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Arkansas State Police Project

Interview with

Kenneth Brown
21 October 2003

Interviewer: Michael Lindsey

Kenneth Brown: My dad was a police officer in Hot Springs. He rode a motorcycle. I had two older brothers who were police officers there. Sometimes they were on motorcycles and sometimes they were in patrol cars. Before I got on the police force, I was an electrician. I was working in an electrical shop and I got tired of crawling under houses and up in attics. You never knew when your next job would come. I got on the local police department and stayed six years. I made detective after three years. It wasn't a good paying job. I had a son, whom I have lost, and a wife, whom I have also lost since then. The best thing I did was leave there and come to Russellville. I lost them, and I was single for quite a while. I remarried, but then got divorced. My wife now had been real great to me. One time as a detective in Hot Springs, I got a call to go to a house. I went there and there was just a screen door for a front door. I saw a guy lying in the hall. The pistol was lying there, and he was dead. His wife

was back behind him, and she was dead. He had killed her, a little boy, and a little girl. They were in bassinets, and the little girl was still holding a doll. Man, that is something you never forget. It is a thing you think about years later. I got on with the State Police and was thankful to get the job. I was by myself [in Russellville] and then [Harold] Luter came up. I think I hugged him because they were running me to death. I made sergeant in the State Police. It was a little different job, with more responsibility. I had three counties I had to oversee with the troopers. There was always something going on. I have never been a desk jockey. I always wanted to be on the road instead of in headquarters. I had to go over their [troopers'] reports every week, and I could tell you who were doing their jobs and who weren't. We got along pretty good. I can't remember what year I retired, but I realized that it was not an older man's job. When you start getting in and out of that car and notice you are slowing down, it is time to go. I am not bragging, but I have got a lot of pride about my job. I drove the governor of California, Ronald Reagan, when he came to Arkansas for a big get-together at the Arlington Hotel in Hot Springs. They had me in a new Buick driving him, and he was super nice to me. I didn't care for that type of duty, but those things happened. I was never looked on as a hero, but I was sharp. My vehicle was sharp, my uniform was sharp, and I had a nice haircut. I put in twenty-five years and I

am proud of it. I didn't do anything real great. I just did my job. I have seen officers that put a badge on and think they are supermen. I don't like that. They need to check a guy real good, and if he has the wrong attitude they shouldn't hire him. I like people, and being in the State Police allowed me to do things for them. If a car broke down and they couldn't afford a wrecker, I would put them in my car and take them home. A guy once told me that cops don't have friends, but the hell they don't. I have got a world of them. I am a people person, and that was the way I was raised. There were five brothers in my family. My dad called me his last mistake. I had a sister that died, but I barely remember her. My dad always said, "Treat people right."

Michael Lindsey: What year were you born?

KB: April 19, 1934. I had a brother killed in World War II. He was in the First Infantry Division and is buried over in Belgium. He joined after the war started. He was eighteen. I think he was killed during the landing [at Normandy?]. They were wading in chest deep water, and I always wondered why they didn't run those things [landing craft] farther up there. My dad was getting ready to ship out for World War I when he had to have surgery. He had appendicitis and he never went, but he was always ready. He was quite a man. He liked people and they liked him. He could do anything.

ML: Was he on the police department when you were born?

KB: No, that was before I was born. He was the fire and electrical inspector for Hot

Springs. I had an uncle and another brother who were firemen. One guy was riding with me when I was a city patrolman and a fire truck drove by and he looked over and grinned and said, "There goes another of those damn Browns." [Laughs] The fire department goes a long [way] back in my family. Policing goes back a ways, too. My dad had a brother that was a federal revenue officer that worked the moonshine—[his name was] Dave Brown.

ML: Did you live in Garland County?

KB: Yes, we all lived in Garland County. We lived out on a farm until tenth grade when we moved into Hot Springs. I can remember going to Uncle Dave's house. He used to call me "sour mash." I thought, "What is that old man calling me?" [Laughs] It was neat, because when I made detective I would be going through files and see fingerprints that were taken by my Uncle Dave. The guy that was before Uncle Dave would shoot the moonshiners if they ran away, but Uncle Dave would chase them down. One time [while I was with the State Police] an airplane had to land on the interstate [highway]. I had some rope in the trunk of the police car, and I hooked in onto the front wheel and got it off the highway. The cars were going by looking like the guy was crazy. There was just a minor problem [with the plane] and the pilot got a mechanic down to look at it. He came and fixed it, and I blocked off traffic and he took off from the interstate.

