

**Oral History Interview of
Lon Sitton**

**Interviewed by: David Marshall
January 24, 2014
Big Spring, Texas**

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Transcript Overview:

This interview features Lon Sitton, who discusses his experiences as a blind musician, life at Texas Tech and in Big Spring.

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| Subject | Transcript Page | Time Stamp |
|--|-----------------|------------|
| Biographical information and youth | 5 | 00:00:09 |
| Pre-school | 10 | 00:10:47 |
| Early interest in music and how he learned to play music | 11 | 00:13:23 |
| Grade school in Lubbock and Idalou | 15 | 00:26:40 |
| Going to Texas Tech University | 22 | 00:42:27 |
| Handicapped accessibility | 29 | 01:02:04 |
| Finding a job after college and moving to Idaho | 32 | 01:11:48 |
| Getting married and adopting a child | 33 | 01:15:27 |
| Working at Hewlett Packard and Capital One | 36 | 01:22:56 |
| Working as a music minister leading Lon to Big Spring, Texas | 38 | 01:28:29 |
| Secular Music | 40 | 01:37:34 |
| Hypersensitivity of other senses | 42 | 01:40:36 |
| Spiritual beliefs | 44 | 01:48:08 |

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David Marshall (DM):

Okay, the date is January 24th of 2014. This is David Marshall interviewing Lon Sitton in Big Spring, Texas. And let's begin with your date of birth, place of birth and full name, also.

Lon Sitton (LS):

I'm Lon Ray Sitton. That's what my mother used to call me when she wanted me real quickly. My date of birth is August 1st, 1954. And what else did you want to know?

DM:

And where were you born?

LS:

In Olton, Texas.

DM:

Right, okay. It was in Olton Hospital when you were put in the incubator, then.

LS:

Yes.

DM:

Can you give me your take on what happened with what I hear was the oxygen in the incubator?

LS:

As I understand it, my brothers and I were in the incubator for twenty-eight days without any—without being taken out for any period of time. We were in there for twenty-eight days straight. I was in the middle, because I was born second. Don was on my left and Jon was on my right. As I understand it, the oxygen burned up the optic nerve. Now, I don't know if it was the amount of oxygen or the strength of the oxygen. I never have known that. Mother just always said it was the oxygen. So that's all I know. Don's left eye retained a little bit of vision. Jon's right eye retained a little bit of vision. But since I was in the middle, I got it from both sides.

DM:

I see. Okay. So the outside eyes survived this somehow. So the concentration—the assumption is the concentration of oxygen was greater in the center and that caused—

LS:

Right.

DM:

—the damage. Did you hear about people a little younger than your or older than you having these problems? Have you come across any people with a similar story?

LS:

Yes. Several people. A lot of them because they were the only one in the incubator, they were preemies. My brothers and I weren't preemies, it's just that there were three of us and so we were small. Some people—I knew some people in school that—I don't know that—I don't know of any other problems they had besides the incubator, but I know they were blind and they also were mentally challenged. But I don't know if that was just from the oxygen. Sometimes when I was taking Algebra II, I thought I was mentally challenged.

DM:

Well, don't we all? How big were you when you were born? Did you ever hear your weight?

LS:

I think I weighed three pounds and eleven ounces.

DM:

Oh, that's pretty small.

LS:

Yeah.

DM:

But not amazingly small.

LS:

Right.

DM:

Back then I guess five or six pounds was normal?

LS:

Right. Yeah.

DM:

Can you tell me a little bit about your parents, how they met, how they came out to West Texas? I think your mother was born in East Texas, as I recall.

LS:

She was. Both of their parents wound up living in Petersburg, as I understand it. I think they met—I think they met in high school. I wouldn't bank on that, but I know they went to high school together. Whether they met before high school or not, I don't know. I know they went to high school together and then my dad got drafted into the service. He went to Japan. And I don't know all the details, I just know that they got married and then he was immediately shipped to Japan and was there when the war ended, when World War II ended.

DM:

That gels with what I have. Because I have here that they were married in 1943.

LS:

Yes. Yes.

DM:

So then off to Japan. Wow. Did he ever talk about those experiences?

LS:

Very little. I know that he didn't like fish. [Phone rings] And he didn't like rice, because he said that's about all they had. So he was not a big fish-eater or rice-eater. He talked about being on the ship for twenty-six days. He had a few relics from Japan. [Phone rings] I think he had a kimono that the ladies wore. And then he actually had a Cimarron [Samurai] sword that we were allowed to touch when it was in the sheath. Of course, we didn't play with it. We knew—I mean, I had no desire to play with a sword. So that's about all I know about the war. Of course, he was there when it ended. That's when America bombed Hiroshima and he just didn't talk a lot about it.

DM:

Well, you can understand that. But he came back and was a farmer, is that correct?

LS:

Yes. We grew up on a cotton farm.

DM:

Okay. And this was near Hart, I believe?

LS:

Yes. That's right.

DM:

But you probably don't remember.

LS:

I do not. We moved to Idalou when we were two and a half years old.

DM:

Do you have an idea where you were [located] from Idalou?

LS:

We were three miles—I honestly don't know. I just know we were three miles outside of Idalou. I wish I—I would like to know the direction. I'll have to research that and find that out. In fact, I know somebody who could tell me.

DM:

Well, I would like to know, too. I live near Lorenzo, just because Lubbock's too big.

LS:

Right. Right.

DM:

So there's a lot of cotton farming out in that area now and I wonder if that—is that mostly what he was involved in?

LS:

Yes. Yes. He did raise some grain or what he used to call maize, but the main crop was cotton. And of course, we had a huge garden.

DM:

And did you all have any responsibilities there, in the garden or helping in the cotton field, anything?

LS:

Our job when we were growing up and got old enough—Well, let's see, I remember when we were six years old, my grandmother taught my brothers and I how to shell black-eyed peas. And that became our job in the summertime. I remember that because it was in the summer of 1960 and Elvis was singing "It's Now or Never" on the radio. And we had a radio out there in the backyard where we'd learned how to shell peas and I remember hearing "It's Now or Never" and "Itsy, Bitsy, Teeny, Weeny Yellow Polka Dot Bikini." That sticks in my mind—so every time I hear those songs, I think of being out there in the backyard shelling peas. And my brothers and I

of course, we were kids, we liked to get up and play and we would—our sisters, they had to go up in the field and hoe the weeds and pick the beans and the peas, and we had to shell peas and snap beans. Later, mother would bring us a big bushel basket, because she canned all those things. And we'd start at eight o'clock in the morning and we'd finally empty that basket at two o'clock in the afternoon. She would give us a lunch break. And at two o'clock, about two o'clock in the afternoon, we'd get up, "Mother, we're done." "Oh no, you're not. Here's another basket." "Mother!" You know. But she would can like—I remember her telling people, "Well now I've got ninety-eight jars of peas and ninety-seven jars of green beans."

DM:

Oh yeah. It was a big bragging right.

