

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH BRIAN STEEL WILLS

CONDUCTED, EDITED AND INDEXED BY THOMAS A. SCOTT

for the

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Interview with Brian Steel Wills
Conducted, edited, and indexed by Thomas A. Scott
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TS: Dr. Brian Steel Wills has been the director of the Center for the Study of the Civil War Era, which is quite a name, since 2010. You were not responsible for the name.

BW: No, I inherited the name.

TS: You've been here since 2010 and in Virginia for a number of years before that. Let's start with your background. I know you're from Virginia. You got a Bachelor of Arts with honors from the University of Richmond in 1981. Let me start by asking, were you a traditional age student?

BW: Yes.

TS: So, you didn't do any military or anything beforehand?

BW: No, I went straight from high school to college.

TS: Why don't you talk about where you grew up in Virginia and why the University of Richmond and few things about your background that you think are relevant?

BW: Okay. When you say relevant, I guess it depends if you want to do a life's history, then I guess they're relevant. If you want to do something for the Archives, I'm not sure how many people will care. But I'll go ahead and tell you that...

TS: Well, what shaped you into the person you are?

BW: That said, I know where you were heading with that. That's why I was joking about that. But I started out on a farm in Virginia, growing up on a peanut farm, in the traditional days when you stacked peanuts. Some of the most beautiful vistas are of these beautiful stacks of peanuts in the fields. My dad had me doing that as early as possible and involved in tractors and other things. Then we had horses. My dad raised and trained Tennessee walking horses. I was the designated shoveler and the one that went into the stalls and made sure that they were clean. My dad did supervise that, make sure that I did what I was supposed to do, and didn't just lark the whole time.

TS: So, that was his primary occupation as a farmer?

BW: He was a farmer, yes. He was a farmer, and my mother was a teacher.

TS: What part of Virginia?

BW: Southeastern Virginia, the Tidewater area, Suffolk, Virginia. Suffolk. In fact, my second book was *The War Hits Home: The Civil War in Southeastern Virginia* [University of Virginia Press 2001], particularly the [Confederate Lieutenant General James] Longstreet 1863 campaign to that area. I always wanted so badly for something big to have happened on our farm. I would go out as a kid looking for either Indian relics or Civil War relics, and nothing seems to have happened on our farm.

TS: No spent shells or anything?

BW: No spent shells, no materials that you could take back and show everyone what a great location you lived on.

TS: When I was preparing questions, I had my geography all mixed up. I thought you were probably writing about where you were teaching, but you were teaching [at the University of Virginia's College at Wise] in Southwest Virginia. So, you went from southeast to southwest.

BW: Well, and stopped in the middle [for an undergraduate education] at Richmond. So, I kind of went across the state.

TS: Richmond's the middle?

BW: Well, more or less between Suffolk and Wise. But Wise, Virginia, which is where my farm is, where I worked for seventeen years before I came here, is closer to six other state capitals than its own. It's that far west. If you took a ruler and drew the line, you would actually go to Detroit, Michigan with that line. So, that's how far west you are. People don't realize that you're that far west.

TS: So, let's see; Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana.

BW: Yes, West Virginia.

TS: West Virginia, of course.

BW: Yes, supposedly six. They've geo-mapped it; so, I'm not trying to create the history there. But they've geo-mapped that this is true. Richmond is six hours away. So, if you're anywhere within six hours—Roanoke is three hours northeast of Wise. Lexington, Kentucky, is three hours northwest of Wise. Knoxville, Tennessee, is three hours southwest of Wise. So, you have Knoxville, Lexington, and Roanoke all in a three-hour trip from Wise.

TS: And you say Richmond is six?

BW: Richmond's six hours.

TS: You're driving pretty fast to get there in six [358 miles].

BW: Well, you can make it.

TS: How big was your family farm when you were growing up?

BW: We had 90 plus acres. So, we had a lot of land, a farm of cows and pigs. We had pigs; we had horses, of course; we had peanuts; we had corn, soybeans. Dad raised watermelons at some point. We actually took trucks to the D.C. suburbs and sold watermelons and all kinds of stuff. He was a real go-getter. Then he also was an oil distributor for a period of time. So, he would do oil. Then he was fertilizer distributor. So, in other words he spread fertilizer to make sure that the crops have the best soils to work with.

TS: What's your father's name?

BW: Curtis—Curtis Leonard Wills Jr.

TS: Had the farm been in the family for generations?

BW: Well, I don't know generations, but it's certainly been around. My grandfather lived on the farm as well.

TS: So, you couldn't help but be interested in the Civil War in that location.

BW: You really were interested in history because of Virginia. Virginia is just a seed of history, especially early American history because of Williamsburg, Jamestown, Yorktown—right in the heart of a lot of things that happened. And not necessarily Civil War although, of course, once you latch into history, you can't help but get addicted to George Washington and Patrick Henry. You've got Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson and J. E. B. Stuart.

TS: Did you have any Civil War ancestors in your family?

BW: Yes, actually, I did, interestingly enough on my mother's side. I had a member of the Confederate Navy. He was Charles [H.] Hasker. He had come over from England. One of the programs I did for the symposia, as I've tried to do different programs through the years was on Charles Hasker, so that they'd learn about who he was. He was actually a boatswain on the CSS *Virginia*. The *Virginia* is the [USS] *Merrimack*. So, if you ever talk about the *Merrimack* and the *Monitor*, the ironclads, the *Merrimack* is renamed the *Virginia* and he was on that. Then he became a lieutenant in the Confederate Navy, ended up being at Drewry's Bluff [May 15, 1862] after they destroyed the *Virginia* [May 11, 1862], and helped keep the Union Navy away from Richmond.

Then he went to Charleston and actually volunteers for a stint on one of the trial runs of the *Hunley*, the submarine CSS *Hunley*. He is in one of the seats that enables him to be able to escape because in both of the trial runs, it goes down and drowns most of its crew. He got out by virtue of being able to get up through the hatchway enough that the hatch cover came down on his leg and trapped him, but they weren't that far out. When they settled, he pulled the hatch cover off and swam to the surface. So, he was the only man who went to the bottom and came out and lived. And he lived past the Civil War. He was very productive and very interested and did a stereopticon type of presentation on the Confederate Navy compared to the modern US Navy in the Spanish-American War era.

TS: Wow. What's your mother's name?

BW: Harriet with one T. And she is a Steel, Harriet Steel, which is where my middle name comes from. I had a relative, Charles [Lowndes] Steel, who was a colonel and was in World War II in the Pacific. He ended up being captured in the Philippines and taken on the Bataan Death March and managed to survive it all somehow and survived incarceration in the Philippines through the war. He was kind of a skeletal type person when he got out, but he was living. When he came back, I don't know if it was in San Francisco or where it was, but I have a clipping that said, "Colonel Steel, now that you're back in the States what are you planning to eat?" He says, "Brother, it won't be rice. It won't be rice."

TS: Well now, I guess you were born about 1960, 1961, somewhere in there?

BW: No, I'm a 1959 baby.

TS: You and Randy [Randall L. Patton] are both 1959.

BW: Well, he's a year older than I am. I was born January 7, 1959.

TS: You knew Randy from graduate school.

BW: Dear friend! He was my office mate at University of Georgia. We have been dear friends and close ever since.

TS: Okay. So, born in 1959, and you graduate in 1981. You're a traditional student, University of Virginia. I'm assuming you were a history major.

BW: Right. I was at University of Richmond. And you asked, why did I go to Richmond. Richmond, of course, back then was still considered a Baptist school. I was a Baptist. I got all the Baptist scholarships you could get which amounted to a couple thousand dollars. Of course, Richmond was much more expensive than that; so, we ended up having to put a lot of money in. My dad basically said, "I'll make sure you get the college education, but after that you're on your own." And so, for the quite expensive time of Richmond, I built up the traditional debt that one gets. But I was very fortunate because my first book was on Nathan Bedford Forrest, and it was a pretty good seller. [A

Battle from the Start: The Life of Nathan Bedford Forrest (HarperCollins Publishers, 1992)] It ended up enabling me to make enough money to pay off my college debt. So, I didn't have to wait for Joe Biden [and his debt forgiveness plan].

TS: I was thinking the other day, you're probably still making a lot of money off royalties with all those popular books that you've done.

BW: Well, they're better than some of the things you could write, I guess. One of my professors at Richmond said, "I just got my royalty check for 50 cents." And so, I said, "I've done a little better than that." But he is right; it's hard to just make money if you're not [John] Grisham and the other people that make all the money off novels and such.

TS: Yes, but I imagine most of your books are still in print.

BW: They're still in print. They're still in print. The Forrest book was retitled and published by a different publisher [*The Confederacy's Greatest Cavalryman: Nathan Bedford Forrest* (University Press of Kansas, 1998)], but they're still in print.

TS: We've talked about how you got attracted to history. You didn't have a choice, I guess, where you were from. I did have another question. What about the military? You've written all your life about the military. I don't think you ever served, did you?

BW: No. I didn't. I didn't.

TS: Did you ever have a desire to?

BW: The closest I came was as a seasonal at Petersburg National Battlefield Park. I was serving on a Confederate artillery piece, and for five summers, I fired the artillery piece for the visitors—then a Coehorn mortar, which is homage to the siege part of the Petersburg battlefield. I loved it. I brought a little show and tell. Here's my picture of me on one of the horses as an artillerist. I don't know if you can zoom in on that and get that or not for the folks that might want to see that for the Archives.

TS: Where are you in the picture?

BW: Right in the middle with the hat on. It's hard to see but I'll pass it on and let you look at it for fun. But one of the things that I did as a summer job was this artillery position with the Washington Artillery from New Orleans, Louisiana. So, we had fun with that. I even brought my own horse one summer and worked one summer on the battlefield with my horse. His name was Danny Boy, and Danny was a very wonderful horse, very pleasant disposition, did not scare. He was good around children, which is always a good thing. He was a pleasure walker, not the big kind of show that my dad rode. He rode the ones that I can't even sit on. I don't really care that much for them, but he loved them. One of his championship horses was called A Southern Colonel, and he actually won a world championship on A Southern Colonel. He would go to Shelbyville and to the national events and all. Horses were work to me, and Danny was the exception. I enjoyed Danny;

he and I were good buddies. We did a lot and rode and worked on the farm. But then he went to Petersburg that one summer, and we had a great time.

TS: Okay. Do you go to the University of Georgia straight from Richmond or is there a gap in between?

BW: There's a gap in between.

TS: What did you do?

BW: Well, aside from military service in the Confederate Army—I always jokingly said that it was interesting to get paid by the United States government to be a Confederate soldier, and I shouldn't complain too much about taxes having done all that—one of the other interests is, I've always had an interest in politics too. I was in student government at Richmond, but I'd actually been assistant postmaster in the House of Delegates of Virginia. I thoroughly enjoyed that in the 1970s as a young person. So, I kept being interested in that sort of thing. But I had a professor at Richmond who said, "You would have to do the things you don't want to do to be in politics." He knew there were a lot of things that I would have trouble with because I would draw the line that I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to do what is questionable or whatever. And he says, "Do you really want to be in politics given the things you would have to do to be in politics?" We all know that there's no politician like that—that all politicians are selfless, and all of them work for the people. We know that. So, I don't know what he was talking about. But I got the point, and I decided to try something different.

My last year at Richmond and in the interim time period, I'll cover two things with that. One, I was in theatre and I love the theatre. I was actually an award-winning theatre person because I did an Irish priest as the family friend of the father and son who couldn't talk to each other and communicate with each other and tell each other they loved each other. But the boy was coming to America and leaving Ireland. So, it was "Philadelphia, here I come." I was trying to reconcile them before he left, and he'd never see his father again. I won a cameo award for that because I could do cameo. I couldn't remember the lines well enough to do real characters. So, I was a cameo. I'm always good at scenes. I can do a scene, and I enjoy it.

TS: I can't imagine you not being able to remember your lines.

BW: Oh, I'm terrible at memory—terrible memory. I have to keep at it and keep at it and keep at it. That's how I remember it. But the other thing that I did that was the interim thing was I was the research assistant for the Virginia Baptist Historical Society, which was housed at the University of Richmond. I worked there for a couple of years and really enjoyed it. I did the archives and whatnot with the Baptist Historical Society and also with the university archives. We collected all kinds of things from old memorabilia to hymnals to papers. We had pulpits like an old church might have a pulpit that they wanted to save—and we got that and put it back in the storage area and so forth. [We

did] a lot with [Charlotte Digges] “Lottie” Moon, the missionary [to China, 1873-1912, with the Foreign Mission Board].

