'. [*SL laughs*] They took our barracks bags and put 'em in the barracks, and they gave us all of our clothes and stuff. So I was on KP, and I got off at midnight. [*Yawns*] I got into the bed—makin' me sleepy thinkin' about it. [*SL laughs*] I got into bed. I said, "Well, I'm tired." And about an hour and a half, two hours later, somebody wakin' me up. "All right, Payne, get out of there. Get on your khakis, your dungarees"—whatever. Dungarees? What? And we got our clothes on. I said, "Where we goin'? I just got in bed." [*SL laughs*] We boarded a train. Couldn't see out the damn windows. They painted 'em black. [02:22:47] I said, "What'd y'all do that for?" He said, "Saboteurs." They couldn't see the lights inside the train when that train's goin' across the country. So we stayed there. Then they get us, and durin' the day, it didn't matter. They gonna see you anyway. See somethin'. So we go to one

of the coaches and eat our breakfast, supper, or whatever. We were on that thing for two days and two nights, I think, or longer. I think it was three days and two nights. And then I woke up, and it was daylight. And some of the guys had the windows raised. "What? We just painted 'em." They raised 'em, it was daylight, and we were walkin' around. We were on the parade ground of Camp Callan, California, six miles north of LA—I mean, of La Jolla.

SL: You had no idea . . .

SP: Six miles . . .

SL: . . . where you were goin' when you were on the train.

[02:23:59] SP: Six miles north of La Jolla. At Camp Callan, California. La Jolla—oh, that's the most beautiful city I ever saw. Most expensive place I ever saw, too. And my aunt and uncle lived out there then, and they worked at Lockheed Aircraft. They had moved from Paragould out there back in the [19]30s, the late [19]30s. They were building aircraft then, too. Mh-hmm, sure was. And I didn't know it at the time. And they had a house—back then you had to take a bridge. They lived at Coronado. Had to take a ferry to get to their property out there. Lot of people lived out there on that island. And when I got a weekend pass—didn't get one the first two weeks. Sixteen

weeks of basic training. The third week I got a pass. You had to know all your general orders, eleven of 'em, before you could get a pass. It took me forever to get those darn things. [SL laughs] But I got 'em down. And from there we left—yeah, we left on another train. And—but it wasn't that secretive, but we went from there to [yawns]—pardon me . . .

SL: That's all right.

SP: . . . Oakland, California. No, it wasn't Oakland. Monterey.

SL: Monterey, m'kay.

SP: And Fort Ord—that was the name of that camp. And Signal Corps—they put us in the Signal Corps.

SL: Now did they just do that, or did you request the Signal Corps?

[02:25:52] SP: No, when they interviewed us and everything, wanted to know what you did in civilian life. And I said, "Well, really never had an honest job." I said, "I worked for a radio station." "Good [snaps fingers], you told us"—they put us in the Signal Corps. Didn't ask me anything else. And I operated switchboards. I even set some of 'em up. BD-91 switchboards and field telephones. You ever see a field telephone?

SL: Just on—in the movies.

SP: You're out in the middle of nowhere and you—it's already hooked up to the command post and ?matter in? signal. You got it.

Signal goes right to that mat. And stuff like that. And that's where I stayed till I got out. And goin' to town various times [*hiccups*]*—*pardon me*—*I learned to love music even more, and I missed it. So I started foolin' around with the bass. I had before. Met several other guys that were bass players.

SL: Yeah.

SP: You're giving me the hiccups. [*SL laughs*] But anyway*—*well, what brought that on? I said, "I guess I'll"*—*I don't know what I was gonna do when I got out. So I took a few lessons and got hooked up with some of the*—*I still had a couple of years to go yet. Hooked up with some of the musicians there and learned a lot. Picked up by listening, talking. And they helped me out a lot. And then when I got out, I went out on the road. And I got hooked up with the union. They get your gigs for you with bands. Some bandleaders say, "I'm comin' through there. I got a*—*I need a bass player for two nights." I worked as a side man. That way you make more money.

SL: Yeah.

[02:27:57] SP: Then eventually I hooked up with big units.

SL: Well, before [*vehicle passes*] we get you out of the army, you went to the Aleutian Islands. Is that right?

SP: Yeah, the first time.

SL: And the—that's out . . .

SP: We went to the Aleutian Islands . . .

SL: . . . that's part of the arpeggio of Alaska?

SP: Oh yes.

SL: Right, and it—and . . .

SP: Yeah, don't—let me give you a little tip on that. A lot of people, "What are you doin' in Alaska?" The islands are separate . . .

SL: Yeah.

SP: There's a chain of 'em. They don't have any trees on them. No trees. Attu, Kiska—wasn't any Japs on Kiska. They'd left the fires burning. See, there was nothin' but caves in the side of those big mountains. [02:28:50] They'd already left there and hightailed it to an island, what we call Paramushir. That's in that—off, just a few miles south of that chain. Dig this. Russians on one side of the island; Japanese on the other side. They got along beautifully. I hadn't figured that one out yet. And—but anyway, went from the Aleutian Islands. Attu—now we're twenty-one days on Attu. No trees, no shelter, all we had was in the caves. So we'd always telephone to the big guns in the navy out there in the harbor, eight miles out, maybe ten miles out. They'd fire those big guns and get 'em outta there, and what few—there twenty-one days. Some of 'em



surrendered; some didn't. I don't get into that. We got that over with and then back to Fort Ord, and then my buddies said, "Hey, we got summer clothes. You know where we're goin'?" And I said, "Either Hawaii or somewhere. We're goin' where it's warm." We did. Way down under. And we passed Hawaii and a bunch of places goin', but we didn't stop there or nothin', and island hopped here and there, settin' up communications. I don't get into that. I'd rather forget 'em. But anyway, New Guinea wasn't bad at all. We got set up and did our jobs, and then it was almost time for me to reenlist, and I said, "[*Unclear words*] there wasn't nothin'—anything I could do about it. I'm stuck." So, automatically, I was in there for another period.

SL: Yeah.

[02:31:02] SP: Not a whole period, but I was in there until I got everything straightened out. So we were comin' back as—on the ship, we heard 'em sayin'—I was on the—well, let me put it another way. They were flyin' me back 'cause I had got a little ear damage. But anyway, they flew us to—we were talkin' about that a moment ago, Vancouver, Washington—not British Columbia, but Washington, across the river from Portland, Oregon. Barnes General Hospital, and that's where we went on the way back. And that's when we heard the war was just about

over. And we had heard about it that it was comin'. In Europe, it had ended. Well, for all practical purposes.

SL: Yeah.

SP: Where we were, we didn't know anything about all that stuff.

But that brought me back, and I was tryin' to make decisions on what to do and when I cut out.

SL: Yeah.

SP: And Sam said, "Well, come on back, and we'll do a little work." I

came back for about a month, and then I went on the road as a band—in a band. Several unions put me in several bands, one type or another. Made a little money that way.

SL: Were that mostly big-band stuff?

[02:32:40] SP: Well, yeah, for the most part. We had some bands you probably never heard of. Abe Lyman and His Californians.

SL: Yeah. Uh-huh.

SP: They're way out in California. Abe and Alvino Rey. Alvino Rey.

He married one of the Bennett Sisters. And I got a gig with them out there. But I didn't stay too long. I—long enough to make a dollar or two and make my decisions. So then I went on the road with a couple of bands, and these one-nighters will kill you.

SL: Yeah.

SP: Especially when you have twenty-two of 'em in a row. You play, you get to a town, and you play nine to one or nine to twelve. Then you load up, ride the bus to the next hotel, go to bed until about three or four in the afternoon, load your stuff up and get ready to play and then go the next town after—that got to be pretty old.

SL: Yeah.

SP: So I called the old man. I had enough. And my boss—and he says, "Well, why don't you do this—just—when are you comin'?" I said, "I don't know yet. I gotta find out how long the gig is." And they gave us about another two weeks, and I told him.

SL: Yeah.

SP: He said, "Well, ?call? now. I'll give you the show back. You remember your show?" I said, "Oh, the one where I screwed up the flour and the biscuits?" [*SL laughs*] And I'll tell you about that later, but he said, "Yeah. That's the one. And then you can sell airtime." Well, I had heard—knew through our secretary that those people made big money sellin' airtime. So prior to that—I'll make it long and short 'cause I don't like to think about things too much of the past, but I had a failed marriage. And I had a beautiful daughter, and she passed away some years ago. And I still have her granddaughter. And my former bride, she

passed away several years ago. When I came home, then I married Josephine Forte, *F-O-R-T-E*. They call 'em ?For-tie?. But I married her, and we were married almost forty years. And that's sorta cheatin' a little bit, but that's how I brought it around, and I came home. And I played a little while, and I stopped. I haven't touched my instrument in ages. I don't have a desire to anymore. I like to listen to big units.



SL: Yeah.

[02:35:31] SP: And everybody says, "Well, don't you know that song by now?" "I'm not listening to the song. I'm listening to the instruments."

SL: Difference.

SP: "What do you mean, instruments?"

SL: Yeah.

SP: Well, I was playin' one of 'em before we went on the air today. I was playin' one about that trumpet player. Nice trumpet there. I'm listenin' to that musician, the way he handles himself. And I'm listenin' to the way he improvises, and it's like he's tellin' you a beautiful story.

SL: Talkin' to you.

