

# FEATURE INTERVIEW: RUSSELL WILLIE

Perhaps the State Police Training Academy Commandant said it best in his final evaluation of Russell Willie when Willie came on the job in 1941—“(Willie) is highly motivated and a quick learner, if he would (only) get serious.” Nearly a half a century later Willie refuses to get serious about life. But at 73 the former prisoner of war has earned the right to be cavalier about life, his future and anything else which presents itself.

Russell Willie retired from state police as a Major in 1967. He was a fixture around Headquarters spending most of his time working in the Bureau of Identification. He is eternally proud of his work in the Bureau. His greatest pride, however, is likely the friendship and association he enjoyed with Governor Earl Long.

Earl had had other troopers as drivers and probably some of those drivers were as close or closer to the governor as was Willie. Russell was never officially assigned as head of Earl's security, yet it was Russell whom Uncle Earl called for as the governor, having been diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic, was carted off to the state mental hospital at Mandeville. When many of Earl's cronies had scattered to capitalize on the political fallout from the commitment, Russell Willie was at the Governor's side.

Long time political writer for the *Picayune*, Iris Kelso remembers Russell this way:

*Of all the people around Governor Earl Long that summer of 1959, none seemed as sane as State Police Lieutenant Russell Willey (sic).*

*If anybody was in charge during those weeks in late June and July when a Covington motel became the state capital, it was Willey. Everybody else—psychiatrists, politicians, reporters, cameramen—got caught up in the bizarre events. We all got a little crazy.*

*... After winning his release (from the state mental hospital) Earl stopped at the Pine Manor Motel at Covington and held court there for days while people all over the state and nation watched in amazement.*

*Willey was Long's driver and an old friend of the governor. He was a laconic countryman. Nothing seemed to amaze him.*

*Early every morning, he walked back into the pine grove behind the motel and called up a flock of quail. We reporters and photographers would be sitting under a tree across a driveway from the governor's room. We maintained a 24-hour vigil. We'd sit there eating a breakfast of peanut-butter crackers and we'd hear Willey back there in the pines—first his soft, high whistle to attract the quail, then a metallic sound as he scattered corn from a pan. This was the one event we could count on every day. It was our hold on sanity.*



*"Of all the people around Governor Earl Long that summer in 1959, none seemed as sane as State Police Lieutenant Russell Willey,"*

—Kelso.

Russell has a theory about why the governor "took a liking" to him. He believes it was because he was always honest with the governor—in offering his opinion, in holding his spending money, in all his dealings. Russell believes there was a mutual bond, a mutual respect, an acceptance for what each of them happened to be. The fact is, Russell and the governor probably got along as well as they did because they were a lot like each other—a little bit eccentric, usually loquacious, and as down home as a plate of white beans and rice.

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Historians, reporters, political insiders, and all the other "hangers-on" propound in one medium or another to have known the real Earl Long. Chances are they do have a degree of perspective about the man and his character. Russell Willie also believes that he has a measure of insight like no one else. But Russell didn't reach that peak in his career without overcoming a number of personal obstacles.

He was born near Folsom in the Washington Parish in 1917. He and his family moved to the Livingston area east of Baton Rouge where he grew into a young man. Much was learned about the southern work ethic from his father who was employed as a logger.

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*"He's candid about why he sought out a job as a trooper, 'I was hungry.' "*

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During the depression he worked for whatever spending money he could save. Odd jobs were the norm. "Piddling around" at a small town restaurant fed him, but he knew as he turned the corner on 23 that he had to find some manner of steady employment.

He's candid about why he sought out a job as a trooper, "I was hungry." He had watched a trooper at that time, named Kinchen as he recalls, who worked in Livingston Parish. He would watch the trooper drive back and forth across the parish on U.S. 190 on the state police motorcycle. For some reason he liked that idea. Perhaps it was the freedom that the job seemed to afford the trooper. Whatever the reason, Russell did what people did in those days to get a state job, he contacted his senator and representative. Both wrote letters of introduction on his behalf to the superintendent. He was hired shortly thereafter.

Russell was assigned, like many others at that time, to a work detail helping provide security for a defense industry. He worked at the ordnance plant outside Shreveport near Minden. There they made artillery shells for the war that was growing more inevitable.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor came in early winter and by early spring Russell was on his way to the war.

After routine stateside training stints, Russell was shipped overseas as part of the 7th Armored Division. It was outside Metz in northeastern France that the pace of Russell's experience level began to quicken, as he and his fellow troops crossed the Moselle River in an attempt to capture the Nazi stronghold.