TS: Oh, yes.

BW: Just a lot of things. So, it was really great, and I enjoyed it. But after two years, I was ready to go to grad school and try something different. When I got ready to leave, they threw a party, which I thought was very sweet of them. A guy named Lynn Dickerson was a professor at the university, but he was also a preacher. Lynn came up to me, and he said, “You know, Brian, we are going to miss you terribly.” And I said, “Dr. Dickerson, that’s so kind of you to say.” And he said, “We will never find anyone who will work for as little as you do.”

TS: Oh, no!

BW: So, there you go. Then, I went to grad school, so I could be a high-paid college professor.

TS: Okay, and you were very naive at the same time.

BW: Well, I really also thought about maybe teaching in high school. I had played football in high school. I was a linebacker and a fullback, and not too bad, but short. I was mostly mean but short, and pretty good, I thought, but not good enough. Then, I got a helmet in the knee in my senior year. Back in those days, it was Frankenstein stitches if you wanted to have surgery, and I didn’t want that. Now, today, it’s a pinprick. They go in and do all kinds of thing. But back in the day, I just retired. So, rather than go on to try to be in a college somewhere, even a small college, I ended up retiring. But I’ve never given up my love of football and love of sports and have been involved with football all my life one way or another. In fact, at University of Virginia’s College at Wise, which is where I ended up going and teaching for seventeen years, I actually for a period of time was their radio color commenter, and then I was also their play-by-play guy. When I would do radio, people would always tell me, “We learn more history than we do football,” because I was always throwing in history stories because you can’t have dead time on the radio. Cannot have dead time. So, if you’re not on a commercial you have to keep talking. And so, I would talk about...

TS: So, you’re saying, “This reminds me of Nathan Bedford Forrest?”

BW: Well, whoever, and sometimes it would be. Sometimes I’d say, “We’re going to attack them both ways as Forrest would say—‘Charge them both ways.’”

TS: Douglas Southall Freeman was in Richmond.

BW: Yes. He was a newspaper editor and writer.

TS: And wrote about Robert E. Lee.

BW: Robert E. Lee and others—award winning.

TS: You were aware of him when you were going through school?

BW: Oh, yes. My mother actually grew up in Richmond before she came and went to school and did all the things and married my dad. It was a fun story there too because she was a nutritionist for the local Girl Scout camp. And so, she was buying produce from local farms for the Girl Scouts. She saw my dad on a tractor with no shirt on, and she said, “I fell in love. I fell in love.” So, then they started courting, and they married, and they were married for a good long while. My dad has since passed away, but my mother, who is 96 years old, is still living, still playing bridge, still doing everything—teacher for forever. She taught for more years than I’ve taught.

TS: Oh, what did she teach?

BW: Mostly fourth grade, but different levels. She was the one who would take groups of fourth graders to Jamestown or Yorktown or Williamsburg or wherever. That was part of the allure there too, plus she sold *Childcraft* and *World Book*. *Childcraft* was the sort of supplemental volumes you could get on science or anything. There was a history one and one on great people; I think they called them men back at the time, if you know what I’m saying.

TS: Great men, yes.

BW: I read that, and it was fascinating. I saw just great stories about people like Robert E. Lee, but they weren’t necessarily Civil War stories. The one about Robert E. Lee was when he was in Mexico, and it was about him being out on a scout and then having to hide behind a log while a Mexican patrol was in the area. And then the mosquitoes, which apparently in Mexico are like the state bird, were tearing them up. But he was disciplined, and he was lying there and not moving and whatnot. One of them actually sat on the log. Then, when they went off, he got up and went back and reported to Winfield Scott what he had learned. So, you can’t help [being fascinated by] the personalities of Washington and Patrick Henry and Robert E. Lee or Light-Horse Harry Lee.

TS: Yes. Did your mother teach you in the fourth grade?

BW: No, no. If she sees this, she’ll understand, but it was a miracle that they understood that I did not need to be with my mother in school and at home, that that was not necessary. That would actually amount to something that would probably be against the constitution.

TS: Maybe even child abuse.

BW: Yes, we don’t believe in torture.

TS: Okay, so why did you go to the University of Georgia?

BW: Well, so I went to the University of Richmond. I was in a private school. I loved the school. I had great times. There were also moments I questioned what I was doing there. Just like everything else, you have those great days where everything's going well and those days where you're looking around wondering, "What in the world am I doing?" But for the most part, I loved the school, and I loved the department. Great department. I had a guy named [Ernest C.] Ernie Bolt [Jr.] as my major professor there—just a super, super guy! [W.] Harrison Daniel was their Civil War guy, and Harrison had a very dry sense of humor. He ended up being a lot more complex than I ever dreamed because you never really knew because his idea of humor was, "So, the slaves were sometimes named Caesar." And he thought that was funny. You just look at him and, "Dr. Daniel, that's interesting. That's fascinating!" But he was passionate. He loved chaplaincy and religion in the war, but he also loved baseball. So, it was just a fascinating thing to see and learn more about these people through the years.

My best favorite professor there was a guy named [J.] Martin Ryle, who taught Soviet history. I took all of his classes, and we went to Europe together and had a great time. It was my first overseas trip. I'll never forget, I went to La Grand-Place [Brussels, a UNESCO World Heritage Site] and looked at all of that, just the most beautiful square in Belgium. He said it was the first time I'd actually absolutely been quiet for minutes while I didn't know what to say. But I love Versailles. I think I must have been a stable boy at Versailles because I really have an affection and an attraction to Versailles. But we went all over. We had actual...

TS: You're talking about a previous incarnation?

BW: Yes, you know, I'm interested in stables; so, I tie the two together. We were on a trip in that case for school to look at some of the international organizations. So, we went to Belgium and Austria. You went to places like Switzerland where there were international organizations. So, it was wonderful, and that was my first trip. I had an aunt who was very generous and gave me the money to be able to go. Otherwise, I couldn't have gone. So, it was a wonderful trip, and I loved that. But all of that ties back to Georgia because in Richmond—private school—with Harrison Daniel, we were reading *The Confederacy as a Revolutionary Experience* by [University of Georgia professor] Emory [M.] Thomas [first published 1970]. Then, he said, "You need to go to a school at your next level that goes up a notch from Richmond."

Now, Richmond was a great school, but he kind of understood that you might want to go somewhere else. So, I applied to Duke, applied to Emory in Atlanta, and I applied to the University of Georgia. And he said, "It would be good if you can go to a public school because then when you come out, you can show you are functional. You can work in a private school. You are functional. You can work in a public school. And to work with a professor that has the kind of clout that can help you would be good too."

I was treated at Georgia like a person. I thought they were wonderful. At Emory it was just very distant and numbers, “You’re number 536,” and all this. At Duke, I was not going to get any money for a year because they didn’t give anybody money the first year. Well, I think, “I’m a farmer’s son. My mother’s a teacher. We don’t have any money. I can’t go.” I’ve already been told, you know, “When you leave undergraduate, you’re on your own.” I can’t afford to pay that kind of bill. So, I’ve had to automatically rule that out. Then, I got a call from Emory after I had been accepted at Georgia. And they said, “We have some Coke money freed up, and we will let you come here.” And I said, “I’ve already been accepted at Georgia, and I’m planning to go there.” “Well, you don’t have to now.” I’m going to tell you right now, “That doesn’t ring well with me. There are certain attitudes.

TS: Emory is saying, “Why did you want to go to a Podunk school like UGA?”

BW: “Why do you want to go to UGA when you don’t have to? You don’t have to do that now. You can come here.” And Martin Ryle had been at Emory; so, he was the Emory connection. I wanted to go to Emory, but again I couldn’t have paid for it myself. Then, I was treated so well at Georgia, maybe not so well at Emory. And then here it comes as sort of an entitlement type of thing. And I said, “No, I think I’ll stay.” And I’m glad I did. I stayed, and then the question was whether I was going to go on after my master’s to somewhere else. I thought about studying under a guy named [Thomas Lawrence] Tom Connelly [professor of history at the University of South Carolina], who had written some really big stuff on the Western theater of the American Civil War [among other books, *Army of the Heartland: The Army of Tennessee, 1861-1862*, and *Autumn of Glory: The Army of Tennessee, 1862-1865*]. He was a very close friend of Emory Thomas. He and ET were very close. But I am eternally grateful that Connelly told Emory, “You know, I just don’t think I want any more students.” And that was good because within a short time frankly he was sick and he passed away [in 1991 at age 52]. So, it would have been an upheaval. Now, he was at South Carolina, again another fine institution. So, it’s not as if I couldn’t have, I’m sure, made out just fine. But then I stayed on at Georgia and got my MA and PhD at Georgia.

TS: Did you know that Emory Thomas was born in Richmond?

BW: Oh, yes. I knew the Virginia connections; he went of course to UVA. So, I knew he had all these Virginia connections, and I was happy to be a student of Emory Thomas—very pleased.

TS: He even wrote a dissertation on Richmond in the Civil War [for his 1966 PhD from Rice University].

BW: And then he turned that into a book [*Confederate State of Richmond: A Biography of the Capital* [first edition 1971, University of Texas Press].

TS: Okay. So, you go to UGA; Emory Thomas becomes your mentor there and, I guess, major professor.

BW: He becomes my major professor. I think it's interesting you choose the word mentor because in so many ways the man I probably gained the most from my teaching and what I've used in the classroom—and this is no shot at Emory because I loved Emory Thomas; I loved him, and he was a great major professor—but Numan V. Bartley, “Bud” Bartley, was really influential to me. And of course, he was [Randall L. Patton] Randy's major professor. Everything Bud taught I took, and you had to be on your Ps and Qs with him. You couldn't go in the classroom and not know what you were talking about. He would not be kind. He could be pretty exacting when he wanted to be; but he was a great, great person. I love Bud to death. He in so many ways was as much an influence on my teaching as anybody. But he will tell me, at a later point, of course, “The Civil War is irrelevant. It has no meaning, no importance at all.”

TS: He said that?

BW: Of course, he was teasing me to try to play off the notion that, of course, his interests are New South and other things. And so, I said, “You know, Bud, that's fine. You think what you want, but the Civil War and Civil Rights go hand-in-hand, and you can't have one without the other.”

TS: Okay. So, those were your major two professors at UGA?

BW: Right. Of course, I took other people. You had to take a lot of different people. But those were the ones I took the most and that I was associated with the most.

TS: I didn't see Bartley listed among the emeritus faculty at UGA now. Is he still alive?

BW: No, he passed away. He's been passed away for a while [December 27, 2004].

TS: And he was Randy's major professor.

BW: He was. But he was funny now. You talk about somebody that just didn't fit any of the profiles. Here's a man who studied history the way he did, and yet he loved Georgia football. So, he would investigate whom did they recruit, where the team stands, and so forth. He'd been the last person that you would have thought would be interested in sports and football. But he loved that sort of thing and really, really, was on top of it. But he was funny. We had a gathering. Another reason that I love being in Georgia, one of the emeritus professors there was very kind to grad students. I don't know if you knew Doc Wall, Bennett [H.] Wall [professor of history, UGA, 1980-1985]. One of the fine people—he believed that the grad students were people. And so, he would invite us to his house, and we would have parties. I'll never forget that when I announced to Bud Bartley that I did not drink beer because I just didn't like the taste of it, he says, “You know, Mr. Wills, you're the biggest waste of a beer-drinking body I've ever seen.” I'm not against having a cold drink. It just wasn't my drink of choice.

TS: Well, I didn't go to UGA, but they had some really good faculty there I thought.

BW: Oh, they had great faculty, and it was a great department. It was at the time, I think, it was at its peak. It really was at its best. And I'm not saying compared to today because I'm not aware of how they stand today. But at that time, they were really an outstanding department across the board with reputations and scholarship of all areas.

TS: Yes. I used to see Kenneth Coleman and [B.] Phinizy Spalding at meetings of the Georgia Historical Society.

BW: Oh, yes. I took Phinizy. I took quite a few of them, so.

TS: Was [James C.] Jim Cobb a student when you were there?

BW: Jim Cobb was not a student. He had been a student [at the University of Georgia, AB 1969, MA 1972, PhD 1975], but he was already out. And so, I didn't know Jim that way. I knew him because of the Southern Historical Association [SHA] and other things. [Cobb returned to UGA as B. Phinizy Spalding Distinguished Professor in the History of the American South from 1999 until his retirement in 2016].