[02:36:05] SP: "Oh, I didn't know that. Where's the song comin' in?" I said, "He's playin' it, dum-dum." [*SL laughs*] "What do

you mean, you listen to the instrument?" If you don't hear the musician, then you're not listening to the song.

SL: What were some of the big bands that you played with before you laid it down?

SP: Charlie Spivak, Ted Weems. Not long. Just shorties. And Sammy Kaye one time. And then hooked up with a Western band one time. I didn't last long with them. I didn't know his music—we knew each other pretty well.

SL: Yeah.

SP: Tex Ritter, but Tex had a nice family. One of my buddies that I was in the service with, Spud Davis, he played guitar with him. Spud says, "Hey, you can get a gig with him." I said, "I don't play that stuff." I—everything is two-beat, you know, mostly. You don't get into the jazz field . . .

SL: Right.

SP: . . . the big units.

SL: Yeah.

[02:37:04] SP: And I had a lot of fun. And I have no regrets. I—if I lived all my regrets I've had, I'd be like so any other people,

SOL.

SL: Yeah.

SP: Outta luck. And—but I have been so blessed. I don't mean by

me. My Maker. I don't know why. But He watches over all of us for a different reason. And the one thing—the only regret I do have—I keep harpin' on this same thing, but I can't help it. I wanted a education so bad, and I coulda gotten it. I didn't have sense enough to do it. First job I applied for—"How far'd you go in school, eighth grade? Can't use you. I need somebody with a education—type," blah, blah. "What?" And you don't do that. I wanted to—I had, as I say, I used to be a fanatic dreamer. Get a good education, grow up to be a big football player. Well, I didn't grow very big. [*SL laughs*] But at one time, I weighed about two hundred pounds. I was pretty well built. But now I'm older and shrunk and lost weight and everything else. But you have those—you dream about those things. But dreaming doesn't get it. You have to get the education. And whatever you want to be—well, you can get flack on this from a lotta people. You can be anything you wanna be if you set your mind to it. I was so wrapped up in myself, I thought the world . . .

SL: You were the center . . .

SP: . . . didn't exist.

SL: Yeah.

[02:39:13] SP: Here I am, a big dude on radio. And that don't make you either. All you do when you start—"Look at me. I'm this.

I'm that." You ain't nothin'. The only thing you are people know about you. They know your name. You're no better than the next guy to you. That's the first thing I was taught. You're no better than any other employee. You're just better known, but that doesn't make you better. And when you're growin' up like that, you get the idea in your head, say, "Hey, I'm smart as a whip. I'm Sonny Payne." You ain't nothin'. You're who the Lord put here. Don't make a mockery out of Him or yourself. Do what you're told to do, and mind your Ps and Qs, you get along with the world.

SL: Let's . . .

SP: But education, that's my heart.

SL: The—so you get out of the armed services, or the army, and the war's over. I don't know. You didn't really . . .

SP: Well, that's when I started . . .

SL: Did you see some . . .

SP: . . . on some of the bands . . .

SL: . . . combat stuff?

SP: Yeah.

SL: A little bit?

SP: Just hopped around the country.

SL: Well, you know, some veterans don't like to talk about the war

much. It . . .

SP: Well, I don't get into that. There's no reason to.

SL: M'kay.

SP: I don't like what I did. I can't help what I did.

SL: Yeah.

SP: I don't get into that.

SL: Okay. We don't have to go there.

[02:40:52] SP: I'd live with that.

SL: Yeah.

SP: And I just don't get into takin' another man's life. I don't get into that crap. You live with that.

SL: Yeah. You never recover from it.

SP: But, anyway, that's why I roamed around so much, tryin' to—I didn't have an education. Didn't know what to do.

SL: Yeah.

SP: So I took up music.

SL: Well, some of that Signal Corps stuff, though, probably kinda helped with your radio work, didn't it? I mean, some of the technical stuff or . . .

SP: Oh, so much more to it than that.

SL: Yeah.

[02:41:35] SP: Oh yes, indeed. You think it's operatin' controls and



everything, and you got to know how to put those wires together. I didn't know any of that.

SL: Yeah.

SP: I didn't even know what a tube was. You learn. And I was taught a great deal. I didn't want that. Although I knew it, I didn't want it. I'm not an engineer. If I took that thing apart right now, I wouldn't know what to do with it.

SL: [*Laughs*] Yeah.

SP: That's not the point. The point is they gave me somethin' that was—fitted my trade, what I could do. And what I did—they said I was good at it. "You're doin' a good job." I heard that. So I just assumed, "I guess you're happy with it."

SL: Yeah.

SP: And we used—well, I don't go. We—let's just put it this way. We used to have to go in behind that first wave [pauses] and set up communications.

SL: Yeah.

SP: And . . .

SL: It's a mess.

SP: That's it. I don't go into detail.

SL: Okay.

SP: But that's it.

[02:42:47] SL: Okay. The—well, back here. You come back, and the radio station hires you back? You got . . .

SP: The first time—when I first came home, he told me it was open. I said, "No, I'm goin' on the road with some musicians." That's where you—why I was talkin' about while ago. You think you're hot stuff.

SL: Yeah.

SP: You ain't nothin'.

SL: Okay.

SP: Take my word for it. You're nothin'. I learned that. You learn by your mistakes. Learning by your mistakes and doin' something about 'em is altogether different. You can learn by 'em, but if you don't do somethin' about it, you're no better off . . .

SL: Right.

SP: . . . than what you were. So what I did—I got tired of the road. "Uh-huh. Wore out, aren't you?" I said, "Yes, sir." "Well, I'll give you your show back, and you can sell airtime." That was in 1951. And I didn't regret it.

SL: Okay, now let's—you had met Robert Jr. Lockwood or Robert Lockwood Jr. I'm not sure.

SP: Robert Jr.

[02:44:01] SL: Robert—and they say Robert Jr. because of Robert Johnson's influence? Is that how that came around?

SP: Oh, how I met him?

SL: No, no, no. I mean, how—why is it Robert Jr. Lockwood instead of Robert Lockwood Jr.? I mean, I guess I . . .

SP: And Robert Johnson.

SL: Yeah. And Robert Johnson. There's—his dad's name was . . .

SP: Well, Robert Johnson . . .

SL: . . . Lockwood.

SP: . . . used to date Robert's mother.

SL: Right.

SP: See, Jr.—not Jr., but Johnson—he was older than Robert. You know, quite a bit older.

SL: Yeah.

[02:44:40] SP: And he used to come over here on a ferry, drive down on the other side of the river there, catch the ferry, and stay over three or four days, leave his car over there, and nobody'd bother him. Get through honkin' around, night clubbin' . . .

SL: Yeah.

SP: . . . and datin' and whatever, he goes on back home. And I never even talked to the man. I saw him and said hello, and

that was it.

SL: Yeah.

SP: And Robert Jr. was more like a brother I never had to me. And I loved that.

SL: Well, so now did the—tell the story about how the *King Biscuit Flour Hour* or the *King Biscuit Time*.

SP: No, no. No. Never a *Flour Hour*.

SL: It was never *Flour Hour*.



SP: No. How that happened? When the—Robert and Sonny Boy first went on the air, I was still cleaning floors and what have you, and I knew Robert. I didn't know Sonny Boy. And Robert introduced me to him. Big song of a gun. Hoo. And he said, "We heard you're workin' up here. Can you get us on the air?" And I said, "I can't do that. All I'm doin' is cleanin' floors and runnin' errands. Pickin' up continuity." "Somethin' you can do?" I said—he said, "Is your man here, your boss or"—I said, "Well, I don't know. I'll go ask him if he can see you." He said, "Come on, Sonny. You can do that." This is Robert talkin'.

SL: Yeah.

SP: Sonny Boy was too gun shy at that time.

SL: Yeah.

[02:46:33] SP: So Sam said, "Well, send 'em in. I'm gettin' ready to

go to lunch. But send 'em on in." And had an errand or somethin' to do. Sam told 'em, says, "Well, if you guys wanna—I got a spot open, fifteen minutes a day in the studio if you wanna play." But he said, "You have to have a sponsor." "Oh." They didn't know that. "What's a sponsor?" [*SL laughs*]

SL: Yeah.

SP: They weren't dumb—they just didn't know. I didn't either.

SL: Just didn't know. Yeah.

SP: I didn't either.

SL: Yeah.

[02:47:11] SP: So Sammy explained 'em. "Oh. Well, we know Max Moore, Interstate Grocery Company." He said, "Well, since you know him, why don't you go over there and talk to him?" So they went over there and told him what the story was. So Max got on the phone, called Sam, and they were gonna meet that night or the next day, I guess it was. And they called him back day or two later and says, "Tell you what I'll do. Fifteen minutes a day, I'll sponsor you guys. I'll give you twelve dollars a week." That was big money. It was what my dad was makin' at one time.

SL: Yeah.

