

Obama Kansas Heritage Project

<http://obamakansasheritage.org/>

Interviewers: Teresa Baumgartner, Steve Cless

Interviewee: Forrest J. Robinson

Date of Interview: June 9, 2010

Location: Robinson residence, Winfield, KS

Videographer: Steve Cless

Transcriber: Jo Wilkinson

Editor: Micaela Ayers

Run time: [1:25:06]

Note: Q1. Teresa Baumgartner, Q2. Steve Cless

Q1. We'll probably start, just to make sure that we have the basic information, your full name.

FR. Forrest J. Robinson.

Q1. And what -- Forrest with two Rs; correct?

FR. Two Rs, that's right.

Q1. What does the J stand for?

FR. James.

Q1. James.

FR. A family name.

Q1. Is there a story behind how you got -- how your family chose your name, how your parents named you?

FR. There's a story behind my first name. I was supposed to have been a girl. And the family was convinced I was going to be a girl. Well, when I turned out a little bit different. My dad was standing in the window of an old, abandoned, long-gone hospital, and he saw Dr. Forrest Kelly walk out. He was a good friend of Kelly's. And he said, "That's it, Forrest." So it's not a family name; it's just -- it is now. We named my son Forrest J. Robinson. He named his son Forrest J. Robinson. So I'm the first and we got the II and the III.

Q1. All right. And the James, is James a family name prior to you?

FR. Yes, yes.

Q1. Okay.

FR. Yeah, from my grandfather, Grandfather Robinson.

Q1. Okay. So when and where were you born?

FR. Here.

Q1. In Winfield?

FR. I was born here, right down the street here. Where you turned at College and Ninth, there was St. Mary's Hospital there.

Q1. Uh-huh.

FR. And I was born there.

Q1. Okay. So you grew up in Winfield?

FR. I grew up, graduated from high school, and got two years of college when they needed more cannon fodder over in Europe, so I was -- I had enlisted but I was in the Army Specialized Training Program, which let us stay in college for a while.

Q1. Oh.

FR. But the middle of March of '43, why I was called up.

Q1. Okay. Uh, what -- what year did you graduate high school?

FR. 1940.

Q1. 1940. And do you mind, what year you were born?

FR. What year?

Q1. What year were you born?

FR. 1922.

Q1. 1922. Year after my mother was born.

FR. That's before the earth was cooling.

Q1. (Laughs.) So what was it like growing up in Winfield --

FR. Uh-huh.

Q1. -- in the '20s and '30s, I guess?

FR. I started in the first grade with my wife.

Q1. Oh.

FR. And so we've known each other for a while. We'll have our 65th anniversary, if she survives, on December the 29th.

Q1. December 29th.

FR. Sixty-five.

Q1. So. And you mentioned this before the camera started, that she lives nearby but is suffering from Alzheimer's?

FR. Yes, she --

Q1. Okay.

FR. There's no telling how long she's going to live. She -- she's just in bad condition.

Q1. I notice that you had a book on your piano from a family vacation. Did grandchildren do that book for her --

FR. Yeah.

Q1. -- Colorado vacation?

FR. When she was starting down, our daughter, who lives in Evergreen, Colorado, insisted that she come out. And I was apprehensive about it. I put her on the tram -- on the plane, and she got there all right and had a great time. Her -- their son, my daughter's son, is a natural artist, and anything he touches -- and he's in art school now in Denver. But he wrote that book while she was there, and it's a story of her experience in the four days that she was there in Evergreen.

Q1. When she came home, did she -- did it -- did she read it a lot and did it help her memory?

FR. Yeah, but I can just even see a difference then.

Q1. Uh-huh.

FR. She was having trouble remembering, which is, of course, one of the hallmarks of Alzheimer's.

Q1. Exactly. Well, go back to your roots. Where was your mom's family from?

FR. Pardon?

Q1. Your mom's family, where were they from?

FR. Oh, they -- mother was from Fort Scott, Kansas.

Q1. Uh-huh.

FR. And my dad was raised in Iowa. And he came down here to Southwestern College, played football in 1902, '3 and '4, and then went into teaching and met my mother down at Copan, Oklahoma, where she was teaching then, and they hooked up.

Q1. And how many children did they have and where do you fit into that?

FR. There were five of us altogether. I was the last.

Q1. And how many siblings do you have who are still living?

FR. How many?

Q1. Siblings do you still have? Are you the last one?

FR. I'm the end of the family.

Q1. You're the only one, okay.

FR. End of the line.

Q1. Well, not exactly because you have your daughter and any other children? Do you have other children?

FR. Yeah, we have a daughter and a son. The son is an attorney in Wichita and the daughter is there in Evergreen, Colorado.

Q1. Okay. Okay. So looking back, who would you say has maybe been the most important person in your life or who has been the greatest influence in your life?

FR. Well, I would always say my wife. She's not only been the most important person, but she's my best friend. And we've had a wonderful marriage, a very varied marriage, because I've gone from one thing to another and ended up in the ministry. But I think we've lived in 22 different places.

Q1. You grew up in Winfield but you moved around after that?

FR. Grew up in Winfield, yeah.

Q1. So when and how did you and your wife meet?

FR. Pardon?

Q1. How did you meet your wife?

FR. How --

Q1. When and how did you meet, you and your wife?

FR. Oh, first grade.

Q1. Okay. And then when did you know that she was special?