LS:

Oh yeah. She had two pressure cookers going. So that was our job. We had to shell the peas and snap the beans. And I still—this last summer, somebody called us and said, "The peas are ready. We're not going to use all of them." Liz and I drove out to where they told us to. We picked black-eyed peas and I stayed up that night—I started at about seven and finished about midnight—shelling those peas. And I loved every minute of it.

DM:

Oh really? Did you also help pick peas, occasionally?

LS:

Not really. Sometimes we picked cotton just because we thought it was fun. But that wasn't really in our—we weren't required to pick cotton. Now, our dad would often—when he was irrigating, we would knock on our bedroom door and say, "Boys, I need you to come help me string pipe." So we would go out and help load those long pipes on the trailer and then he'd drive it up into the field and we'd—he'd tell us where he wanted them placed and we would—each of us would grab one end of the pipe and we'd do that until we got all the pipes laid where he wanted.

DM:

So a fair amount of work on the farm.

LS:

Yeah.

DM:

You might be interested to know, when I asked Jon that question about chores on the farm, the first thing he said was shelling peas.

LS:

Oh yes. That was our job.

DM:

Your mother—I have a note here that she later worked at Idalou ISD as a teacher's aide?

LS:

She did. In the kindergarten. She loved kindergarteners.

DM:

Is this before you were in school—probably when you were in school, or after?

LS:

Actually, we went—after we moved to Idalou, the doctor told mother that she needed to get us in a pre-school. Because he said, "When they start to school, they need to get used to being around other people than just yourself." So Mother enrolled us in a preschool when we were three years old. And I can still remember her leaving and we just bawled and bawled because our mother left us. We survived and we graduated from that preschool when we were done with kindergarten. In the first grade, we started elementary school in Lubbock and the lady at the preschool told mother, she said, "You're going to be bringing your boys to school to Lubbock every day, why don't you just work for me?" So mother worked in that preschool until—well, she was still working there when we were in college. But finally she decided that she wanted to work at Idalou because it was a lot closer. And so that's when she got into the Idalou school system. But like I said, that was after we got into college that she did that.

DM:

Tell me about—first of all, this school in Lubbock. What was it called, and tell me what you can about that.

LS:

The preschool that we went to, it was run by a lady called Mrs. Shaver. I don't know what her first name was. I just know her last name was Shaver. She's passed on now. She had this preschool and we—Mother enrolled us in there when we were three years old. We started out going there just in the afternoon. But then I guess after we got used to going there, then we went there all day. And it was just a preschool. It was actually her house. She had this huge house. She had all these different rooms that we could go in and play and all this stuff. I remember she had a Christmas tree and in the springtime she had an Easter tree.

DM:

Really?

LS:

During the day, we would come in to—she had this huge living room that she called the music room. And she had a piano in the music room and when she would start playing the piano, we would all go in there and march around the piano. I remember one day I ran into the Easter tree and knocked it over and spilled all the water out of it. And the housekeeper came in there and yelled at me. “Get out from there! You don’t need to be over there!” And she just yelled at me for knocking over the Easter tree, but I survived.

DM:

How dare you knock over the Easter tree? (laughs)

LS:

Really, really. I mean, you know, it was like a Christmas tree. It was in a stand and it had water in it, and so when I ran into it and knocked it over, all the decorations and all the water—ooh, that housekeeper was mad at me.

DM:

What’d you think about the piano? When did you develop an aptitude for music?

LS:

I guess I’ve always—I remember Mrs. Shaver playing the piano. I could go to the piano right now and play for you the march that she used to play to call us all into the living room, you know. I’ve always enjoyed playing the piano. I don’t know—at home, we had this old, upright piano. I don’t know where we got it. But I remember playing on that piano and I remember telling mother—well, one of my grandmothers played the piano. She played hymns. And I remember telling my grandmother what notes she was playing. And so then mother told our choir director at church. And this was—I was five years old. And she said, “Lon can tell you what notes you’re playing on the piano.” And he said, “Oh, he’s got perfect pitch.” And I’m like, “I do?” I didn’t know what perfect pitch was. But it was just—you know, God gave it to me. I didn’t learn it. God gave it to me, and I still have it, I still use it. It’s a gift. It’s a wonderful gift. And then when we were—the next year after that, when we were six, our parents bought a brand-new piano. I don’t know if Jon told you about Grandmother Steele or not.

DM:

No.

LS:

Grandmother Steele was a lady who lived in California who read about us in the newspaper. I guess when we were born there were some articles that came out—and I guess it was national because she read about us and she wrote to my parents. And she lived somewhere in California. I

don't know the town. But she from time to time would write to our parents. I know sometimes she would send them some money to help out. And I remember she made these little material house shoes for us. She called them booties. And I remember we wore booties that she made for us when we were little. And then when we were in high school, we got a package one day and she said, "I sent the little boys some more booties." Well of course, by that time, we couldn't wear her booties. But I guess her memory started failing. We laughed about it. We thought it was funny, that we couldn't wear the little booties. But I think Grandmother Steele pretty much sent my parents the money for that new piano they bought. And that new piano is this one that's sitting over there that you can look at. That's the piano that I grew up with, I learned to play. When I moved to Idaho, my mother called me one day and she said, "I'm going to sell this piano and buy you—and send you the money since you live in Idaho and you can buy a new one." She told me, she said, "I called the music stores and they will give me three hundred dollars for that piano." And I said, "Mother. Don't sell it. It's worth—to me it's worth a lot more than three hundred dollars." So the next time my sister and brother-in-law and I came to Texas, we got a trailer and loaded it up and moved it to Idaho. So it was in Idaho then it got moved to Oregon, then it got moved back to Texas and now it's here in Big Spring. So that's the piano that I grew up with. And I love that piano.

DM:

Just a lot of sentimental value, isn't it?

LS:

Right.

DM:

I understand that you play by ear, typically, although you can read music in braille.

LS:

Yes. Yes.

DM:

I don't know if you still do.

LS:

I don't know if I still could. I learned—I learned how to read braille music at one time. But braille music is complicated.

DM:

You don't have enough hands?

LS:

Right. Exactly. Exactly. It's been a long time since I've used braille music. But I had a wonderful piano teacher. I played—well, I started playing, you know, when I was five and then I kept playing. I didn't use my thumbs. I didn't know you could use your thumbs to play the piano with. So when I was eleven, mother found—she found—somebody gave me a braille book that was called, *Read, Remember and Play*. It taught you how to use braille music. Well, mother found a print copy of that book. So then she found a lady in Lubbock who said, "I will give Lon piano lessons and he can use his book and I'll use my print copy of the book." So the first day—I remember the first day going over to her house and I played for her and she said, "How come you don't use your thumbs?" And I said, "I don't know how to use them." I was eleven years old. And she—yeah, she did teach me how to read music. But more important than that, she taught me how to play all the scales, she taught me all the key signatures, and to this day, like if you tell me, okay, this song is in three sharps, I can tell, "Oh, that's in the key of A." And that's because of what she taught me. She taught me so much about theory, about—she taught me how to find notes on the keyboard. I mean, it was awesome.