[02:48:01] SP: But anyway, they said, "Is it all right that we tell

everybody where we're goin' to be playing?" And Max said, "I don't care what you tell 'em as long as you sell the"—"Sell what?" "Well, I'm gettin' ready to tell you boys that now." He said, "I got a flour put out by Buhler Mills in Kansas City." And he said, "I got half-a-box carload of it out there, and they can't—I can't give the darn stuff away. You sell that flour for me, and I'll sponsor you from now on." "What do we say about the flour?" And he said, "Well, it says King Biscuit Flour." He said, "By the way, why don't you boys call yourself the King Biscuit Entertainers and make a song up." So Robert Jr. wrote that song. "Good evening, everybody. We're King Biscuit Boys who come out to welcome you. Every mornin' for my breakfast, we have King Biscuit on our plate," and blah, blah, blah. They were on the air—we had people from all over the county. [02:49:10] I'm talkin' about—now here's what I'm gettin' at. Most of 'em were ladies. The majority of them were either in beauty shops or shopping in—to a place where they knew they were welcome and knew each other. And then the beauty saloons—I call it saloons. [SL laughs] Jeff's Beauty Shop around the corner—they had all the ladies goin' there mostly. That was a pretty popular place. So one of the ladies says they had never heard this kind of music before. They started playing. They called it

*King Biscuit Time Entertainment—King Biscuit Time—period—* radio show. So anyway, they would call up—"Tell Sonny"—I wasn't on the air. Mostly time, it was the announcer, my boss. Now I knew these commercials by heart. I'd read 'em over and heard Sam doin' 'em so many times. So anyway, they went on, did the commercials and so forth. And he sold out that half-a-boxcar load eleven days.

SL: Wow.

SP: Half-a-boxcar load. He ordered another one, and it took about a month, but they got rid of that whole boxcar load. They sell it to grocery stores, King Biscuit Flour. So Max called him later on down through the years—I was in the service then. No, it was right after I went in. He wanted to put a meal out. He said, "Why don't you call it—we got a big ol' dude up here, plays the harp—he swallows the thing, call him Sonny Boy. *Sonny Boy Cornmeal.*" Sonny Boy didn't know the difference, and he said, "Yeah, that would be all right with me." He didn't know he was gonna get paid. He got paid a little bit. Not much.

SL: Yeah.

[02:51:15] SP: And they get rid of that. Well, from then on, it's always been *King Biscuit Time*. The radio station finally got the patent, federal and state. You have to have state. And

nevertheless, years ago—I've forgotten how long—this—there was three—four of 'em—group of young men headed to Clarksdale. They'd been to Memphis. They had the radio on, and they heard the show. They had just gotten together. They didn't know what to call themselves. This true story. "Why don't we call ourselves the King Biscuit Flour Hour Boys? We play an hour on a set in nightclubs, and then they take a break. Maybe we can get on the radio." [*SL laughs*] That's how it all started.

SL: Oh, okay.

SP: Well, when it got going, [*clears throat*] Max came up to the station—Max Moore, still livin'—and he said, "Did you hear what I heard today?" And I said, "I hadn't heard what you're talking about." "I heard someone on the radio—King Biscuit Flour Hour Boys." And they were over at Clarksdale. I don't know what club they were playing in, [*clears throat*] but Max found out for us, and he called 'em up. Said, "Now these boys"—not that week, I'm talkin' about this later, they went on with that, and they made several, at nighttime, they were on worldwide almost. Yeah. They had a syndicated show. And Max finally got a hold of 'em and said, "I don't wanna upset the apple cart. You know, you boys are breakin' the law." Well, these kids didn't know it.



And they were a nice bunch of guys. All beautiful. "Mr. Moore, we didn't know that." They were just lookin' for a name. And they got the idea from . . .

SL: *King Biscuit Time*.

SP: Said, "But you can't use that."

SL: Yeah.

[02:53:15] SP: So they stopped usin' it, and I have no idea where they are today. They still may—I understand, occasionally, they'll pop up, and somebody'll hear 'em. But they don't call themselves that name anymore. They were so gracious and honest, they decided—they dropped it. They didn't do it. And that's how that came about. So even now today, every now and then, "Sonny, how long you been doing the *King Biscuit Flour Hour*?"

SL: Right.

[02:53:50] SP: I said, "I ain't never done it." "What? [*SL laughs*] You've never done it?" "No." I said, "I do the *King Biscuit Time* radio show. I don't do the *Flour Hour*." "Well, you got 'flour' up there." I said, "That's right." So I don't go into detail. They get curious enough, they'll figure it out.

SL: Well, what about the—couple questions here. First about—how—tell the story about how you got the name "Sunshine."



SP: [*Laughs*] Years ago, we used to do remotes. And we had—I used to—being on the air in Marianna, Arkansas, they had a beautiful little hotel there, and I did it, not in the lobby, but they had a special downstairs room leadin' right out onto the sidewalk.

SL: Okay.

SP: Big room, pretty good size. And Sam rented that room. We went on the air from eight to nine in the morning, four to five in the afternoon.

SL: Okay.

SP: And at that time, I didn't have a car. And I'd gotten one, but I had to trade it in, didn't have any money to buy another one, so I had a friend of mine that was a butcher there at a grocery store in Marianna, and he went to work—he lived in Helena. Lived over here on Perry Street. Sam Tamburo, I never will forget him. And he said, "Sonny, you can ride with us this week." I had been using my Aunt Mary Bracada's car, and Sam, my friend, lifelong friend, he—they're all passed away now. He used to give me a lift up there.

SL: Okay.

[02:55:41] SP: And then I made arrangements. I had transportation. But, anyway, I got a ride with Sam, snowin' and

sleetin', and I said, "Sam, won't this car go any faster?" Sam wouldn't drive over forty miles an hour. Good conditions or bad. I said, "We'll never get there on time. It's seven thirty." Well, back then, it took about twenty, thirty minutes to get there.

SL: Yeah.

SP: Now I make it in twenty or less. So anyway, I got to the studio. So I turned all my switches on. "Hey, Bill"—Bill Fury—"are you there?" I said, "Bill?" So he didn't answer. So he'd been indisposed for a few minutes.

SL: Right.

SP: So he came back, and he said, "Were you tryin' to get me?" And I had my headset on. And I said, "Yeah." He said, "What's the matter with you? You sound horrible." I did sound kinda crabby. [*SL laughs*] I said, "Well, it's raining, it's sleeting, and it's cold, and I'm miserable." I hadn't had my first cup of coffee yet. "Oh, did you ride up with Sam?" And I said, "Yeah, I did." [*SL laughs*] He said, "Why are you so crabby?" I said, "I don't know, man. Come on. Let's get on with the show. We go on in two or three minutes." He said, "Man, you ain't nothing but a ray of sunshine." He had the damn mic on all the time we're talking.

SL: Oh.

[02:57:22] SP: And I didn't know it. So [*SL laughs*] he said, "All right, Sunshine, see you tomorrow." And so I got back home, and Karen McCardy down at the jewelry store—I went in there to get—there was a little shoe shine shop in there, and I went in there to get his ads, and she said, "Hey, Sunshine, how you doin'?" It started. [*SL laughs*] And it hasn't let up since. That's been—oh, gosh, that's been a few years ago. Few years ago.

SL: That's funny. Lockwood wouldn't give up on it either, would he?

SP: Huh?

SL: Robert kept callin' you that too, didn't he?

SP: Sometime.

SL: Yeah. You know, the other thing that . . .

SP: He always said Shine. He never said Sunshine.

SL: Shine, Shine.

[02:58:17] SP: He always said, "Shine. Let's go. We're goin' here, goin' there, doin' somethin'."

SL: Another thing that seems to be kinda unique about your show is the live-performance stuff. People comin' in and actually playing music. You know, you don't get much of that these days.

SP: No, no, no. Ordinarily we—four or five times a month, yes. I'm very surprised. Now what it is—we have some young kids that come into here. And I'll lead the one direction on this one

child—he's from Fayetteville. And his name is Kory Montgomery.

SL: Yeah.

SP: Well, you know Kory.

SL: Yes.

SP: And his father—big, tall dude. They—I went up there one year to emcee a fest . . .

SL: Yeah.

SP: . . . for Liz.

SL: Yeah.

SP: And so his daddy said, "Sonny, do you mind if he comes down sometime? Be on the show, maybe?" I said, "Not at all." Well, now, Kory don't play that kinda blues. So at that time Kory was what? Fifteen or sixteen.

SL: Yeah. Real fast.

[02:59:39] SP: Yeah. And so I got him down here one day, and his father was foolin' around or somethin'. I said, "Well, let's have a talk." And he says, "Okay." So we sat—I sat over there and talked to him. I said, "I've heard you"—and I emceed him up here behind George's. They put on . . .

SL: Yeah.

SP: He had his band there with him.

SL: Yeah.

SP: He said, "Sonny, I love the blues, and I want to play the blues."  
"Is that what you're callin' your band now?" He said, "Uh-huh."  
I said, "Kory, you gotta live it fore you play it." "What do you mean, you gotta live it?" I said, "You have to live it." I'll give you an example in a moment. I said, "You don't pick up that stuff and play it. You have to know what you're doin', and you have to live it. Not have to, necessarily, but it sure does help."  
"Oh, I don't understand all that." So he went to school after he left here. Went out to California and took some lessons. He's back, and then when he came back, Kory still hasn't learned to quit yellin' and screaming. I lectured that kid until I'm blue in the face. So I said, "What are you gonna play for me today, Kory?" "Oh, I'm gonna play a little Muddy Waters." And that's when I butted in. I said, "I don't want to hear Muddy Waters." "Why?" I said, "He's dead. I wanna hear Kory." "Well, Memphis Slim or Sonny Boy or somebody?" He said, "I play it all." I said, "Kory, I've told you time and again you have to live it fore you play it." "No, you had—you—you're not going to"—"I don't want to hear them. God rest in peace. They're with the Lord." I said, "I want to hear Kory Montgomery." This kid still hasn't got it to this day what I was talkin' about. I think he does. He just doesn't want to start all over, I don't think. But he's good at

what he does. I got his CD back there.

