

**Texas After Violence Project
Interview with Mr. Jim Willett**

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Place: Texas Prison Museum
Huntsville, Texas
Equipment: Sony mini-HD DV camcorder
Recorded on: Sony mini-DV cassettes
Interviewer: Celeste Henery
Videographer: Maurice Chammah
Transcription: Maurice Chammah
Reviewed & edited: Maurice Chammah

MR. JIM WILLETT: Is it going to bother it? The noise going to bother it?

CHAMMAH: Not at all.

HENERY: I don't think so. It's March 2nd, 2011, and we're here with Mr. Jim Willett, and interviewing is Celeste Henery and Maurice Chammah is doing the video work today. And basically we just wanted to start by asking you about your background, if you could tell us a little about your background, and how you came to work in the Texas prison system.

MR. JIM WILLETT: I came to Huntsville in 1970 to finish my college at Sam Houston State University. I'd gone to a junior college for a couple of years, and after I was here for about a year, I had been working at a service station, and some guys, friends of mine, were working for the prison system, and told me "You need to look into getting a job with the prison system. It's not like it is in the movies and they pay way better than what you're getting at the service station, so I basically put in an application and I think I bugged the people to death 'til they finally decided to get me off the phone, from calling so much, and they hired. And I went to work at the Walls, just to get my way through college. I had no intent of staying there, as a prison employee. I actually never took a criminology course in college. I was a business major.

HENERY: Can you talk a little bit about what that process was like, of going to work?

MR. JIM WILLETT: Well I had an oddity happen to me and to this day I have no idea why, but they hired me one day, and they told me to go to the warehouse beside the Walls and get my uniforms, and to take them over to the officer's tailor shop, which was also outside the Walls, and they'd get my uniforms ready, and that I was supposed to go and report to, I believe to the captain at the Walls, and he took myself and another guy on a tour, and showed us around, and the next night I went to work there. I never had one minute's training, other than that. I didn't even know they had a training school, til months later and somebody mentioned it and I said "Well you know what're you talking about?" And they told me, and I don't know why I didn't go, but I went to work that first night, and they sent an officer, not any ranking officer, just an officer, up to one of the pickets on the side of the wall, and we went up there and relieved an officer that was there. This would have been about ten o'clock at night. And this guy spent about fifteen minutes with me telling me what to do and what not to do, and he said "If you need anything pick up the phone." It didn't have a dial on it. If you picked it up, it rang at what they call the searcher's desk. And he said "If you need anything, pick up the phone."

That was it. And I was scared to death. I was prayin' that nobody tried to escape while I was up there that night, you know? And that's kind of how it started.

HENERY: So a lot of the training was just on the job? Case by case?

MR. JIM WILLETT: Yeah, and then oddly, even officers today would find unusual; I worked on those pickets for six months, and then I actually transferred to the first shift

and they put me working in the buildings where the inmates lived, and I'm going to say that at least half of what I learned there was from the inmates. They tell ya. There was an inmate, and that was his job, part of his job, tell you what to do, make sure you don't screw up. And that was a good job for an inmate to have, and if he let you screw up, see he was subject to lose his good job, so he pretty much told what you supposed to do and when to do it. But that's kinda how you learn that. But you a situation then too where there were a whole lot of inmates in there and only one or two officers in the building, with several hundred inmates. And they were still segregated back then like- oh gee I worked four building at the Walls, and I'm not saying this was a regular thing that happened every day, but I worked four building at the Walls when I was the only white person in that building, and I was the only person in a grey uniform. But everything went okay.

HENERY: And could you talk a little bit about, I know you've had a long trajectory and career in the prison system. Can you talk about the different roles and capacities in which you worked, to warden?

MR. JIM WILLETT: Well, I basically just worked my way up the ladder. I was an officer for probably, and I'm getting old and probably don't remember exactly, but about three or four years, and then I made sergeant, about a year later lieutenant, a couple of years later captain, that kind of thing. And I worked my way up the latter, and eventually made- and all of that, I'm thinking about the things in the grey uniform, it's just all basically the same, but of course as you get a little higher, you're more of a leader and administrator in the things that you do. The system wasn't so big then, and these promotions didn't happen, the opportunity for them didn't happen as often as they do now, so typically, I mean let's say a guy makes sergeant, by the time he gets ready, if he does what I thought was right, and wait, you had time to wait, and by the time you went up for lieutenant, which was the next, you knew the answers to the questions, you'd figured things out, and you'd been around long enough to know, and could kind of just step right into it and do it. But then when I made Assistant Warden I had to transfer to another unit. I got Assistant Warden on- over by Navasota, and I stayed there six years. Assistant Warden, I thought, was really good for me, because I just thought I was good at that. It is a situation where you're doing a lot of administrating, but I can tell you that there's a lot of difference between being Assistant Warden and a Warden. As Assistant Warden you make a lot of suggestions, but it's not your fault if it screws up most of the time, and as a Warden you're going to be the one held responsible.

But anyway I was Assistant Warden for six years there and then three years I believe it was at Diagnostic, and then I made Warden there and was there five years, and then the last three years back at the Walls Unit. I don't know I've said what I've said about the difference between a warden and assistant warden. With that said, there's a lot of difference between being the warden at, what was called the Byrd Unit, now the Diagnostic Unit, and- a lot of difference between it and being at the Walls. And I have to say mainly because I did all of those executions.

HENERY: And can you talk a little bit about the executions, in your capacity as Warden?