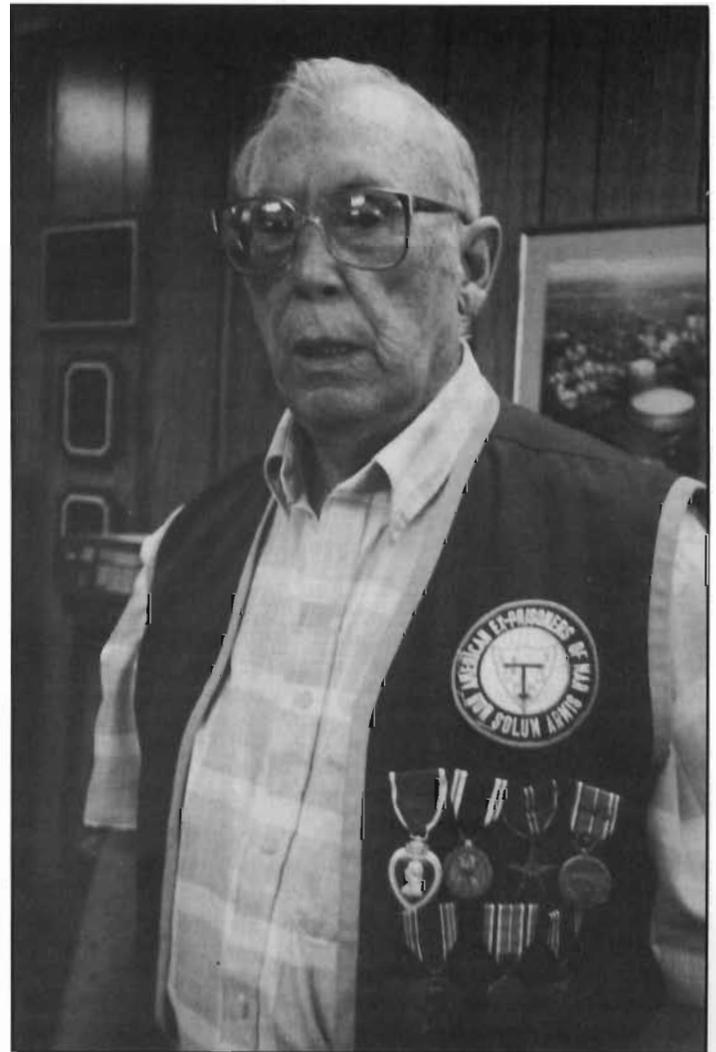
As the Americans fought their way into the countryside at the edge of Metz, Russell realized, if he hadn't fully realized it yet, that he was officially part of the war. There was smoke, exploding shells and death. Death everywhere. Russell studied the dead bodies lying along side the road, troops killed in the previous day's assault; but he and his fellow soldiers pressed on. They had no choice. Then almost out of nowhere Germans flooded the street, assaulting the American flanks with a vengeance.

A hand grenade exploded near Russell, throwing burning powder and debris into his intended path. It blew his shoe off and knocked him out. The injuries to his hand and leg were survivable but painful. The Germans gathered up their prisoners like so much debris and threw them together into a shelter covered with straw. A Nazi officer raised his machine gun and pointed it in the direction of the huddled captives. Fortunately, at the last minute, he was dissuaded from peppering the soldiers by a German first-aid officer.

Russell was shipped to one and then another internment camp where he remained until the facility was liberated. What he endured, what he saw, what he experienced has affected him from that time forward. The recurring nightmares never seem to stop. He can't shut the images of vermin and sickness of the camps out of his mind. In this interview he talks candidly about that time in his life.

Let's hear what he has to say about the final days of the war, his return to civilization, and his eventual return to the sanity (or insanity) of the Louisiana State Police in the 1950's.

*continued*



*Willie is the last surviving prisoner of war in the State Police family.*

## How big was the camp?

I guess there were about 2,000 Americans in there and who knows how many Russians. There were also Italians and French in the same camp. It was a big place. It was a hell hole. When people died, and a lot of them did, they'd just take their clothes right off them and bury them.

## Over all, how bad was the treatment?

I had no food. I'd rather they beat me every day and give me something to eat than not to feed me. We were pitifully fed. Most of the time we didn't actually have anything to eat. No food whatsoever, and the Germans didn't have too much food themselves. They were in a bind. The Russians were coming one way and the Americans were coming the other and we got caught in between.

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*"There was no way to escape,  
there was no way out."*

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## Did you know that at that time? Did you have any idea what was going on with the war?

Well, not really. The Germans had a good propoganda machine. They kept on telling us this and that, but when we heard the Russians coming in we knew that we had allies coming close. So, with the Russians closing in on the camp the Germans were preparing to march us out to an area near the Baltic Sea. We knew that's where most of the Jews had been killed in mass and we figured that we would be next. There was no way to escape, there was no way out.