SL: Yeah.

[03:01:58] SP: From start to the last one he sent me. He's earned a lot of respect in my book—from me. He's ten times better than when I heard him the first time.

SL: Yeah.

SP: And so anyway—"I don't understand what you mean I gotta live it." I said, "Well, do you know what it is?" "Well, it's about past Afro American history. You told me that last time you were in Fayetteville." I lectured, you know. I said, "I know that." But I said, "No." I said, "Do you know what it is?" "It's music." I said, "All right. Now I'm gonna tell you a story, and I don't mean to take all your time, but I'm gonna tell you a story about what it really is. And I would be willin' to bet that you'll get a thousand phone calls from a thousand different people with a thousand different answers on blues." Robert Jr. and that minister I was tellin' you about earlier?

SL: Mh-hmm.

[03:03:14] SP: When I got old enough to tell me what blues is, I ask him one day, "What is that?" "Afro American blues history. Songs, gospel. Music, blues, derived partially from gospel, the musical part." "What about the lyrics?" "That's another part."

"I don't understand." He said, "Let me put it another way: frustration." So Robert told me this one. I mean, told me about Sonny Boy 'cause I knew I was sittin' here when he went over the first time to Europe. And I said, "Sonny Boy, you ain't gonna be fit to live when you get back, bro." Sonny Boy went over to Europe. Nobody—now before he went, the agency in New York that booked him says, "I'm gonna give you five thousand dollars." Sonny Boy and Mattie, his wife, had relatives in Wisconsin. They wanted to [*hiccup*]*s*—pardon me—they wanted to move up there.

SL: Yeah.

BP: Out of tape.

SP: All right. That would have been just enough to get 'em through. Matt Murphy and Memphis Slim and a bunch of 'em and—went over to Europe with him on that first tour. When he got over to London, he played at Crowdaddy's Club in London, England. It was in [19]54 or [195]5. I forgot when. They loved him. They loved him. Matt Murphy and—they were over there eleven days. Matt Murphy and them says . . .

BP: We're out of tape.

SP: . . . I said, "Well, I guess" . . .

SL: We gotta stop. We're out of tape.



[Tape stopped]

[03:05:04] SL: All right. So this is tape four of the interview.

SP: And we were . . .

BP: Yes.

SL: We were talkin' about . . .

SP: We were talkin' about Sonny Boy Williamson gettin' ready to go overseas and this—he had his mind—he and Mattie had his mind set on a new house in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, because they had relatives up there, and they had been there from old Mississippi over here. They loved it up there. Well, this guy—agent promised him five thousand dollars. Well, when they got over to Europe, they didn't spend anything. Matt Murphy and Memphis Slim told me Sonny Boy tried his best to buy that suit, and the guy wouldn't take his money. He tried his best to buy drinks. Nobody'd take his money. He'd didn't spend ten dollars the whole eleven days they were over there. That was just an expression. Course, knowin' Sonny Boy, I think he did. But as far as expenses, hotel room . . .

SL: It was all . . .

SP: Now the agents said no drinks. "I'll furnish your food and hotel bill and airfare." Well, when he got back—now we're building up to something here. I want you to keep in mind. Not because I

say so, but because I'm tellin' you what I know.

SL: Okay.

SP: I heard it from the horse's mouth.

SL: Okay.

[03:06:32] SP: And—"Yeah, I did too. I did—you can hear it all over the world." True story. So anyway, when he got back, the agent said, "Y'all did a good, marvelous job over there." And he gave Sonny Boy a check. That was before desegregation. Get my drift?

SL: Yeah.

SP: Sonny Boy looked. "Three thousand dollars? I thought he said five." He said, "Sir"—if he had said what was on his mind, he would have been in jail and slaughtered by now.

SL: Right.

SP: No, fact. He would've been. So he used his head. And he said, "Mr. So-and-so, did I misunderstand, or did you say five thousand?" He was—"Sonny, well, I said five thousand, but you had a lot of expense." "A lot of expense? Two thousand dollars' worth?" He didn't say that. He's thinking, "What? I didn't spend nothin'." But, "Sonny Boy, I'm sorry you had so much expense." That's when Matt Murphy and Memphis Slim, all of 'em says, "Sonny Payne, he didn't spend ten dollars." Well, I'm

sure he spent more than that, but . . .

SL: Yeah.

[03:08:09] SP: That was an expression. So as I say, Sonny Boy couldn't say what was on his mind. I want you to hear this carefully. He said—well, we'll just call him Mr. Smith. "I'm goin' to Chicago in a few days, and I've been offered to make a LP for Chess Brothers." I played it today. I don't know if you heard it.

SL: Mh-hmm. I did.

SP: He said, "Sonny Boy, you're gonna—what?" He didn't tell him what it was. So when he got back home month—'bout two months later, they made that—he sent it to him. And this ol' boy up in New York says—he told his manager, said, "Looky there. He played a song for me." He said, "You know what that means in the South?" He said, "Hadn't you ever heard of frog gigging?" He said, "Yeah—well, no, I'd never heard of that." He said, "Why?" He said, "They eat frogs down there, bullfrogs. They love their frog legs. They're delicious." He said, "I had it one time." He said, "You ought to try it." "Oh, really? Well, what kind of title is that? What's the title of it?" And he said, "The title says, 'I ain't fattenin' no more frogs for snakes.'" These water moccasins love those snakes. All hunters in this area, they go—a lot of 'em go hunting—frog gigging every year.

[03:09:48] They serve it in the restaurants today.

SL: Yeah.

SP: Frog legs. They're good. Sonny Boy was saying, "You are a snake, and I ain't workin' for you no more, and I ain't makin' no more money for you. I ain't fattenin' no more frogs for snakes. You're a snake. I'm fattenin' frogs, and you're a snake. I ain't workin' for you no more. I ain't gonna give it to you." What did I say a while ago? Frustration. They're singing true blues. They're telling you what they have seen. Years ago, and I'm goin' back to get my point across.

SL: Yeah.

SP: During—before desegregation . . .

SL: Yeah.

SP: . . . you couldn't walk up and down the street. You had to get out of their way or let them by, or they would do the same for you—or they did it for you, I'll put it that way. They would walk around you or get off the street or walk across the other street. And remember a long time ago—well, in the beginning, I said a friend? Black people didn't have friends. What—now wait—what I mean by that—what I'm saying when I said you gotta like somebody, you've gotta like 'em well enough to let them come to you and tell you their problems. "Hey, Sonny, you know, my

kid left me. We had a fight." You know, stuff like that.

SL: Yeah.

SP: You see what I'm talkin' about?

SL: Mh-hmm. Personal stuff.

[03:11:29] SP: All right. Sonny Boy and all the other artists living today—or back then, especially—he couldn't say, "Well, you promised me five thousand dollars, and I'm gonna get a lawyer or find out what you're crooking me out of." He couldn't say that. What did he do? He sang about it. I played that song today. You remember when he said, "One day I started taking sick boy"—or something—"I found out my mistakes." And I said, "How'd you do that?" And he said, "I started checkin'. I left that little gap in there, so I could do that." And he found out his mistakes, and he started checkin', and he got back not five, three thousand. Five! Three! And he made up his mind what he—he wanted to call him every name in the book. But he couldn't say anything. Frustration. They sing about Afro American history, culture, and things that have happened in their lives because they didn't have friends enough back in those days to go to—especially a white dude—and say, "Hey, I got a problem." "I ain't got no time for you, boy." That's the kind of crap you used to have to listen to. "I ain't got no time for you,

boy." You don't do that. I'm tellin' you that's blues. That's blues in a nutshell. It is—that's where the other part of the music comes in. Some of the music and some of the lyrics are blues, and some aren't. You don't play—in other words, he was living about an experience he had and another one had it right here in Helena. He was gonna—some old gal around the corner at Reed's Juke Joint around here—it used to be a pool hall—and she was a moocher. And Sonny Boy used to tell that to Robert a lot. He said, "You been goin' out with that dern broad again?" Said, "Yeah. I told her ?I had to give her? twelve dollars, and she wanted six of it." So from then on, Sonny Boy—I got the song on that one, too. He said he couldn't tell nobody about his girlfriend. Somebody wanted to hear about his troubles and his anxiety and whatever. He said, "You know, boys, one time my baby'd taken sick, boys, on July the twenty-ninth. Her doctor bill was four hundred dollars, and I couldn't give her but three hundred and ninety-nine." Get my drift?

SL: Mh-hmm.

SP A dollar short of four hundred. That's blues. He's singing about what happened to him. Another time in that same song, she ask him—"My girlfriend wanted to ask me for one hundred dollars, and I couldn't give her." He didn't—he said, "I couldn't give her

but ninety-nine." A polite way of saying, "I'm sorry, Honey, you want a hundred dollars. I ain't got but ninety-nine." A polite way of sayin', "I've got it, but I ain't gonna give it to you."

SL: Yeah.