And by the way, Doc Wall, when we went to the SHA, Georgia was still heavily connected to that. [Wall was secretary-treasurer of the SHA, 1952-1985 and president in 1988]. Now it's under other people, but under [William F.] Will Holmes [secretary-treasurer of the SHA for fifteen years] and then other people have since taken that mantle, but Will was the main one. But Doc Wall would have us in his hotel room because he would throw a party there too. He liked to have a party. He has connections to Tulane. He had connections in [the University of] Kentucky. He had great stories about different personalities—of Bear Bryant when he wasn't at Alabama. But anyway, the point is that he would introduce us to famous people that we wouldn't have met otherwise and whom then we could talk to as real people. It was great. He said, "John Hope, come over here."—John Hope Franklin. And, my gosh, you're meeting John Hope Franklin!

TS: What did Wall teach?

BW: He was more business. He did a history of Exxon, I think. [*Growth in a Changing Environment: A History of Standard Oil Company (New Jersey) 1950-1972 and Exxon Corporation 1972-1975* (McGraw-Hill, 1989)].

TS: So, it sounds like you had a good time at UGA.

BW: Yes. And then John [C.] Inscoe was perfect. He was a great colleague. Inscoe and I worked at the *Georgia Historical Quarterly*. I was an assistant there and worked with John [editor 1989-2000] and [assistant editor] Sheree Dendy and a few others. So, it was great. I'll never forget one time we brought in William [S.] McFeely from Mount Holyoke [where he won the 1982 Pulitzer Prize for Biography or Autobiography for *Grant: A Biography* (W. W. Norton 1981)]. They brought him in, I think, to try to get the Pulitzer Prize heft and all that stuff, and he came for a period of time [1986 until his

retirement in 1997]. I'll never forget, he came in one time and he says, "Brian, can I borrow your office? Brian, can I borrow your office?" I said, "Dr. McFeely, sure you can." Well, he went back in there, and he was excited. You could hear him and all that. I said, "Are you okay?" He says, "I'm fine. I just had to work things out." I said, "Well, I understand that. I do understand that. But I'm glad you were able to do that. I was glad I was able to help."

McFeely was potentially going to be on my dissertation committee. I did my dissertation on Nathan Bedford Forrest because Emory said, "Why don't you just pick some aspect of Forrest's life and write about that?" I said, "No, I'm going to do the whole thing." I said, "I'm just all or nothing. I want the whole thing." So, I was going to do the whole life of Forrest. He [McFeely] was going to be potentially on the committee. When he went into this thing with Forrest, he just decided he couldn't stomach that.

TS: He didn't want to be on your committee?

BW: He didn't want to have anything to do with that, even if it's just a student.

TS: Well, Forrest is pretty controversial.

BW: Well, he was. But the point is that McFeely just didn't want to have anything to do with him. He came in with this yellow pad with all these comments and turned red faced and got excited and finally blurted out, "Forrest was worse than Hitler." And I said, "Dr. McFeely, I think that's letting Hitler off pretty easy"—because as bad as Forrest was, he was no Hitler. Now, Forrest is controversial—slave trader, Fort Pillow, First Grand Wizard of the Klan. He did not found the Klan. It found him, but he was in it. So, he was controversial. But I said, "What we need to do is understand these people in the context of their times and see what we can learn from them, and also, of course, what we can learn about what we don't want to have happen again."

TS: Did you take any psychology along the way? Because it seems to me Forrest would be a prime candidate for a good psychiatrist.

BW: He probably would sit down if he didn't strangle him or kill him.

TS: I mean, it seems like he was constantly mad at somebody.

BW: Well, he had a lot of stuff going on. He had a lot of internal demons. And I think he was one of those personalities that didn't brook much nonsense and unfortunately had a tendency to express that in a very overt sort of way.

TS: I don't know whether you would know anything about this, but I'm thinking back about 70 years now. When I was in elementary school, I remember reading a children's book on Nathan Bedford Forrest that talked about his hard upbringing [probably Aileen Wells Parks, *Bedford Forrest: Boy on Horseback* from the *Childhood of Famous Americans*

Series (Bobbs-Merrill 1952)]. And, you know, back 70 years ago, here's a book about a great man that came up the hard way.

BW: Sure. Well, the focus there was kind of Lincolnesque. You know, he grew up in that kind of hardscrabble life and made good, et cetera, et cetera. Of course, he was an exceptional soldier. But the personality that made him a good soldier made him problematic as a person, as a citizen. But it's funny. Forrest was more complex than people would give him credit for. He, toward the end of the war, will write a letter to his son. Now, keep in mind that Forrest had six months of formal education. So, he wrote the way he spoke. Fight is F-I-T-E. So, "fite" is what he wrote.

TS: So, why don't we spell it that way, the way you pronounced it?

BW: He would have spelled out his letters if they were original to him the way he pronounced it. And if it's perfect, you knew a staff person or a clerk wrote it. But he would tell the clerks what to say and if they didn't give it the right pitch, he'd give it a new tune. So, he'd make them say what he wanted. In this letter, he tells his son, "I don't know what will happen to me once this war is over and what my fate will be. But in all things, be more like your mother." Well, his mother was a much different person than Forrest.

When he met his future wife and went to court her, the guardian of the future wife said, "Forrest, you cuss and gamble, and Mary Ann is a Christian girl." And he looked at him, and he said, "I know. That's why I want her. That's why I want her." He knew what he was, and he knew what she was and that she would make him better. And so, here he's telling his son, "Don't do the things I did. Don't make the mistakes I made. Don't make the choices I made. Do be more like your mother." And so, it was kind of a funny kind of letter. He, of course, did survive the war and did live a little while after—lived through reconstruction, 1877.

TS: He didn't live that much longer though.

BW: No. He didn't live as long as some. Obviously, some lived into the next century but he...

TS: What happened to him?

BW: We don't really even know. There's a lot of speculation about whether he had some kind of complications from diabetes or whatever. We don't know. He had a condition where he literally could not absorb nutrients into his system. And so, even though he would eat and he went away toward the end of his life to some of the springs to try to recover his health, he couldn't sustain weight. He just deteriorated to the point that he basically died. He basically starved himself to death.

TS: Do you get any static from doing a biography of Nathan Bedford Forrest from the faculty?

BW: No, no. The only person was McFeely. I'm sure I've had some issues since because I wrote about him with other later situations. But I would never know it. Most people that are going to hold Forrest against me won't tell me that to my face.

TS: Really?

BW: Yes.

TS: Well, I mean you're trying to be objective when you're...

BW: I was trying to be, and I thought he really needed to have a serious treatment. There had been a really good book that had been out, but it came out around World War II. I thought it needed an updating. And so, I was really interested in trying to do that.

TS: HarperCollins published your dissertation very quickly [under the title *A Battle from the Start*.] That wasn't bad!

BW: That was a big deal. I was very lucky.

TS: So, you get the degree in 1991, and in 1992 the book comes out.

BW: That's right. I was very lucky.

TS: And so, you must not have had to do too much editing to the book.

BW: No. I had to do some work, and I had to have a little bit of work to even get a dissertation finished because there were some people thought I needed to say more about Fort Pillow, and I needed to say a little more about the Klan. And so, I said a little more about Fort Pillow and added one sentence on the other stuff. And it was all of a sudden, "This is what we wanted. This is good. You've covered it now."

TS: Okay. It was a Main Selection of the History Book Club.

BW: It was a big deal. I was very, very lucky and didn't write for a little while after because of school. I was busy trying to do my lectures and, you know, just become a professor and all of those things. I did leave Georgia and took two years as a visiting professor at Georgia Southern. So, I was at Georgia Southern for a couple of years. Then, I was in a three-year appointment that I didn't want to get into the third year and be desperate. So, I was looking for jobs, but I didn't want any job. I wanted jobs that I thought I would be willing to go to. I looked at four different schools, and one of them was the one I ended up going to—Clinch Valley College of the University of Virginia as it was at the time, University of Virginia's College at Wise now.

TS: So, it was called Clinch Valley College?

- BW: It was Clinch Valley College of the University of Virginia at the time. That was its original name [from 1954 to 1999].
- TS: Well, that's a tongue twister.
- BW: Yes, and that's why they wanted to change it. And of course, it still became a tongue twister because the University of Virginia's College at Wise is a tongue twister too. So, like in all things, our [KSU's] Center for the Study of the Civil War Era became the Civil War Center, and the University of Virginia's College at Wise became UVA Wise. Clinch Valley was always known as CVC. They just shortened it to CVC. The school would have a chancellor [who] answered to the president of the University of Virginia. So, we'd have a president of the University of Virginia and a chancellor of Clinch Valley. One of the chancellors had worked with the president at UVA, and he wanted a real close connection. That's why the name change became a really big deal. But they did it. They executed that.
- TS: You changed the title when *A Battle from the Start* was reprinted in 1998. Why the change?
- BW: I think that was very perceptive of you. Of course, it shows you the power and strength that an author has. The book came out, *A Battle from the Start: The Life of Nathan Bedford Forrest*, and I liked the title. I did not come up with that title. Somebody from the original press, HarperCollins, said, "Why don't you use that?" I said, "That is a great title!" He [Forrest] had said, "My life has been a battle from the start." So, it was perfect. Then University Press of Kansas bought the rights, and they said, "We'd like to republish your book, but we want to change the title."
- TS: They've published a lot of Civil War books.
- BW: They did, they did. I said, "I want to keep the title." And they said, "We want to republish your book." I said, "You don't understand. I want to keep the title." They said, "We want to republish your book." So, I got that I was going to have to change whether I liked it or not. So, then the decision was made to find some way to put either Confederacy or Civil War something in the title, because that way they thought it would sell more.
- TS: They thought that somebody out there might not know who Forrest was?
- BW: Somebody that might not know who Forrest was. That's exactly right. So, *The Confederacy's Greatest Cavalryman*, which is an ironic thing, because he really wasn't a classic cavalryman. He took horses as mobility, as transportation to get to the battlefield. Every fourth man stays behind, holds the four horses, while the other three go on foot and fight on foot. That was more of the traditional way Forrest would fight.
- TS: So, you're saying he's not that great [a cavalryman] then?

BW: No, no, no. I didn't say he's not that great. I said he's not a traditional cavalryman. It's two very different things. He was very great, very positive. Towards the end of the war, when he's finally beaten [in Wilson's Raid into Alabama in 1865] by [Union general] James Harrison Wilson, he will say, "You're the only one who's beaten me first and last in this war." So, he'd been pretty successful. Now, he'd actually lost a couple of battles, but he found ways to blame somebody else. And he survived one battle. So, because he survived and lived to fight another day, he claimed that as victory.

But he was the kind of guy who had all these sayings. He's supposed to have said, "Get there firstest with the mostest." He didn't say it just that way. Remember, he was the kind of person who cut words down, fight, F-I-T-E. He would cut words down instead of spreading them out. So, he would be the kind of person who would have said something similar but in a very different style. I found a conversation with him and other Confederate generals who were sharing their secrets of success after Chickamauga in the Atlanta area. One of the comments was, "How did you do it?" He says, "Well, I'll tell you my idea, I-D-E-E. I try to get there first with the most, and then if I can't whoop them, outrun them." I think he said that because that sounds more like him. But he was very fascinating guy, a "war to the knife and knife to the hilt" kind of guy.

TS: So, he actually said "first with the most?"

BW: He said "first with the most," but I think he was then saying it even better: "If I can't whoop them, I outrun them."

TS: Right, right, right. Okay. Now, after you got here in 2014 *The River Was Dyed With Blood* came out. We're getting a little bit out of chronological order, but it's on Forrest [subtitle, *Nathan Bedford Forrest and Fort Pillow* (University of Oklahoma Press)]. Fort Pillow is, I guess, one of the biggest marks against him on his record.

BW: Sure, sure.

TS: I guess my first question is, why the second book? Did you just go into more detail? Did you change your interpretation by the time you got to this book?

BW: That's a good question too. The answer is that I did not really change my interpretation, but I gave more detail and more explanation. Fort Pillow in the biography is one chapter. This is a book, but it's not really just about Fort Pillow. It's about excess in warfare. I started with the Revolutionary War and some of the things that were happening that showed excess in warfare. I went all the way to World War II and Vietnam, but the World War II, Vietnam, and the Revolution were just the beginnings and the ends of the book.

TS: Well, of course, at Fort Pillow, supposedly they [the 6th U.S. Regiment Colored Heavy Artillery] are trying to surrender, and Forrest doesn't accept their offer to surrender but slaughters them. Right?

BW: No, that's not right. So, let me go ahead and help you quickly.