MR. JIM WILLETT: Well, the warden's job at the Walls, in dealing with the executions, is you're basically, just as you are as the warden over the rest of the prison, I mean it's your responsibility. The things that take place there are your responsibility. I felt like, personally, my way of dealing with it was it was my responsibility to see that these executions went as smoothly as they possibly could. If you have more specifics I'll try to answer them, but that's basically it.

CHAMMAH: In trying to-

MR. JIM WILLETT: Does he get to ask questions?

HENERY: Yeah

CHAMMAH: If that's alright- in trying to make them go smoothly, what was that process like of trying to prepare for the first one.

MR. JIM WILLETT: The very first one for me?

CHAMMAH: Yeah. The first one for you and before they became the kind of thing that you had many in the past that you could- you sort of had a routine. Before you really had that routine, what did you do?

MR. JIM WILLETT: The first one was very difficult, in more than one way. One way it was difficult for me was I had never witnessed an execution when I saw the first one that I did. I wouldn't wish that on anybody. I mean because all you've got to go on, all I had to go on, was people telling me, well this is what happens, and then this happens, and you're trying to play a movie in your head of what this looks like, and it's just not an ideal situation, you know what I mean? If you were doing something that didn't amount to much, or wasn't very important, that's a different story, but you don't want to goof this up.

So I had, the first one, I had a lot of anxiety and worried about me a lot. And as it went on I quit worrying, I didn't worry about me. It was everything and everybody else there to worry about. But I got caught up in that on the first one, and then the other thing that sticks out in my head about your question is just the matter of dealing with an execution, of having somebody who is quite as healthy as you are, strapped down to that gurney, and the thought hits me that, you know, in a few minutes you're going to give a signal to an executioner who is going to end this guy's life. I was going to do that. And the guy was perfectly healthy. I mean that's just, almost, unrealistic. It's definitely very unusual and different than what we know in our day to day lives. And so all that was, I was caught up in thinking about all of that. The first one for me was difficult for me like that, and then unfortunately the first one did not go smoothly. Probably one of the worst ones I dealt with the whole time I was there as far as mechanically, medically. The medical person had trouble finding a vein, and I know you hear that a lot out there, but that doesn't happen that often, but that one was- it wasn't the worst one I dealt with in that manner, but it was pretty bad. And then where we normally would go with a- you put one in each

arm, one's live, the other one's backup, and it took such a struggle to find the first one that myself and the medical person made a decision to go with just that one, and then when the executioner started to push the fluids through it popped out of his arm, and we had to start all over again.

So it was not a good night. But I did leave there that night thinking surely it can't get any worse than this. It's gotta get better.

HENERY: And was there training at any point for that, Mr. Willett? Or people's counsel?

MR. JIM WILLETT: No, I talked to the fellow who was Warden there before me, and got his advice and rundown on how things should be, and then one of my supervisors questioned him and he told me a little story about how things go, and so I put those two things together and tried to think. You know my problem was again I was too much caught up in myself cause I didn't know what it was supposed to look like, and that I was thinking okay that just happened and what do I do next? And so you know after a few that went away and I was thinking about the inmate on the gurney or the officers that were- what they're doing and stuff. So, but the first time that's when he asked about was the first time, it was just not pleasant at all. Not that any of them were pleasant, but it was, gee I wish it would have been different.

HENERY: And is it a conversation that people within prisons speak about, at the administrative level? Executions, specifically. Or is it something that's not spoken about, or just from a procedural standpoint?

MR. JIM WILLETT: Yeah I mean you would have people who were there maybe, in whatever capacity, and some of them just merely as witnesses. They may talk about it afterwards. There may be times when these people get together and have a beer afterwards, but unless there's something unusual happen, probably the next day nothing's going to be mentioned about it. It's not ever going to be brought up again.

HENERY: And also, I've read your book and at one point you spoke about funerals, and I was wondering if you could talk about that, if you attended?

MR. JIM WILLETT: Yeah. I probably attended, I'm gonna guess seventy, seventy-five percent of the funerals. Maybe the person, if anybody ever sees this, they may wonder about the funerals. The inmates who die in the prison system, who, no one claims their body, they are buried at the inmate cemetery, the Captain Joe Byrd Cemetery here in Huntsville. It's in the city limits. In fact, it's only a block off from the east side of Sam Houston's campus. But anyway those people who die in prison and no one claims their body are buried up there. And they're all given a service, whether any family or anybody shows up. If you have that situation, you'll typically have maybe ten or twelve inmates who work at the cemetery, the chaplain, the inmate's officer that stays with them, and the warden, assistant warden, maybe both, or a major. Sometimes when neither one of us could make it we would send the major. But you'd have those people there and have a service. I mean the chaplain goes right along with the service, just like normal.

But more likely, I'm going to say sixty, seventy percent of the time, family does show up. I think you have situations where anyone whose dealt with funerals recently knows they're not cheap, and you've got Uncle Joe, who may have been locked up fifteen years and is probably zero chance he's got burial insurance, and when they find that the state will bury them at no cost to the family, I think they go that route and then they show up for the funeral. I've had- I've went up there to funerals where we have six or seven cars show up and people get out of it dressed in the nicest clothes like their Sunday go-to-meeting clothes. Everybody dressed up. I've had people bring their own pastor. I've had people bring people they want to sing a song. I mean, just everything. But that's what that's all about, the cemetery and the burials.