[03:14:50] SP: That's your blues. In song, that's your blues. In music, that's your blues. It's about Afro American history, gospel, and all that. Believe this or not—I didn't know this for a long time—and—till I talked a little further with Robert and a few others and even Cotton. Cotton used to tell me about it. Cotton was one of my dear friends. Still is. James Cotton. They tell you all this. In other words, I talked so much I'm gettin' all screwed up in my own thoughts. But nevertheless, that's their way of expressing, tryin' to tell you something that they had tried to tell you before, but you didn't want to listen. So since you don't want to listen, they sing about it. That's pretty much it, in my opinion. And the reason I respect my opinion is because I was told by experts, the people who lived it. And now, that doesn't make me an authority or a great blues—knowledge of blues that I can tell the world. I don't do that. I tell you what I have learned through the years. I got the proof to prove it right there on those records. You listen to the songs and listen to the lyrics, and you'll know exactly what I'm tryin' to tell you.

It's right there.

SL: Yeah.

[03:16:39] SP: They're tellin' you. That's blues. Now some of it is musicalwise because they'll play it—maybe they're hungover, had a fight with the old lady, and they're playing somethin' bluesy and sad and all that. And, you know, crap.

SL: Yeah.

SP: But, no, the true meaning of blues—the way I usually put it—Robert always told me, "Just tell 'em it's about past Afro American history, their nature, their history, music, their lives—they're tryin' to express somethin' about their lives." He said, "That's what you have to tell 'em because it's about life experiences and frustration when nobody would listen." Don't want to hear it? They'll sing about it. He did. He dedicated that song to that dude in New York.

SL: The dude in New York didn't get it.

[03:17:36] SP: And that guy in New York, what I've been told, I didn't hear it. I wasn't there. But he said, "He what?" He said—well, this manager was tellin' him, said, "Don't you know what that means? You're a snake." [*Laughs*] "Well, that's [*unclear words*] play this song." He didn't have sense enough to know he was being insulted. [*Claps hands*]



SL: That's somethin' else.

SP: Really.

SL: That's a good story. You know, they couldn't—gosh.

SP: It's true.

SL: Okay, so what year is this that we're talkin' about? Where are we in our story here? You get—you come back, and you get—and you're doin' the show, and—now the show started before you went into the army.

SP: Oh yeah.

SL: And you come back, and it's still goin'? The same guys and . . .

SP: Yeah.

SL: . . . they—the *King Biscuit* . . .

SP: Right.

SL: . . . has . . .

SP: Sonny Boy died in [19]65.

SL: Yeah.

SP: It's the same stuff. Think about when did you have desegregation.

SL: Well, you know, of course . . .

SP: No, just think about that.

SL: It's, you know, the . . .

[03:18:55] SP: In other words, it was still being played and carried

on because people did not know the true meaning of blues. And they didn't know what it really was. Just like I was tellin' 'em about Kory—I said, "Do you know what blues is?" "Oh, yeah—well, I'm playin' it." And I said, "No, you're not. You might be playing a blues song that you heard, but you're not gonna ever gonna play it like they do." When I say "they," I'm talkin' about the people who lived it and played it and died on it. You—I said this before. My good friend, Charlie Musselwhite . . .

SL: Yeah.

SP: He's the only white man I ever heard that could really play the blues. And I'm not singling out whites and blacks. I'm doing it for this way. I've always maintained, as Robert has said many times, I don't think there's a white man living that can play the black man's blues. First place, you gotta live it and understand what you're doing. You know, 90 percent of 'em don't know that. Oh, they'll play a blues song. "Going to Kansas City," you know, one of those upchug deals that's been on the market for ages.

SL: Yeah.

[03:20:23] SP: But they're not playin' the real thing. What we're doing today is simply, on the *King Biscuit Time* show, is playing exactly some of the things—not all of it—now we're playing some

up-and-coming kids. Oh, we got a bunch of 'em back there that are excellent. Good, good musician. Perfect. They learn their lessons well from their ancestors. [*Vehicle passes*] And a lot of these percentage are all white, too. They learned from the Afro American people. They have learned down through the years, in musical terms, what it's all about. And so much of that is not vocal. Therefore, you miss a lot of it. There are lyrics to the majority of 'em. [*SL sighs*] Just like—did you hear me play that one today—"Wake Up Baby"?

SL: Yeah. Mh-hmm.

SP: That's a true story. Sonny Boy's—I don't mind. He wouldn't mind me sayin' it. He was shackin' up with this ol' gal, and he just put some different lyrics in it, so it wouldn't sound so nasty and dirty.

SL: Right.

SP: He come in, and he saw a washer—wash pan with a hatband around it. In other words, what he saw was a hat, but he wanted to make believe he saw nothin' but a wash pan. I ain't never seen no wash pan with a hatband around it before. [*SL laughs*] He knew some dude had been there before him, and he knew that. But she let on like, "You don't know what you're talkin' about. You're drunk." That's blues.

SL: Yeah.

[03:22:23] SP: He knew that. He caught her. [*Claps hands*] Now he—there's several songs. But some of these songs he didn't write. Elmore James and some of the old dudes. Oh, I—we're gettin' to the point—I—when I have to start remembering. It's like saying I wish I was twenty again. But I'm not. But there was so many in there that were not recognized that just ticks me off to no end. "Who's that?" "Why don't you listen?" "Why, I heard that song before, but it didn't sound like that." "No, you hadn't heard that song before." Whatever it was I might pick out. Well, that's an old one I played today by Armstrong. He's a blues violinist. Really. Used to be a jazz violinist. Dig this—with some of the big units. Occasionally he'd appear maybe with Dizzy Gillespie or, well, years ago, Fats Waller, and some of these dudes been with Count Basie and Duke Ellington. And some of those blues songs—I got some back there that the Duke wrote. Yeah. Beautiful stuff. It's strictly blues. You don't hear the lyrics. You hear the melody. Beautiful. Too much—it's so much to be—dig me—to learn today about this stuff. It's out there. I just don't know it yet. All I know is what I've learned in my young age or whatever you call me. But I've learned what I've learned from people who lived it and know it. That's the

only way you learn about blues. You're not gonna tell me you walk in here, and you started a band together. "Hey, man." "What do y'all play?" "Well, my band plays—well, we do the blues. We do," as I said before, "Muddy Waters, Robert Jr. Lockwood, we do 'em all." First thing that hotel man or whatever he is—nightclub owner—"I don't want to hear them. I want to hear you. What does your band sound like?"

[03:25:01] You don't go into somebody's else's music, which you know absolutely nothing about. You don't do that. Some of the younger ones today, Afro American musicians, they think they know all about it. They don't. They think they do. And there's two or three that I know personally. I tell 'em they don't.

SL: Different times. That's . . .

SP: Huh?

SL: Different times now.

SP: Different times. What they are hearing is not the true meaning of the blues. What they're hearing is the rhythm and the song.

SL: Yeah.

[03:25:45] SP: They're not listening to the lyrics. They got different lyrics for different songs, but not those. Not these. But they got different lyrics, and they have no idea what they—they have an

idea of what they're playing. They're playing what we call music as blues such. But not the real ?McCoy? 'cause you have to put those lyrics in there to understand what they're singing about and what they're playing about.

SL: Well, and what I'm hearing is that Robert and Sonny, they had to finesse their stories. They couldn't just make it simple, or they—you know, fatten frogs for snakes—that's some finesse, you know. It's not, "This guy ripped me off two thousand dollars."

SP: That's right.

SL: You know. There's some finesse there.

SP: He put it in a nice, polite way. Now you ain't gonna have me behind bars for somethin' I ain't done.

SL: That's right. So he [*laughs*] . . .

SP He used his head.

SL: . . . gets the last word. He gets the last word in there, but he does it in a . . .

SP: But he didn't. See, the point is at that particular point in time, he didn't tell him what the title was going to be because he may have figured it out, but I doubt it. But . . .

SL: Right.

SP: He didn't tell him that. He said, "I'll send you the LP," ?the

album?. [*SL laughs*] He did.

SL: Bless him. That's so good. Well, you know, I've got . . .

SP: Now Sonny Boy didn't even write that one.

SL: Yeah?

SP: It says he did on the back of that album, but he didn't. I want to say Elmo James.

SL: James.

SP: But I'm not sure.

SL: Yeah.

SP: There's so many down the road that I've known and met. There's two of those guys that wrote that together.

[03:27:49] SL: Well, now lemme ask you this. Can anybody in this day and time—can you live the blues anymore?

SP: Can you what?

SL: Can you live the blues anymore? Can you experience—can you—it's a different time now, and it's not really . . .

SP: What'd I just tell you? They—if you're living it, that means you invite me to dinner and then you refuse to pay for it. I said, "Well, you son of a guns all—that's—I'm tellin' you what's on my mind."

SL: Yeah.

SP: I don't have to sing about it.

SL: Right.

SP: See, that was their way of talking before desegregation. They learned how to—they could insult you in a song, and you'd never know it.

SL: Yeah.

[03:28:45] SP: Oh yeah. Sonny Boy could insult you in a minute with a song. You'd never know he was doin' it. He's not gonna name your name, but if the shoe fits, you might hear it [*laughs*]. No, in this day and age, when you say "live it," living the blues is another story where you've had—lost your home, lost your wife . . .

SL: I guess, yeah.