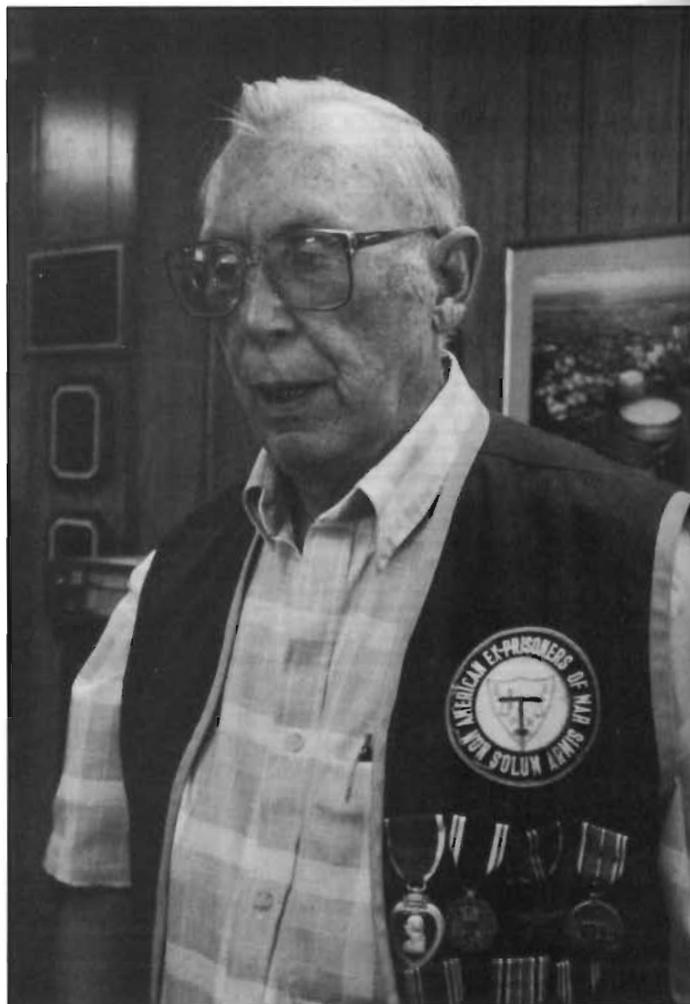
## Did people try?

No not in our group. In fact we were ordered by the U.S. Government not to try to escape, because they knew what the score was with the war winding down and we didn't. They knew where their positions were, they knew where the Russians' positions were and they knew things from both sides.

Then the Russians showed up, they started bombing. They even shot some of our own people because they mistook us for Turkish troops. They came into the camp and turned us loose to return to our own people.

We had to work our way through hell, through pockets of German troops and everything else. You'd never believe the things that I saw. I saw hogs eat people. I saw people stacked up like cord wood, I saw Russians just deliberately shooting German women and children. It was the most horrible thing that you could ever imagine. It was just a continuous shooting, and people stacked up like logs.

We were walking, we just kept walking. We would get ourselves a bicycle or something or another and some Russian



*"It was the most horrible thing I had seen... a little girl standing outside starving to death with both parents dead inside."*

would take it away from us. And we walked more. We kept going as far as we could. I remember reaching Poland and witnessing the most horrible thing I have ever seen. I'll never forget it. There was a house on the side of the river, blown out, all the windows and everything. This one little girl 5 or 6 years old was standing out there starving to death with her daddy and mother inside dead. It was obvious she had nothing. She had no one. And I had nothing I could give her, no candy, no rations, nothing. Talk about hurting inside, I can still see that little girl standing among the ruins. The image has never left me. Something like that effects you forever.

## You must have wondered how she would survive?

Yes. I still wonder how she made it. It comes to my mind all the time, what ever happened to that little girl? Why do things do you that way? I don't know. But it happened and she still comes to mind. If I would have had any candy or anything the Russians would have shot me for giving it to her. I was just lucky that I didn't have anything I guess, that's the only way I can look at it.

So, we went on into Poland and just continued to see people dead all along the side of the road. We saw them where they committed suicide. So many of the Germans began to commit

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RUSSELL WILLIE *Continued*

suicide rather than face the loss of the war. As night would fall we would begin to look for a house to stay in for the evening. One morning after staying in an abandoned house one of my buddies called for me to come see something.

He told me, be prepared, this is really something. Hell, I'd seen everything in the world, or so I thought. I went out there and saw that a group of Germans had cut their own throats and stabbed their own children. We found mothers and fathers who had hanged themselves. I knew that it had been suicide because all of the victims could have stood up to prevent the choking. It was something, I tell you.