DM:

How do you find notes on the keyboard? Would she put stickers on the keys or anything? How do you do that? How do you find middle C?

LS:

Middle C—if you look at a piano keyboard, the three black keys in a row, and then you go up and there are two more black keys in a row, okay? C, every C on the piano is located right below—or right to the left of the two black keys. So middle C is right in the middle of the piano.

DM:

So you could feel to both sides and say, "Here's the center."

LS:

Exactly. Exactly.

DM:

—or you could use the pedal location, or something like that. How about transposing? Can you transpose into a different key?

LS:

I can. And like I say, that's a gift. So many people—I mean, I've been blessed—I tell people. I've even told people here in Big Spring, I say, "I cannot read sheet music." If you put a piece of sheet music in front of me and say, "Play this for me", "Sorry Charlie, no can do." But we have a very capable pianist in our church who can do that. So I tell people, "If you want to sing with

music, let this lady play for you. But if you need it, if I know the song, and you need it in a different key, if somebody says, that's too high for me, then if I know the song, I can play it for you in any key that you want to sing it in." So that's a gift.

DM:

Let's say you're going to perform a new song that you've never heard before and you listen to a recording, would that be the best way?

LS:

Yes. Yes.

DM:

How many times would you have to listen to that before you've got it down.

LS:

It depends on—it really depends on how hard the song is. You know, like let's say it's country gospel, country gospel is basically pretty simple. But if it's like a classical-type arrangement, then it's more difficult, you know.

DM:

But a hymn would be easier.

LS:

Right. Right. And you know, it's wonderful with today's technology, you know, the career that I've chosen. There are recordings to everything. If I want—if the choir—if I decide we want to do a new Easter musical, I can order copies of the listening CD. They also have rehearsal CDs that have each part sung on the CD. And like, if I listen to the alto part, you know, they have a microphone near the altos. And so I can hear them above the rest of the people. And I've done that many times. I'll sit there and—I don't try to memorize—to exactly memorize all the parts, I just try to know them well enough so that when we do get into a choir rehearsal, I can hear the altos and kind of know that they're singing the right notes or whatever.

DM:

If you hear a melody line, can you kind of put together a harmony or chords or something to accompany that?

LS:

Yeah.

DM:

For those of us who are talentless, that just seems amazing.

LS:

Oh, well, you know—I've said it over and I'll probably say it a thousand times—it's such a gift. I'm just blessed. I mean, I'm not perfect. I mean, you know, somebody will say, "Well, you only need to hear it once." "Wrong." There have been times when I've listened to CDs I bet you a thousand times. Now, what did they do there? And I'll go back and try to hear it again, you know. But it's fun. It's what I like to do.

DM:

I think I read somewhere, I guess in a newspaper article, that you'd lead the music in church by playing the keyboard, mostly. Is that correct?

LS:

I have done that. What I'm pretty much doing now is—since we have accomplished musicians in our church—in fact, we have a husband and wife. She plays the piano and he plays the organ. And they're very accomplished musicians. Mainly what I do now is I just stand at the pulpit and they play and I lead the music. I've got a braille hymnal.

DM:

So you follow the hymnal with one hand and lead—

LS:

Yes. Yes.

DM:

Okay. Do you play other instruments besides the keyboard?

LS:

No. I tried to learn to play the guitar until my fingers got real sore and then I—when I was going to college, being a music major, I had to take a semester of each family of instruments. Like a semester of drums, a semester of strings. My brass instrument, I chose the trumpet and I learned the scale on the trumpet, and I enjoyed it. I just never got that good at it.

DM:

So keyboards and then singing.

LS:

Yes sir, yes.

DM:

Well, I've jumped ahead and I want to talk a little bit more about that. But let's go back to Idalou for a while. I want to hear about Idalou schools. Did you start in first grade?

LS:

Actually, we started to school in Lubbock. Dupre Elementary School. It was located on Avenue T, somewhere on Avenue T. There was a lady there who taught all the blind students in the area, in the Lubbock area.

DM:

How many would that be? Checking this recorder.

LS:

It varied. Sometimes, there was five, sometimes there was ten, sometimes there was fifteen. And we weren't all in the same grade. She taught us braille and she taught us how to do math, because we mainly did our math in braille. But then in—in—so part of the day we spent in her room, and then part of the day, we would go to other first-grade rooms, second-grade rooms and spend it with other people just so that we would get used to doing that and being around sighted kids.

DM:

So this was a move toward mainstream, which seems very important.

LS:

Yes. We had all of our textbooks in braille. That was furnished by the state. And then when we started, you know—back then, elementary school—what we called elementary school was first through sixth grade. And then when we started junior high in the seventh grade, that's when we started to school out at Idalou.

DM:

I see.

LS:

They furnished our textbooks. Of course, in junior high, we had to move from class to class. And so they got us each a metal typing table with wheels and we pulled it around from room to room. We had our braille books. Sometimes we'd have to go to our lockers and change books because we couldn't carry all of them. But we had our braille books, our braille writers, and our portable typewriters, because everything that we turned in to the teacher had to be typed, because they didn't know how to read braille. We had our Royal portable typewriters that we used.

DM:

That just—you know, that seems like an advantage, ultimately, just the fact that you could type at that age. Because who else could type? What other junior high kids—

LS:

Right. Right. And see, we—the same lady that taught us braille taught us how to type when we were in the third grade. Because she knew that we would have to type because all of our teachers wouldn't know how to read. So we used—she used those typing records. A, S, D, F, G. Space. H, J, K, L, semi, space. We learned where the keys were from those records and from her teaching us how to type.

DM:

By the way, what was her name?

LS:

Mrs. Fewell was her name. F-e-w-e-l-l. She's passed on now, but she was—at times, of course, we got aggravated at her, and she got aggravated with us. I could tell you some stories about when she got aggravated with me. But I won't. She was a wonderful teacher. She really was. One thing that I thought was always amazing about her was of course, she could see and she knew how to develop our fingers to become sensitive to read braille, but she herself did not read braille with her fingers. She looked at it and read it with her eyes. But she knew how to teach us how to read it.

DM:

By the way, I failed to get the name of your first music teacher.

LS:

The lady that taught me lessons, her name was Sue—I think her last name was Wigham. I don't know how to spell it, and I don't even know if she's still around or not. But she was the one that gave me piano lessons.

DM:

And how long did you take those lessons?

LS:

Four years.

DM:

Did you take formal lessons after that?

LS:

No. And now I wish I had. I stopped taking lessons because I was in junior high and while Jon and Don got to do their thing in junior high, Lon had to practice. Lon got tired of practicing, so one day my mother said, "If you're not going to practice, then I'm not going to pay for your lessons." And I said, "Fine." I wished I had not have done that now. Oh well.

DM:

You know, we all have lists of those things.

LS:

Right

DM:

You know, this whole time—while you were at school in Idalou taking the regular classes, mainstream schooling, you had those lessons for a while. What other outside activities did you have? Extracurricular types of activities. Were you involved in any school clubs or anything like that?

LS:

Well, we were always involved in church. Our parents—my dad was a deacon, mother was a Sunday school—so we were very active in church.