ML: Growing up in Hot Springs, what were your impressions of the State Police?

KB: I liked them, but I didn't like the one we had in Hot Springs. He looked down on the city police. He was the only one there for quite some time. He was from a family that seemed to be smart alecks. He liked to look down on the city police

and sheriffs and thought he was better than everybody else. A lot of people did not like that man. He made it through Little Rock. I never learned to kiss ass. If I like a guy, I actually like him—not for advancement or promotion. The best thing I did was get on the State Police. I had to do some things that I didn't want to do. If you get on a manhunt, you have to stick with it, even though you might want to be home. I had three counties as a sergeant and I had some real good troopers. We looked after each other, and that is what it is all about. We worked with each other. If one of my troopers heard something bad was going on, he would be there for backup.

ML: What were your three counties?

KB: Pope, Johnson, and Yell.

ML: You didn't have Conway County?

KB: Thankfully. When that man down there [Marlin Hawkins] was sheriff, he was as strong as could be. He could get anything he wanted. It didn't bother him to call up to this county when we got one of his supporters for DWI [driving while intoxicated] or reckless driving and tell us that the guy was a good man for him when it came to voting time and that we should let him off. He tried to work you. There was politics in it, not so much in the State Police, but with things like this. Even after I retired, people would call me to see if I could get them out of things, but it doesn't work that way. Thankfully, I never had to shoot anyone. I had two drunks in a car run into me one night and put me in the hospital for back surgery. I was driving eastbound on Highway 64. It was real dry weather and it was night, which saved me. I was driving down through there and I saw this one light com-

ing toward me. I thought, "That motorcycle is running fast." I was moving pretty good too, probably forty or forty-five [miles per hour]. There wasn't a ditch or fence on my side of the road, which was another good thing for me. I saw dust kick up—they had gotten off the road on the shoulder and then I realized that it was a car. I swerved over and got completely off the highway. These two drunks, who I knew, hit me in the door and it knocked me silly for a while. I called headquarters and asked for a wrecker for both cars. It was a new Ford Mustang, and when they picked up the front end, the engine fell out. That is how hard they hit. My police car was torn all to heck. They were the kind of guys who get drunk every weekend. I had back surgery, but I could still do anything I wanted. I am more careful about what I pick up, though.

ML: You mentioned that you knew these guys. Did you find it typical that the people you arrested for DWI or whatever were locals, instead of people passing through?

KB: Yes. Normally it is somebody that is doing it every weekend. Thinking back on my career, I did my job and I treated my troopers right. Some of them would use you. They would ask to take off if their brother was coming in town or something. Then I would have to find someone to cover for them, and it was normally me. We had a captain come through one time who was real educated, but was just ignorant. He is retired now. Sometimes people would bring in a cake or pie to headquarters. When he was captain, none of the troopers got any of that. He took it all home with him. [Laughs] I think he had a college degree, but he didn't have any common sense. All of the guys knew it, too. I think what happened was that he was in Little Rock headquarters, and they sent him up to Clarksville to get rid

of him. He would ask me what I thought about taking some men to do this or that and I would say, "I don't think anything about it, except that it is very dangerous." He wanted to do things that would make a big splash and make him look better. He should never have been in police work. He wasn't mean, but he didn't know police work and he didn't know people.

ML: Before him, was Boone Bartlett the commander?

KB: Yes. I don't know how many years he had been in the State Police. "Slick" Wilson was over in Fort Smith, and he was a "man's man." He really ran a tight ship. Boone rode motorcycles for the State Police during the early years. He was good with people and was one hell of a football player. He had a brother-in-law who was a pro[fessional] football player. I don't remember where he played football, but I have had a lot of people tell me what a good football player he was. I don't get down to the headquarters anymore, though if I am driving by I might stop in and say hello to the radio operators. When I was working, we would have some guys that would come down every day and sit there and listen to the radio and try to figure out what was going [on]. It was kind of like going to the movie for them. I find other things to do. When I came up here, there was quite a bit going on for one guy. I knew what I was getting into, and I was proud to be a State Police officer. I helped a lot of people. My brother, Carlton Brown, was a State Police officer in Springdale and went on to be chief of police at Rogers. After that he was a deputy United States Marshal.