HENERY: And just about your, I know you've done a lot of interviews over your life and as a consequence of being warden, and there's a lot of emphasis or focus on your role in executions, and I was wondering what that's like, given that that seems to be a small percentage of what you actually did as a warden, in terms of the work, what that experience has been like for you, and your willingness to talk to so many people publicly about becoming this figurehead for executions in Texas?

MR. JIM WILLETT: I don't know, it's kinda strange isn't it. I mean if I had never been there, if I had never went back to the Walls as the warden, nobody, nobody would have ever interviewed me, so it seems strange to me. I don't know I think most of the wardens who have messed with those things don't want to talk to the news media about them. And I probably, it's one of those things I kind of got into a, and it wasn't because I wanted to, and most of it happened right at the very end of my career, that news media started coming in, because I was retiring and I had done all these executions and I got along with most of them really good. I didn't have problems like I'd heard before. Nobody went out and bashed me about anything. And I just look at it usually that, I don't intend to be the spokesperson for all of these people who have overseen executions, but I just look at it as; a lot of times folks like yourself are just curious, or they just want to get it down on tape, or you know, whatever. So I just try to help people understand the answers to the questions they have. And I'm more comfortable telling you about the process, and what goes on. I don't ever too much discuss any personal feelings I have about it. But I guess does that answer your question? I think it's mostly just trying to fill you in on what you want to know. There's certain things I wouldn't tell you. If you asked me who the executioner was I'm not going to tell you that.

HENERY: Understandably. And could you talk about some of the changes in the prison system that you've witnessed? Institutionally?

MR. JIM WILLETT: The first one that pops into my mind and probably because it popped into my mind a while ago, was getting there while the living quarters were still segregated. I know to younger people like yourselves that's gotta be just almost an unbelievable situation. But I'll tell you something. When we did that, it also happened in the chow hall, because when you went into the chow hall you go up this ramp and there's

a big room on this side that's the chow hall, and the Black people ate on this side and the whites and Hispanics ate on this side.

And so one day we were told "We're desegregating the chow hall."

And you know what we had to do? They would not do it. You could tell them "Go both ways," and they wouldn't do it. If they were Black they kept going this way, if they were white or Hispanic...And we'd have to tell them "No, you're going to eat over here today." And we had to get it started that way. Which I found strange. Especially today looking back at it.

We still had what I would call real solitary confinement where an inmate, if he were given that as a punishment, would go into a cell with a solid door that you could close on the front of it. He couldn't control his own light. You could literally put the guy in total darkness. He ate bread and water two days in a row and on the third day he would get a meal, and then go back to bread and water again for two more days. And they could stay that way for fifteen days. Oh Lord, I don't know what all you're asking me.

I don't know another thing like I said before we didn't have a whole lot of staff, officers I'm talking about. There was a small but close-knit group of people who worked at a prison and today if you go there's just tons of officers everywhere. So that's a big change. I mean obviously, definitely the officers were more in control of things than they are now. The courts sure changed a whole lot of things. Gee I don't know Celeste I could probably sit here and think of some more things, but those are the ones that pop in my mind.

HENERY: Okay. A long career.

CHAMMAH: I'm curious about in 2002 when the federal government stepping out of some of the responsibilities that they had taken on during *Ruíz v. Estelle*? Did that shake things up in any kind of big way? Or were there big changes that you saw decades after *Ruíz v. Estelle* as the federal government started to leave more things back to the states, to the state?

MR. JIM WILLETT: Now I left in 2001, but I don't think there's been- I don't think things changed a whole lot after that. And some of the things that happened turned out to be good for the prison system. And an example of one is, they told us use of force was a big thing, using physical force on an inmate to make him do something. That became a big issue, and one of the things we had to do, besides keep a record of all of that, was you had to videotape them. And you were expected to go all out to try to videotape these things if at all possible. But what we found out, I think the prison system found out, was that was a good thing. Because an inmate would sometimes go and say "Well they did this and that to me"

- and then you have a video here that you could say "Well wait a minute, that didn't happen. He's lying about that."

Whereas before it was just word against word. So some things like that were good, and some I don't think were.

HENERY: And how did you come to work for the museum?

MR. JIM WILLETT: Well, I retired in 2001, and I had been retired maybe a couple, three months. And the guy who ran the museum called me and asked me if I would come to work. And at that time it was located in an old, small bank building, downtown across from the square. And they had a very small business. It was really, really a mom and pop thing back then. I mean, if you got- I bet probably never had more than fifteen people in a day. I mean it was just really a small operation. And I would go down there and work a couple days a week, maybe four, five hours a day, and I did that until we moved out here, which was probably a year and a half later, about that. Maybe a year later. And it was busy, all of a sudden I started working forty hours a week. And then for some reason after we'd been out here about four months, the guy that ran the museum left, and they asked me if I wanted the job I've got now, running' the museum. And I've been here since. It's fun sometimes. I really enjoy the research.

HENERY: So do you do a lot of the research for the installations and for...?

MR. JIM WILLETT: Well I like doing research about specific things, specific subject matter. I just enjoy that kind of stuff, cause it's a learning thing for me too.

HENERY: So you've continued to learn about the system?

MR. JIM WILLETT: Well yeah. I have learned so much about what happened there before I got there.

HENERY: Gotcha.