DM:

This was First Baptist Church, Idalou?

LS:

Right. Right. Right. Very active in church. We got real involved with the youth group. And then in high school, there was high school choir. And that became my first love. The guy that taught high school choir was also the band director. His name was Mr. Banks. But he was an awesome choir teacher. I first got interested in choir when we—because we were in church. We had awesome choir directors at church. I remember me and the preacher's son, when we were ten years old, he and I started singing alto, because I could hear the alto parts. And he could read—he knew how to read music. He could read the alto parts. So he and I would sit together because our voices were still, you know, they hadn't changed yet. So we started singing alto. And I thought that was the coolest thing, to sing alto. And then when my brothers and I were about in the seventh grade, we asked our choir director at church if we could sing with the adult choir in the Christmas cantata. And he said, "If you will come and learn the music and not clown around and mess around, then I'll let you sing." And it was cool. I loved it. And then when we started high school, that was the first grade in Idalou that had choir. I think they started band in the fifth grade. And my brothers and I wanted to be in the band and our parents said, "No, we can't afford

band instruments.” So we weren’t ever in the band. When we got to be freshmen, we started high school choir and it was awesome because we got to go choir contests. Oh, it was fun.

DM:

So you traveled around a little bit, is that right?

LS:

Yes. Yes.

DM:

Do you remember how far you would travel on some of these trips?

LS:

Oh, our choir contests—I don’t remember exactly where they were. It was just—it was fun.

DM:

What about Idalou, First Baptist Church Idalou. Did they have traveling choir tours, anything like that?

LS:

No, we really didn’t do anything like that. We just went to church and sang in the choir. They never had choir festivities. (clock strikes three in the background)

DM:

They had Christmas and Easter pageants?

LS:

Yes. Yes. Yes. I guess when I was in high school, that’s where I got the idea that I wanted to be a choir director, because of—just the fun of having people singing parts. It just fascinated me.

Yeah, I want to do that.

DM:

What about subjects? Besides choir, other subjects in high school that caught your attention?

LS:

Well, I always enjoyed English. English was—I mean, I kind of thought it was fascinating to diagram sentences. What’s the verb, what’s the subject, what’s the predicate? And then besides that, in English, we got to read novels. And I loved that part.

DM:

And again, this is something—they ordered the book in braille?

LS:

Yes. Yes. Now—in high school, a lot of our braille books, they were like—the covers on them were like a three-ringed binder. And each book was labeled in braille, but it also had a print label that anybody could look at it and see what the book was. Well one day in our history class, we were supposed to read the next chapter in our history book. Lon decided he would rather read the novel that was in the English book. So I took the label so my history teacher thought I was reading the history book, but I wasn't. Oh goodness, I shouldn't tell on myself like that. (laughs)

DM:

That's good. Do you remember the names of any of your teachers that—for better or worse, those that stick out in your mind?

LS:

Our seventh-grade English teacher, her name was Mrs. Hill. Our eighth grade English teacher's name was Mrs. Hill, but it was a completely different person. Our eighth grade teacher Mrs. Hill, her husband was the history teacher. I think all of our teachers liked us. They just seemed like they did. I got in trouble in the eighth grade with my history teacher because I was eating candy in class. So he took me out in the hall and busted me with a paddle.

DM:

Yeah, they used to do that.

LS:

Yes, they did. But I survived. I was not the quiet—I was not always the quiet student who never caused a problem.

DM:

Oh, Lon, I just can't believe that. Shame on you. (laughs)

LS:

I know. But I mean, I never got expelled or anything like that. Hey, let's have some fun once in a while.

DM:

Did you have any close friends in high school?

LS:

Yeah. When I was—I think I mentioned the preacher's son. We got really close to him. And everybody at church teased us about, "Oh no, the deacon's kids and the preacher's kids are running around together." But yeah, when we were—you know, we developed other close friends. There was a friend of ours, a girl who was blind also and she went to high school with us.

DM:

Were there any—besides providing you with the typewriter—I don't know if they provided your typewriter or if you had to purchase your own typewriters. Do you remember?

LS:

When we were in—let's see. I'm trying to remember. Our parents bought a typewriter—I think they bought our first typewriter and then the Lion's Club actually bought one or two typewriters for us. So we each had a typewriter. And I remember when our parents bought our first braille writer that we used. And then a year later—you know, this was back in elementary school. So when we did our homework, we had to share a braille writer. The a year, they bought another one. And the third year, the year after that, they bought another one. So, yeah. And I still have my braille writer. I don't use it very often, but I still have it. Because now I use—I have a braille printer that I use that works off the computer.

DM:

Did the Lion's Club—this was the Idalou Lion's Club—

LS:

Yes.

DM:

Did they help occasionally with things like that then? They helped with the typewriter. Did they sponsor you in some way or was this a one-time thing?

LS:

They did that and then two years, when we were growing up, they told us about the Texas Lion's Camp for Crippled Children that was in Kerrville. We went to one of the two-week sessions, two different years. We did that.

DM:

Now, is this in the summertime?

LS:

Yes. Yes.

DM:

I believe Jon mentioned something about a school in Austin. Or was that Kerrville?

LS:

No, the school in Austin we went to was the Texas State School for the Blind. And we went there three different summers—well, that's when I first learned how to use a cane. When I was growing up and going to school at Idalou, I was totally dependent on my brothers. They could see a little bit. And I couldn't. So I never bothered to learn my way around the school. I always walked with them or somebody else. I was not independent when I was going to school. So when we heard about the summer program in Austin, that's where I first started learning how to use a cane so that I could become independent. And then when we graduated from high school, we went to the Arkansas Enterprises for the Blind in Little Rock, Arkansas, for a summer college prep program. And during that summer I discovered that I needed more help learning how to use a cane because I just hadn't done it that much. So at the end—we graduated from high school in 1972. All three of us went to the Arkansas Enterprises for the Blind that summer for the college prep program. That ended in August of 1972. We all came home. My brothers got ready to start to Texas Tech, and I, after being at home for about two weeks, I flew back to Little Rock, Arkansas, and spent three more months there in Little Rock without my brothers. It was very, very difficult but it was one of the best things that ever happened to me.

DM:

Because you needed to be out of the company of your brothers, to not be dependent on them?