FR. About in the eighth grade. She's a fine musician. I tell people that she's a musician and I play trumpet. (Laughs.) But we both were involved musically there at Winfield High School. And we just were close friends clear up until our senior year, and then we had our senior dates. And the girl I was dating then said that she was glad that I was having my senior dates with Betty Jean because she could trust her. But she went on to Southwestern and so did I. And she graduated in 1944. I was still in Europe at that time.

Q1. Okay.

FR. And I came home and I was surprised that she was still available. And we were engaged in two weeks.

Q1. Did you write at all when you were overseas to her?

FR. She didn't write as much as she should have. I wrote her more than she wrote me. But they were great letters. I've still got them in a file in there.

Q1. Oh. Good for you for keeping them. What did you say her name was, Betty Jean, your wife?

FR. Betty Jean, B-E-T-T-Y J-E-A-N, two words.

Q1. Okay. Wonderful. So what did you say you've learned from your wife?

FR. What?

Q1. What have you learned from your wife, from the kind of person that she is, has been?

FR. She was a charmer. She won every queen award that Southwestern had, including the high one, which is May Queen, and she was queen of May. I've got a picture I can show you if you'd like to see it.

Q1. Yes, later.

FR. Okay, later.

Q1. Uh-huh. That's wonderful. Um, looking back over your whole life, what are you proudest of?

FR. What?

Q1. What are you proudest of in your life?

FR. Travel?

Q1. Travel. No, what are you proud of? What would you say are your -- is your greatest accomplishment in life?

FR. I think probably I'm in my apex at this point. I -- when we got married we -- I was just finishing school at Stillwater, at Oklahoma State, and we opened a gift and jewelry store. After almost eight years, the doctor said I couldn't stand on this

injured leg anymore on that concrete, so we sold, came up here to Winfield, and stayed with her parents awhile, and then moved to Wichita and got jobs at Boeing, both of us.

And it was about that time that I was beginning to feel that I was called to the ministry. And we set a date of when we would make our mind, either I'd go to the ministry or try to get a job elsewhere, and on Christmas Eve day we discovered that she was pregnant, and her -- her objection to going to the ministry was that we would -- you know, that would be so late because we were 34 then and we'd go to seminary and it would be close to 40 and come back and try to adopt, because the doctor said she couldn't get -- couldn't have children, and out of the blue she became pregnant and we had the two children.

Q1. And so the reason for waiting or the reason for not going into the seminary was taken away?

FR. Yeah. I would say the accomplishments I -- I graduated from seminary in 1959, and I went to First United Methodist in Wichita as a staff, and I realized very soon that I wasn't called to that at all; I was called to the full ministry. So the next year we went down to Derby at that church, which had just been established four years before. And then this church here at Winfield opened up and we came down, we built the present sanctuary that is here now. And four years later the senior minister at First Methodist in Wichita was killed in a plane crash and I was called to come up there. And I was there

for five years, right in the middle of Watergate, and I was consumed by the feeling that we needed some new blood in the political sphere, so out of the blue I resigned from my pulpit and ran for governor in '74.

Q1. Oh.

FR. I lost by three votes per precinct. But -- thank God.

(Laughs.) I don't know what I'd have done with it. But I think probably my ascension in the ministry was quite important in the development of my life. I came down here as interim president of the college.

Q1. Was that right after you ran for the governor?

FR. Yeah, that was after that. And stayed on as vice president for development. And then -- well, it's a long story, but we -- we resigned -- I was -- well, I was on the governor's cabinet as secretary of the department on aging, and the governor and I didn't quite see eye to eye at all.

Q1. Which governor was this?

FR. Bennett, Governor Bennett. We just didn't see eye to eye and I resigned. And I had built a camping trailer, so we went out to a ranch in Colorado we knew and established a camp that we went back to for 30 years. I was out there -- oh, we were out there until 1980, 1980, and I decided I wanted to go back and take a church again.

So it was very late in the appointment cycle in the Methodist Church, and I talked to the bishop and he said, "The only church I've

got open is out at Johnson," little, tiny church out there on the Colorado border. We had gone past there on the way to the ranch the year before, and I said to Betty Jean, "Can you imagine anybody serving a church clear out here?" And guess who ended up serving in it? But we had two years there. Then the bishop called me back to Wichita to be the head of the United Methodist Foundation for the state, and I stayed with that until we retired and came down here.

When we left on our honeymoon, as we drove south out of town to Oklahoma City, I said to Betty Jean, "I've got a feeling we're going to come back here to retire," and we did.

Q1. So -- and in retirement, since you've lived back in Winfield, any -- any special memories or --

FR. Memories of here?

Q1. Yeah, of what you've done since -- what you've been involved in since retirement here.

FR. Oh, there are just -- there are just so many memories. Probably the most penetrating memory was the 30 years that we camped out there at that ranch in Colorado. We went out every summer and stayed a month.

Q1. Uh-huh.

FR. And it was just great.

Q1. Were you doing that when your children were growing up, too, or was it after they were grown that you started going out there?

FR. I missed that.

Q1. That's okay. Did -- were -- when you went -- during that 30 years, was part of that time when your children were growing up? Were they -- was that part of their memories or vacations?

FR. Our children said their growing-up memories are at the ranch.

Q1. Okay. Uh-huh.

FR. 'Cause we did everything, hiking, fishing, camping, the works.

Q1. Wonderful.

FR. A very -- a very colorful woman owned that ranch, and we would gather every night down at the big lodge in front of a big fireplace, and she would churn butter and tell stories about the ranch, which were unbelievable. And Betty Jean urged her to write a book, which she finally did, and the name of the book is *Just Don't Panic*. Yeah, those were just wonderful experiences.