MR. JIM WILLETT: And you know fortunately we've got a great library of interviews that we've done with people who used to work for the prison system a long time ago and that kind of thing. We've got probably about as good a book library as you could find about the Texas prison system anywhere. We've got board minutes dating back to 1915, we've got all of the inmate ledgers dating back to the very first inmate that came in 1849. Gee whiz, just all sorts, Huntsville Item on microfilm from way back up until, I don't know where we are now, maybe somewheres around 1950, but just going through that kind of stuff and we've got the inmates of Texas have had a newspaper since the late twenties. It's an inmate newspaper. We have that on microfilm, so you know it's just a lot of stuff you can read and learn.

CHAMMAH: To go back to the executions for a second I've always wondered, was there a big difference in the way that you had to handle things. I mean obviously the executions themselves were relatively consistent, but was there a big difference between when there was a big media circus outside and when there wasn't, the big spectacle ones where a

thousand people come in for Karla Faye Tucker or something versus the ones that would come up...Was your role?

MR. JIM WILLETT: Gary Graham. Let's talk about Gary Graham.

CHAMMAH: Sure, yeah.

MR. JIM WILLETT: We had for his, there was concern months prior to that execution that we'd have problems. And we had meetings at the Walls Unit that were attended by F.B.I. people, Texas Rangers, I mean you name it. We had a lot of people there who knew what they were doing. And if we hadn't had the help of like the D.P.S. the day of that execution, we'd of had some really bad scenes outside the prison, cause it was just huge. Just as a, for instance, out in front of the walls you always see the little group of people out there. Well that's typically, at those small executions I'll call them, that's anti-death penalty people. But when you have a big one like the Gary Graham you also have those who are for the death penalty that come. And they get, we try to get them at opposite ends, one at the West end, one at the Northeast end. And they will usually do that. I think it's just one of those old things, you know birds of a feather stick together. But at that one, Gary Graham's, we had the New Black Panthers on one corner, and the K.K.K. on the other corner. And if we hadn't had the D.P.S. riot team there I think we'd have had some killings, or at least some bad scene there. So yeah, it's a totally different thing, and we had people come in to help out from other prisons. We didn't have enough staff on our own to handle it.

CHAMMAH: And you oversee that? You would oversee that as well?

MR. JIM WILLETT: No. That's pretty much- while I'm over- Prison staff that are outside the prison system, you've got the sheriff's department there taking care of stuff. But all of these people, and I don't remember, somebody, the Texas Rangers, they had control over certain things and all. But if it hadn't of been for those outside agencies we'd of had a huge problem. And to give you an example, just real simply, you've got Gary Graham who was a Black inmate and there was a lot of concern over racial issues, and also about the one witness that witnessed the murder that he did, but there seemed to be a lot of it about race, at least from my perspective. No more than two or three nights after that, I would say, we had an execution of a Hispanic inmate, and about six or seven people showed up. So, I don't know it's just hard to say what makes them big and what turns out a normal crowd.

HENERY: And speaking about race, Mr. Willet, would you be willing to share a little bit about, you talked about when it was still segregated, and then after integration how things have changed or not changed, in regards to race relations within the prison as you observed them.

MR. JIM WILLETT: Well I think we found out that, for instance Black and white inmates can get along better than we probably thought they could. I think they probably got along better than they thought they could, to be honest with you. On another side of

the coin, and something I hadn't even mentioned and it just popped into my head. When I got to the Walls, I can't recall right now of having more than I think we may have had a couple of Black officers on the whole unit. So obviously you go to a prison now, there's a lot of them, and there's even supervisors and stuff, so you would have never thought about that then. I mean it's a different time. And it all worked out pretty good the way I look at it.

HENERY: And is a lot of the administration, from guards onward, from the area in general? Like you're from the region is that correct? You're from the region correct? From Huntsville? From East Texas should I say?

MR. JIM WILLETT: Well I've lived here for forty years. Will be forty-one this year. I came from central Texas, closer to, not far from Waco.

HENERY: And a lot of people who work in the prison are from this area?

MR. JIM WILLETT: This area? Yeah, except that it's gotten so large now you have people who, and especially I'm thinkin' now of really current, that you've got people who come here from even out of state, that they came to Texas cause they're out of a job and they know the prison system in Texas will hire them. Or they're hopin' so. I talk to people, like I know I've had a couple of conversations with different men at different times in the last three or four months, that came down here from Detroit, out of the auto industry. They just couldn't find a job when they got laid off. So yeah I would say went I went to work it was all local guys, they were older guys, they had been there forever, and college students like myself. So that's all kind of changed too.

HENERY: Gotcha. And after you retired did people continue to come to you as a source of knowledge, a source of information about-

MR. JIM WILLETT: People like who?

HENERY: I don't know, other up-rising wardens or whatnot? Assistant or..?

MR. JIM WILLETT: Yeah. I wonder how long that'll keep on.

HENERY: You stay open to it though.

MR. JIM WILLETT: Yeah, but I'm gonna be real honest with you and tell you if I retire from here I probably won't be, because at some point I'm going to - I do it a lot now for the prison museum too, you know, but I just feel like at some point I'm going to get to where I don't want to talk about it anymore. Maybe I'll get to the point where I can't remember what to tell ya. I know you mentioned the book a while ago and I had to look up something in the book awhile back, and said "I'm glad I wrote that book when I did." I'm not sure I could remember all this stuff now, cause I kept running across stuff I'd forgotten about.

HENERY: And one thing about the book; there's a series of journal entries about the executions, and did you keep a journal while you...?