ML: What about when they opened I-40? How did the State Police react to this new system?

KB: We knew that if we didn't patrol it, it would be fast. I have been on the interstate driving sixty miles an hour and have looked over on the two-lane highway and have seen a car pass me. [Laughs] It was a new day, really. One time I pulled over a car driven by an elderly German lady. She handed me her German driver's license and I told her that we had a German trooper in Arkansas. She asked me what his name was and I said, "Fritz Von Luter." She said, "Yes, he is German!" [Laughs] I had talked with Dwayne Luter before this and asked him what nationality he was, and told me German. From then on we called him Fritz. [Laughs] If we didn't pick on each other, it wouldn't be nearly as interesting. He was a real fine trooper and was good at the arson business when he was in CID [Criminal Investigation Division]. It never got too big or too rough for him.

ML: It seems unusual that you spent all of your time in one area and still made sergeant.

KB: [Before making sergeant,] Boone was the captain and Jack Howard was the sergeant. Boone was getting close to retirement, and Jack was a pretty good politician. He had some big guys who would help him if they could. Jack, who had played football at Arkansas Tech [Russellville] and had been a teacher for a while, had difficulty making a decision. You would ask him something, and he would stumble around and seem to get real nervous. [Still], he was able to make lieutenant and that was when I made sergeant. I went to Little Rock and took a test. I kept my nose clean and did my job. Did you see those knives up there? Have you ever heard of Jimmy Lisle?

ML: I know that he is a knife maker.

KB: He hired me after I retired from the State Police. He was a schoolteacher at one time and had been a coal miner. He had more sense than any man I have ever known. He had a knife place between here and Dardanelle. He asked me to come to work for him after I retired. I told him that I didn't know anything about knife making, but he said he would find something for me to do. We liked each other real well, and I went to work there. He had a metal building away from the knife shop, and he would buy twenty-foot long rods of metal to make into sharpeners. I took those rods and ran them through a machine that cut and sharpened them. I did that and then boxed them up and took them to Fort Smith, where he had a shop that coated some stuff on the metal. It is not hard work, but it was boring. He made me a custom knife with my dates of service in the State Police. That man was something else. He taught school for a number of years and then he got into knife making. He was a real great guy.

ML: When you retired, was it because of the special incentive package they offered around that time?

KB: No. It is a younger man's game. I stayed twenty-five years. My night vision wasn't as good, and I wasn't getting in and out of the car as well. I got to thinking that I hadn't gotten shot or broken any bones, except for my back, and I got out. I really care for the State Police, but I thought that was the best thing for me to do. I have done a lot of things since I retired that I didn't have to do because of the pension, like working for Jimmy Lisle. I am thankful for something other than policing, and that is being raised out in the country. I learned how to get along and do some things. My father had an eighth grade education, but had the

most beautiful handwriting you could ever imagine. My mother was a wonderful cook. She was a small woman, but she could sure use a switch. I have always said that if mom and dad weren't the way they were, us five boys would have been in the penitentiary.

ML: When you moved into town, that probably took away a lot of the things you did for fun.

KB: We rented—my cousin Clyde Brown's parents owned the house we lived in. We lived on twenty acres and had another twenty acres across the road. We had a couple of milk cows, chickens, and a couple of mules for plowing. We lived well. My dad always worked in town. I had gone through the tenth grade [when we moved into town] and talked the principal out there into finishing school there instead of going to Hot Springs High School. He was a tough principal and really ruled the school. It was a trashy school until he took over. He came in like a warden and would whip your butt and told you [to] tell your mom and dad to come and see him if they had any problems. After we got in town, I had a job at a service station and bought a 1929 Model A touring car with four doors and a convertible top. It cost $200. My dad could fix anything. He knew Model A's and he fixed up the motor. I would drive it out to Mountain Pine from Hot Springs so I could go to school I sold that car to some guy because I wanted a V-8 Ford—you know, something the girls would like. I bet that car would be worth $50,000 right now. When I got ready to go to the state police—the principal had become the county school supervisor and I went in there and told him I was trying to get on and asked him if he would recommend me. He said he would be proud to do

it. I lost a good wife and son to different diseases. The gal I am married to now has been real good for me. We have been married for ten years and she's a great lady. She is a banker, so she can work when she wants to. [Laughs] She knows how to treat people, and we get along wonderfully. I am thankful for that and am lucky to have her.