Q1. Is there a story she told about the ranch that stands out particularly in your mind? Did you have a favorite story from her stories about the ranch?

FR. Oh, there are just so many, I don't know how I would -- how I would select. Probably our daughter was a child of the hippie movement, and we had problems, and we took her out there. And the owner of the ranch, Margaret, urged us to leave Robin there at the ranch, and she stayed almost a year. And it utterly changed her life, just turned her around, and that was a great experience.

Q1. I'll bet. In what ways has your life been different than what you imagined?

FR. In what --

Q1. How has your life been different than what you imagined it would be?

FR. Oh, I had no idea it'd be so varied. I've got industrial parks all over around the state that I helped establish when I was in the governor's cabinet, and I never thought I'd be doing that. I never -- never dreamed that I would head a foundation or head a college. So it's been -- it's just been very varied and very intriguing and interesting and fun.

Q1. Can you remember when you were a boy, was there something special you wanted to be when you grew up?

FR. It's awfully hard to go back to that, but I was always of the inventive kind, and I so-called invented a lot of things and built furniture. That table and that table and that table (indicating throughout) and others that we've since gotten rid of. But it was very hard to know but I so thoroughly enjoyed -- if you'd look in our garage you'll see I've got a full garage -- a full shop out there, and clearly enjoyed, even as early as the first grade, working in the workshop at home. But I never thought that would all shape itself to where I would have the varied -- I think it's our calling to seek out what talents we have. I've done a lot of writing. I've written a lot of poetry. I've written some music. Just never satisfied. I'm always looking for something new. (Laughs.)

Q1. That's wonderful. Well, I noticed in your hallway you have -- it looks like a nativity set only it must be Jesus and Joseph in the carpenter shop. Where did you get that? It seems like a perfect thing for you.

FR. That was -- yeah, that was about 20 years ago. There was a man who bought out a lot of antiques in Europe and he went bankrupt. He couldn't even afford to have his ship unloaded. And a friend of ours bought up a lot of those antiques, and we got this and, well, other pieces of furniture through him. And that itself was a great experience.

Q1. Uh-huh. So that little piece in the carpenter shop -- that was one of that collection?

FR. Uh-huh.

Q1. Okay.

FR. And some others, this clock. Oh, I don't know what all.

Q1. Wonderful.

FR. I believe that boredom is a sin. I really -- I think life is too short, and I believe we're called upon to try to exploit every moment.

Q1. So is that a message you've tried to pass along to your own grandchildren?

FR. Our son is a fine carpenter.

Q1. Ahh.

FR. He builds beautiful furniture. And a very successful attorney.

Q1. Uh-huh.

FR. And very active in the church. The daughter, she just had the problems of the '60s, and she never finished school. She got a -- her GED but she didn't finish school, and she spent -- she worked at a number of places. But she is an artist, too, as is her son, and anything she touches turns to art. She builds and designs very unique costumes and for formal attire. It appeals to the younger generation. It doesn't appeal so much to us. But -- and I've got some stuff hanging in there that you can see that are very interesting.

Q1. Well, and any mother who would inspire her children to do what your grandchildren did for your wife --

FR. That's right.

Q1. -- must be a good mother.

FR. Yeah, she was, she was a great gal. And my mother was a great inspiration to her because she was a natural artist, and just anything she did turned to a work of art, whether it was writing or ceramics or metalwork. A very interesting woman.

The family, my mother is a Calvert, and the Calverts were the George and Cecil Calverts that founded the state of Maryland under Queen Anne. Then on her father's side, there were four ancestors on the Mayflower, and the man who fell overboard in Plymouth harbor was a grandfather back down the road. So my dad used to say that mother's blood whistled the *Star Spangled Banner*.

Q1. So I -- someone fell overboard on the Mayflower? I don't remember learning about that in history.

FR. I missed that.

Q1. You mentioned someone fell overboard on the Mayflower?

FR. Yeah.

Q1. I don't remember. Can you tell that story, what you remember about it?

FR. Oh, I don't know if I can remember their names. Richard Rogers, Francis Cooke, John Tilly and John Howland, that's it. Those four. John Howland was the one who fell overboard. I like to say that he jumped overboard because he wanted to found this great adventure called America, but actually he fell overboard and had to be rescued with a grappling hook.

Q1. That makes a great story. Let's see, we might talk a little bit about places. So you've spent most of your life in this area.

FR. Around this area.

Q1. And I'm -- and, obviously, you consider Winfield home.

FR. Absolutely.

Q1. So how --

FR. In fact, I used to think as a child that God was a United Methodist Republican that lived in Winfield. (Laughs.)

Q1. What made you think that?

FR. I don't know. My dad was an extreme patriot, and he just hammered into me the -- the patriotic side.

Q1. Uh-huh. Well, do you remember what Winfield was like when you were young and what it's like now, how has it changed?

FR. I don't think it's hardly changed a bit. It had about 10,000 population in those days, and I think it's around 11,000 now. And we did have two colleges here, but the one college went out of business. But we've got quite a bit of industry that's been added across the years. I helped to build -- to establish the industrial park east of town when I was in the governor's cabinet. And that's the biggest one we have. But, no, I think the city hasn't really -- a very music-oriented, very much so. In fact, I was reading an article yesterday that I had in my files called *Mad About Music* by William McDermott, who used to write for the Reader's Digest. He's gone now. But, yeah, just great things in music for a small town.