SP: . . . kids. You can sing about it. Here—that's your point of view of the blues. That's not really what the true meaning of it was to start with because it all derived from Afro American gospel. But down in that part of the country, from what I've been told, and by Sonny Boy and a lot of others, down there you couldn't tell all those heads of states where to head in. You had to be very respectful. So that's how it all started. They would sing about it in gospel. [*Claps hands*] "Praise the Lord, pass the ammunition, we're not going fishin'." That's an old song. But stuff like that. And in point, what I just said. He couldn't say what was on his



mind. They had that same type of thing down there as well. They couldn't say what was on their mind to everybody. But it derived out of gospel music. Might be some sad person that passed away, and they'd put it in song how sad they were to hear it and sing about it. This is where your musical part comes in. You hafta have the lyrics to go with the music or the music to go with the lyrics. It has to be one or the other. You don't have both, you don't have it. You gotta have one or both.

[03:30:47] SL: You know, we're sitting in this room, and I'm lookin' at all these images of all these musicians and all these bluesmen. And you have, somehow or another—that *King Biscuit Time*, that simple "You need a sponsor," that simple direction, and that simple early success, it's like it has grown—it grew into almost a—oh, what do I wanna say? A mecca.

SP: Well, like Sam Anderson building a good radio station, and I come in and inherited a part of that, or I got in on the ground floor, anyway. And Sam used to tell us, "Learn all you can from 'em. People like that are smarter than you think they are." And, oh, I have. I don't necessarily pick their minds at all. I don't have to. We're friends. They talk to me when they want to, and they tell me what's goin' on.

[03:32:05] SL: I guess that's what I'm tryin' to roll around to you.

You got—you fell into this position. I mean, you got into this position, and all these folks—I mean, they don't come here—they don't come to you just because you're on the radio. I mean, maybe they do at first, but they become your friends. I mean, they become—they trust you. There's somethin' about you that has kept this thing goin'.

SP: Like ?Earl sings?, "You can get odds on that any day."

SL: Well, I don't know.

SP: No, I—people that come here—it's just like when I was a kid. I didn't have a radio. As I say, I'd listen to my sis's radio. The Swift Jewel Cowboys we were talkin' about. That was my idol. And when I saw them in person, yes, I went bananas. [*SL laughs*] All right, to me, I used to hear them in my mind. We were poor, but we were rich. We could hear things other people probably don't. I heard the way they talked to each other, the way they would sing and tease each other sometime. And they became my instant idols, really. And like anythin' else, you can't help but love it. Well, I don't know about the love part, but they come in here, and they hear me—those people from Dublin, Ireland, over there. Those photographs, they came in last year, and I said, "Where's Mark?" They kept sayin' Mark. Well, the old man over there, he said, "The county of Mark in Dublin,

Ireland."

SL: Ah.

SP: Well, big ol' fellow, too. And I said, "My boss had not told me we were already worldwide." I wasn't aware of that. I knew we were goin' to, but he never tells me anything when it's important. *[SL laughs]* And I said, "Whatever brought you to—how'd you happen to hear about our *King Biscuit* show?" "Well, we hear you all the day," like an Englishman instead of an Irishman. And they got their own accent, anyway, but I thought it was pretty neat, and the lady spoke up and said, "No, well, not every day because they're eight hours ahead of us." The show goes on today. By eight o'clock tonight. Get me?

SL: Yeah.

[03:34:55] SP: It's four o'clock in the morning over there. So it goes over the Internet, and they put it on tape, and they tape it, and then they play it back the next day.

SL: Great technology.

SP: And I said—and then it dawned on me. "I guess we're already doin' that." That's the second time I had heard that we go all over. "All over? We hadn't started yet, had we?" I never bothered to ask. *[SL laughs]* Oh, I knew we were, but I wasn't sure how long that would last. But every day, they download it.

By eight o'clock tonight, it's in London, Germany, Australia, Japan. Yeah.

SL: Okay, there's at least a couple more things I wanna do here before I let you off hook.

SP: That hook sure is gettin' sharp.

[03:35:46] SL: Oh. [*BP laughs*] There's some folks in Arkansas that we've interviewed, and I don't know, some of them I'm sure have crossed your paths—path, and some haven't. But I was thinkin' while we were on break, have you ever heard of—what about the places where these guys would play? Did they ever talk about the local—you know, like in Arkansas or goin' to Canada or going, you know, places in—on the road. The circuit, the chitlin circuit.

SP: You mean the musicians?

SL: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Did they ever talk about . . .

SP: Sometimes. Locally, the—like—not only locally. They'd play in Jackson, Mississippi. Couple of times in New Orleans. Tryin' to think of that one place. Oh, come on. Greenville. Not Greenwood, but Greenville. And Yazoo City. That's near Jackson somewhere. I forgot.

SL: There's one . . .

SP: No, that—I think that's answerin' your question. They never

talked about where they went as such. They did among themselves. We didn't know that. That was pretty quiet.

SL: There was a place . . .

SP: But you're talkin' about—you talked to some people in Arkansas . . .

SL: Yeah, there's a place . . .

SP: I don't get your drift. Where you're tryin' . . .

[03:37:21] SL: Well, there's a place in Camden, Arkansas, that—and we interviewed a fella down there by—Randall Ferguson, and he had a restaurant with a big dance hall in back. And it was—it catered primarily to blacks. And apparently, it was a very popular place. Ferguson's, it was a—he cooked up front and had a huge dance hall in back. And I just wondered if you'd ever heard anything about the spot in Camden.

SP: No, the guys might, but I . . .

SL: Okay.

SP: No, I really and truly haven't heard of them.

SL: M'kay.

SP: No, not that I can recall.

SL: Okay.

SP: No, the guys never talked about too much where they played because a lot of things. You never know what went on half the

time.

SL: Yeah.

SP: They're personal things I'm talking about. Gettin' in fights,  
being fined for drunk . . .

SL: Right.

[03:38:19] SP: It's water under the bridge. They don't talk about all  
that stuff. When it happens, it happens. Next day, it's  
forgotten. Go on to the next level.

SL: Well, Ferguson's was kind of a—I think it was a unusually  
popular spot and drew from all—from counties all around. It—  
you know, big bands played there, too. So I . . .

SP: In this place you're talkin' . . .

SL: Yeah, uh-huh. At Ferguson's in Camden. I'll send you . . .

SP: Well, did he . . .

SL: . . . I'll send you . . .

SP: . . . did he say it had blues bands there?

SL: Yes. B.B. played there, and who was—who were the big bands  
that played there?

Joy Endicott: Bobby Blue was one of 'em.

SL: Did Louis Armstrong play there?

BP: Louis, I think you said.

JE: I think so.

SL: Louis Armstrong played there. I mean, it was a big hall.

SP: Well, you're not looking at blues bands, either.

SL: Well, that's true.

[03:39:15] SP: They—I don't know. They may have.

SL: Yeah.

SP: I don't really think so. For the most part, they played mostly in Jackson, Mississippi; Yazoo City; Greenville. They'd take gigs like that once a month. And never miss a lick on the regular gigs. And they never talked too much about where they were played.

SL: Okay. Okay. So . . .

SP: But they've been around, believe me.

SL: Yeah.

SP: They have been there. Especially in Europe.

SL: Okay, now we've only kind of mentioned your wife a couple of times. Your—the one you just lost. And is there anything that you wanna say—any more about your forty-three years, was it forty-three? Forty-three years of . . .

SP: Almost forty-three. Forty-two and three quarters, whatever.

SL: Well, she sounds like another one of the blessings in your life, and so . . .

SP: Oh, there's only one that ever straightened me out. I'll put it

simply. My wife was not only my lover but the greatest friend I ever had. And I liked her. Think about likin'. I told you about that.

SL: Yeah.

[03:40:48] SP: You have to like somebody before you marry them.

I liked that gal the minute I saw her. She had so much class and every—she was so gentle. You've seen ladies that did their nails nice and carried themselves well and made sure their skin was clean, nails clean. Little dainty type. She wasn't all that worried about herself. She just made darn sure she looked okay. She didn't want somebody saying, "Well, looks to me like Josephine could have combed her hair." That woman was gorgeous when she woke up in the morning.

SL: That's a beautiful name.

SP: She was a handsome woman. And don't ask me how I got it. I don't know. [*Laughter*]

SL: How did y'all meet?

SP: I don't wanna go into that.

SL: You don't? [*Laughter*]

SP: No.

SL: Okay.

SP: No. It's a long story but a good one. But I don't wanna go into



that.

SL: Okay. All right. Well, we don't have to.

SP: Brings back too many wonderful memories.

SL: Okay.

SP: She—oh—if I—if she had a problem, she'd come to me. If I had a problem, I let her know about it. We'd sit down and talk about it. Now we had our ups and downs. We didn't say we didn't. Sometime raise our voice at each other. But nothing serious. But we had our ups and downs like everybody else.

SL: Sure.

SP: They don't—they just don't have women like that anymore. [*SL laughs*] I'm too old to find out, anyway.

[03:42:35] SL: Well, you're lookin' pretty good. What about—you know, we've been—we talked segregation and haven't really talked about desegregation, especially in this community. You know, there were all kinds of—you know, *Brown v. Board* was in [19]57. There were desegregation movements scattered throughout Arkansas a little bit before that. And then there were places in Arkansas that really took their time and kind of went around the law for a number—for a long time. And it's—Helena—West Helena was kind of in that latter category. They just didn't . . .