LS:

Yes. When I was growing up, I didn't want to answer the phone. They'd say, "Lon, you answer it." "No! I don't want to answer the phone." I was scared to talk to people. And so when I went back to Little Rock without my brothers, it was like, "Okay Lon, you've got to learn how to be on your own." And that's when I learned, if I don't know something, ask questions. That's when I learned how to become independent. I kid you not, it was scary, but God helped me through it. And then I started to college in the spring of '73. At the same time, that's when I was like, "Okay, if you're going to get anywhere, you've got to stand on your own two feet, ask questions." I would be in a history class and the professor would say, "Okay, on Friday, we're going to have a test." And I'd sit there and go, "Okay. How am I going to do this?" Because everybody was going to go in the room, get their test papers and take their test. I couldn't do that. So I had to go—after class, I had to find my way to the front of the room, stand there at the professor's desk until everybody left and he'd say, "Can I do something for you?" "Yes sir. I need to find out how you want me to take this test." And he'd go, "Oh, hm. Yeah. Guess you

can't read it, can you?" "No, sir." "Okay, come into my office. What have you got going Thursday morning at ten-thirty?" "Nothing." "Okay, come into my office Thursday morning at ten-thirty and I'll give you the test." Me and this professor in a room all by ourselves. But it was so interesting, because I did that several times. Some professors, they'd read you the question, you'd answer it and they'd go, "Mm-hmm." Read you the next question. You'd answer. "Mm-hmm." Finally, you'd finish the test. "How'd I do?" "You'll find out." "Thanks." Other professors—I had a history professor—I kid you not. History was not one of my favorite subjects. Why do I have to learn about the War of 1812? Didn't like that, but I had to take it. I had this one history professor—I don't remember his name, I wish I did. I'd tell you it. He was the coolest guy. I went in to his office to take the test, and he said—he read me the first question. A, B, C, or D. I said B. "Are you sure?" "I think so." "Now, wait a minute, Lon. Remember in class when we talked about so-and-so and so-and-so?" "Oh, yeah." "Now think about it. Do you still want to put down B for your answer?" "No, I think I'll put down C." "That's better." [Laughter] I didn't tell him to do that. He's the one that did it. But he was cool. So anyway. But I mean, I found out—I mean, Texas Tech was a big university. It's bigger now, but I found out that hey, I was able to get all the help that I needed, but I had to ask. Nobody came up to me in class and said, "Young man, may I help you?" No. I had to ask. And God gave me the courage to ask. Well, I knew that I had to if I was going to swim. It was either sink or swim. So I had to ask questions and I had to figure out what I needed to do to pass that class.

DM:

Now, what about just getting across campus and finding your room--those kinds of things?

LS:

There was an instructor provided by the commission for the blind who was able to teach us those things. Each semester we would register early and find out what classes we were taking and where they were and then I would call him or her, because they would switch—it wasn't always the same person. But I would call him and say, "Okay, I've got two classes in this building and I've got"—we would make an appointment and we'd start from point A and he would show me how to find each classroom. I never could understand why they would have an English class in the mechanical engineering building. That made no sense to me. But that wasn't up to me to understand. That's where the class was, so I had to learn where the mechanical engineering building was in order to attend that class.

DM:

Stepping off curbs, concerning yourself with traffic, and not to mention masses of students walking by, finding your way into a building down the hallway and in the right doorway. It's difficult for someone like me to understand. The cane helped you with all of this?

LS:

Oh, yeah. And that's—

DM:

So the cane was a real life-changer.

LS:

Yes. Oh, yes. Once I learned how to use a cane, once I learned how to go down the stairs and not being afraid of falling on my head, it was—I went through college with my cane in one hand and my briefcase in the other hand, and sometimes a tape recorder.

DM:

Sounds like such a challenge, as if college isn't enough of a challenge with the learning aspect. But to learn how to get around and how to find a way to adapt yourself to their requirements, like an exam that you're supposed to be able to read, that kind of thing.

LS:

But you know, it was something—I'd do it again if I had to. It was rewarding. I could tell you—I could spend hours telling you funny things that happened to me. I look back on them now and they were hilarious. Like I'd go in a room, I'd go in a classroom sometimes. And there wouldn't be anybody in there. And I'd think, where is everybody? So I'd sit down and finally in about five minutes, somebody would come in and go, "Oh." And I'd go, "What?" "There's a note on the board that says no class today." "Oh, no one told me." So then I'd get up and walk out of the room. But now that I look back on it, it's funny. It's like, "Well thanks for telling me."

DM:

Did you ever come across a professor or a fellow student who kind of took into mind the fact that you couldn't see and would make an effort to—to tell you things like that? I mean, is that a rare instance?

LS:

Yeah.

DM:

People just don't think of it.

LS:

Right. Right. Right. But most of the professors I had were very accommodating, you know. I remember one of my history professors. Again, I would take notes in his class because that's the only way—I do not have a photographic memory. And he told me one time, he said, "If I say

something and then I repeat it again, that means you better write that down, because I'm going to ask you that on a test." Oh yeah, I'd get lots of tips from different professors. I had some professors who did not think that I should be a music major or a choir director because I didn't know how to read music. But I just said, "Okay", and took their classes anyway. I was determined, that's what I was going to do. My voice professor that I had—because I had to take voice lessons all the way through school—he was amazing. He just took me under his wing. He wasn't—you know, he didn't—he didn't spare me of any—he told it to me like it was. He told me how to—he said, "Now if you're going to be on stage singing for somebody and they clap, you need to learn how to bow, acknowledge them." He told me all those things. He would—

DM:

Who was this?

LS:

His name was Bill—William Hartwell. In fact, when my wife and daughter and I moved to Texas in 2006, my wife and I were in Lubbock one day and I heard this guy say, "Lon Sitton." And it was him. He remembered me from back in the seventies. He told me in 2006 that he had just retired and he had taught voice and choir at Texas Tech for forty-five years.

DM:

Is that right?

LS:

And it was neat seeing him again. But I mean, he would—he didn't sugarcoat anything. If I wasn't doing something right, he'd tell me. We would—every semester, I would go to what they called a voice jury. And I had to sing in front of all the voice professors. Just me in a room by myself, with six voice professors, and they would write critique sheets on me and tell me how I did. And he would read those critique sheets back to me. He would say, "Okay, Lon, this is from Mrs. So-and-so. She said you have a nice voice. Oh, she was just being kind." "Thanks a lot", you know. But you know, I learned so much from him. So much from him.

DM:

Did you, whether in junior high, high school, at Texas Tech—did you ever feel disadvantaged? Like, life's not fair.

LS:

I guess I did. But I never did let it get me down. I felt like I was on—I was in pursuit of something. And I wasn't going to let anybody tell me that I couldn't do it, you know. Yeah, I knew that I couldn't read music. I knew that I couldn't take a sheet of music and interpret it from what was written on the page. I knew that I couldn't do that. So I had to learn music other ways.

I had to learn music from recordings or whatever. But I knew what I wanted to do and I wasn't going to let anybody tell me I couldn't do it. Conductors—when I took conducting classes, sometimes conductors—because we would have to stand up there and conduct the rest of the class, and sometimes they would say, “Lon, I can't tell what you're doing.” And I would have to re-do it again or whatever. I had a choir director one time that said, “Your job is to get them to do what you want them to do.” And that's what I do today when I direct the choir at my church. I know that I don't look like other choir directors. Because I can't see what other choir directors look like. So I'm sure that my directing is not like everybody else's. Yeah, I know the basic patterns. One, two, three, four. One, two, three, one, two, three. I know all that stuff. But if I can get the choir to do what I want them to do, then I've accomplished that. And the choir here in Big Spring is so wonderful to do what I want. They'll try to do anything that I want them to do. They're awesome.

DM:
What church is it?