Q1. So, so many small towns in Kansas and other areas have become almost ghost towns.

FR. Yes.

Q1. Why do you think that hasn't happened to Winfield?

FR. Well, it had great lay leadership, for one thing. And we were at the crossroads of a wagon train and Pony Express, so we were established as a federal institution in that sense. But I think it was just the, the leadership. We had wonderful leadership.

I've written two papers. We have an annual event in which five people present papers about Winfield, and I've written two and

presented them, about the events of my early life and what made -- what I feel made Winfield, Winfield.

Q1. Do you still have copies of those articles?

FR. Yeah, yeah.

Q1. Oh, I'd love to see that, too, when we're finished.

FR. Yeah. Now, they've been printed.

Q1. Uh-huh, uh-huh. So, oh, that's interesting. So what would you say are your favorite landmarks or favorite places in this area?

FR. Island Park. You came past it down here. It is actually a park on an island, and it's been a public center for over a century, well over a century, probably 120 years. A beautiful place. When you go out you might look at it. As you're leaving town, it's on the right.

Q1. Okay, will do.

FR. That and Southwestern College has been a strong element in the development of Winfield.

Q1. You mentioned a lot of strong leaders -- a lot of strong leaders and leadership in keeping this town strong.

FR. Yes.

Q1. What -- who are some of those most interesting characters who were influential in --

FR. Yeah, boy, you're really pressing me. I think Mark Jarvis, who was the CEO of First National Bank, was the most impressive person to me, but -- and we were very fortunate to have some --

just some outstanding teachers, particularly in the crafts and in music.

I built that table in the corner over there in eighth grade under Harvey Douglas, and he was a great character molder. But the man that had the most influence on me, you can see in that lower picture, Paul Painter -- built us into -- musically into a city with a national reputation. We won the national music contest in our -- my junior and senior years. I played first trumpet, or tried to, and Betty Jean played first flute. He was a great character molder.

And then a man name of Curly Vaughan, who probably is as responsible for anybody of having tennis teams in high school across the country, a tremendous person with -- and he developed some very, very outstanding tennis players.

Q1. Now, was this at the high school or at Southwestern?

FR. That was at the high school.

Q1. At the high school. Well, you did say in high schools. I'm sorry.

FR. Uh-huh.

Q1. Well, I noticed that you're sitting in front of a beautiful grand piano. And you mentioned the musical heritage that both you and your wife and the town has here. Where did you get the piano? Who played it?

FR. Her -- her parents bought that for her in 1928. She was six years old. And the woman who was her teacher, the picture there

on the piano, Marie Burdette, and she really shaped her into a fine pianist. And we've carried the piano ever since. When her mother gave up housekeeping, she gave the piano back to Betty Jean. Now I'm trying to sell it and I don't want to, but I can't take it to a small apartment.

Q1. It's a beautiful piece.

FR. Yes, it is. It's 108 years old. A real antique.

Q1. And did Betty Jean play that piano through much -- after you got it back, did she still continue to play it?

FR. Oh, yes, yes.

Q1. I bet.

FR. She did up until about four years ago, five years ago, and she would try but just couldn't do it. In more recent months our son has tried to get her to play. We'd bring her over here, and she couldn't play a note or play a note on her flute. Uh, just couldn't do it.

Q1. Must have been frustrating for her.

FR. She's lost it completely. It's terribly frustrating, yeah.

Q1. Oh, gosh. I have one more question about place. Are there any stories or legends about the area or any church you've been a part of? You may not have an answer to that question.

FR. Well, now, what is --

Q1. Are there any -- any of the churches that you've been, that you served, or any of the places that you've lived, are there any

interesting stories or legends about any of those places that you can remember?

FR. Yeah. I think they all kind of mesh into one because I've built every place I've been. The last was the most exciting, out at Johnson. And when I went there, my predecessor had talked the people into building a Quonset hut for education on the back of a beautifully Elizabethan architecture church. And I had to buck that. And we ended up with -- well, a friend of mine, an architect in Wichita, was given the contract, and he went out and just designed a wonderful facility, so it's now a kind of a "cathedral of the west" in that little tiny town of a thousand people of Johnson. But it's great.

Q1. That's a great legacy --

FR. Yeah.

Q1. -- to leave. Well, you mentioned, before we started the interview, what you've been doing in -- most recently, in your lecturing. Can you tell us a little about that?

FR. Yeah. In World War II I was in 104th Infantry division, and we were involved in the Battle of the Bulge. And when the bulge finally gave, the Germans just backed up. We went south and across the Remagen Bridge and headed toward Berlin. It was like Remagen was down here and Berlin was up here (indicating). And the Germans were surrendering by great numbers. They wanted out, too. So there wasn't much fighting going on. It was just more occupation.

We were walking down the road one day, my platoon of about 15 men walking down the road, and somebody came up in a jeep and said there's a concentration camp down the road. And we thought we were smelling something. And the closer we got to that concentration camp, the worse the smell became. And I shall never forget, and one of the most shaping experiences of my life, was walking in the gates and seeing 1200 rotting, stinking, mutilated, starved-to-death human bodies in great rows. And I thought, "Why, this just can't be. Mankind can't do that to his fellow man or fellow woman." But -- well, it's indescribable. It really is.