[03:43:20] SP: We had our faults. But the way I've seen and coped with that, I tell everybody. I went from loving and hiding my friendships with friends to openly saying, "That's my friend, Robert Jr. Lockwood." I didn't have to hide it anymore. When ?Dad? found out I was with—I won't say who; it's not important. I was with a very well-known artist. "You were—where'd y'all go?" "Went to the restaurant over in Mississippi of all places and had supper, and they served us"—that—'cause that was after. He said . . .

SL: Yeah.

SP: "But—really? I didn't even know you knew him." You don't tell everybody your business, but if somebody sees me with my friends, they're gonna get curious—"Who in the world is that? What does he play?" Does he have to play something? It went from openly saying, "That is my friend," instead of being ashamed of it. You're afraid to tell because you're afraid you might get beat up back then.

SL: Yeah.

SP: Not now. You don't have to worry about those things. Oh, now I take that back. You don't have to worry about it as such. But it still exists. Very, very small. But it's still there. Not for me. For those who hadn't got sense enough to know what it was all

about in the first place. That's—I don't go by Helena-West Helena—they were all bad. I remember a stint before seg—desegregation—I did—where was I? Aragon Ballroom in Chicago. I was with some Mickey outfit, twelve-piece band. Not a big one. And union called me and got me the gig. And back then and there, people said, "You people sure do hate these people up here, don't you?" I said, "I don't. What gave you that idea?" They found out I was from Arkansas. That's what tipped it off. So right after they—well, it was a waiter, and I was talkin' to a friend of mine that was in the band. And he said, "That's the only one we got in here. I don't know why they're lettin' 'em in here to start with." Chicago told me one thing right there. Don't fuss at us. You're doin' the same thing that we used to do. Helena-West Helena. Son, go up north anywhere you want to. Somewhere in that area, you're gonna find somebody that's from up there—"I don't want them bird dogs around me" and blah, blah, blah. But, aw, that—I don't even discuss that crap anymore. "You had just stayed with Robert Jr. Lockwood during his festival?" "Yeah, we had our own bed and everything." "Stayed in his house?" "Yeah, why? What'd he do, commit a sin?" Robert used to have a little minifest on an Armish—what do they call 'em? Arm—Marmish, Quakers, or somethin'? See,

he lived in Toledo—I mean, Cleveland—between Cleveland and the Pennsylvania borders about eighty miles.

SL: Yeah.

[03:47:35] SP: Well, he rented this farm, and he started out with just a small festival every year. And they had a few big names on there. And so Josephine and I went over to this restaurant to eat across the country road. He said, "Sonny, why don't you and Josephine go on and have some lunch, and then we're gonna start about three this afternoon." Big farm. Clean—you could fry an egg on that farm. Not literally, but . . .

SL: Yeah.

SP: . . . when you went there, it was clean. So we got in the restaurant, and this lady comes over. And I'm dum-dum me. And it was dark, similar to this—a little dark, and I said, "What the hell? I can't even see the menu hardly." And she come over, looks like she had on a nightgown. She said, "What would thee like to drink, first of all?" I said, "Pardon? What would thee?" I said, "You talkin' about me or her?" "Thee." "Me." I said, "Well"—whatever it was. Josephine says, "Well, this one would like a thee cup of coffee." And then it dawned on Josephine who it was and what it was. So we ordered, and we ate, and they were so kind and very reasonable, too. Went back

over, and Robert said, "Did y'all eat lunch?" I said, "We had a good lunch." I said, "These nuts over there looked like in sleeping gowns wanted to know what thee wanted to drink and eat." And Robert started laughing said, "They're Amish."

[03:49:29] And I said, "At that restaurant?" He said, "Well, that might be the Quaker bunch. They're all down there, not together but separate, but you got half and half. I imagine it's the Amish." [*SL laughs*] And I said, "Oh." I knew what that was and Quakers, too, but I'd never seen one before, and I didn't know what was all about. But that was a great experience, and that's why this other crap we talk about I don't like. It has to be brought out and finally come to a head for good, instead of people still thinkin' bad things. I've had so much said about me and to me in past years, it don't bother me anymore. I don't fight 'em or nothin'. I laugh. I said, "But if you live that long, you get to heaven. What you gonna ask the Old Man when he [*unclear words*]"—what was the name—"You did—made fun of My people, My kids. You. Nobody made fun of you, did they?" You know. I know that's me talkin' a bunch of stuff. But that's how I really feel about that.

SL: M'kay.

SP: I can't help it.

SL: So there's a lotta folks—a lotta music comes out of this area.  
One of my favorite bands was, of course, the Band. And . . .

SP: Was who?

SL: The Band.

SP: Oh yeah.

SL: With Levon.

SP: Levon. Ah yeah. Now that wasn't blues. That was altogether  
somethin' else.

SL: That's correct.

SP: Ronnie Hawkins.

SL: Yeah, that's correct.

SP: Yeah.

SL: Yeah, starts out rockabilly and . . .

[03:51:27] SP: All very close friends, and we've had a lot of fun in  
our day. They used to pile up and down the street here. The  
Sonny Boy Blues Society had the old J. C. Penney building at one  
time. And Ronnie came down, oh, several years ago. Let's see,  
I'd say fifteen years ago, and played. I got on the bus. They  
said—I went in the club—Josephine and I did—and they said,  
"Sonny, Robert"—I mean, "Ronnie's lookin' for you." I said,  
"Well, where is he?" "He's on his bus." So Josephine said, "I  
wanna stay here and see if Annie's come in yet." And I said, "All

right." And I went on the bus. There was three or four people on there, and in the front, this old man with a long, gray beard [*SL laughs*] and long hair, and he said, "Who you lookin' for?" I said, "Well, I was lookin' for a friend of mine, but I don't see him." "Well, who's your friend?" Real snotty. I said, "Well, I've been talkin' to you pretty nice. If you don't mind, I don't—I'll tell you. But you talked to me civilized, and I hadn't done anything to you." He said, "Didn't say you had. Why don't you sit your ass down?" [*SL laughs*] I said, "What?" I said—I knew right away who it was.

SL: That sounds like him.

SP: I said, "What in the world did you do to yourself?" Used to have jet-black hair, wavy hair, [*SL laughs*] and all the girls loved him, too.

SL: Sure.

SP: He married this older lady up in—and I've never met her, but I've talked to her a time or two.

SL: Wanda?

[03:53:22] SP: Yeah. And he's just a—he's still the same. He's still wonderful guy. He just decided he wanted to look like he wanted to look and do whatever he wanted to do. He did.

SL: Yeah.

SP: He's had a little heart problem, but I . . .

SL: Yeah.

SP: I don't see him much. Levon used to come down 'bout once every other year. His daughter—we had his daughter and her band on our festival.

SL: Amy?

SP: Mh-hmm. She had a good band, I think. Levon helped her get it. But she's pretty talented.

SL: Yeah.

[03:54:05] SP: And that whole family is good people. I love 'em. I don't ever get to see any of 'em. I always say, and I mean it, too, before I die I would like to see 'em all again. Scared me when I saw Riley. We sat there and talked about old times. We don't see each other once or twice a year. Every other year, every three years. Well, it'd been a while, and so we made a night of it. They had to come get us on the bus. "Mr. Payne, he's goin' on in a few minutes. Y'all better come on." So Riley said, "Well, I ain't goin' to get up and play a song and sit down." He's got diabetes so damn bad he can't . . .

SL: I know.

SP: . . . he doesn't feel good, so he set down and played, and the people didn't understand or didn't like it.



SL: Really?

SP: They thought he should get up and dance around everything.

He and I were talkin' about age. He's a month older than me.

His birthday's in September. He'll be eighty-six. I'll be eighty-six in November. September, October—two months, whatever.

And we had a good visit. Shot the breeze.

SL: He's a pretty generous guy.

SP: Huh?

SL: He's a pretty generous man. He's . . .

SL: He's only been married three times, but he's got ten, twelve kids, as I said before. But Riley doesn't beat around the bush.

He tells it like it is, and he'll say what's on his mind.

[03:55:46] SL: You know, for folks that may not know, we're talkin' about B.B. King.

SP: Oh yeah.

SL: We're saying Riley. But . . .

SP: Yeah, Riley B.

SL: You know him as Riley, but . . .

SP: Riley B. But—his—he used to have lawyer. "Stop callin' him B.B."—I mean, "Riley B." "It's B.B., darn it." He fussed at me. His name was Sid, I think, or [SL laughs] I forgot his—what his name was. But they were through here last year. Yeah, that's

when it was. I've—yeah, last October. We had a very dear visit, and they got a museum down in Indianola, and they were on my show here two or three, four months ago. And the directors and so forth. And we had a nice visit. They wanted me to come down and introduce him, maybe. I said, "Well, don't count on that. You ask Riley if he wants me to." "Well, you did at the festival." I said, "That was our festival, and Riley wanted me to." I said, "This is his hometown. He may want one of his friends to introduce him. You don't know that." "Sonny, I think they'd like you." And I said, "Well, maybe so. But think about it. Get one of your friends that he likes real good down here to bring him on. That would thrill him more than anything." He and I know each other.

SL: Yeah.

[03:57:24] SP: It's no big deal. It is here, but not down there. So I left it that way. I didn't—I was doin' my show, anyway. I couldn't get down there. It was gonna be on a Friday and Saturday.