**H**ow long did it take you to get back to your own people

I guess it was 2 months or so. We made it through Poland and into Russia finally making it to Odessa, a port city on the Black Sea. We caught a British ship there. They fed us kidney stew and that was almost as bad as the prison camp, it like to have killed us.

We were dumped in Naples, Italy. They cleaned us up and gave us some clothes. It was the first real taste of freedom. At night we would slip out and chase a few women. We finally made it back to the United States.

That's when the Associated Press took a picture of me eating a steak at Camp Miles Standish. They saw me, what a fine looking fellow I was and took my picture. That picture was published in every major newspaper in the country. That was about April 1945, about the time that President Roosevelt died.

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*"I made up my mind that I was  
going to make it . . ."*

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**D**id you ever think that you wouldn't make it out of the camp, did it ever cross your mind?

I never had it in my mind because I made up my mind that I was going to make it through the ordeal. If I would have let down and said I'm not going to make it, I would have died, I'm sure of that.

I just didn't give up, I couldn't. It was just plain determination. You've got to have it. I saw my own men die on us, on the side of the road. They couldn't make it. I believe the country boy was better off than the city slicker. Because I was raised out there in the country and plowed and knew a little about life it just wasn't as bad on me. Some of those boys over there from New York and other cities had never been off of a concrete slab.

**D**uring your confinement, what did you learn about people or in general?

Mostly that you couldn't trust anybody. You didn't know

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who to talk to or who to stay away from. They (the Germans) were slick, they could talk better English than you could. That was a clue. If they talked better English than you did, you knew something was wrong.



*After receiving some of the country's highest military honors, Willie was discharged from the service in 1945.*

### **W**hen you got back stateside, how long did it take you to go back to work?

I was discharged that October. I returned to Louisiana but everybody knew I was alright because they had seen my picture months before. But you know how the military works, slowly. I was already home, had been home for awhile when my daddy got a telegram from the army telling him that I had been liberated from the POW camp and was O.K. Hell he knew



*Willie, shown here being promoted to Major by Billie Joe Booth, spent most of his career in the Bureau of Identification.*

that, I was home running his car up and down the highway wearing it out and drinking and spending his money. The telegram said "your son will be coming home soon" and my dad told me, I certainly hope not. I can't stand another one at this point.

By January 1946 I returned to the State Police and stayed there continuously until I retired. They put me in the Bureau of Identification because of the injuries I had received in the war and that's where I stayed for most of my career.

### **W**hat was the Bureau like at that time?

The Bureau was a very small outfit. It consisted of the records and the unit that kept the fingerprints. We also had the Crime Lab and Photo Lab.

But they weren't any larger than a small office. Louis Heard was handling the Bureau of Identification at the time. He was as smart a police officer as I've ever seen, even without high school. I think he went to third grade. He lied about his education and went into City Police. Heard could run ballistics tests, he could run blood samples, he was a fingerprint expert, he was all of this and that. He was smart even without a high school education. He just worked hard at what he did.

Billie Joe Booth was in there too. I will say that that's the two smartest police officers that I was ever affiliated with. Billie Joe had a college education. And Billie Joe was shrewd. There's no reason that Billie Joe didn't make it as Superintendent. He should have been the colonel.

Some people who didn't know him thought he was a kind of a funny person. But the more you got to know Billie the more you understood him and liked him. He and I worked arm and arm there for 20 years. Like all people who work closely together we've had our disagreements and small spats but as far as getting along, I don't guess any two fellows got along as good as we did.

### **D**id you work for him or he work for you?

Sir, that's a word that I don't like to use. It's not who worked for who, it's who worked together. I don't like to say that he worked for me. We worked together. He didn't work for me he worked for the state, I worked for the state.

Heard was in charge; I knew that Heard was in charge. But we worked for the state not for each other.

I had that philosophy throughout my career and it paid off. I can go anywhere in Louisiana right today and all the old troopers, even some new troopers, they remember me as being a good fellow, not a major but Willie, one of the guys. I'll bet you could go anywhere in this state and somebody knows of me.

### **T**hen personal relationships were important to you?

That's right. I never tried to pull rank on people. Where ever I travelled in the state, I'd call people and ask them to

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meet me somewhere for a cup of coffee or lunch. It was important to show people you cared. People trusted me even though I was from Headquarters and Baton Rouge. One of the guys in a troop told me that people felt comfortable with me because they knew I wouldn't come back and pimp them out. They trusted me not to violate their confidence. That made me feel good. It ought to make anybody feel good.

It would never have crossed my mind to return to Headquarters and go see (Colonel) Burbank or whomever and say that some trooper was goofing off. We had some good men and we had some bad ones, but I wasn't going to betray a trust placed in me.