In fact, my commanding officer took me into a hospital ward, supposedly a hospital ward, and it was like a big barracks, and along the left side were beds jammed side by side, and the dead and the dying on those beds, some of the dead had probably been dead for three or four weeks, and the smell was utterly atrocious. I stood there awhile, and I don't know what my CO did, but suddenly I couldn't take it and I ran back out into the concourse and grabbed onto the side of his jeep.

But a kind of a strange thing was happening. One of our men had managed to smuggle a portable radio. Now, a portable radio now is something you stick in your ear, but a portable radio in those days was about this long and about this wide and about this high (indicating), took ten D-size batteries. And Glen Miller's orchestra was playing from England, and of all numbers,

he was playing *Moonlight Serenade* (humming song). And, you know, that just floated like a haunting mockery over the whole scene. It just made fun of that whole scene, and I was torn all the more.

Suddenly the music went off, and I can't think of the commentator's name right now, but anyway, the commentator came on and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, we've just had word from Warm Springs, Georgia, that Franklin Delano Roosevelt is dead." Now, you've got to understand that he was my commanding officer, of all of us in the services, and somehow with my commander gone, it just seemed like the bottom dropped out of everything. And I remembered at that time that it was my favorite sister's birthday.

Suddenly I grabbed ahold of the side of that jeep and I lifted my head to heavens and I cursed God in vile terms, "There cannot be a God who could allow a thing like this." But, you know, the good Lord took, took me under wing, because I have no memory at all of what happened at that time for the next two weeks. I know what I did, because a book has been written about it, about our unit. We went in town and rounded up all of the available adults who were capable to come out with shovels and blankets and anything that would do for a stretcher, and we made them help us bury those 1200 people.

But that is not the story in itself. We would have to reach down and pick up those pieces of body, and the skin often would slide off

as we got ahold of them. We had no gloves. We had no soap. And for two weeks we picked up that ghastly pile of human beings, stacked in piles in various places. And it was just about four years ago my wife suddenly said to me, "I never knew of anybody who washed his hands so much." And a good psychologist said to me, "You were remembering the Holocaust and you're trying to get that off of your hands." So that was my Holocaust picture.

And I'm going around the country. There is a -- there is a devastating anti-Semitic movement throughout Europe and throughout the world and in America. In fact, just recently, at a high school in Pennsylvania, there was a movement of 200 high school seniors called Kick a Jew Day. That just made me sick at my stomach.

But anyway, it was a life-shaping experience. I have -- I since have become very impatient and anxious to do the good thing and to get the world to moving. I don't know how much time you've got, but I could tell you one story. Are you doing all right?

Q2. We're fine.

Q1. Yes.

FR. Don't you want to sit down?

Q2. No, I'm fine. Thanks.

FR. I was in Raleigh, North Carolina, speaking to a group of 600 laymen. And I made my presentation, and then I always open it up to questions after that. In the middle of that question

period, suddenly an Oriental woman stood up in the middle of this 600-seat auditorium, and she started talking but broke into tears. And she cried and sobbed and sobbed and sobbed. The crowd just hushed 'cause no one knew what to do. Finally, she got ahold of herself, and she said to me, "Could you possibly forgive me for Pearl Harbor?" And I thought, "Lord, I don't know what to do with this one." I never had that question before.

But then a thought occurred to me. I said to her, "Would you mind coming down to where I am?" And she looked at me apprehensively, and after a time she moved down the row and down that aisle and came down. When she reached me, I threw my arms around her and gave her a big bear hug and a kiss on the cheek. And then I said to her, "Can you possibly forgive me for the atomic bomb?" And the crowd just erupted, jumped to their feet and applauded and applauded and applauded. That's one of the most life-shaping experiences I've had.

But here just about four months ago I woke up in the middle of the night, like maybe 3:00 o'clock, and that story came to my mind and I couldn't get it out, and suddenly a thought occurred to me: Is it just possible that the United States of America could take the leadership and approach the empire of Japan, that the two enter into a treaty of forgiveness? (Clock chimes.)

Now, I've had no luck with that idea. I've written to both of our United States senators and I got a form letter back. I've

written to David Broder, the syndicated columnist. I haven't heard from him. I wrote to David Axelrod, who's the President's aide-de-camp. Haven't heard a word from him. But I'm going to keep on and pursuing that.

Recently I was in -- my son and I were at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, and I met the director of the museum that I hadn't been able to get through to either, and I think maybe I've got just a little crack in the door.

I've written to Bob Dole. Now, I don't mean to be a name-dropper, but when I ran for governor in '74 he was running for his second term in the Senate, and we campaigned together, so we've been good friends for years. I haven't had time to hear from him yet. That was only about three or four days ago.

But, you know, I feel that if such a thing could possibly, such a naive thing -- 'cause it would be naive 'cause it would be totally contrary to world direction in human history. The solution to human problems is bang, bang, bang, bang, bang. And I say, no, there's a greater -- there's a greater solution, with the idea that forgiveness is the ultimate form of love. And I don't know if I'll ever come up with anything from that but I'm going to keep trying to see if I can get some support.

I'll never forget that woman, as I said that to her, a big smile came on her face and tears down her cheek, and I can see her working her way back up that row. So --

Q1. I can't that think of anything appropriate to say. (Laughs.) I do -- one thing I would love to ask you, and you don't -- you may not -- you may not even be able to answer this question but after that back at the concentration camp, after that two-week time period that you don't remember, do you remember how you began to heal and how much time that it took? And I'm assuming that this may have also played a role in your decision to enter the ministry, your call to serve God.