TS: Yes. That's what I want you to do. I mean, I'm just saying this is the way it's come down.

BW: I know that's the way it's come down, and that's why I wrote the book. You asked me, why did I write the book? A person had come out with a real tough interpretation on Forrest, and basically said what you just said. I said, "I've written about Forrest. I know what I think happened. I'm going to look at it again. I'm going to look at it even more closely. I'm going to look at it from many new sources, and I'm going to see what else I can come up with." So, the book was about excess in warfare, which also deals with other things during the war that are not related to Forrest, and to some things that he was accused of in different places. One of the places that is supposed to have been really horrific in terms of mercilessness is the [Battle of the] Crater [July 30, 1864 during the Siege of Petersburg]. Well, the Crater is never looked at as a place where war crimes took place. And yet Fort Pillow is basically supposed to be this massive war crime. Well, two things to keep in mind: number one, Forrest went there to capture a fort he didn't think would put up much resistance because he did not have respect for the troops that were garrisoning it.

TS: Who were largely Black?

BW: They were literally half Tennessee Unionists—traitors in their minds, of course, because they had not sided with the Confederacy. Or Black troops. So, they're half and half. And he didn't think they'd put up a fight. So, he didn't expect much to it. He says, "They have horses and guns that we need." So, he was going to capture the fort to take away all their stuff, all their horses and guns. If he had been wanting to wipe the fort out, if that had been his goal, Forrest was usually pretty clear and usually pretty straightforward: "I'm going to wipe the fort out." He didn't say that. He says, "They have horses and guns that we need." He clearly made it an understanding that he didn't think there would be much trouble getting it. He didn't think it would be much of a fight. These were not soldiers that he thought could stand up to his troops. When they got there, Forrest was not there. The Confederates surrounded the fort and fired into the fort.

This is a long story made short. The big earthworks on the very outside would have to have about ten thousand men to hold. The Yankees didn't have that many men. They had less than a thousand. They have only a fraction of the men they would have needed to garrison the entire thing. So, they [the Union troops] don't have anybody on the outside works. There's a middle set of works that was on higher ground than the fort they occupied, the piece of the ground they occupied. They [the Unionists] had some pickets on that to warn them if something was coming—to tell them that trouble was there. The commander of the fort, who was a Tennessee Unionist, said, "I don't expect any trouble. There's nothing in the region that tells me I even need to be worried about anything."

Well, of course, then Forrest's people show up. He had a little more to worry about. They run the pickets into the fort. Now, they [Forrest's troops] hold the high ground. They can literally fire down into the fort. So, they're firing at the fort. Forrest comes in, later in the morning [of April 12, 1864], investigates, because he never went to a battlefield that he didn't look at it for himself. He didn't trust anybody doing it as well as he would. So, he has two horses shot out from under him in the course of this investigation. If you've ever come off a horse when you didn't intend to, you don't feel very good. You're banged up. You're beat up. He didn't think they were good opponents to start with—worthy opponents in the sense that they put up much of a fight. He's sore, and he is beat up. So, at the end of the day, when the final attack comes, he sends in the attack. He does not lead the attack. Now, you can always argue he was trying to preserve his deniability. He wasn't thinking that way.

TS: He didn't think that way?

BW: He doesn't think that way. If he wanted to lead them, he would've led them. He sends them in to overwhelm the fort. Now again, it's a complicated story. They sent in surrender demands. The Union refused to surrender because—and this is complicated in this sense—the Tennessee Unionist commander [Major Lionel F. Booth] who had been in charge of the fort actually had been an old army sergeant, knew a little bit about what the war was about, knew what he needed to do. He is killed at the early part of the engagement because he's behind one of the embrasures, cannon openings, and one of the sharpshooters from the high ground targets the men working the cannon, including this officer, and kills the commander. The Tennessee Unionist that was not in command [Major William F. Bradford] then becomes commander, tries to pretend as if the other guy is still living, and sends back this communication as if this dead man is communicating when in fact it's this other guy. And then he says, "No, I'm not going to surrender," because they had had a plan that if they got into trouble, there's a gunboat [the *USS New Era*] in the [Mississippi] River. They would retreat to the gunboat, and the gunboat would cover them until help came.

TS: But the gunboat didn't show up?

BW: The gunboat was out of ammunition. It had fired all morning long. It didn't have enough ammunition. And the gunboat commander [Captain James Marshall] got back his gunboat away from the shore, so that it couldn't be captured. Which when they broke from the fort, the Confederates overcame the rampart, and the Union commander said, "Boys it's every man for himself." When you've got that kind of leadership, you know what you're in for. Now, they're all running out of panic to get down to the bottom. Well, Forrest has sent two forces on either end of the landing, so that they could cut the retreat off. And those troops fire into the retreating federals, killing many of them or wounding them. Then, others are trying to swim, many of whom cannot swim and are drowning. So, I mean, there's people dying left and right as part of this combat.

Two things. Number 1, they panicked and broke. Number 2, remember the sharpshooters have been shooting at them all morning. Where does a sharpshooter hit

you? Here or here? Head or chest? What's going to kill you? Head or chest? What's not going to kill you? Hand? Foot? So, if you look, and more people are killed than wounded, some of that's because Forrest lost control of the battle, and people were killed who should not have been killed. They weren't allowed to surrender. But it was on a case-by-case situation. Now you say, well, why didn't Forrest stop that? Forrest went into the fort after it had fallen. He sees the gunboat. He's already had two Union gunboats cause him difficulties in another location. He doesn't want this one to cheat him out of his victory. So, he's focused with artillery from the fort on the gunboat instead of focusing on what's happening around him or even on the landing below where he doesn't see what's happening. So, he wasn't doing his job, but he also wasn't directing a massacre.

Then one of the [Union] surgeons [Dr. Charles Fitch] comes up and says, "General, they're killing people down there." And he says, "Well, who are you?" He says, "I'm the surgeon of the post." He says, "Well, if you Yankees are part of this force, we're going to fight you till the yonder flag comes down until you surrender." And he says, "I'm not a West Tennessee Unionist." He says, "Well, you're the commander of Negro troops, and I ought to kill you for that." He says, "No, I'm actually not with them either." Well, he's not a Tennessee Unionist. He's not a leader of the Negro troop. "Who are you?" He says, "I came from Iowa." Well, that threw Forrest off. He didn't know what to say about that. So, he looked at him and said, "Well, if you people in the Midwest had stayed out of this, we would have won this by now." And then he lets him go and takes him to the rear for safekeeping.

If he feels like this guy, who has just told him bad things are happening, is a witness to a war crime for which he's responsible, what would you do? He wouldn't be going back to the rear and safekeeping. I would make sure he didn't get there, but he survived the battle, survived the war, and wrote about it after the war. It's just a more complex—I think Forrest lost control of the battle. I really do. I think bad things happened. People did things they should not have done. But then, the other thing about battles, if somebody's trying to retreat, and somebody's trying to shoot, and somebody's trying to surrender, do you stop to try to determine which of those things they're doing or do you just shoot them?

TS: So, it's a lot more complicated then.

BW: It's very complicated.

TS: Yes, I understand. Okay. Well, you're at Wise from 1992 to 2010. How big was the college when you got there?

BW: It wasn't about twelve hundred students. It got to about, I think, almost two thousand. It's kind of backed down a little bit now, but it was around two thousand at its top [current enrollment 1,922 students according to the university website in 2024].

TS: You actually wrote a college history.

BW: Yes, I wrote the history of the college just like you've done for Kennesaw. I did the...

TS: *No Ordinary College: [A History of the University of Virginia's College at Wise* (University of Virginia Press, 2004)].

BW: *No Ordinary College*.

TS: What made it not ordinary?

BW: Well, it was outreach to the coalfields region by the University of Virginia. In fact, the University of Virginia would say, "We don't have branches. We don't want branches." So, it was never a branch, but it was an outreach by the University of Virginia to a region that did not have access to public education. So, it was a real mission kind of oriented thing, and it grew on its own. Then, when the Commonwealth of Virginia created the community college system, it had the choice of either going into the community college system or going independent. It had enough clout because it really had some good friends in large part because of its longstanding chancellor, Joseph [Charles] Smiddy [the college's first biology professor, head of the college from 1957 to 1985, and the first chancellor in 1968]. Papa Joe Smiddy was its longstanding chancellor—very popular in Richmond, a lot of friends. He gets the exception for CVC that they will continue to be part of UVA, but they will be still a two-year college. Then, eventually it became a four-year college. So, it's a four-year college, but still connected.

TS: When did it become four years?

BW: I'd have to go back to the timeline for that. It's been a while since I've been through the timeline. [Approved by the Virginia legislature in 1966]. But years ago, it went to four-year pretty quickly after that community college shift. And then, the other problem was that...

TS: Was it two-year when you went there?

BW: No, no, no, no. It's four years. It was long a four-year school when I went there. And Papa Joe had already retired. He ended up being an emeritus chancellor longer than he was professor of biology and chancellor of the college. He was also my father-in-law.

TS: Oh, is that right?

BW: Yes, I loved Papa Joe. He was a World War II veteran and one of the finest people I've ever known—an entertainer; he played the banjo. One of his favorite lines was, "Hold my banjo, and I'll hug your wife." He was just a real character, just one of the finest people. We went to Ireland, he and his son and I. We walked into a pub, and one of the pub people looked up and said, "Oh, my God, the hillbillies are back." Because he never went anywhere he didn't bring the banjo and play and do so. They loved it. People loved it.

TS: So, the college goes back a long way.

BW: Well, 1954. I can recommend the history. I can recommend the history [laughs].

TS: You recommend it, okay. Well, let's see, I guess while you were still at Wise you wrote the book on the Civil War in Southeastern Virginia (2001).

BW: That was my second book, yes.

TS: *The War Hits Home*.

BW: *The War Hits Home*, yes. I sent my parents a copy on September 11, 2001. So, it's the most interesting thing that on 9/11, *the* 9/11, I sent them a book called *The War Hits Home*.

TS: Oh, wow. University of Virginia Press.

BW: Yes.

TS: All your books have had really remarkably good publishers.

BW: Yes. I've been very lucky. I've been very fortunate.

TS: And you were department chair for a while there, I think.

BW: I was chair of the department. I was chair of the faculty senate. I've been a little bit of everything. I was one of the faculty representatives to the honor court, which was very important to me at Clinch Valley, UVA Wise.

TS: While you were there, you also wrote the book about cinema: *Gone with the Glory: The History of the Civil War in Cinema* [Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2006].

BW: *Civil War in Cinema*, yes. I love that book. It's a little book, but it's a fun book. And I enjoy it.

TS: *Gone with the Glory* because the films don't glorify the Civil War anymore?

BW: No, "gone with the glory" meaning that when you're trying to assess them as historically valuable, you don't have much to work with because history has a tendency to be a second nature. As one of the people that did movies years ago said, "If we'd have wanted historians to make films, we'd have never made any."

TS: A little play on *Gone with the Wind*, I guess.

BW: Well, I was playing off *Gone with the Wind*, and then I was trying to figure out what cover I should have. I was going to put some *Gone with the Wind* thing, and I thought, “Since I’m using a play off the name *Gone with the Wind*, I’ll put John Wayne. So, I put *The Horse Soldiers* [a 1959 Civil War film starring John Wayne]. So, that’s on the cover there, *The Horse Soldiers*. And then, if I’d known I was going to be here [Kennesaw State], I would have done something different. But, actually, what’s funny is I was here before I knew I’d be here. I came to give a program—one of the symposia was on Forrest. I came to do that with John [D.] Fowler [the first director of the Civil War Center].

TS: Yes, I think that was March 2008, if I’m not mistaken.

BW: Yes. But it was no thought that I’d ever come to Kennesaw. I just was talking about Forrest and coming in. Back in the day, you went to the Jolley Lodge, which was nice. It was nice to go to the Jolley Lodge. I hope one day that’s made more possible for ordinary citizens.

TS: Is it not possible to go there?

BW: I think it’s all really up to the president now. I don’t know. I would say, “Don’t quote me, but you got me on film.”

TS: You don’t go to the Jolley Lodge a lot anymore?

BW: No, not anymore. But you know, in the day, we actually did some programs when I first came. The school was very different when I first came [in 2010]. [Daniel S.] Dan Papp was a super president, involved. He actually came to some of our programs and staff rides and was very involved in that way and just a great guy. Then, the dean, [Richard] Rich Vengroff was very supportive. And then when we got to [Dean Robert H.] “Robin” Dorff [2012-2018], he also did some things—took the staff ride idea and really ran with it. He was the one who helped push that idea, and we’re still doing it. We’re doing that.