MR. JIM WILLETT: On most of them. That kinda got started kinda screwy, was real early on and I don't remember if it was the first one, but I went home and just sat down and started typin' about what all happened that day, and it just kinda seemed to unwind me some, so I continued to do it. But there were times when maybe, and this didn't happen a whole lot, but just as an example, maybe my assistant warden say "Hey you want to go have a beer?"

And I'd go do that and then I'd come home and maybe I wouldn't write about it. So, most of them I did. I never intended, you know at one point I thought "Well I can quit writing these I'm okay now, I can handle this." But I got to thinking that maybe somewhere down the line maybe a great-grandchild or somebody might find that interesting and read this stuff. And I got to writing stuff that wasn't about the executions at that point, but I never had any thoughts about writing a book until it was right at the end when I retired and a guy called me. In fact, one of the articles that came out, about a week or two before I retired, and a guy read a newspaper, and I can't remember what book company he was with, but he called me and asked me if I'd be interested, and I had a really good friend that earlier in my life was a writer. And so that's how that all got started. Ronnie Rozelle the guy that helped me write my book, that's how that happened.

HENERY: And what was that process like for you in terms of remembering everything, and details?

MR. JIM WILLETT: It was fun, and we did it in a- you can do it better these days because Ronnie and I weren't smart enough then to do instant messaging, so we did emails. And at one point I still have them, but I forget we had written about twelve hundred emails writin' that book. And it was a funny process for me, an odd process for me because sometimes I would write a chapter, and I'd send it to Ronnie, and he'd send it back and I'd think "Golly, he made that into - I wished I had said it that way," kind of thing. And then I'd write him the next chapter and I'd send it to him and I'd get it back and I'd think "Where did he get this? This isn't at all - He's totally missed any-" So it was kinda weird writing, because he didn't know the details and the process and all, and he'd get confused sometimes, which I took to be my fault, cause I'm a believer in good instructions are those that can't be misunderstood, so I've got to say that I'm the one who was at fault, but that's the process we used, and it was fun. I wouldn't want to do it again if I were workin' here like I was then, because it just took up a huge portion of the day between both jobs. And there's other stories that I thought about, you know if I retire someday I might work on those. I mean just because you've got five executions there, what happened was I thought there were maybe fifteen or twenty that were really interesting stories, and what I literally did was I gave them to Ronnie and I said "You pick. You don't know anything about these, so you be the reader and you pick which five you want to put" and that's what we did.

And my wife saw them and she said "Well you didn't put the most interesting one in here." So you know that's how that goes. So maybe someday there will be more. My wife says what do they got these days, the digital books? She says "You need to do one of those."

HENERY: Does talking about it all been- do you feel that's just a service to create a kind of transparency and to allow the public to know what goes on inside of prisons, or is it also, or and is it also, been helpful for you to tell your own personal story, because you are a person?

MR. JIM WILLETT: I think at some point in the early on it was good for me inside to get it out and tell people, but no now it's just, gosh I've done this, and that bein' said, and I hate to say this, I can't remember what it was, but the Spanish guy, the guy from Spain asked me a question last week and I thought, and I told him "Nobody's ever asked me that question." Now I can't remember what it was, but every once and a while a question will come up and I think "Never thought about that. I don't know." Mostly now it's just, I don't want this to sound bad, but it's just for your information.

HENERY: Sure. This is what, we hope to make this just for the public record [inaudible].

MR. JIM WILLETT: Yeah. And you know I thought all along there's nothing wrong with, and probably the taxpayers out there need to know what this process is if they want to know. Again I wouldn't tell anybody who the executioner because he doesn't want to be known. But this other stuff? I don't see anything- I like the taxpayers, and I think that they needed to be treated really good. I don't have a problem with telling them what goes on.

CHAMMAH: Other than writing, or maybe going and having a beer with the Assistant Warden, were there other things that you did to kinda wind down after?

MR. JIM WILLETT: I usually just went home, and a lot of times got with the family. I mean if I walked in and they were watching T.V. I may have sat down and watched T.V. with them. My wife pretty early on quit asking me about how things went and all. I think she got the feeling that it just kind of drug out that part of the night longer, so she's always been very supportive, and the kids obviously, and at that time when that was taking place the girl was maybe eleven and the boy maybe sixteen, seventeen, in there. They never asked any questions. I mean it's almost unbelievable. It was like it didn't make any difference to them or they didn't want to know or something, I don't know. Never discussed it much with them.

The only thing I know is that at one time we had a period where we were doing a lot of executions really close together, and my son expressed to his mom that he was concerned about me cause he said "You know, Dad's looking' like he's kinda tired," or somethin'. And we all were. You think it doesn't get you down like that, but it does if you do a bunch of them. And I think it's emotional. I don't think it's so much physical. Yeah. One year, is it January or February? Maybe ninety-nine. We did like, I'm going to say five

executions in seventeen days, or something like that. I mean it was unbelievable. People always ask about the executions and I say "you know really I think we in Texas," and really I mean the people who do the executions, have it better than some of these other states, I said "if you do one in most states you have months to sit and think about that execution." You don't have it here. I mean a few more days you're on another one, and that one's gone out of your memory. You don't dwell on it if something went wrong, or something got to you or whatever. You don't have long to dwell on it here. So in some ways we have it better here I guess like.

CHAMMAH: What other things can go wrong, other than the thing you mentioned with the not being able to find a vein?