FR. Well, the main thing is I couldn't talk about the Holocaust. I become too emotional. So I put it in the closet. I shoved it back. And it was 60 years after the experience that I finally decided to go back to the Holocaust Memorial Museum and get myself equipped, and I started lecturing on the road. And just by word of mouth, the story has gotten out. I've been to, again, the east coast and to Los Angeles and to San Antonio and to Denver, Kansas City, Des Moines, and many places in between. And I've had a great experience. It's a second calling.

Q1. And has it been a healing process for you, too, even all these many years later, to be able to do that?

FR. Yeah, yeah. I thank God that I've got a good memory and I can call up all of those details.

I can tell you one more story real quick about that. After we left the concentration camp -- and I say, say, for that period I have no memory. I remember ending up in the town of Frankenberg, Germany, and I was walking to our mess tent to get lunch. And

12 German soldiers came out of the woods with their arms up. And I took them prisoner and took them down to a concave -- a conclave where we were keeping prisoners. When we got down there, my commanding officer was there and he said, "I don't care what you're doing, you've got to help us process these prisoners." "Yes, sir," you know. So I did.

And the second day, suddenly there stood before me a handsome, exceedingly well-dressed man of about 27, I would guess. There's one strange thing about his uniform, though; he had on riding jodhpurs, you know, what you wear when you play polo. And I thought, "What is a man doing in combat wearing riding jodhpurs?" I finally looked at him and I said, "Drop your pants." And he did and on the inside of his left leg was a holster.

He had told me that he was raised in England and educated at Oxford, and he spoke fluent English. And I reached in and took that gun out of his holster, and he said, "Look at that gun." And I did, and it said Smith & Wesson, U.S. Government Property. I said, "There must be a story behind this gun." He said, "There is." He said, "My father took that gun off of an American soldier in World War I, and here you are taking it off of that soldier's son in World War II." And then he laughed a cynical laugh that I'll never forget. He said, "You know, we don't solve international problems with war; we just end up trading weapons." And that has haunted me ever since.

And, and as I thought it through, I can remember, oh, so well just 20 years ago when Saddam Hussein in Iraq were at war with Iran. Do you know who the number one arms provider was for Saddam Hussein? The United States of America. Weapons that were left over and were shooting our helicopters out of the sky. You don't solve international problems with war; you just end up trading weapons.

Oh, but a worse one. I remember so well, as a child, we spent a lot of time down on the river down here fishing and all, and every half hour a freight train would go through loaded with scrap steel. You know, where they were going? Kansas City. Why? To be put on barges and floated down the Missouri and the Mississippi to New Orleans and loaded onto freighters. To be sent where? Japan. Steel that came back at us in the form of battleships and cruisers and destroyers and bullets and mortars and bombs and shells, all the paraphernalia of war at Pearl Harbor.

So we don't solve international problems with war; we just end up trading weapons. I feel that there is a magnificent futility in war, or a magnificent futility in violence of any kind. And I hope I'm helping get that mind across.

Q1. You were caught up in that.

FR. Yeah, I really --

Q1. As a soldier taught to follow orders, what would you say to today's service members who are fighting these wars --

FR. That's right.

Q1. -- if you could talk to one of them? Because once they sign up, they don't have any choice. What would you say to them about what they're doing because you were in that same position?

FR. I guess I'm not getting that.

Q1. Well, you understand what I'm trying to say, Steve?

Q2. Well, you mean like trying to talk about it?

Q1. No, I don't know. It's just how did it feel to know that and be caught as, you know, you were still serving your country and, you know, and then all the healing that you had to do after and now we have damaged soldiers coming home who need help recovering from those sights and trauma that they've been through, is there anything, either as a former soldier yourself or as a minister, that you could say that would help them?

FR. Well, I try.

Q1. That's a hard question.

FR. It's a hard question. But I feel so passionately about love and as the alternative to anything else we tried in world history.

Somebody asked me in one of my things, "Did you forgive Adolph?"

(Break in video.)

Q1. So, so let's talk a little bit about the Paynes, about President Obama's great-grandparents and how you came to know them. When did your life intersect with that family?

FR. I really don't know when they came to Winfield. They were here when I got here in '64 to serve this church. And they both were

sickly. But wonderful people. And I went out and visited them in their home. She deteriorated in '68. And it was lung cancer, I think, as I recall, but she finally died in March. But I couldn't have the funeral because I was conducting a seminar at Southwestern that day, so my associate, Dr. Leslie Templin, had her funeral.

Two weeks later I went out to see him in his home, and he -- I can tell you he was acting rather strange, and I said, "What's the trouble?" He said, "Oh, I've got a lot of pain in my left shoulder." And I said, "Have you talked to the doctor about it?" And he said, "No." And about that time a member of the family came in, I think it was Obama's grandmother, I'm not sure, but she came in the room and I told her about that pain -- came in from outside, and I told her, I says, "He's told me about a terrible pain he's got in his shoulder. I think he needs to see a doctor." She called me back the next day. Cancer of the left lung. And he lived until October.

Well, in the meantime, I moved to First Methodist in Wichita as senior pastor, so I didn't get to have his funeral either. But it was a shock to me, the newspapers I showed you, that those people were the great-grandparents of our president. And I immediately went out and found the grave, and that was the second article in the paper about it.

All I can say, I remember where they sat, back in that left-hand corner, and they just always smiled, very genteel, very sensitive and warm people.

Q1. And they had, surely, previously lived in Augusta, so they moved to Winfield from Augusta?