LS:
East Fourth Street Baptist Church in Big Spring. I would highly recommend it.

DM:
It's none of the three Baptist churches I just drove across, just coming down the main road here, Birdwell and back.

LS:
Right, right.

DM:
Because there are three close.

LS:
Right, right, right. No, this is on East Fourth Street.

DM:
Okay. Now, did you live in a dorm at Tech?

LS:
I did. I lived in Murdough. My brothers and I all lived in the same dorm. It was funny because when we were in high school and started pursuing college, a guy in the housing department told my mother, she said that he said, “Ma'am, we usually don't put three people in one room.” And

we were like, "We don't want to be in the same room with each other. We want to branch out." So we all had different roommates and we all did our own thing. It was great.

DM:

So how did you get along with your roommate?

LS:

I had wonderful roommates. The first semester that I started to college I went into the room that was assigned for me and my bed was not where it should've been. It was on the other side of the room, right next to his bed, which made it look like a double bed. There were—I was told that there were wine bottles all over the room and Playboy magazines pinned up all over the walls. So I thought, "Oh, this ought to be interesting." Well, the next day when I was out learning where my classes were, I came back and that room had been cleaned out. So evidently, he came in there and either decided he wanted another roommate or something. I never met him. So I was in that room by myself for a while before they assigned me another roommate. But the next roommate I had was awesome. He and I got along great. I had good roommates. I had a good experience.

DM:

Did you see your brothers often?

LS:

Yeah, whenever we wanted to see each other, we'd go up to their rooms and talk and listen to music, or whatever. Yeah, we could see each other as—and you know, we all were doing our separate things in our separate fields.

DM:

Right. Now in Idalou school, you were taking a lot of the same courses together, I suppose. But then all of a sudden, off in your different directions. I think that's a really interesting part of this story, the diverse interests. Your brother Don was in what, mass comm [Mass Communications]?

LS:

Yes. Yes.

DM:

And Jon was in business. So that is pretty interesting. By the way, okay, Murdough, I'll tell you where the Southwest Collection is. If you're going down the street toward the SUB [Student Union Building]—

LS:

Oh, okay.

DM:

Yeah, it's on the right, or the south side.

LS:

Wow.

DM:

There's an old building called the Livestock Pavilion in between Murdough and the SUB, a little octagonal—well, an oval-shaped building. It's been there since the beginning of Texas Tech. We're back behind that on the south side. Just to give you a little orientation there.

LS:

Okay, okay.

DM:

Do you go back to campus occasionally?

LS:

Only when I get to go to football games, which is not as often as I would like. Or our niece, Jon's daughter, is going to Tech and when she's in a play, we go there and try to go to her plays. But that's about the only time I get to go back.

DM:

You're not in a situation where you're finding your way around campus—in recent years?

LS:

No. Not by myself, no.

DM:

I'm just wondering how things have changed.

LS:

I'm sure they have changed a lot.

DM:

They've done things like, you know, of course, these are for wheelchair-bound people, but ramps and audible street crossings, signals, things like that. I'm just wondering how accommodations have changed from the perspective of—

LS:

Now, there were wheelchair ramps when I was there.

DM:

Were there?

LS:

Yes. Yes. I don't remember any audible street lights when I was there.

DM:

That's fairly new.

LS:

Yeah. Yeah.

DM:

How about in society in general? Maybe even in Big Spring? I know that there have been efforts at making facilities more accessible, and that includes for the blind. Are you noticing any big difference though? Or is it about the same getting around now as it was thirty, forty years ago?

LS:

I know there are some differences. When we—when we lived in Idalou, I served at the church in Idalou for five years. I was able to walk from my house to the church. It wasn't that far. I would love to be able to do that here, but our house is far enough from the church to where I can't—I can't do that. I wish I could because I like to walk. It gives me time to think. So I don't take—really, in Big Spring, there's not—I mean, I know there are places that you can call. There's a thing in Big Spring called Tracks that you can call and they will take you to your doctor's appointments or whatever. I just don't do any of that because I have a wife that is kind enough to take me where I need to go. And if I need to go to church and practice with somebody and it doesn't involve her or she can't take me for some reason, then the people who I practice with are real kind to come and get me or whatever.

DM:

You mentioned earlier that when you reached a certain age, you were going off in the direction of music, you were interested in music, you took lessons, piano lessons, whereas your brothers did not. That's what I picked up.

LS:

Right. They were not interested in playing the piano.

DM:

This divergence of interests, of individual interests I think is important. So when you got into Texas Tech and you were all pursuing different majors and different careers, did you have organizations that you belonged to, that all three of you belonged to, or were you also going off in different directions in that regard?

LS:

All of us were busy going to school. When I dove headlong into being a music major, I was real hesitant about it at first because people told me that getting a degree in music was very difficult. At first I thought, "Well, I don't know if I want to do that or not." So I just took a lot of basic courses. I finally ended up taking a music literature course and it was so interesting that I finally just thought, "Well, I don't know what else to do, so I'm going to major in music." And then when it got really hard, when I got into all the music theory and composition, yeah, it was hard, but by then, I was too much into it to back out, so I trudged on through. But besides that, I got real involved in church when I was going to college. I found me a wonderful church.

DM:

Which one?

LS:

Calvary Baptist Church. Back then it was on—it was on the corner of 18th and Avenue T. And then before I graduated from college, they moved out to some—82nd and something. I voted against the move, but that didn't stop them from moving. Just because I didn't want them to move, but they did anyway. It was a wonderful—I grew amazingly in that church. Don was busy with his radio stuff. Of course, with the Tech radio station being on campus, he got real involved in that. Jon was busy with his degree in business. So you know, there wasn't a whole lot of stuff we did together except just visit each other.

DM:

I just think it's an interesting story. What about—I was talking about some accommodations earlier—I think Jon mentioned something about having a tutor. Having people read lessons—

LS:

Yes. Yes. Yes.

DM:

Did you have that as well?

LS:

Oh, yeah. Braille books in college is not a feasible idea. Because there's so many of them and you might take a class where the textbook was written by your professor. And he says, "I wrote this book and we're going to use it." Well, of course you knew it wasn't in braille. So we would have readers that would read books to us. And most of the time, they would read them on to a tape. And then we would take the tape and use it, run it back, hear it again, or whatever. The state commission for the blind would pay readers to—they would keep track of their hours and then they would go in every two weeks and say, "I read for Lon, I read twenty hours." And they would pay that person for his twenty hours or whatever. It gave them extra money and it gave us some good readers.

DM:

Did they have a program on campus? They have one now that's called Student Disability Services. Do you remember anything like that being there in the seventies?

LS:

When I was there, the Commission for the Blind actually had an office on campus. And so that's where we would go to sign our reader's vouchers. If there was anything that we needed that they could help us with—like if I needed a new tape recorder to take to class or whatever, I would go there and talk to the counselor and she would see that I had a new tape recorder or whatever.

DM:

Did they provide typewriters?

LS:

No.

DM:

By the way, the director of the Student Disabilities Services is a guy named Larry Philip or Phillippe, I don't know how he pronounces his last name, but he went to Idalou.