And while I'm being honest, let me tell you about something I think is a problem today. If you're a retired trooper and you go into almost any troop in this state and walk up to the desk and introduce yourself, you get a very cool reception. Now why is that? I don't expect a desk officer to drop what he's doing and talk



*"If you're a retired trooper and you go into any troop in this state... you get a very cool reception."*

different. The way young people are raised has changed. When I was growing up and visitors came for a visit, I would get up and show some respect. If I didn't my daddy would get me up. There was more consideration for one's elders, more respect.

**D**o you mourn the loss of that sense of family which existed among troopers, active and retired?

Yes. When I was on the job and somebody from one of the troops came to headquarters for work on their car or to pick up supplies or whatever, the Colonels always made sure we took the time to visit with them. To talk to them. To see what kinds of problems they were having in the field.

**S**peaking of Colonels, how many did you work for?

I worked for about 7 or 8 of them.

*"... it's a shame that retired troopers end up forgotten souls."*

to me but it's a shame that retired troopers end up forgotten souls. It wouldn't kill some of these guys to offer you a cup of coffee and a little conversation.

That bothers me and other retired troopers a lot. When you walk into a troop and introduce yourself and ask a question, troopers just don't give a damn.

**W**hy do you think troopers today have that kind of feeling, what do you think prompted this?

It's a different world, people are different, troopers are

**W**hich one did you respect most?

That's tough to say, but probably it was Murphy Roden. He was tough. He might come and chew your butt out, but he respected your opinion. If you disagreed with him he wouldn't fire you, he admired you for standing up for what you believed. He had the respect of the troopers and that was essential. If you didn't have their respect you couldn't do anything. It wasn't necessary that the troopers feared the colonel, just that they respected him for his position.

**W**hen did you first meet Earl Long? How was it that the two of you established a close relationship?

Well back in those days you were either Long supporters or anti-Longs. My daddy and my people out in Livingston

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Parish were Long people. I had met him when he travelled through Livingston Parish and he would stop in front of the house and everybody would just shoot the bull. He did that several times. He was always stopping the car when he would be travelling to talk to regular folks. I later met him while working the Legislative session and was assigned to him during those times.

But my ties to the Longs mostly came as a result of Mrs. Blanche Long, Earl's wife. She was born and raised in Elizabeth over near Covington, not far from where I was when I was a kid. She was a Revere before she was married and there's still a lot of Reveres over there.

When I first started getting close to the Governor and Mrs. Blanche, she took a real liking to me. She trusted me and knew that I would do whatever she wanted. Not that she was one of those first ladies whose always running troopers around, and making them stand around and wait on them and so forth.

She was, by the way, one of the finest and best first ladies that we've ever had. She wasn't like most of the other governors' wives who treated troopers badly. With Mrs. Banche, she was always thinking of the inconvenience to the trooper and trying to make things more comfortable.

For example, if you took her down to the Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans for some function, she wouldn't make you wait around for her. She'd say be back at 2:00 or whatever time, take the car and go. Most first ladies expected you to sit right there, bored to death waiting for them. Worse yet, you'd have to wait in the car or outside in the heat, you couldn't even go inside. You never got offered a glass of water, a cup of coffee, a meal or anything. You just sit and twiddle your thumbs. Mrs. Blanche wasn't like that at all.

We didn't have but about 3 troopers assigned to the Mansion at the time, so we were always having to double up on our duties. I was actually still assigned to the Bureau but had gotten close with the family during Long's first administration. In the 1951 election I'd work at Headquarters during the day and at the campaign headquarters at night. Long was running a candidate in that election since he could not succeed himself and I spent many a night going around putting up election signs and such. That was before Civil Service and was permissible.

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*"I guess Earl liked me because he felt he could trust me."*

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I guess Earl liked me because he felt he could trust me. I told him that I didn't want to fool with his horse race betting money because he was always sending people to place his bets. But I didn't want any of his money. I remember he sent me shopping in New Orleans once and he gave me something like \$5,000 to spend to buy a bunch of junk. When I got back to the mansion I said here's this and here's that, here's your receipt and here's your change. I guess he was in shock because he really expected me to keep the remaining money. People were stealing from him all the time, but I didn't want his money. And I believe that's when he began to trust me.

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*"I would be at the mansion late at night and Earl would come down and say, let's take a ride."*

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**D**id you actually work for him in his last year as Governor?