MR. JIM WILLETT: Well, It's not any fun when you have to physically remove a guy from the cell and strap him down to the gurney. And fortunately Gary Graham was the only one like that. I had a couple others that resisted, but it wasn't a struggle, it wasn't a fight. So that can go wrong, and fortunately, if only those three were the only ones that everybody else walked in and got on the gurney, totally unrestrained nobody touchin' 'em, you know. What else can go wrong? Really not anything else other than, and I don't say that this goes wrong, but I can recall one guy who was rude to the victim's family when he made his last statement, so that's kind of a downer there.

CHAMMAH: And are there, just to follow that a little farther, you said there were about five or so that you included in the book, but there were more that you had written about as sort of- what were, you don't have to necessarily tell us about specific ones that you remember, but what are things that really make you remember certain ones and not others?

MR. JIM WILLETT: That they said something weird or did something weird, you know something like that. I don't even remember if this one's in the book, but I had one guy who made a really good last statement, and you know they would tell, we try to get together with them that afternoon, find out how I was gonna know when they were through with their statement, and I think this guy said "I'll just tell you when I'm through."

And so he got through making this really good statement, and he said "That's all Warden," or something like that,

and before I could give the executioner the signal he says "Oh. One more thing. How about them Dallas Cowboys?"

And I thought "My gosh. What is somebody doing thinking about the Dallas Cowboys at this point? I mean you're seconds away from dyin'. And you know it."

I mean I would care less about the Dallas Cowboys, whether they even exist anymore or not. I just couldn't believe it. I mean maybe it just happened to be out of this guys

nervousness or whatever, but I thought "Well gosh." And there was a few things like that that happened that were just stunning, you know.

HENERY: I was going to ask you about what you've learned from prisoners, I guess over the years, things that, if there was anything that stuck out in terms of...?

MR. JIM WILLETT: I don't know. If you had asked me did I learn things from inmates I'd said yeah probably nearly as much as I did from supervisors, but I don't know things off the, specific like that or, hard to say. Probably seein' how some of those guys are able to deal with being locked up and better themselves is- something to be learned out of that. I don't know.

HENERY: And in moving in and out, I think it's a rare experience for those of who don't work in the system to move between those who have no liberty and those who do.

MR. JIM WILLETT: And you know it's strange that you go to work there, and I guess everybody would have some kind, be really leery of the situation and the people, I'm talking about the people that you're around. But after a while you walk around them just like you did somebody at Wal-Mart, or on the street or something, I mean you really do. Not that there's not people in there you're leery of a little bit all the time because you know what they're capable of doing, but you better let go of that being scared pretty quick or I don't know if you could make it.

HENERY: And are there a lot of folks that don't make it because of...?

MR. JIM WILLETT: Well I would only say this, that there's- not everybody's cut out to be a prison guard. It's just flat how it is, but some people really like that and some people function well with it. I don't know, you've got to as a guard, you've got to understand that you're over these people, but at the same time you've got to treat them like human beings.

HENERY: And if you don't mind sharing Mr. Willett, are there things about your own constitution, person, that you think facilitated that, that made it possible for you to have a whole career and climb through the ranks?

MR. JIM WILLETT: You know I don't know. One of the things I had a really hard time with when I first went to work was knowing that we're supposed to expect- why does the mind do this sometimes? Knowing that you're supposed to respect your elders. And there I am, twenty-one years old, and I'm in a unit where probably the average age of these guys is forty-five years old, and that was a hard thing for me, to tell these people what to do and not call them "Mister."

I just had to really struggle with that at first, but after a while you understand that they understand, and you go along with it. I don't guess that really answered your question, but if you want to restate it or re-ask it I'll try to get to it better.

HENERY: Sure, no, do you think- it definitely answered part of my question. Are there things that enabled you, personality traits, or things about the way you think about things, or you've said you, attention to instruction, that made it easier for you to, or you said the ability to give very clear instructions, and that seemed to...?

MR. JIM WILLETT: That was stuff I learned from somebody else. I think ninety nine point nine percent of the stuff I did well I learned from somebody else. I don't think I'm very good at figuring things out on my own, but I watch people, and saw people that did- one of the best things that happened to me, I had probably been there for eight or nine years and I reached a point, I worked with a guy who talked to everybody the way I'm talkin' to you right now, and I, I mean I had watched situations where nine out of ten times a supervisor would have been yellin' at this person, and this man talked to him just like I'm talkin' to you in those same situations, and I thought "My gosh, if he can get this job done as well as he's doin', and do like that, I think that's better on all of us." And I started moldin' myself into that way, and that's one of the things that really helped me, was just stay kinda even keel when dealin' with these guys.

HENERY: How are we for time Mr. Willett? Can we ask you...?

MR. JIM WILLETT: We can go on a little longer.

HENERY: Okay.

MR. JIM WILLETT: But you're out of questions.

HENERY: I'm not out of questions.

CHAMMAH: We never run out.

HENERY: [laughter] saving the best for last.

MR. JIM WILLETT: I'm going to turn on that fan again.

HENERY: Please.

MR. JIM WILLETT: Good.

HENERY: At the end of the book you had some, you shared some reflections on, I guess what could be largely said as prison reform, or-

MR. JIM WILLETT: I've changed my attitude on that, my mind, I was wrong.

HENERY: Would you be willing to talk about that?

MR. JIM WILLETT: Yeah. I think what you're talking about, let's get that straight-

HENERY: Sure.