TS: I’m impressed that you said that Vengroff was supportive.

TS: Yes, very supportive.

TS: That’s great.

BW: Yes. He’s the one that hired me. So, I’ve felt close to him in a lot of ways. Hermina was here at the time. I brought another show and tell. Here’s a picture of Hermina and me with Andrew Young. So, I had a great visit with Andrew Young.

TS: Yes. It was Hermina Glass-Avery at that time. It’s a different last name now, I think [Glass-Hill]. I remember I’ve worked with her on some of those symposia that she got a lot of Black history into them for a while [7th Annual Symposium on New Interpretations of the Civil War, 2010, on “Alternative Southern Realities: African Americans in the

Civil War; 8th Annual Symposium, 2011, on “Civil War to Civil Rights”; and 9th Annual Symposium, 2012, on “1862: The Path to Freedom.”

BW: We all tried to cover all the grounds. One of the first ones I did when we got here was from “Civil War to Civil Rights.” We were trying to cover a lot of ground. But it’s been a very great opportunity because Wise, it was about five-and-a-half to six hours from anything of any significance in the Civil War, and here you’re 15, 20 minutes. It depends on traffic. But you’re 15 minutes from the battlefield. That’s Kennesaw Mountain. So, it was a great opportunity. When I got the offer to come here, one of the people on the panel [asked]: “Why do you want to leave where you are?” And I said, “I don’t. I’m fine. I’m happy where I’m at.” I was an endowed professor at UVA Wise. I had the Kenneth Asbury chair of history and very proud of it and all that, and busy with school and all those other things, very involved. I spoke to groups all over Virginia, everywhere else. So, I was very at home. “Well, why do you want to come here?” I said, “That’s another question.” Because then I could say, “I could come to do the entire Atlanta campaign in two hours. I can go to Kennesaw Mountain in 15 minutes. And then Wise, you were at Bushwhackers Paradise [Wise and Buchanan County, Virginia], but that’s it. Bushwhackers Paradise is the middle of nowhere where not much happened, although one of the small battles was a battle called the Battle of Pound Gap that had James Garfield, future president of the United States involved. So, it was kind of interesting. A few named people came through.

TS: I guess one of the questions that was in my mind—I’ve been at Kennesaw 55 years; I know when we had two thousand students. How did you find the time to do all the things you were doing?

BW: Well, one of the reasons I didn’t write anything right after the Forrest book came out was because of trying to do all those things and be involved in the school in all the different ways and compartmentalizing time. So, if you’re going to be in faculty senate, if you’re going to be in the honor court, if you’re going to be with all the things I was doing, you don’t have a whole lot of time to do a lot of research and writing. And in the summer, the way that things were at the time, I was under a nine-months contract. And when you’re in the summer, you’re trying to scramble until you can get back to get a paycheck again. So, that was always kind of an interesting time. Another appeal here was that I had a twelve-month contract and at the time, an administrative type position because this was a director of the Center for the Study of the Civil War Era. So, it was an administrative position. That was attractive. And the twelve months was attractive. It really was one of the reasons I left an endowed chair to come here—one of the more practical reasons among the historical reasons.

TS: Yes. I should mention in passing that you won an outstanding faculty award in 2000 from the Commonwealth of Virginia.

BW: Commonwealth of Virginia.

TS: Did they do one for every college in the system?

BW: No, it was for the entire commonwealth, all public and private institutions. Only usually around eleven people from every school in the state would be considered.

TS: Okay. So, it's not just the University of Virginia then?

BW: No, no. Now in theory, you could have two or three winners from one place. So, you could have two or three different people from UVA or something like that in theory. But most of them tended to come one from here, one from here, one from here, one from here across the board. I was very lucky to be able to get that because it was a great honor to get from the Commonwealth of Virginia. Then, when I had just turned 40, where I was at a point where this might not have been possible, I got 40 under 40, right at the end of my time before I would have been not eligible for it. So, I was lucky I got several honors that came at different times and was fortuitous to give.

TS: Right. Do you want to say something about the Honorable Elizabeth S. Wills?

BW: Sure. My wife is from Southwest Virginia. I've already mentioned that my father-in-law was Joe Smiddy. [William Joseph] "Bill" Sturgill was a member of our board [for twenty-four years and chairman for eleven]. And so, they're either Sturgills or Smiddys that have a lot of Clinch Valley connections. We ended up meeting. A couple of mutual friends introduced us, and we ended up getting married. We've been married now as of this next October for thirty years.

TS: So, is that 1994?

BW: Yes. That's good math.

TS: Didn't take you long after you got there.

BW: Well, I said, "I want to find a wife who must have her own teeth and all the rest." Now, she was really a great catch because she was a judge.

TS: She was already a judge when you got married?

BW: She was already a judge, and she was very engaging. You want to find somebody that you can have discussions with. She did not like exactly the same things, which is good too.

TS: I'm pretty sure she told me she'd been a judge thirty-six years; so, if you've been married thirty years, she was already a judge.

BW: That's why I wouldn't know for sure because I didn't know her at the earliest stages.

TS: Well, I won't ask what she ever saw in you, but [laughs].

BW: Well, no. I won't even try to go there because I tell her that she's the cougar that took the handsome young historian [laughs].

TS: I guess she's called a presiding judge now of the Virginia Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court, 30th Judicial District of Virginia [for Wise, Lee, and Scott Counties]. Previously, she was chief judge.

BW: Well, she was at one point. She's given that up in the last couple of years. She was the chief judge for a good period of time, but it rotates. People ask me—I had one person says, "He doesn't even live here." I have an apartment here. I live only five minutes away from campus, but I do have a five-and-a-half-hour commute home. I go home about once every two or three weeks. So, I think of myself as a military family on furlough. Every now and then I get home to see my wife. Sometimes, she comes down. They were very kind. They got all of the kids and one grandkid to come to the last symposium we had [on March 16, 2024; the 21st Annual Symposium, titled "Reunion."]

TS: Oh, you had a big turnout.

BW: My last symposium, and it was a wonderful turnout! And four children and seven grandchildren! So, I've got a lot to go home to.

TS: For sure. Are they all still in that area?

BW: No, no, no, no. One daughter and several grandchildren are in Rabun County, Georgia.

TS: That's not far away.

BW: In beautiful country; and then one daughter lives in Lakeland, Florida, with her husband and two children. Then my son and my other daughter are in Wise, both lawyers.

TS: Now, you've got a farm there?

BW: Yes. Farm there.

TS: How big a farm do you have?

BW: It's about half the one I grew up on, somewhere in the 36 to 40 acres [range]. I can't remember exactly how many...

TS: Are you growing anything?

BW: Mostly stuff that can be cut down and fed to animals. So, we really don't have anything significant. We do now have cows on the farm. We didn't originally have that, but we got a big federal grant to do some water projects and some things. But one of the obligations was you had to have cattle on the farm because they wanted to see how they would deal with these waterers and all this stuff. So, we had new fencing and cattle.

We've always had quarter horses as opposed to walking horses. So, I say, "It wasn't even a full horse; it's a quarter horse" and some others. But all of our children have ridden. My wife's ridden.

TS: Well, it's remarkable; since you've been at Kennesaw, if I counted correctly, you've published six books since you got here. Does that sound right?

BW: I put it at four only because I couldn't remember.

TS: Well, the first one I think you probably had it written, if not published, before you got here on *Civil War Sites in Virginia* [University of Virginia Press, revised edition 2011].

BW: Right, that's a small volume.

TS: But you take [James I.] "Bud" Robertson Jr.'s book and revised it or updated it?

BW: Yes, revised it and updated it. Correct, correct. And I added a lot about Southwest Virginia that he didn't have and some things about some other sites that had come on in the Shenandoah and the Central Virginia. But I updated it and expanded it a little.

TS: Well, it's after you got here but I'm sure you had written most of [the next book] before you got here.

BW: *George Henry Thomas: As True as Steel* (University Press of Kansas, 2012).

TS: I was impressed to say the least with the bibliography.

BW: Well, I loved doing the project. I wanted to do it because I wanted to show a little variety besides the Forrest-type person that I had written about. Forrest only had six months of education. This guy had a West Point education. Forrest did not have much writing. Most of his writings are very narrow and very few. Thomas wrote a fair amount. The problem is that his wife ended up destroying a lot of the personal papers after his death. So, there's a lot more I wish we had that we didn't have. So, even though he wrote quite a bit, [much of it was destroyed]; he had staffers that do have letters and some other things. I did have some original letters.

TS: That's why it took so long to get a major book of Thomas?

BW: Well, yes. There were some books on him. One thing I won't do in that book is—you'll notice if you read it—attack Grant. A lot of Thomas people attack Grant, and Grant people tend to kind of be dismissive of Thomas.

TS: I'm going to say this. Most of your books where anybody's done a review—they've talked about you giving "the most balanced account."

BW: I tried to do that. I really tried because it doesn't do me any good to try to sell some point of view. I'm trying to get into their mind as much as possible and see things through their eyes. [General William T.] Sherman is the one that I got the ["as true as steel"] quote from because Sherman was his friend. He liked Sherman, and Sherman liked him. But Sherman could never say anything good. He didn't say something bad or vice versa; he said, "He may be slow, but he's as true as steel." So, I was sure he said that.

TS: When I first saw that I thought this has got to be a pun off your name.

BW: Well, that's another reason I used it.

TS: But of course, Sherman is the one that said it.

BW: Sherman's the one that said it. Of course, it goes with my middle name. And I'm from Nansemond County, which is where the farm was. But it's now Suffolk [since 1974], and there's a history for that too which we don't want to get into. But the point is, the next county over [to the west] is Southampton County; that's where Thomas was from. So, part of my curiosity was, "What made this fellow from the deep southern part of Virginia, almost on the border—in fact, his home is within miles of the border of North Carolina—go with the Union? Why did he stay with the Union when Robert E. Lee and J. E. B. Stuart and Stonewall Jackson and others did not? Why did he...?"

TS: Good question, why?

BW: Well, he really did see secession as a fool's errand. He saw his duty with his country. He did not feel the same devotion to Virginia that Lee and others did. And his wife was from Troy, New York. I don't want to say that when we marry our wives don't influence us. I wouldn't say that about my judge.

TS: Well, he's right, isn't he? What a disaster it would have been if the South had won.

BW: Well, his point was that he thought it was just a terrible mistake to even make the secession happen, and then a potential war and then the war itself.

TS: The book just flapped open to a famous picture of Kennesaw Mountain.

BW: Yes, of Kennesaw Mountain, and Thomas is there. Thomas is the man who's trying to punch his way through at Cheatham Hill. So, that's Thomas. Of course, Thomas is also "the Rock of Chickamauga" [for his defense during the 1863 battle in North Georgia]. He's got tons of nicknames—"Old Pap."

TS: "Old Pap" sounds like they must have liked him.

BW: The men liked him. The men did like him. They were happy to have him as a commander. They were proud to serve under him. And he knew that his army was the reason for his success. He said, "My army made me." So, he was always appreciative of

his staff, appreciative of his subordinate officers, appreciative of the generals, appreciative of the soldiers. And he had a dry sense of humor. At one point his largest command through most of his time was the Army of the Cumberland. The Union armies were named after rivers, typically, so, the Army of the Cumberland. One of his men came up to him and said, "I want to furlough." He said, "Why do you want a furlough?" And he says, "I want to go see my old woman." And the general looked at him and says, "I have not seen my wife for three-and-a-half years. Why do you think you deserve more than your general?" And the guy looked at him and says, "Well, me and my old woman ain't that kind." And he laughed. He thought that was hilarious. He thought that was funny. "We're not the kind that can stay away from each other like that. We're not the ones that can stay separated for all those years like you did. I want to see mine." And he wanted to see his too, but then he knew duty was first. He was a real soldier-soldier.

TS: I guess so.

BW: And it [the book] was an award winner. I won an award with that one. I won an award with the *Inglorious Passages: Noncombat Deaths in the American Civil War* [University Press of Kansas, 2017]. I won different awards with my Pender book [*Confederate General Dorsey Pender: The Hope of Glory* (LSU Press, 2013)] and with some of the other books. So, I've had some success that way.

TS: Richard Barksdale Harwell award for the best book on the Civil War for 2012 [the year the book on General Thomas was published].

BW: And then the *Inglorious Passages* came out.