FR. That happened what?

Q1. Didn't they move to Winfield from Augusta?

FR. Yeah, I think so.

Q1. Because that's where Madelyn was raised?

FR. I think that's what it was, from Augusta to Winfield, and that happened afterward. That was all in -- my experience with them was '68 when I moved to First Church Wichita.

Q1. Uh-huh. So did you -- when they were members of your congregation, you saw them and you visited him, did you have any other contacts with them or opportunity to get to know them?

FR. Just when I would go out and make pastoral calls. They weren't involved in the church. You know, I can't remember their ages, but I think they were close to 80 at that time. We can see it when we go to the --

Q1. I looked at their birth and death years on -- in the photograph from the - from the, from other's tombstones, and I'm guessing that that would be about right.

FR. Yeah. Can you read the tombstone, the dates on the tombstone?

Q1. The year, the year -- it was 1870 something, both of them, were their birth years.

FR. Uh-huh.

Q1. So they would have been --

FR. So really my experience with them was not all that extensive other than the shock I had when that newspaper came out and said that they were buried here, and I thought, "My heavens, that was the Paynes," you know.

Q1. So, and, you did not realize that until that newspaper article --

FR. Yeah.

Q1. -- the first newspaper article? You shared that with me --

FR. Yeah, that was my first knowledge of that.

Q1. I'll be darned.

FR. And I think I told you before that I've done everything I could to get ahold of the president because I'm wondering if he knows that. But he gets 2,000 emails a day.

Q1. Uh-huh.

FR. And I have written to everybody that I can think of. And maybe I told you that. I don't know. But I've gotten nobody to respond.

Q1. Uh-huh. What would you like the president to know about?

FR. Just the fact that they were buried here and I was their pastor.

Q1. Uh-huh. Sure.

FR. And a lot of people make pilgrimages now out to the cemetery since that news came out.

Q1. So I suppose they were retired at the time? If they were 80, they would have been retired?

FR. Yeah, uh-huh.

Q1. Umm --

FR. Of course, most of the people who were in the church at that time are gone.

Q1. Sure.

FR. Now.

Q1. You say you visited them. Do you remember where they lived?

FR. Oh, yeah, I could show you the house if you'd like to.

Q1. Leave that up to Steve.

Q2. That would be great.

Q1. (Laughs.) Well, that's a -- yeah, you just never know.

FR. (Looks at wristwatch.) How are we doing?

Q1. I think we're doing okay.

Q2. We're doing okay.

Q1. And, gosh, I, you know, one of the things that I should ask -- one of the things I should ask you is, is there anything that you wanted to tell us that we haven't asked you about yet?

FR. Boy, you've covered the ground pretty well. (Laughs.)

Q1. Well, you've told us some really important things, I think, important not in the sense of worldly important but - uh, you know.

FR. I could tell you one more story about the war.

Q1. Why, sure.

FR. On May the 8th we moved into the town of Delitzsch, Germany, and there were just two of us together. Don't know where the others were because we were -- the infantry had already been through and we were just kind of mopping up and organizing this community. And we saw a Lutheran church down the street. And suddenly we heard an organ, and it was coming from that church and it was beautiful music, and we gave each other that "Why not?" look. So we went in, and the organist was probably, I'd say, 87 years old, and he looked up and he said, "Oh, Americans, you've come to save us!" And we had a good visit with him.

Well, the next day was May the 9th, and I was charge of quarters at our forward command post. That is kind of running the office and assigning men to their positions. And the noises of war were going on, the bombing and the shelling and the strafing and the dat, dat, dat, dat, dat (using onomatopoeia). But after 9:00 the sound started waning, and by 9:30 it was the most devastating silence I ever heard. There was nothing.

Well, when you're in the service and you're given an assignment, you stay on that assignment subject to court martial if you leave. But, in the meantime, the carillon in that Lutheran church started playing wildly. I think he wasn't trying to put anything together; he was just hammering (indicating). It was just bells everywhere. And he kept playing and kept playing. Finally, I took leave of my senses and I picked up my carbine, made sure I had a carbine -- an ammunition clip in it. I went

to the door and I opened it and I didn't see anything, so I walked out to the street. And as I reached the street, a door opened in a house across the street and a German soldier, with his rifle in place, came out (indicating). Now, to catch the drama of it here, here's an American soldier and a German soldier standing 20 feet apart with their weapons pointed at the other. Oh, I -- it suddenly swept over me, I would loved to have blasted his eyes out in revenge for the Holocaust. And I know my trigger finger was nervous. But there was something about the higher call of those bells. And we stood and looked at each other.

Finally, I decided I'm going to do something, so I took a step toward him, he took a step toward me, and we ended up with that awkward dance in the middle of the street. As we reached each other, I put my arm out and he locked his left arm in mine, and here was the crazy sight of an armed American soldier and an armed German soldier walking down the middle of the street to church.

And we got to the crest of the hill, and the church was down in the valley, and in -- if you've been to Europe, many towns are built like a wagon wheel, the church is at the hub and the streets all emanate from it. Well, every street was full of pilgrims, I think from every nation on earth, heading for the church. That of itself was disturbing enough. But as we got down there -- oh, the church was full, the yard was filled with people, and suddenly as we stood there, the bells stopped, and the organist

broke into the greatest of all of the hymns, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*. And I -- something just came over me. I don't know what it was. But I heard in my heart from the 46th Psalm, "Be still and know that I am God." And I'll tell you, this GI who had cursed God violently a month before suddenly felt forgiven. And there's where the forgiveness comes.