LS:

That name sounds familiar.

DM:

His older brother was about your age. So he said he knew about you guys.

LS:

I remember the name Phillippe. Does that—

DM:

Phillippe. It has an E on the end.

LS:

That's how they pronounced it.

DM:

That's it. I'm glad to know that now. So one of the projects coming up is to find out the history of the Student Disabilities Services and what all they've been involved in and how they have evolved, because much has changed in that area. But you don't remember that name from back in the seventies.

LS:

No.

DM:

Okay. Well, let's see here. And so tell me about your degree, the year that you graduated.

LS:

I graduated in the spring of 1978 with a degree in vocal music education. I remember going into the office of the music building and telling the secretary there that I was going to graduate, turned in all my paperwork, and I ordered a senior ring, because I wanted to show something.

DM:

Something tangible.

LS:

I asked her, "What do I have them put on my senior ring?" And she said, "BME." I said, "What's that?" She said, "You have a bachelor of music education. It's not a bachelor of arts, it's not a bachelor of sciences; it's a bachelor in music education." So that's what my ring says inside: BME; Bachelor of Music Education, Secondary, because I wanted to teach high school choir. That's what I wanted to do. I did my student teaching at Coronado High School. I enjoyed that. It was fun. I enjoyed my student teaching. And then after that, I began looking for a job. I moved home with my mother. This was in the summer after I graduated in 1978. My dad passed away in January of 1978. So I moved home with my mother and I was looking for a job. Hadn't found one yet. In October of 1978, one of my sisters, Joyce, her and her husband decided to become Mission Service Corps volunteers in Caldwell, Idaho. So they moved to Idaho. So I was living there with my mother. My sister called me, this was about in November of 1978, she said, "Lon, we have a small church, we need help with our music program. We've got a guy now that's leading music, he's tired of doing it and he wants to quit. So if you'll come up here, you can live

with us and the church will pay you two hundred dollars a month.” I hung up the phone and I told my mother, I said, “That’s the stupidest thing I ever heard of. I’m just getting my degree and they want to pay me two hundred dollars a month? That’s crazy.” Well, the next thing I started to do was pray about it and I thought, “You know,” this is in November. “I probably won’t find a job until the school year starts again in September. So I might as well go up to Idaho and help them for about three months and then come back and look for a job.” Well, so I went up to Idaho, lived with my sister. Started working in the church. I was getting SSI, supplemental security income, living with my sister, and everything just felt right. I mean, we got a choir going and I was helping people learn how to do special music in the church, I was leading music and finally, I thought, “I can’t leave this. This is too good.” Then my sister came in the room one day and she said, “Lon, I think it’s time you move into an apartment.” I said, “I do, too.” I loved my sister, I still love my sister. She had two—no, three boys. One of them was a baby. But I decided that they needed to live their life and I needed to live my life. So I moved into an apartment, my mother sent me all my stuff that I still had at her house. And I was working in the church, but I couldn’t live on two hundred dollars a month plus my SSI. It wouldn’t put food on the table plus pay the rent. I told a lady in our church one Sunday night, I said, “I need something more. I can’t live on this much money.” She said, “Well, why don’t you put in an application at Hewlett Packard? They make computers. That’s where I work. I’m a supervisor. If you’ll tell me what day, I’ll take you over to Boise,” which was about thirty minutes away from Caldwell, “and put in an application.” I did. They interviewed me. I worked at Hewlett Packard in production for eighteen years assembling computer parts. And I loved it. I was still able to do my job at the church, but in the daytime, I worked at Hewlett Packard. During that time, that’s where I met my wife. We met on a blind date. Everybody says that’s a joke, but it’s true. We actually—two of our friends—one of her friends was dating one of my friends and they decided that we needed to meet each other. So they introduced us and we started going together. We dated for a year and then we got engaged. We were engaged for seven months and then we got married.

DM:

That’s great. Liz, and what is her maiden name?

LS:

Wolf. W-o-l-f.

DM:

From that area?

LS:

Well, she moved—growing up, she moved around a lot. Her dad was a salesman. And so they moved around a lot. When I met him, they were living in Idaho and she had her own apartment.

And then I—at the time, she was living like twenty miles away from me and I finally persuaded her to get an apartment where I was so she wouldn't have to drive so much.

DM:

When were you married?

LS:

We were married—excuse me—in April of 1989. This year, it'll be twenty-five years. Three years after that, on our anniversary, we picked up our daughter from the hospital. She was two days old. We adopted her. That's another amazing story. We were—

DM:

This is Val—Valerie?

LS:

Valerie, yes. She's twenty-one years old now. We were going to a gynecologist and we wanted children. He called me one day, because we were doing all the stuff that—infertility stuff. And he called me one day and he said, "What do you think about adoption?" And I said, "Oh, we've thought about it, getting on a waiting list or whatever." He said, "Well, I've got a lady. This lady was adopted and she got involved with a guy and he is now no longer in the picture and she has decided she wants to carry this baby full term and give it up for adoption. You two were the first people I thought of." And I said, "So what do we do?" And he said, "She wants a closed adoption. Find yourself a lawyer and have him call me." And so we did.

DM:

What do you mean by closed adoption?

LS:

She didn't want to know who we were and she didn't want us to know who she was. And I said, "When is this baby due?" And he said, "In three months." We had three months to get ready for a baby. She came along and she was wonderful. She is wonderful. When she was four years old, she was diagnosed with leukemia. We thought we were going to lose her. But by God's grace, she went through two years of chemo and she survived and is doing great.

DM:

Can you tell me about the Make-a-Wish, the story of the Make-a-Wish?

LS:

Make-a-Wish was—they got involved, of course, through the children's hospital there in Boise, because that's where she was going through all of her treatments. They asked Valerie what she

wanted for a Make-a-Wish. And she said, “Well, I’d kind of like to have a playhouse. But I’d also like to see my grandmother in Texas.” Which was my mother. So they said, “Well you know, there’s some people that like to make playhouses for children.” So Valerie actually got both of those things. She got a playhouse and then they flew us up here to Lubbock. We got to see her grandmother. When the Make-a-Wish chapter in Lubbock found out that Valerie wanted to see her grandmother—you know, most Make-a-Wish kids want to go to Disneyland or Six Flags, or Hollywood or whatever. Valerie didn’t want to do that. She wanted to go see her grandmother. So when the Make-a-Wish chapter in Lubbock found that out, they lavished us with—we were greeted at the airport with a band. We were greeted with a group of Harley motorcyclists. We were taken to the 50-Yard Line [50-Yard Line Steak House] for supper. And all week, we were treated royally by different groups who wanted to do something for Valerie. We were on TV. Finally, by the end of the week, we were like, “Thank you, but can you just let us have a little bit of privacy, please?” I mean, the cameras wanted to follow us everywhere we went. And Valerie was only five years old. We were just amazed—I mean, they took us to the mall. Valerie and grandmother got to ride in a golf cart. Every store that we stopped at gave Valerie an outfit. I mean, it was—Liz and I sat there and cried because we felt so inadequate. It was like, what do you say? Thank you is not enough. It was overwhelming. It really was.