TS: It's a minor part in your book [on General Thomas], but I did say that I have flipped through it. There was a part where you're talking about Thomas actually seemingly growing in understanding of African Americans because of the war—that he had a much higher opinion, I guess, of African Americans after he saw them fight.

BW: Right. Well, I'll say two things. First of all, he was from Southeastern Virginia. He was from Southampton County. His family and he fled to the local town. It was called at that time Jerusalem. Today, it's Courtland, Virginia. But he had fled during Nat Turner's Rebellion. So, he'd seen all kinds of things related to slavery one way or the other. He had given some of his old books to slaves, to his friends to read.

TS: Nat Turner, that was in the 1830s.

BW: Yes [1831]. So, he'd been involved in a number of different things related to the institution of slavery one way or the other.

TS: He would have been young at that time.

BW: He was young [age 15]. But his time in the war—what you just said is important in this sense. When he first went to Kentucky to train troops, he'd been in Virginia for a very

brief period of time, Western Virginia, and then he went to Kentucky. And then he was in the Western Theater the rest of the time of the war. Western Theater is everything from the Georgia line to the Mississippi River. He was in that theater. He looked at the soldiers there as people who have to prove themselves. They were white. Had nothing to do with race. It had to do with material. Are you the right material to be a soldier? When Black troops began to be a factor where they could potentially be soldiers, he wanted them to prove themselves. It's like he'd wanted his white troops to prove themselves. And so, he felt that when they did show that they could be soldiers—not just wear a uniform, but actually perform in battle and perform feats as well as any other soldier—then that was what settled his mind on their capabilities. Not again because of race. It was because they were raw material until they proved otherwise. And raw materials made into soldiers were fine with him regardless.

TS: What'd he do after the war?

BW: He continued in the military, continued in the army, was in the South during Reconstruction, and ultimately went to California in the last year of his life. Actually, he went on an inspection tour all the way up to Alaska where he determined there wasn't anything worth having in Alaska, and that he didn't know why we would want to bother with it. He did say it would have been nice to have had that before the war because we could have sent all the hotheads there, and we wouldn't have had the war. He will also make a slight comment about himself because, of course, he's "Slow Trot," "Ol' Slow Trot," and all that stuff. But he said, "I traveled several thousands of miles, which was pretty good traveling for a slow man." So, he kind of had a sensitivity to him, but he usually suppressed it. I think that was part of his problem. He suppressed a lot, and eventually his weight and his heart cost him, I think, in that suppression. You know how when you keep things bottled up, that's not a good thing. You need to let things out, and he didn't let things out. Forrest was the other way—let too much out. So, you can go from one extreme to the other.

TS: Right, right. Well, you were doing about a book a year after you got here at the campus.

BW: I was for a while. They were coming out pretty fast.

TS: *Civil War Sites in Virginia* in 2011. The Thomas book in 2012, and then *Confederate General Dorsey Pender: The Hope of Glory*. And Dorsey got killed in the war [from wounds at the 1863 Battle of Gettysburg].

BW: That's right.

TS: The Pender book in 2013 by LSU Press—why did you do that book? He wasn't the most famous general.

BW: No, he wasn't the most famous, but it does go back to my second book. He was actually at Suffolk for a small period of time, and I wanted to know more about him because he had done some of the most interesting things in Suffolk of a personal level that I thought

anybody had ever done. I'll give you the quick story, and you'll understand what I'm saying. He was a West Pointer, very young. He had just been married. He had some military service in the far Northwest. So, he'd been in Washington State in that region fighting two battles out there and fighting in Washington State before the war. He came back east. He ends up in North Carolina, which is his native state, and he ends up being basically a glorified drill sergeant because you took people that had a military training and tried to use them to train other people to be soldiers. Well, that wasn't very glamorous and very glorious, and he kind of chafed at the bit. But he was writing constantly to his wife, constantly telling her how he felt. So, you had this whole ream of letters that was wonderful to have.

TS: Which you didn't have for Thomas.

BW: Which I didn't have for Thomas or Forrest. And so, it was a wonderful problem to have where I had the opposite—"This is way too much. How do you deal with it all?" Then, there was a published set of letters, but I went to North Carolina and compared each letter individually to the original letter. And I found where there were ellipses that they didn't put things in the published letters that I wondered why not. Most of the time I agreed. They didn't need it. One time, I was astonished, and I'll tell you that story.

It was a story about Pender at Suffolk. When he goes from Raleigh there's a camp just outside of the border of North Carolina and Virginia, and then he goes from there to Suffolk. He's still a young man, a colonel, and he's trying to get his regiment situated. He begins to engage with the local community, and he finds that they adore him. He's telling his wife, who has had not only a child but then a hard pregnant situation where she lost the child. She's had a lot of issues, and he's telling her how people love him, how they adore him, and he's telling her how good a time he's having. He says, "I went to the dinner with this and I had something with that." And then he finally said he went to a dance, and he danced with this young lady. And he said, "She offered to do anything for me that I wanted." And I said, "Why don't you make a sack for the hair for my wife?" "Well, I won't make anything for your wife, but I'll do anything for you." And he wrote that to his wife.

TS: To his wife? Wow.

BW: He wrote that to his wife. So, she put up with that for a little while. And then on the last one, when he says, "I was at the dance flirting with people," blah, going on, and wrote it in his letters, she sent a letter back, and she wrote out the letter. "This is how the family's doing and oh, by the way..." And she laid him out.

TS: I bet.

BW: She quoted these things. "Why in your sober senses did you tell me this? Was it to make me jealous? Was it to make me wish that I was good enough for you? What is it? What is it? Was it your ego? What is it that you were doing?" And it tore him up. He never dreamed that what he was doing, which he thought was just sharing these wide-ranging

thoughts with his wife, was anything of infidelity or anything else, or any question about his love or his devotion to her. It tore him apart. And so, he wrote at the bottom of the letter, “Tonight this war holds no more terrors for me.” And he sent it back. That’s the reason we have this letter because he sent it back.

TS: Oh, my goodness. And she saved it?

BW: And she saved it. She saved all of it. So, that’s why we have it now. We don’t have her letters.

TS: Of course, he didn’t live long enough to matter.

BW: Well, that’s part of the problem. But the other part of the problem is that he wrote about twice a week sometimes—literally once or twice a week. The point is that later on he tells her that he’s more careful about what he reports and what he says. And he says, “I was doing some things with some ladies, but they were older ladies, and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.” But he said, and I thought this was a classic line that the guy left out of the published letters. It’s one of the chapter titles of my book: “My dancing days are over,” he said to his wife. “My dancing days are over.”

TS: And they left that out?

BW: And so, he left it out. So, because of that Suffolk experience, I already knew that part of it, and I wanted to know more about him. Who was this guy? And then when I went to North Carolina, and there is this whole box of letters, you had all the raw material you needed. You had all of the stuff you needed.

TS: He’s got a screw loose somewhere it sounds like.

BW: Well, bless his heart. My uncle once said—my uncle lived in North Carolina—he says, “He was like a little innocent lamb” in the sense that he just didn’t get how dumb this was that he had done until she laid him out.

TS: Okay. You did that book in 2013, and then we’ve already talked about *The River Was Dyed with Blood*, 2014. That’s four in four years, and then you waited all the way to 2017 for *Inglorious Passage*. You mentioned it earlier, but the book is on noncombat deaths. There were so many people who got sick due to the unsanitary conditions.

BW: Sure, sure. Disease of course killed more people by far than bullets or shrapnel or anything else. But I wanted to have something that remembered as much as possible every person who had died other than the lists of dead people from disease because you’re going to have to group that. But I thought, “I’m going to find everything else. I’ll find all the suicides and all the accidental deaths.”

TS: Were there lots of suicides?

BW: Well, there's a bunch. But here's my problem. I was going to find them all.

TS: You can't?

BW: You started scratching the surface, and the surface got deeper and deeper and deeper. And you and I both know, if you wait for the perfect book, it's never going to be written. So, you've got to reach a point where you've said what you've got to say, you've done what you had to do, and you finished, and you close the book. I'm still finding and still getting from some other people at times stories about this person or that person who drowned trying to take a bath or who was killed in some oddball freak accident. My favorite by far is the guy that's on the Mississippi River area when he's walking with an open cask of black powder, smoking his cigar.

TS: Oh, he's stupid!

BW: And the diarist says, "He blew his head off. Those mortar men are said to be careless." That was all he said, but there's that story of this guy that blew his head off. And of course, he's just as dead as if he went to Gettysburg or Chickamauga or Kennesaw Mountain or anywhere.

TS: Well, I've always used a number about 600,000 killed in the Civil War. Is that accurate?

BW: They really push it to a million.

TS: A million?

BW: Yes. They push it to a million now—750,000, minimum, to a million.

TS: We only had about 31 million in the whole country.

BW: It's incredible the price that this war exacted.

TS: There's nothing else like it in America history.

BW: That's right, that's right. It's incredible. But the record keeping is so bad, and you might have people that were not ever found. If you went into the woods and died, they may not know you perished. You're missing; you're missing; that's all they know.

TS: Okay, one last book, 2022. You had five years between books or did I miss something? Then, Charlton Heston—*Running the Race: The "Public Face" of Charlton Heston* (Savas-Beatie, 2022)]. Other than that he was in the Army Air Corps in World War II and was later president of the National Rifle Association [1998-2003], what's his connection with all your military history?

BW: Well, it's not so much because of military history, but if you go back to that book that I wrote, *Gone with the Glory: The History of the Civil War in Cinema*—movies, I love the

movies, and I love historical movies. And there's probably not a more iconic figure in the big epic sort of historical movie.

TS: Well, I thought he was a great Moses in *The Ten Commandments* [1956].

BW: Well, he was a good Moses. He was a great Ben-Hur [1959]. He was El Cid [1961]. He was [British General Charles] "Chinese" Gordon in *Khartoum* [1966].

TS: Oh, I saw that he even directed and played Sir Thomas More in *A Man for All Seasons* [for a 1988 made-for-television film for TNT, Turner Network Television].

BW: He did, he did. He never shied away from things. He tried different things. There were, of course, people that said, "He's wooden. He's not really that great an actor." But he says, "I'm always striving for the perfect performance." And I argued in the book that he's always reinventing himself and looking for his audience in a way to keep relevant, the way to keep it updated, to keep it going. I think the NRA just was one of the incarnations. He found an audience that would listen to him and would take him seriously. I think he believed it, but he believed it in a funny sort of way. He'd always been a hunter. He'd always loved guns in the sense of collecting and hunting and that sort of thing. But he really did love the Constitution, and he saw the U.S. Constitution as one of those things worth defending.

TS: Well, I gather that he's also thinking that somehow or other the ordinary folks are being left out in society, the culture wars, all that.

BW: Yes, he was very much into that. He would say, "Mrs. Clinton, it doesn't take a village, it takes a country. It takes a father and a mother." He would say different things. But he was one of those people that really did cross a lot of things because he took the Hollywood contingent on the March on Washington [for Jobs and Freedom (1963)].

TS: Yes. Martin Luther King...

BW: And so, he was a very strong admirer of Dr. King. In fact, at one point in the book, you'll remember if you saw that, he introduced Coretta Scott King and was talking about how exceptional Dr. King was. So, he was certainly a person who crossed a lot of borders. And he went to take a sandwich board. He loved Thomas Jefferson. So, he'd quote Jefferson, "all men are created equal," and stand on the steps to protest segregation. He didn't do it often, but he said, "Every now and then I have to put the champagne glass down and stop partying, spending time with my own people and get out and do other things." So, he felt an obligation to give back to society and to do for causes that he believed in.

TS: Yes. Well, I guess it made sense to shift to support Ronald Reagan. They had to be old friends from early on.

BW: They were friends. He had seen him as a part of the Screen Actors Guild. He had thought, “This is a really incredible negotiator!” He admired his skills there, and he thought, “This is a man that really can get things done.” And I think he looked at him as a president that would do the same thing. But he felt like you only have so much of the coin that you can spend, and he was trying to be very judicious, so that when he would call on Reagan for anything or write him, there was a very specific issue that he thought was important enough. In other words, he didn’t want to just be seen with Ronald Reagan to be seen with him or just go to go. He thought, “If I’m going to go, I need to do something important.”

But he had worked with the arts with Lyndon Baines Johnson. He knew, of course Kennedy and admired Kennedy. He had not thought much of Richard Nixon, but he thought he’s better than the alternative. Of course, when it turned out that he had Watergate, then he was trying to figure out how he could get past that. But he was really close to George Herbert Walker Bush. He actually became very close to the father, [the first President] George Bush. They did a lot of communications back and forth.