The war was over. We came home. The first -- we were the first two ships that came home because we had such a good record of killing people and they wanted to train us for the invasion of Japan. So we had a month furlough. My parents just went ape when I ran up on the front porch and cried out, "Is anybody home?" It was 10:00 o'clock at night. But the next morning, the very first call I made was to Betty Jean. Two weeks later we were engaged and then married -- well, of course, almost on that same day the Japanese surrendered.

I have strong feelings about the atomic bomb, and I respect Harry Truman. He had to make that decision. But I never have understood why that bomb had to be dropped on populated areas. Why didn't they drop it in Tokyo harbor? But they did. And had they not used the atomic bomb, I probably wouldn't be sitting here because the prediction was an 85 percent mortality rate of those who would go in on in an invasion of Japan. So I've got strong feelings about it, yet I know that my life has been preserved because we did drop it. Well --

Q1. Well, that certainly informs your story about the Japanese woman in the audience, too.

FR. Yes.

Q1. You needed to tell us that story. That's the -- that's an important piece.

FR. Yeah, yeah. So you got anything else?

Q1. Uh, gosh.

FR. You came for a little bit and you got a whole bushel.

Q1. This has been wonderful. But I do think we might want -- is there anything else you can think of?

Q2. No, I was wondering about how --

FR. I can't hear you from over there.

Q2. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. How do you want to be remembered by your children, by people of the community? How do you think you're going to be remembered years from now?

FR. I -- I've never thought of that. They know my history. They know what I did. Our son is my total companion in all this. He went to Washington with me. And they all are very proud of my involvement. But that's about it. I just haven't thought of what heritage I would leave.

Q2. Your family, how do you think they'll remember you? Your children, for instance, how do you think they're going to remember you?

FR. I'm not getting that.

Q2. Your children especially, how do you think your children are going to remember you, you know, as a father, and not so much as World War II veteran or any of that, but as a father? How do you think -- how do you want to be remembered by them?

FR. You know, Larry Hatteberg asked me that same question (laughs) and I don't remember how I answered. That's just difficult for me to respond to that. You don't do it to be heroic. You do it to be of service. I pray every day for our American citizens who have put their lives on the line, are facing a gun right now, could have their head blasted off in the service of their country and of me, and I don't feel worthy of it. Now that sounds kind of schmaltzy, but --

Q1. If you could imagine that eventually you succeed, if you could sit down in a room with President Obama, just the two of you, what would you say to him? Would you give him any advice?

FR. I would tell him first about his grand -- great-grandparents.

Q1. What about them especially, just --

FR. Just that I was their pastor and all of that. But I think I would -- I would probably tell him the two stories, the story -- yeah, of course the story of the woman who interrupted me with her question, and then I would tell him the story about the German soldier. And I'm sure he would bomb me with questions. I've not met him. I don't know him. I'm a little disappointed in him at a number of points.

Q1. I think those are good things to tell him, those two stories.

FR. Yeah. I used those just last week at a men's breakfast. And that's all I did, I just told them those two stories, because they do intertwine. But I don't think there's anything else that I've got that --. I got some of those papers you wanted to see. But other than that --

Q2. Were you the subject of a *Hatteberg's People*? Were you the subject of a *Hatteberg's People* awhile back? Did Larry come and talk to you?

FR. Did Larry what now?

Q2. Did Larry Hatteberg do a story about you for *Hatteberg's People*?

Q1. You mentioned Larry Hatteberg?

Q2. Yeah, did Larry Hatteberg come and do a story about you?

FR. I understand her better than I do you.

Q2. Okay.

Q1. I bet it's --

FR. Usually it's worse.

Q1. You mentioned Larry Hatteberg.

FR. Oh, yeah.

Q1. Did he come and visit and do a story on you for *Hatteberg's People*?

FR. Yeah, I -- he was down here and interviewed me about two years ago. I married them.

Q1. Ahh.

FR. So they've been friends for all those years. Did that answer your question?

Q2. Yes, it did. (All laugh.) It did, absolutely.

Q1. Well, what do you want --

Q2. Well, if you can sit there for a second, I'll get some shots. I want a shoot of you two.

(Break in video.)

FR. Possum, squirrels, lots of redbirds and lots of other birds. I just thoroughly, oh, roadrunners, which is kind of rare.

Q1. Yeah.

FR. And occasionally one will come tearing through the yard.

Q1. Well, that's fun.

FR. Yeah.

Q1. So tell me, now, when you moved -- you're moving to an apartment across the way, so it'll -- it's in the same area but it'll just be a smaller place?

FR. Yes. It'll be smaller and I'll have to get rid of a lot of furniture. As I say, I don't want to. I love it here.

Q1. Uh-huh.

FR. But I've fallen lately. I've fallen five times this year.

Q1. Ahh.

FR. My legs give out.

Q1. Uh-huh.

FR. And so it's probably the best.

Q2. (Inaudible.)

Q1. Okay. Does it matter what I say?

Q2. Not at all.

Q1. Okay. Then I can just jibber jabber. Well, yeah, I do -- it surprises me that one of your children doesn't want this piano. Do either of them play? Are they musical at all? Oh, I'm sorry --

FR. I play trumpet. I played trumpet.

[END]

NOTE: Images of side view of Mr. Robinson, of piano, and of interviewer Q1.1. Some chatting about family and this project.