*Earl Long died on Labor Day, thirty years ago at the age of 65.*

I was with him alot. See I had kind of half way left the Bureau and Horton took that over. The Crime Lab went one way and the fingerprint section went another. Things were changing. I began to spend more and more time with Earl. I would be at the mansion late at night and Earl would come down and say, let's take a ride. And we'd go out at 11:00 or midnight looking for ice cream, or mushmel-lons or watermellons and stuff like that. I spent many an hour just riding and visiting with that man, and you may disagree with me but I believe that he was the best governor Louisiana ever had. It's kind of strange that now years after he's dead

and gone, lots of other people like newspaper reporters and writers claim the same thing.

**I**'ve read some of those accounts. They credit Earl Long with having a progressive approach to race relations at a time when Louisiana was a staunchly segregationist. They also credit him with getting things done, it's just the manner that bothers historians. When did his administration and his personal life begin to unravel?



*The racial problems of the 60's, like this confrontation in a Plaquemine church, were typical of the times.*

*continued*

Most people remember his last year as governor when people began to say he was crazy. But I remember going and picking up three doctors in New Orleans, one from LSU, one the head of Tulane and another from Loyola. And it wasn't any of my business but that never stopped me from doing anything, and I asked them what their opinion of the governor's health was.

They told me that he was taking pep up pills, slow down pills, and that he was drinking, smoking. He had never been a drinker or smoker. And those habits were changing him. I remember if he wanted to go somewhere he would take a pep up pill and 30 minutes later when it was over with he'd need a slow down pill. As a result he was having a series of little strokes and they were affecting his behavior. His mood could change in an instant.

I remember getting on a plane with him in Denver and before the door was closed, he was just as calm, talking to people, just as jolly as he could be. But when the door was closed, he just snapped. He went crazy. He started cussing, telling dirty jokes, he was loud. He was a different person.

**Do you believe that your relationship with him was different from other troopers he surrounded himself with? Were you the closest to him?**

That would be hard to say. There's no doubt he used some of them, but he trusted me and if it came right down to it he would just as soon as had me there as anybody else. I never took a red penny from him and I can't say that for the rest of them.

**You mean that troopers stole from the Governor?**

Sure, but every one of them that did is six foot down today.

I knew them all. They all felt like they deserved the extra money because of what they had to put up with, and maybe they did but they stole. I never did and I've got a clear mind.

**It's possible that the troopers misinterpreted Earl's kindness. Wasn't he known for being generous, for having a kind heart?**

Well, like his roadside shopping deals. If we were going somewhere and he knew we'd be visiting folks in the country for example, he'd first go by the hardware store. He'd buy horse collars, trace chains, stuff like that, things that farmers could use on the farm. He'd throw it all in the back of the Cadillac and we'd head out.

When he'd pull up to a farmer's house to talk politics or whatever, Earl would notice that the farmer's horse needed a new collar or could use a trace chain or whatever and Earl would pull one out and give it to him. Well you know what that farmer thought of Earl from that day on, hell he'd kill for him. That farmer was bought for the rest of his life.

**So he used this means as a way of establishing grassroots Sloyalty?**

Yes, he was smart like that. He was shrewd, he was a real politician. I've seen him on the phone and I've heard him talk. I've had 3 or 4 people on the line at one time in the mansion and he'd get some fellow on the phone and say how is that old cow? He'd remember those things. Or how's that hog or this or that. He'd ask about everything, the dog, the farm and the last thing he'd ask about was the wife. And that's the honest truth. He wouldn't ask how's your wife and then go after it, he would ask about the farm and hogs first.

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STATE OF LOUISIANA  
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT  
BATON ROUGE

*To Lt Willie  
From Gov. W. J. Warlick*

The governor's handwriting appears on this envelope; a Christmas present to Willie.

## He knew what was important to the men?

Yes. Then again I've heard people call up, so and so didn't vote for you and he's still got a job with the state. Earl would tell the caller, well that may be so but that man's got a wife and three kids and they've got to eat and he's going to keep his job. I've heard him do that. It's probably a side that most people never saw or heard.

There are still people who don't know that side of Earl Long. I'm probably saying more now about the personal side of Long that anybody ever has. Most people will talk about the public Long but they won't talk about the private Long. They won't tell the personal things about him. I have been to places and heard people say, yea, I was with Earl Long when he did this or that. But I was there and many times that was not the way things went. People want to be part of the family that we had, part of the legend I guess.

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*"He was brought to the basement of the courthouse in Baton Rouge and wouldn't get out of the car to be examined by the coroner."*

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## Were you with Earl when he was headed back to Baton Rouge after checking himself out of Ochsners in New Orleans? That's when his car was forced off the road by deputies as it entered East Baton Rouge Parish?

I wasn't with him then, but from that day on I was with him. He was brought to the basement of the courthouse in Baton Rouge and wouldn't get out of the car to be examined by the coroner. That lasted about an hour and when the papers were signed committing him to the state hospital in Mandeville he started screaming and hollering and cussing everybody.