And so, one of the great joys for me was not only going to the film archives and seeing all of his personal papers and things that have been donated and reading all these things including the scrapbooks that his mother put together for all these years because his mother still came to the set until she was finally too old to come and died. But she was there forever. And in fact, she was there—he was not a young man when he did *Treasure Island* [playing Long John Silver in a made-for-television movie in 1990]. And he was playing the character with the cane and everything else, the crutch and everything else. At one point, he was down on the ground, and she was watching and jumped up: “My Charlton, my Charlton!” Because she thought he was down and was hurt and all the rest. And he said, “Mom, it’s just part of the role. It’s part of the role.” So, here he is. He’s an old man by this point [66 or 67 years old]. His mother’s an even older person, but she’s still thinking of him as her little Chuck, her little boy [born John Charles Carter].

TS: Well, let’s talk about the Center [for the Study of the Civil War Era] a little bit before we run out of time.

BW: Okay. All right.

TS: And maybe before that even, what all have you taught since you got to Kennesaw? The Civil War course, of course.

BW: Well, I did Civil War and Reconstruction, Old South, and then I’ve taught, in more recent times, the survey again. I hadn’t taught surveys since a long time ago, since UVA Wise. But once I’ve stopped with my administrative position, once the rules changed on me in midstream, I went for a period of time where I didn’t change what I taught. And then the last couple of years, I’ve taught surveys.

TS: Okay. And is Kennesaw doing a search for somebody to teach the Civil War course now?

BW: I don't think they have anything for that position yet because when I would retire, they would need another year I think to actually get that position. But they were theoretically looking, I guess, at bringing somebody. I mean, potentially one of the areas was Old South. And so, theoretically they'd have somebody that could teach that. Now, what they'll do with the Center I don't know. I mean, it's going to be something that I'll not have input in, and frankly I'm happy to leave to the folks here to make that determination. I've done what I could to make a strong outreach to the community. I think very popular, a lot of programs.

TS: Yes, let's get into all that; first, the annual symposium.

BW: Right.

TS: And that started before you got here and you've kept it up. It's continued for over twenty years altogether.

BW: That's right, that's right.

TS: How did the [Vincent Joseph] Vince Dooley leadership conferences come about?

BW: Well, one of the things I was trying to do was to see if there were other areas besides just the symposium. Now, when I first came here, we were still at the end of a cooperative agreement with the National Park Service. So, we had a fair amount of money, and we ended up having programs because of the sesquicentennial. We had programs in the spring and the fall. So, we had actually two sets of programs. Once the cooperative agreement finished, I still managed to scrape enough to do the stuff as long as there was this sesquicentennial [2011-2015]. But once that was over, we went back to just a spring symposium. So, I thought, "What else can we do?" I began to look at some other things. One of the things was Director's Day, which I've toyed with, which I wanted to do for battlefield preservation and some other things. Then, I was maybe interested in something on leadership and then on collecting. Out of those came the Director's Day for several years. Then, I decided that that was a bit much, and we just let it go. I had met Coach Dooley before. I knew Coach Dooley, but not personally. We weren't close. But I felt like if I could talk to him, because he was looking at football for Kennesaw...

TS: He was heading the [Football Exploratory] Committee [in 2010] to decide whether we [KSU] were going to have football.

BW: Exactly, he was their big consultant for football. And so, there were a lot of reasons why I thought, "It won't hurt to talk to him." He was interested in history, always had been. He had been at various historical events and programs that I've been a part of. And so, I met with him, and I threw out this idea of a leadership symposium. Then, of course, I said, "We'd love to call it the Vince Dooley Leadership Symposium." I was hoping that we might get a little bit of financial support, but I certainly was most excited about it if he was interested in us at least borrowing the name.

And he not only gave us the name, but he was generous with his time. He was at every single one until he wasn't with us anymore. He was even the year before he died at that symposium and always sat in the back, so that he wouldn't intrude, and always was very, very susceptible to anybody and open to anybody because all you had to do was go to him and say, "Will you sign this?" And he signed it. Or, "Will you let me tell you my Georgia story?" And he let him tell them. He would come in, and you could tell him anything, and he was just willing to be open to you and very pleasant—just a super, super human being—great person. And so, that was very exciting. Then our Annual Collector's Showcase is the other annual event that we carried on.

TS: And you've still got one coming up.

BW: Yes, we will have one on June 15th of this year, which will be my last. Now, the very last event, we've agreed to partner with a group called the Society for Women and the Civil War who are having a national conference in Atlanta, and we're the co-host of that conference ["Women in the Western Theater," July 26-28, 2024, held at Courtyard by Marriott Atlanta-Kennesaw, GA]. I said, "Now you understand," when they talked to me about that two years ago—"that we don't have any money to give you." She said, "That's fine. We don't need your money. We need your name and the fact that you're here and that you'll be willing to co-host it." It's a national conference, and it will be held largely off campus, but some will be on campus.

TS: This is for historians who are researching women's role in the Civil War?

BW: It's both about historians that are researching women's roles, but also women historians. It's both. It's a society for Civil War women. So, basically, they're coming through and doing a number of things. The Atlanta History Center is another main contributor or co-host. So, the Atlanta History Center and the Center for the Study of the Civil War Era are both trying to make sure that this event could come here to the Atlanta area. That's at the end of July, and it'll be the last official event that I'm part of before I retire on August 1, 2024. But my last event is the June 15th Collector's Showcase, which will be at the Kennesaw Center where the Holocaust Museum is.

TS: Well, you've done a lot of battlefield tours and staff rides. Do you want to talk about those at all?

BW: We had tremendous tours through the years. We did a tour to Shiloh. We've done tours to Vicksburg and to Virginia at the end of the Civil War. I've worked with some of the top historical figures, whether they're Park Service people...Jim Ogden [James Ogden] has been really crucial for us and important for us. Jim is at the Chickamauga and Chattanooga Battlefield, and Jim is just a fabulous historian, a great person. We've done things with [A. Wilson] Will Greene. He had been the executive director at Pamplin [Historical] Park in Virginia [near Petersburg], but he retired. And then, we got him to be our top local historical figure in Virginia to talk when I took a group to Virginia.

[I brought] an old brochure; there's one of my Dooley Leadership Symposia images that Coach Dooley did. Then, here is our pamphlet, and that's Coach Dooley and [Edwin Cole] Ed Bearss. Ed Bearss was the senior historian with the National Park Service for years and years and years and years. But this is Coach Dooley, and there's Ed Bearss. And this is a group at Shiloh, and it shows some of those same individuals at Shiloh.

TS: Now, is that the one that has Dan Papp in it?

BW: Well, Dan did our staff ride. Here's another set of pictures, but this is our older brochure. It shows the old mountain logo. The logo has changed quite a bit through the years from the original thing. You mentioned that John Fowler created the center before I came, and he did, but it came out of the symposia. I've had [KSU history professor] David [B.] Parker do a program for us. We've had other people here. [Coordinator of the KSU Public History Program] Jennifer [W.] Dickey has done a program for us. We've had really great local folk. Our own university folk do programs for us. We're very excited about that.

TS: Well, you've had great attendance, I think.

BW: Oh, we've had great attendance. We felt really positive about outreach. One of the missions for the school for the length of time I've been here is to try to get community engagement, and we've certainly been involved in community engagement. One of the other things—when I first got here, I said, “What do we do to jump off?” I did a program on John Brown because it was just about the time of Harpers Ferry and the Harpers Ferry raid. And then, I did an election of 1860, and Abraham Lincoln, of course, was not on the ballot in Georgia. So, he was not on our ballot either. People came by and voted, and the vote went to, not the person that won the real vote, John Breckinridge, but it went to John Bell. Because, as I laid their platforms out, tried to explain who they were and what they were, as people read about them, they wanted the moderate person who was not the extremist; and so, they voted for John Bell. And even poor little Stephen Douglas didn't win, but I think he came in second, although Breckinridge might have. But the point is the guy that won the state didn't win it, but John Bell won.

Then, I had a night with Abraham Lincoln. One of my dear friends, James [A.] Getty, who's actually been in movies and TV and all kinds of things—he and I did steamboats together. I used to do the American Queen, the Mississippi Queen, and the Delta Queen. And he would do “An Evening with Abraham Lincoln.” I said, “Jim, if I get here [to KSU], I want to get you for an evening.” And he says, “I'd be glad to.” And he came. He does a first-person of Abraham Lincoln, talking about being Abraham Lincoln, and being in the situation of the country and so forth and so on. It was fabulous. We had a tremendous time. He has since passed away [in September 2015], so I've lost him, but just a great individual. Again, top scholars—[Virginia Tech professor] James I. [“Bud”] Robertson Jr., who's one of the top scholars; he's also unfortunately passed away [in November 2019]. Wiley Sword, one of the great collectors—he's come to several of our things, and unfortunately, he's passed away [in November 2015]. So, one of the things to

borrow a phrase from Dr. King, “Longevity has its place,” but you also watch other people going on.

TS: I’ve got a lot of Bells in my family tree; so, I think I’m somehow distantly related to John Bell. Anyway, it’s amazing how busy you’ve been to do all these things. I know how much work it takes to put on a conference. And it’s remarkable all that you’ve done.

BW: Well, I guess the biggest thing is I felt like it’s been what Kennesaw hired me to do. They wanted me to come. I know [former dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences Richard] Rich Vengroff said, “We’re not here to get you to raise money.” That changed, of course. But, “We’re hiring you to try to reach out to the community, do these programs.” And that’s really been, I think, the secret to success here because we’ve been able to do the things that [we’ve done]. You know, there are not many other places out there—there are other centers in the other parts of the South; some of them are doing marvelous work, great work—but there is no center like ours in the Southeast. There is no center for the Atlanta campaign or the Western Theater like ours. It’s just nothing quite like ours.

I don’t think Kennesaw has appreciated just how special this opportunity is for the university. I’ve spoken in California. I’ve spoken in Michigan. I’ve spoken in Colorado. I’ve spoken in New York. I’ve spoken in Texas. I went to Australia and talked to the Australian Civil War people. Just this past couple of weeks ago, I went to London to a conference of the Civil War Round Table of the United Kingdom. And everywhere I went, Kennesaw State, they’ve heard of us now. They’ve heard of us now. They hadn’t heard of us before.

TS: Yes. So, your administrative position changed?

BW: Yes.

TS: When?

BW: Well, it kind of went midstream. I don’t remember what year it was, but it was the whole determination that there weren’t going to be as many “quote” administrators. And they began to do some reconfiguring, and so...

TS: And so, we’re doing away with centers?

BW: Well, that was the other thing is, “Do we want centers, and what would a center be?” Of course, they tried to say that, “You’re not a center because you never officially were designated a center.”

TS: You’re not officially designated?

BW: That’s what they kept saying. And of course, I told them that I wasn’t here when it was founded. That passed through all these years, and it’s gone through all these

administrations as the center. And we've certainly treated it that way, and we've continued to be involved. But anyway, things did change, and once they changed, we've still tried to keep our head on the forward lean and keep going with the programs, and, I think, continue to do good service for Kennesaw State University as if nothing's changed. And increasingly...

TS: Regardless of what Vengroff said, I think fundraising was already a big part of centers by the time you got here.

BW: Well, it may have been but it wasn't with us because he told me not...

TS: How much do you typically raise in a year?

BW: I don't know, I mean, you'd have to go back and look. We've covered every cost we've had for programming the entire time. What we haven't covered is my salary. And some of that's with the History Department, but some of it's supposed to be covered through the center. And we were never told. In fact, I was told, "You don't have to worry about being 'self-sustaining.'" Well, of course, now we are. You have to be self-sustaining. I wouldn't mind it so much about all of this except that I felt like I was hired one way, and rather than being grandfathered in until I retired and somebody else could be hired under their way, they changed the rules and imposed them on me. And I do feel like that's been a struggle.

Part of our problem has been that when I got here, I had an office assistant that was there to help me out, and I had a number of people. One of the first folks was Rose Procter [who also served as Operations Manager for the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, 2007-2010, and Director of the PhD program in International Conflict Management, 2010-2013.] She helped hire that person, Aisha Coore, and was very helpful; very, very positive towards what we were doing. Rose and Aisha both would tell the candidates that, "Your job is to help Dr. Wills do his job." And it was very important because they could do those sorts of technical things because there are a lot of things we [faculty] can't do that I could let somebody like that do. And I tried to tap into the creative elements as well. So, on our flyers and different things, I always let the office assistant be involved in that, and usually, they are the ones that designed the image and then got it sent through design approval and all of that stuff. Well, once I lost that full time position, it cut back under Dean Dorff to a half time position. And then it cut back after that to no position at all.