MR. JIM WILLETT: That I said at the end of the book that we needed to get these guys more education so they could get out and get a legal job and stay out of prison. Is that what you're talking about?

HENERY: It was just all of what was written in your-

MR. JIM WILLETT: Well that part there, let's talk about it.

HENERY: Okay. Sure.

MR. JIM WILLETT: I think I was wrong. And you talked to me before we started this about Angola [Louisiana State Penitentiary]. I am in a total agreement with the Warden at Angola, and he said that if you educate an inmate you are left with an educated inmate. In other words, I mean to really be blunt, if you educate a crook you're left with an educated crook, and he said that unless you change the morals of these people you're not going to accomplish what you're trying to accomplish, and I think he's correct. And what he's done over there is bring in Christian people to work with these inmates. They even have a seminary there now. And it has worked. I don't know any other way to say it and people who don't agree with this, you just have to go look and see, you can't say it didn't work. And what he's done is gotten these inmates to change their morals.

When he got there, that place was a place. People were getting beat up and stabbed and all sorts of stuff goin' on and it has gone to nothing. They never have those problems. You may say "Well those guys have figured things out and they're wanting to get out." I don't doubt that, but the thing is these guys at Angola are doing life, and when you do life in Louisiana that's what it is. The only way you're ever going to get out is die or the governor gives you a, what am I trying to say?

CHAMMAH: Pardon?

MR. JIM WILLETT: Pardon. And we all know how often governors give pardons. That doesn't happen very often. So these guys have done this turnaround in their lives with no real reason to do it, other than they just want to be better morally. So I think that's the key. Now the problem with getting it implemented is you can't be usin', I would assume, you can't be usin' taxpayer dollars to do this religious-type stuff. But it works is all I can tell you. It seems to me that that is what you should be doing is trying to change these people morally. Let them understand that you are a good person and they should be trying to help you and not hurt you.

CHAMMAH: And are seminaries one way of doing? What are some thoughts on how that-

MR. JIM WILLETT: I don't know exactly how all that works, other than he'll take these people who have graduated and put them on the other prisons to work with the inmates

there. Texas is looking into doing something like that. It's supposed to start down at the old Darrington Unit, south of Houston, sometimes in the near future. We'll see how that goes. The warden over there in Louisiana, he's the one that got it started. I think it is- you have got to have that warden in this program a hundred percent or it's not gonna work. We'll see

HENERY: Did you have much contact with various wardens beyond the state? No?

MR. JIM WILLETT: Okay. Let me put a little footnote.

HENERY: Sure.

MR. JIM WILLETT: I didn't seek out any of them, but at that time I was over there it happened to be a time too where a lot of the other states were going from whatever they had, electric chair or whatever, into lethal injection, so I mean if you're going to learn about that, where better to go? And so a lot of them, and I'm talkin' in the three years I was there probably eight or ten different states that the warden and maybe chaplain and assistant warden or somebody like that, a group over to stay with us a few days and witness how we did an execution. So I did in that means, but again I never got back with those people again if they called to leave something that was the only way we talked. I guess the answer to your question is really no.

HENERY: Can you talk about what they would actually do when they were there?

MR. JIM WILLETT: Mostly just watch how we did things, yeah, yeah. They were just mostly observers.

HENERY: Gotcha. And in the context of executions, did you have contact with various family members, or were you principally there to just oversee the-

MR. JIM WILLETT: I didn't have, I don't recall having any contact with the inmate that was going to be executed, his family, and I had very limited conversations with the victims' families, and those were, the one, those were basically accidental run into each other, accidental encounters.

HENERY: And do you ever receive, or have you ever received letters Mr. Willett? Contact from various people?

MR. JIM WILLETT: Of those people?

HENERY: Yeah, of people who have various perspectives about, do people vent or share their perspectives-

MR. JIM WILLETT: No. I'll tell you somethin'. I had a couple, three times when someone would call on the day of the execution wanting' me to do somethin' to stop this execution or whatever. It usually, I don't recall it ever bein' a family of this person. It was

just somebody against the death penalty. I've never had an unlisted telephone number and I've never been bothered at home. Nobody's ever bothered my family.

HENERY: So most of the encounters take place with media following the-

MR. JIM WILLETT: I've had a couple, three out here where people would be against the death penalty and I'd tell them "Go look in our museum, we're right in the middle of the road, we do not lean one way or another here at the museum."

HENERY: And do most of the people know who you are?

MR. JIM WILLETT: No. That's funny. I tell you what. This Spanish film crew who was in here last week, we were probably an hour or more into the interview and the guy doing the interview, he knew I worked for the prison system, and he floors me by saying "What did you do when you worked for the prison system?"

I [inaudible] I couldn't believe that he didn't know, so when I told him boy that opened up a whole 'nother extra thirty minutes or so. But you know.

CHAMMAH: I'm just kinda wondering, what you said about other wardens from other states coming in to witness makes me think, either with executions or with just the running of the prison in general how much does the personality of the individual warden kinda have an effect on the culture of the whole prison? The way things are run? Is there a lot of discretion, or a lot of differences warden to warden?

MR. JIM WILLETT: They would like it not to be, I think the people who run the prison system, but I think historically it's been that way. I mean you put a guy out there and tell him these are the basics and it's gonna kinda run kinda like he wants it to run. I mean the guy's got a lot of authority, but he can use too much and get himself run off. And I think the farther back you go the more you have of that, of where they, we're talking sixty, seventy years ago, they sent a guy to a unit down at Rosharon and said go down there and run that unit, and he was on his own I think. I had something else I was gonna say, but now I can't remember. What was the question again?