ML: One of the big events after World War II was Sid McMath and his G.I. Revolt. Do you remember what the feeling around Hot Springs was when he was running for office? [Editor's note: In 1946, Sid McMath created the Government Improvement League to challenge Hot Springs Mayor Leo P. McLaughlin's running of the city. McMath ran for city prosecutor, and eight other veterans in the League ran for various offices and won. This incident is known as the G.I. Revolt.]

KB: My cousin that owned this property where I grew up, Clyde, was the third best pistol shot in the world. He never got his hands dirty of anything. He went on through college and became an attorney. He became Circuit Judge in Hot Springs at the same time Sid McMath was Governor. He had a guy in court and someone smarted off to him and the police officer told my cousin that the guy said he was going to kill him. My cousin told the officer that maybe if he showed him his shooting medals he would leave him alone. He did a lot for himself. He had a wonderful wife. He never had children. Didn't Sid McMath's wife shoot his father? His dad was an alcoholic and lived in a big, nice home on the edge of town. I think his dad was drunk and beating one of the saddle horses and his wife shot him. Nothing ever came of it. The G.I.s came in and cleaned up the town from

the old guys. It was pretty rough down there for a while. It isn't the same old town. I have a brother that moved back to Hot Springs. He lives on the lake there. He retired from Mary Kay cosmetics in Texas. He worked in the plant. He told me that she [Mary Kay] could go down the line and call each one of them by name. He got a pretty darn good retirement from it.

ML: What did you think about carrying a .38 caliber when you first started off? It seems like a small caliber.

KB: I told them I had my own weapon, a .357 magnum. I wanted a little bit more than the .38. Those old guns were good, but the .38 doesn't have the wallop. I stayed in good shape shooting. My brother won a lot of trophies shooting.

ML: Was your dad part of the motivation to join the police force?

KB: No, [I was] just tired of working in the electric business. Have you ever been in the racetrack? I lacked six months of being a journeyman electrician. You know how you can raise the windows up on the grandstand? I was the one that ran the wiring for that. They got the tallest stepladder you can buy and then they took an extension ladder and wired it onto that. There isn't anything but steel and concrete below. They sent me to the very top of that contraption, and I still had to reach as far as I could to run the wiring. I knew then that I had just about had enough of the electrical business. I was losing interest anyway. It pays pretty well if you are an electrician. I saw my brother riding around in a police car and it looked pretty good. I was single then. Also, I didn't like to go under those houses because you never knew what was under there. The attics were bad because of the insulation.

ML: What was your typical day at the Hot Springs police department?

KB: It was an eight-hour shift. After two or three years I made detective. I walked into the station one day in my uniform and they told me to wear civilian clothes next time. I thought, "What are they doing, firing me?" They told me I was going to be a detective and drive an unmarked car. I was surprised, but I took it and made some pretty good busts. They didn't pay well. You could live, but you didn't have much extra. I learned a lot there.

ML: Was the town segregated between black and white?

KB: Malvern Avenue was the main street for the black community. That side of town was mostly black.

ML: Did you ever go into the casinos?

KB: My [first] wife worked as a cashier at the Vapors Club. She took care of the cash register, and that really helped us. They were good to her and she never had any problems. It helped us out. I didn't like her having to do that, but she wanted it. Sometimes a guy would tip her $20, which is nice when you don't have it.

ML: At the time it was completely open, right?

KB: Right, everyone knew where it was. People would be coming in there from Chicago and Saint Louis—everywhere. Like nowadays people drive from here over to Tunica [Mississippi] all the time to gamble.

[End of Interview]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]

[JD]

Follow up Interview
16 December 2003

ML: Tell me about the bear that Boone Bartlett had.

KB: He got the game wardens to trap it for him. It was a small bear and was probably half-grown. He made a pen out behind the headquarters and under a roof that the bear stayed in. Herman Lindsey was the Director then and he named the bear "Herman." If we had a troop meeting or something, he would say, "Fellows, Ol' Herman out there needs something to eat." So we would all chip in a dollar or so. I think he was feeding him dog food. He was really growing. He had it at least twenty years. It kept growing and getting bigger, so he took it to the zoo at Little Rock. When he went to Little Rock, he would go by the zoo and check on Herman. He really liked that bear. Sometimes if we were having lunch around there we would bring it something to eat. It was a pretty good bear and turned out to be a big bear.

[End of Interview]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]

[JD]