I could get help from the dean's office, but I guess we know how that might be good or bad because there are times when they're so busy and overwhelmed it's very hard for them to be able to help in the time that I needed something done. Most of what I need is very specific to certain moments or certain periods. So, the point is that I ended up doing a lot of that on my own. We have what we call the Kennesaw Corps membership, which we've used to raise money. We allow donations through the [KSU] Foundation but also donations through the bursar's office, which of course is not called a donation if it goes to the bursar's office through the Fund 1400. And that's been what's really helped fund our

programs and to offset the cost associated with my position. I would, again, like to think that what we've done is no burden whatsoever on the university. That is what my intent has been to try to make sure the university is totally the beneficiary without having to worry about making sure that we do what we need to do.

And so, in many ways it's been a struggle, but it's been a great joy because when you see the program, you know that happened because of all the things you've done to make it happen. I will say you sweat bullets going in, but then you celebrate coming out. It's always been we've been very lucky. We've always had a kind of program you'd be proud of when it's over, and you look back and you think, I'm glad I did that. There are moments when you're leading up to it, you're maybe not so happy because it's more of a challenge than you want. But it's still a challenge you have to meet.

So, [my wife] Elizabeth asked me, "When you retire, what will you miss the most?" I'll miss the people. I'll miss the students. I'll miss the events. I won't miss the bureaucracy. I won't miss some of the rules. I won't miss some of the other things that happened that make life challenging and exciting. I'm very glad that I did not go on from being a faculty member to being something in a different realm because that would have been, I think, not as nearly as fulfilling for me. But I'm sure that one of the things I can look back at is that in every case we've answered the bell. We've met the challenge. We've done what we were brought here to do. And I'm very proud of those fourteen years, almost fifteen years at Kennesaw.

TS: So, I guess you're about 65?

BW: No, I'm not about 65. As of January, I am 65. And I always thought you should retire when you're 65. I thought that when I was 20.

TS: Well, you're on Medicare now.

BW: Yes. Well, the bad news is, of course, for Social Security I've still got to go a few more years, but we're going to work through that too. We'll work through that.

TS: You can take it at 65.

BW: Well, you take a hit. The full Social Security is 66 and 10 [months] for my age.

TS: Well, you've won all kinds of awards. The Charles L. Dufour Award from the Civil War Round Table of New Orleans—I guess that was for the Thomas book because it came out in 2013.

BW: You know, it's really kind of a broad work award. And then the Houston, Vandiver Award was for...

TS: Yes, the Civil War Round Table of Houston gave you the Frank E. Vandiver [Award for Merit in 2020].

BW: Right, and that was again not for any specific book. It was for work both at the Center and the publications.

TS: I looked up what they say on their website; it recognizes outstanding contributions to Civil War scholarship or preservation.

BW: Right, right.

TS: And Vandiver, I didn't realize this, but he'd been president of three different universities including Texas A&M [1981-1988].

BW: Another thing that you don't realize is that Frank Vandiver was my "grandfather."

TS: Oh, really?

BW: Not really [laughs]. He was my academic grandfather because he was Emory Thomas's major professor. So, Emory Thomas is my academic daddy and Frank Vandiver my granddaddy.

TS: Emory Thomas earned his PhD from Rice University in 1966 while Vandiver was a history professor and administrator and the acting president of Rice a few years later in 1969-1970.

BW: Yes. So, Frank Vandiver was Emory Thomas' major professor. Emory Thomas was my major professor.

TS: So, he's your academic grandfather.

BW: He's my academic grandfather. So, I told Emory when I won [the Vandiver Award], I said, "Look at what just happened." He said, "Isn't that cool? Isn't that cool?" [laughs]

TS: Vandiver actually wrote on more than the Civil War. He had a book on Black Jack Pershing [*Black Jack: The Life and Times of John J. Pershing* (2 vols., Texas A&M University Press, 1977)].

BW: He absolutely did. He was something else. He was quite a scholar, quite a scholar; and an interesting personality. I never met him; of course, I never knew him. But everything I've ever heard about him, the people that did know him said he was a fascinating fellow.

TS: And also, I guess, an early member of that Houston Civil War Round Table.

BW: Yes. But I'm still speaking; I've got programs literally the next week after I retire. I'm going to Spotsylvania to do an Emerging Civil War Symposium there [August 2-4, 2024, giving a keynote address on Friday evening, August 2 on " 'The Devil Take the Hindmost: Why Nathan Bedford Forrest Could Not Save Atlanta.'"] I'm very happy

with that. Very excited about that. I'm going to Pamplin Park again in the fall. They've had me there last year, and they had me there before several years. They have an annual symposium that brings in top speakers, usually six or seven top speakers, and they're kind enough to say that I'm one of those. I think that one year they actually did a play off of *The Magnificent Seven*, you know, the movie [originally 1960]. So, somebody asked me, "Which character were you?" I said, "That's up for them to tell you. I don't know which character it would be."

TS: You can be Yul Brynner.

BW: I'd like to be one that lived [laughs].

TS: Okay, well, do you have any books in the works?

BW: Well, several things that I'm waiting to retire to do. This summer I'll have more time. One of them is *Rage of the Storm: The Emotions of the Civil War*, which I'm really excited about. I think that's going to be a way of trying to deal with how people lived in real time with the Civil War because obviously, we know hostility and anger and all of these very specifically. There are a lot of complexities to the way people felt about what they were seeing and experiencing. The war that has made me think about that is the Ukraine-Russia war and to think about how living through that and knowing that this is Day One in what you experienced. And then this is Day 50 in what you experienced. This is Day 300, and this is what you experienced. What is it like to be in that kind of environment? And these people did live it, whether you were North or South, even though northerners didn't see the kind of fighting on their territory that the southerners did, they experienced war in all of its facets.

And so, I've got [material] that deals with greed and that deals with all the different range of emotions—compassion, all the different range of emotions. And it's almost like a history of the Civil War, but through this emotional lens, the same way that I followed through with William Dorsey Pender from my Suffolk book. There's a Union general that was very, very successful and very good in Suffolk called George Washington Getty. Not a very well known person, but he was involved in a lot of activities through the war, including being badly wounded in Eastern Virginia in 1864 [in the Battle of the Wilderness]. But he was in a lot of major engagements. And then he lived a long time after the war [to October 1901]. So, it might be a chance to really explore that. So, many of my people—Thomas dies in 1870; Pender dies in the war itself; Forrest dies in 1877. So, none of my people make it into the next century where you can really look at what did they live and how did they experience things in the post-war period. And Getty did live a long time. He did live a full military life; all the rest of his life was service in the military; and then he retired to his farm. And that's where he died at his farm.

But I went to West Point years ago, and you asked me, "How can you do so many books?" I try to research everything I'm interested in at the same time, and I put it in files. It's there. I researched Pender, Thomas, and Getty while I was at West Point. I've got all my West Point material. I don't have to go back. It's all in a file somewhere.

I've already used Pender, and I've already used Thomas, and now I guess I've got to use Getty. So, those are the next projects.

TS: Well, you've got to grow some hay, I guess, when you go back to the farm.

BW: Grow some hay. We have horses, cows, dogs, and grandchildren. I've got a lot of things to keep up with.

TS: I've got an idea Elizabeth has some plans for you too.

BW: She might, she might. But the good news is, she's got to still work for a little while longer and keep me up to the lifestyle to which I should be accustomed. I can be a gentleman farmer, and, plus, I can travel. The good thing has been our ability to do our own thing. And so, she goes at times and does what she wants to do, and I do what I want to do. This will give me that chance to go to some of those places that I don't think she really wants to go, but I really do want to go. There are some Civil War sites that, remarkably, I still haven't seen. So, I've still got a few places I want to go.

TS: Does Elizabeth have to run for election or is she appointed?

BW: They're appointed by the legislature. That's not a one campaigning thing. This is a selection-election thing.

TS: Well, she must keep them happy to keep being reappointed.

BW: You know, it's like everything else. You go through a certain amount of stuff. Then, there are people that obviously say all these things, good or bad and oftentimes quite bad. But then the legislators know how to take that with a grain of salt because it's like student evaluations. Who writes the student evaluation? The student that loves you, and the student that hates you. Who doesn't write it? Everybody else; except you, because they all love you.

TS: Back in the old days, they didn't have any choice because there would be paper evaluations. We'd bring them into the classroom. Professors would go out, and somebody else would administer it.

BW: Do you know that's exactly what I did too? Then, we always had 100 percent participation rate because they're there for the exam, and you trapped them. Now, they get online if they feel like it. If they don't feel like it, they don't. Or they can go to Rate My Professors and say whatever they want to say.

TS: That's too bad, I think.

BW: Well, there are a lot of things that are good and a lot of things that are bad. It's just life. My father-in-law was always funny. He said, "Because it seems to go on forever, if you only have an hour to live, you would want it to be in a faculty meeting." He was already

an administrator when he said that, instead of being a faculty member. But, you know, we can sometimes drag things out and carry things on and argue over things that you would look back and think, “We spent a lot of time on that! We spent a lot of time on that.” But the other thing is, the more things change, the more they stay the same. So, it’s just sometimes the format and style and technology versus really the fact that something has fundamentally changed all that much. People ask me questions: “You’ve been at all these different schools. How have the students been?” And I said, “I’ve always had really good students everywhere I’ve been. And I’ve always had some students that frankly need to be doing something else with their lives, and some of the middle ground.” But I said, “I’ve been blessed whether I was at Georgia Southern or at UGA or here, or CVC, to have really good students.” I’ve had some really fine students. I’ve got one that’s presenting a paper here shortly for what he’s done in research.

But I’ll tell you another thing I probably should say. I was a distinguished visiting professor for Wofford College [in Spring 2016 on the topic of “Civil War Biographies], and it was arranged for me to leave. I kept coming back for weekends to do the Center activities. So, I would drive from Spartanburg back here. But I absolutely adored Wofford. What a wonderful school and wonderful people! I had a great experience there. But it was a professor who had retired, [after some forty years of teaching at Wofford] and they named this Lewis [Pinckney] Jones Visiting Professorship after him, and they brought in usually retired professors of some renown. I was lucky to be not retired yet and be able to go. But anyway, I was very proud of that. So, I would not want my profile not to have a shout out to Wofford because I really love those folks.

TS: Is that a Baptist school?

BW: No, Methodist. I’m pretty sure it’s Methodist. [Note: Wofford started in 1854 with a bequest of \$100,000 from a Methodist clergyman named Rev. Benjamin Wofford, who died in 1850. It continues its affiliation with the United Methodist Church]. Now, [the University of] Richmond is not Baptist anymore, but it was a Baptist.

TS: Is Wofford closely connected anymore?

BW: I honestly don’t know.

TS: I’ll have to check that out. [Note: According to Wofford College’s *2024-2025 Catalog*, “As an institution related to the United Methodist Church, Wofford seeks to create a campus atmosphere congenial to spiritual development and social justice. The Methodist heritage fosters on the campus an appreciation of many faiths and a free exchange of ideas.”]

BW: You’d have to check that out, but they’re wonderful folks.

TS: At any rate, I think we’re all going to miss you when you leave here.

BW: Well, good news is, I know the roads, and I have a car, and I can always come back. So, I've already told some of the folks, if they have something they want me to do, just let me know and give me a shout out, and I'll try to head back in this direction. I certainly look at it oftentimes when I hear anything about the school. I think about good folk here and the folks that I've gotten to know. And, of course, always you and Randy [Patton] and people that are special to me will be folks that I'll keep an ear out for.

TS: I hate to think how many miles you've put on your cars over the years.

BW: I've put a lot. I've had a lot of cars. And the big thing I tried to do was get another car at just about the time it was beginning to be too many miles. So, I didn't let it get too big before I got another. Because the one thing I did not want to do was be sitting on the side of the road, if I could help it.

TS: Okay. You can tell Elizabeth I made you talk today, and that's why you weren't available when she called.

BW: Well, that's okay. When I get through here, I'll call her back and tell her that I'm okay, that I didn't get sacrificed.

TS: You tell her it's all my fault for keeping you busy.

BW: No, it's my pleasure, and thank you for the invitation. I hope that this is something useful for folks to learn a little bit more about another piece of the college's history.

TS: Thank you very much.

BW: It's my pleasure. Thank you, Tom. Thank you.

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