CHAMMAH: How much the sort of personality of an individual warden-

MR. JIM WILLETT: Yeah. I would say this, and I recently, my daughter and I had a conversation, about a year ago, she was a substitute teacher, so bouncing from school to school all around this area, and she got to telling me one day that this school is so much better than this school and different things, and I said "You know, I'm gonna bet you that schools are a lot like prisons, that the personality of that warden, or that principal, is going to be throughout that school," and I believe that. I like the low key wardens myself. I think that they, not that I was one, but I've always liked those men of few words, you know that everyone's always a little leery of them.

CHAMMAH: I was just going to ask what separates a good warden from a bad warden.

MR. JIM WILLETT: Well I think a good warden is going to have to go in that front door every day bein', having two big concerns, and that's gonna be the staff and the inmates, cause he is responsible for them, and they all look to him for guidance in the things that they need, so in the end you wind up almost a servant to these people if you're doing your job right. I mean that's the way I see it.

HENERY: Did you visit, have you visited all of the prisons in Texas?

MR. JIM WILLETT: Not after it got so big. At one time, when it was only maybe thirty, thirty-five units, I had been to all but one of them. But now that they're all over the state like they are, no. Gee whiz, no. I've probably still have been to about thirty-five of the hundred and five, or whatever it is.

HENERY: And do you feel that it's getting too big, or do you think it's just a question of, there's a demand that needs better-

MR. JIM WILLETT: Oh no there's certainly a demand, I mean that's how come it- the people of Texas demanded that we get all these other beds, but yeah it's almost gotten too big to handle. I mean for one thing look at the fact that, when was it, maybe in the eighties, that they made regional directors. That tells you right there it got too big, they thought, for one person to be over the whole thing by himself.

So yeah I don't know how you could manage it today it's so big. I don't have too much bad to say about those people, cause I wouldn't want to be in their shoes.

HENERY: And how many folks worked below you when you were the warden, more or less?

MR. JIM WILLETT: You know I don't remember. I'm going to say that we probably had, with the teachers and the shop people and everything, we probably had somewheres around five hundred people at the Walls. I'm just guessin', cause I really can't remember now. Yeah.

HENERY: Gotcha. That gives an idea.

MR. JIM WILLETT: But you've got these big units that, around Texas, that wardens are on for maybe eight hundred people at the unit.

HENERY: Which units are those Mr. Willett? Do you know offhand?

MR. JIM WILLETT: Oh you've got, I'm going to guess maybe the Estelle Unit outside of town, your high security units, and your units that there usually high security units with a big inmate population, like up at Palestine you've got units up there that have got four thousand people. Golly that's a lot of convicts in one place.

HENERY: I guess just, I don't know if there's anything else you wanted to add about your vision for prisons, as somebody who has overseen them, in terms of-

MR. JIM WILLETT: Well you know I guess if I had one wish, the thing would be like, if this thing over that's happening in Louisiana, at Angola, if we could get it all over our prison systems and turn around and just say "Hey, we're going to have to close some of these prisons down," not cause we don't have the money to run them, but because we don't have any inmates that need to go. Of course I've said for a long time if you could get rid of drugs, you could close down most all the prisons in Texas, cause so many people come in, a huge percentage of them are in some way connected to drugs. So yeah, maybe we could close some of the prisons down.

HENERY: And the rodeo?

MR. JIM WILLETT: I hated messin' with the rodeo. When you work at the Walls you're going to work at the rodeos in October. Even if you're off, you're going to come in on your day off and work that rodeo. So for that reason I hated 'em. They were fun to watch, and it was neat to get to see Dolly Parton and Willie Nelson and all of those people come in, and you're gettin' to watch them for free [phone rings] excuse me. [tape cuts]

MR. JIM WILLETT: But in all honesty, now that I've gotten older and thought about it, it really hurt this town. Just, if you just think about a hundred thousand extra people comin' into Huntsville in one month, and all the hotel rooms and all the restaurants, I mean it may not have effected me directly, but it affected this community and it wouldn't have been a good thing to go on, I think. And it's almost impossible that you could get it started again, you know, just it'd cost a fortune just to build an arena, I mean I think it's out of the question. We'll never have it again.

HENERY: Alright Mr. Willett. You've been very gracious with your time. I just want to thank you for being willing to do this.

CHAMMAH: Thank you so much.

MR. JIM WILLETT: Sure. Sorry it took so long

CHAMMAH: Nah. We learned a lot.

MR. JIM WILLETT: I'm going to tell you one thing.

HENERY: Yes sir.

MR. JIM WILLETT: Hope you never get an abscess tooth, if you've never had one. That's the only one I've ever had, and I'm going to tell ya' that is miserable.

HENERY: They took it out?

MR. JIM WILLETT: Yeah. And I'm going to tell you what, he stuck that, I don't know what you call it.

HENERY: Giant needle?

MR. JIM WILLETT: No. He took that pliers, whatever they're called, and he went in my mouth, and two seconds later he pulled that tooth out. It was that simple. But you know how things happen. And I got this darn thing on Sunday, and then Monday was a holiday, and I didn't get to get the medicine 'til Tuesday and I was in some kind of pain. And even after he gave it to me, it took hours before it set in. And I was miserable. It was awful.