He asked for me and I talked to him. I told him, governor if you want, I'll go get my car and we'll go to Mississippi but we didn't and I'm glad we didn't. We headed out for Mandeville, me, the governor and George LeBlanc in the back seat.

## Who was George LeBlanc?

He was the chief criminal deputy for the sheriffs office, a very fine fellow. We were all good friends back in those days, we worked together just like troopers. So anyway we started out and the news media was all over the place taking pictures, hollering, following us. And as we drove through

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# State of Louisiana--Parish of St. Tammany

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To STATE POLICE LT. RUSSEL WILLIE, 370 NORTH 12TH STREET, BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA

You are hereby summoned to appear in Covington, in the Twenty-Second Judicial District Court for the Parish of St. Tammany, La., on the 26th day of June, 19 59, at 10:00 o'clock A. M., and from day to day and term to term until discharged by the Court, to testify to the truth according to your knowledge, ~~in accordance with the subpoenaing process~~ **RE: STATE OF LOUISIANA, EX REL, EARL K. LONG**

~~defendant~~ plaintiff, ~~and~~ ~~defendant~~ on the part of the **PLAINTIFF, BY ORDER OF THE COURT.**

And therefor you are not to fail, under penalty of the law.

By order of this Court, this 23rd day of June, 19 59

*Edw. Skene* Deputy, Clerk

*Willie was subpoenaed as a character witness on behalf of Long during the governor's mental hospital stay hearing. Willie never had to testify.*

Denham Springs, Walker and so forth along 190 the reporters were right behind us.

While we were travelling he started writing a list of names, about 50 of them. I still have it. He wanted me to call all of them, he slipped me \$20 and said, "call all these people" and he gave me the list.

As we drove on he asked me, why don't you knock that one in the head and shove him out of the car? He asked where my gun was and I told him I didn't have one and I recall him being frustrated and saying, "you're one hell of a trooper, don't have a gun." But I was the only trooper around that he didn't fire, he fired the rest of them, including the Superintendent.

**F**or the benefit of those unfamiliar with what happened after he was admitted, tell us what happened.?

After several days, a court hearing had been scheduled to try and get Long released. Well, they brought him from the hospital to the old school house for a hearing. The courthouse was being renovated. I had been subpoenaed as a character

witness for Earl.

But before court even started Earl fired the Hospital Board Chairman, Jesse Bankston, and appointed a new board. Sitting right there in the courthouse. The judge, Robert Jones, had gotten his education through his family's friendship with Long and he held up starting the proceeding until Earl did what he had to do. Well Earl appointed a new board on the spot and of course the new board declared him sane.

The schoolhouse was packed with reporters, spectators, politicians, everybody. They all started hollering when he got cut lose after the judge declared him sane, but he was tired and he looked it. We went outside and left. Sixty Rayburn was with us in the car. The reporters were right on our tail so when we crossed a bridge outside of town I had troopers block it so that we could get a jump on them.

We got to a place called the Pines Motel outside of Mandeville and I went in and secured 4 rooms for the governor and all of us. Some reporters finally arrived and checked into the remaining rooms. But there were hundreds of reporters there, hanging aorund, they were everywhere. They had come from all over the United States and overseas.

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I actually got to be pretty good friends with some of them and helped them out when I could. I was in charge of the governor's security while he was there and they had to work with me and they did.

### **W**hy didn't ya'll come back to Baton Rouge?

We couldn't right away. He was tired. He had this doctor, this psychiatrist with him, and he had this nurse, attending to him. They said he was too exhausted to travel. We stayed at the motel for about a week. We would drive out at night and go to Sixty's daddy's house or to my relative's house. We didn't stay at the motel all the time but that's where we operated out of.

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*"That picture ran all over the country, showing Governor Earl Long sitting on a plane with a pillow over his face."*

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### **Y**ou drove from here to where?

We finally left for the pea patch farm back in Winnfield. When we got there the politicians just wouldn't leave Earl alone. He was still having problems, hollering at us every night. People were in and out of the farm all night. Finally he had enough and called me in. He told me to get the Cadillac, put some watermelons and trace chains in it and head for Fort Worth. He told me to reserve a room there and he would fly over and meet me.

That was the flight that he had the picture taken with pillows over his head. The reporters sure didn't help him look sane. That picture ran all over the country, showing Governor Earl Long sitting on a plane with a pillow over his face.

### **S**o how did things go in Fort Worth?

Well, reporters were following him everywhere he went. In fact when he got to Fort Worth he put a pillow case over his head. I had a room reserved for him and he met me at the front door of the hotel so I could escort him up to his room. He had taken the pillowcase off by now. I think he actually had driven around the block where the hotel was an extra time to attract more reporters. When he came in there were several people with him, Sixty, I think, some deputies, several women, it was quite a few that tried to get into the elevator.