SL: Yeah.

SP: And Saturdays, I don't go anywhere. [*Yawns*]

SL: You know . . .

SP: That's what I do. Not all day. [*SL laughs*] I sleep.

SL: What about—let me ask you about this because that—well, first of all, let me say this. *Indianola Mississippi Seeds* is on my phone, the album that B.B. did called *Indianola Mississippi Seeds*.

SP: Right.

SL: I love that album.

SP: Right.

[03:58:05] SL: I keep it with me all the time. I carry it with me.

There's another artist—I was a little bit taken back by you sayin' there was only—the only white guy that—or your favorite—Musselwhite was the one guy that seemed to have the ability to . . .

SP: Charlie?

SL: Yeah.

SP: Oh yeah.

SL: But what about Jimmie Vaughan? Do you ever listen—have you listened much, or do you know who Jimmie Vaughan is?

SP: I don't know Jimmie Vaughan, do I?

SL: You don't know Jimmie Vaughan. You know, I feel like he is one of the few . . .

SP: I don't . . .

SL: Really—I'll send you a CD.

SP: You have a CD by him?

SL: Or I may . . .

SP: . . . by him? I'm surprised . . .

SL: Well, I've got it on my phone.

SP: I'm surprised I don't have it. I get CDs. Is he with a record label? [*SL sighs*] See . . .

SL: I'm not . . .

SP: . . . MCA and Columbia, and well, Capitol . . .

SL: Well, you . . .

SP: . . . is no longer in business but . . .

SL: Have you heard of Stevie Ray Vaughan?

SP: Stevie Ray, yeah.

SL: Okay, Jimmie is his older brother.

SP: Oh, okay. Now I know who you're talkin' about.

[03:59:15] SL: Yeah. And he does—last time I saw him, it was—the bass was on the bass pedals of the organ, the B-3. And it was just him and the organ player, drummer, guitar, and one other guitar player. And it was just—one of the most . . .

SP: Two different musicians altogether.

SL: Yeah.

SP: I got some Stevie Ray Vaughan and Lonnie—Lonnie—I can't think of his last name—Chicago boy—playin' together on a CD

over there. Jammin' it—course, both of 'em are gone. But this is one they made a long time ago on the Alligator label. Bruce Eagleheart used to get all of 'em on his label. And—but you're talkin' about two different breeds altogether.

SL: Yes.

SP: I haven't heard Jimmie Vaughan's playing as such. If I did, I didn't—I don't know it. I don't have it.

SL: Well, I'll get that to you. I think you'd like him.

SP: I'm surprised don't have it. All your big record companies—I get everything.

SL: I bet you do.

[04:00:26] SP: Some that I don't even ask for and don't know anything about. But I don't know what label it's on. If I knew that, I'd just call 'em and tell 'em to send it. They'd send me all of it. It doesn't cost me anything. They want to—they wanna get their music promoted. And I—in the old days, you had—what was that? Payola.

SL: Payola.

SP: You don't have that no more.

SL: Yeah.

SP: You know better. So they figure out a way to do it. We don't charge 'em for the records anymore. See what . . .

SL: Yeah.

SP: . . . what I mean?

SL: Yes.

SP: They were makin' money all the way around.

SL: Yeah.

SP: That's why they ?want? that payola.

[04:01:11] SL: [*Laughs*] Well, is there anything else you wanna talk about before [*sound of coins jingling*] we shut this thing down? I—you've really done a great job and a beautiful service for the state.

SP: Say your prayers when you get home now. I don't know if you're tellin' me a fib or what.

SL: No, I'm not. I'm not.

SP: Well, I'm grateful for that. I—what I've told you I've learned on my own, mostly. And by being inquisitive. You know what that is? [*SL laughs*] That pill . . .

SL: Oh.

SP: No, it's not dope. That's Prilosec. I had a little indigestion from that food we had.

SL: Okay.

SP: Excuse me.

SL: That's all right.

BP: I don't think we've ever had anybody take a pill on camera before.

SL: I don't think we have, either.

[04:02:09] SP: The only pills I do are blood pressure and Prilosec.

Sometime I get heartburn, indigestion. [*Hiccups*] It's not real—I know why I got the hiccups now. [*SL laughs*] Stop laughing. My mind wandered while we were away—just thinkin' while we were away. We didn't go anywhere. I don't—the only thing I know is—I know you're sick of hearin' it, but you know, even the young musicians and other young mus—and young people—you know they're gonna be running our country someday? I'm fifteen years away from bein' a hundred. Only God knows when I'm goin', but I like—I ain't volunteerin'. I'd like to stick around a while, but I think young people should be more inquisitive. Above all, as I harped so many times, get the education. You're lookin' at a guy that didn't. I learned the hard way. I don't have the time or the money to tell you how many hard knocks I've had brought on by myself. Strictly stupidity. And you learn. But then you hafta learn to do something about it. Take my word for it. I had a lotta help in my life. A lotta help. Sam Anderson, the owner of this station, taught me everything I knew about radio. Sam's not with us anymore, but one of the

first people that ever took time with me to try to teach me something. And our present-day boss, my brother-in-law, used to work for his father. They had a large farm down at Wabash, Arkansas. And the owner now, Jim Howe, he decided to get off the farm, and Sam had the radio station up for sale in [19]84. And Jim bought it. Now I've known them—I think the only thing he holds against me—my boss—he's as big as Sonny Boy Williamson. Tall and big, and when he was a little boy, he used to whip his backside, and I don't think he ever forgot that. He said, "You think you could do it now?" [SL laughs] I said, "No, not hardly." No, but a wonderful man like everybody else. He expresses his feelings differently. Everybody else does, too. But I couldn't ask for a better person. My wife passed away, and I was right at her side. She had Alzheimer's. And my brother-in-law was at the foot of the bed. And he held her foot. And she was in a coma, and I said, "Babe." I said, "Just squeeze my hand. I'm here. And your brother's down at the foot of the bed, and shake your foot." She shook the hell out of that foot and squeezed my hand, and I thought she was gonna break my hand. [SL laughs] "What? Are you all right?" And she didn't hear me. She just squeezed my hand a couple of times. And then we left the room, and before I got out of the door, the



nurse came running. I heard a bell go off, and I ran back in there, and it was two or three little rooms in this one—what do they call that?

SL: ICU or somethin'.

[04:06:13] SP: ICU. Yeah. And then she was gone. I saw that buzzer going that way [uses hand to indicate horizontal line], and the nurse said, "Don't worry about it, Sonny. She's all right now." So anyway, I got home and funeral arrangements and everything. And my boss was over to my house before, the day after, and the day after. I got my sisters—well, you know, two of 'em were still living. No, all three were. Yeah, eleven years ago, yeah—eight, whatever. [Two thousand] oh three. And he was over there, and then after we buried her, he came by the house, and I was appreciative of everything. The only thing that got on my nerves was—don't misunderstand this, but people comin' and sayin', "Sonny, I'm so sorry." "I know you are, or you wouldn't be here. I see you there. You wouldn't be sorry if you weren't here." I don't know why that rubbed me that way, but it did. And, oh, I wasn't mad or anything. I didn't mean it that way. I just said, "Well, thank you so much." But I got tired of hearin' that 'cause it seemed like every other person was sayin' that. "Come on, man. I'm grown up." And so Jim came

over one afternoon. He had a lot of work to do hisself. One thing about him, he's a hard worker. He's—he can outsell anybody in the radio station. I mean anyone. It was only me left. But there used to be several of us. Didn't matter who you were. He'd outsell you. He could sell you a hot blanket in hundred-degree temperature. But he was so good to me. And he says, "Come on. We're goin' for a ride." We had put out signs to register here for something. I forgot what it was. And we went to pick 'em up 'cause whatever it was was over.

BP: There's no more tape. We're out.

SL: You're outta tape?

BP: We got thirty seconds.

SL: Okay, go ahead. We got thirty seconds here.

SP: So anyway, he spent the whole entire afternoon with me in his van pickin' up those stupid signs. And I said, "God bless you." And you, too. Thank you.

SL: [*Claps hands*] He knows how to work thirty seconds, doesn't he?

SP: We got—still got ten seconds. [*Laughter*] What?

Jim Howe: I just wanted to see if they could hear you.

SP: We were just talkin' about you.

JH: I just wanted to see if they'd buried you yet or not. [*SL laughs*]

SP: No. This is my boss, Jim Howe. [Points to his right]

SL: Jim Howe.

SP: That's Scott. [Points at SL]

SL: We just heard a story about you.

SP: That's Brad [points at BP], and that's Joy [points at JE].

JH: Great. Can y'all come every day? Boy, this has been the best day at the station we've had in years. [*Laughter*]

SP: We were just talkin' about when Josephine died, and you came and picked me up and pickin' up those stupid signs, and you stayed with me all that afternoon.

JH: Well, that's what I's supposed to do. Havin' just came to check in seeing how y'all were gettin' along.

SL: Well, we were thinkin' we were ending.

SP: Shoo.

SL: He—we've put him through the ringer pretty good.

JH: I don't think he'll be accountin' for three or four days after this.

SP: Naw, I'll be all right.

SL: [*Laughs*] I think he'll be good.

JH: That's good. Has he had a good day?

SL: He's had a good day.

SP: All day.

SL: We've had a good day.

[04:09:57 End of interview]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]