That's when I had to deal with a reporter. There was this one guy who was a horse's ass, I knew it, the governor knew it, even the other reporters didn't like him. Anyway when he tried to get on the elevator Earl said, "hit him Lieutenant." And when I did he said, "thank you Captain."

The reporter fell on the floor, he slipped of course. They



*The fondest memories of Earl Long? "I guess sitting and riding with him and talking with him . . . just being a regular person."*

sued us. The governor wanted to apologize in the papers for it but all the other reporters were calling up and thanking me for doing it. They told me that that particular reporter would crawl over his own mother's grave to get a two bit story. They really hated him.

### **W**hat other trouble did you have on that trip?

The only other trouble I had was when I came back from Little Rock. I flew back from Kansas City to Hotwells, Arkansas. They had some prostitute out of Memphis and there she was with this low cut dress with her bossoms hanging out and Earl went wild about it.

He wanted to take her for a ride. He told me to go up to the room he was staying in and get this other fellow, that he would drive them around. But when I came back Earl was locked in the car with the prostitute getting ready to drive off. I was trying to convince him to let me or someone else drive but he had the doors locked and wouldn't have anything to do with it.

The reporters were standing around watching all of this. They were saying aw Willie just let him go, we're not going to follow him. But there was this one little television man out of Little Rock who said he was going to follow the governor and take some pictures and such. I told him, no you're not, I won't let you. And the reporter said, "you don't have any authority here in Arkansas and you're not stopping me." I told him that I might not have any authority in Arkansas

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but I had the authority over the governor or something like that. In any event, it worked and Earl drove off.

Within 20 minutes he was back at the hotel safe and sound. It was all just a show, I knew it and the reporters knew it.

### **W**hat's your fondest memory of Earl Long?

I guess sitting and riding with him and talking with him. Just being a regular person and just talking in general. I guess that was one of the fondest things because at other times we would be with people and we couldn't talk or visit. But being alone with him, when there weren't all these other demands put on his attention, he could just be himself. Those are nice memories.

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*"Blaze was the most outrageous, filthiest, uncalled for picture I'd ever seen."*

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### **D**o you think history has been unkind to Earl?

I think the news media has. Two university professors have written a book on Earl and they told the whole story, the truth about the situation. I think the picture show **Blaze** was the most outrageous, filthiest, uncalled for picture I'd ever seen. There was hardly any truth to it. In fact, I wasn't going to go see it but people asked how I could criticize it without having seen it, so I went. And it was nothing like the truth at all; it was all fiction. They had him dying in her arms. He did die up there in the motel room because he didn't want to go to the hospital. He didn't want his opponent in the race he was in to know that he'd been sick. He figured if the people voting knew that he was dying they wouldn't vote for him.

Now that's saying something about the man, about Earl Long. The fact that he had been governor, re-elected governor, had done such silly things on the Legislative Floor, had been sick and all that. Now you tell me. You explain it; I can't. He had to be good to somebody, somewhere. At one time he ran for governor against 10 candidates, Grevemberg included and he beat the whole damn bunch at once.

### **W**hen did you finally retire?

In 1967 with 25 years of service.

### **W**e know what Russell Willie did for State Police. What did State Police do for Russell Willie. What did you get out of it?

I got friendship from people all over the state. I learned a lot from it. I learned good stuff and learned bad stuff. But mostly I met some of the most wonderful people I've ever known through the State Police. And today when I have an occasion to run across them it's such a good feeling. It means

so much to visit and remember the old times.

### **D**o you miss it?

You have to miss it if you've spent most of your life as a State Trooper. If they'd had a 30 year retirement deal like they do today I would have stayed. I just hope that the new guys will pay attention to tomorrow, their future to what's going to happen to them after retirement.

In the years since I've been gone I think my retirement money has gone up something like \$200. All this percentage increase is a bunch of crap. I know that they have people retiring at \$25,000 so a 10% raise to them is \$250. But for many of us, probably most of us 10% doesn't do a thing, maybe \$70 or \$80 a month. My bread costs me just as much as it does everybody else.

I'm 73 years old and a lot has happened in this organization. Ya'll have the trooper's association working to do good things for troopers but they need to remember those of us who came before, those who are retired. People on the job get a regular step increase every so often but we don't get hardly anything. It's good the Association is there to look after things because we sure don't want a union in State Police. I'm in favor of what the association is doing in trying to get a commission, I think most of us are and we support it. Maybe down the line they can help the retirees. And I wish the association the best. After all, we're all troopers you know.

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