DM:

It’s such a wonderful story and especially her choice, I want to go see my grandma. It’s just a wonderful story.

LS:

Right.

DM:

A wonderful thing. And she’s okay?

LS:

She’s fine. You’d never know by looking at her that she was ever sick.

DM:

Does she go back for exams occasionally and all that?

LS:

She did until she was off chemo for ten years and then they said, “In ten years, we terminate the case.” So yeah, she’s been—

DM:

That is just wonderful.

LS:

I mean, she lost all of her hair and everything. It was scary. One time, the longest she was ever in the hospital was two weeks, because she had a bad—chemo suppresses your immune system. She got pneumonia, she got sinus infections and she was very susceptible to all these infections, but God pulled us through. You know, it's amazing because she would go to—they had a camp there for cancer kids that she would go to in the summertime. And every year, there would be kids there from the year before that weren't there the next year, because they didn't make it. But she did. It was amazing.

DM:

This all happened in—you adopted her up in Idaho, right?

LS:

Yes. Yes.

DM:

Let's go back to Idaho a little bit, talk about—tell me a little bit more about Hewlett Packard. It's interesting to me that you assembled computers for eighteen years. How did you do that? All by feel, I suppose?

LS:

Yeah, yeah.

DM:

And what part of the computer?

LS:

I was in a lot of different areas. I assembled different parts that would go into the computer. I was in an area that part of the time we assembled parts for the mainframe of the computer. At one time, I actually worked in what they called a clean room. I assembled magnets that could not be contaminated. So we'd have to go into this room and put on our hats and our gloves and things on our shoes. We had to wear smocks. Everywhere I went—I mean, it was amazing because everywhere you go, you'd have somebody who trained you how to do the job. You'd work in an area for a while and they would discontinue that. So you'd have to find another job. I got to where sometimes I'd be talking to supervisors or management and they would say, "Okay, now we're going to discontinue this, we need to place Lon somewhere else. And somebody would say—I was in an area one time—I was in a place and they said, "Well, this particular—we might put Lon here where they assemble printed circuit boards." And they would put capacitors and all these parts in these printed circuit boards. And they'd say, "Well, I don't know if Lon could do that or not." And I would say, "Let me try it." If I can't do something, I will be the first

to tell you that I can't do it. But don't just say that I can't do it without letting me try it. And so there were many different situations when the trainers that I had were so patient with me, and we would figure out ways for me to do things by just feeling of it. And sometimes I'd say, "I can't do that because I can't feel this with gloves on my hands," or whatever. But eventually, we would eventually figure out some kind of job for me to do. Like I say, I was there for eighteen years. And I told Liz, I said, "I'm going to be here until I'm sixty-five and I'll retire and I'll take care of you." Well after eighteen years, they started sending more and more of our computer assemblies overseas because labor was cheaper. They didn't have to pay the benefits and stuff overseas like we were getting. So finally, it was like—I took what is called VSI [Voluntary Separation Incentive], which was a package that I would get my salary for a year after I quit. So I finally did that because they said, "We could send you to California and you might work there for a year and then be in the same situation you're in now." Well, I didn't want to go to California. I didn't know anybody in California and I didn't want to go there for a year and then have to try and figure out what to do after a year. So that's when I decided to take my VSI and end my career at Hewlett Packard and that's when I decided that I wanted to go full-time in music ministry. After I quit Hewlett Packard, I finally got a job at Capital One. They had a call center in Boise. I worked in collections for a while, calling people, trying to get them to pay their credit cards. I worked there for two years. They finally fired me because I wasn't bringing in enough money. I discovered the humiliation of getting fired. But really, after it was all said and done, I'm like, "I'm glad I don't have to worry about that anymore." So you know, I learned how to take a negative thing and turn it into a positive. But now, like if I ever get a call from a person, you know, sometimes you get a call and they'll say, "For verification, I need the last four digits of your Social Security number." I'm very patient with those people because I know where they're coming from.

DM:

Of course, yes.

LS:

Because I had to say that when I called people. So now, if I call anybody and they say those kinds of things, I'm very patient with them. They're just trying to do their job, just like I was trying to do my job.

DM:

It sounds like some people might not have been patient with you. (laughs)

LS:

They weren't. "I don't want to give you my—!" "Sir. I'm just asking for the last four digits, that's all I need. It's for security purposes." "Well, I don't want to give you that." "Well, I'm sorry sir, I can't help you unless you give me," so yeah, yeah. Yeah.

DM:

How did you come down to Big Spring?

LS:

After my Capital One job, I was working part-time in a church—well actually, I wasn't getting paid, I was just helping. A pastor came to that church in Idaho to do a revival, a series of meetings, and he told me that they had a position for a music minister in their church in Hermiston, Oregon. So we moved to Hermiston, Oregon and lived there and served there for three years. It was a wonderful experience. During that time, my mother was diagnosed with macular degeneration. She started losing her vision. [Phone Rings] She came to visit my sister and I. We were there and she told us about, she said, "You know, the church in Idalou is now looking for a minister of music." We were very happy in Oregon. We loved living there and we loved the church. But I told Liz, I said, "You know, my brother Don and my sister that lives in Lubbock, they've been taking care of mother by themselves for years. Maybe it's our turn to step in and help. When we left that church in Oregon, we cried. We weren't unhappy there, we loved those people, but we felt like—we didn't think the church in Idalou would hire us, but they actually called because they saw my resume. And so we felt like that was God's way of saying, "It's your turn to move and help take care of your mother." So that's when we moved to Idalou. That's the church I grew up in. We were there for five years. When it was—when it was time to move on, we started looking for—you can tell after a while that it's time to move on by whatever. Different things happen. And we just felt like it was time to move on. So that's when we started sending out resumes. The pastor from East Fourth Street Baptist Church called me one day after he saw my resume. We came and looked the church over and they called us here. We moved here in January of 2011. So this is starting our fourth year here in Big Spring. Our daughter, after she graduated from Idalou, she went to South Plains for a semester. Then she went to—when we moved here, she went to Howard College for a semester. And then she decided she just wanted to work for a while. So now she has a job working at the Settles Hotel. It's a real fancy hotel here in Big Spring that just got rejuvenated.

DM:

It's a historic hotel, isn't it?

LS:

Yes. She's working in the restaurant as a waitress. Doing very well. Doing very well.

DM:

So you feel at home?

LS:

Yes, yes, yes. I don't know how long we'll be here. I'm not ready to move in the least. But that's up to the Lord. We just take one day at a time.

DM:

Tell me a little bit about—we were talking about music interests earlier. But in church music, do you lean more toward hymns or more modern inspirational music? Who are some of your favorite composers for example of church music?

LS:

Well, let me put it this way: my brothers and I grew up very active in church. But on the sidelines we enjoyed pop music of the sixties and seventies. So when contemporary—when Christian music started becoming contemporary, I just thought that was the coolest thing that had ever happened. So I got involved in contemporary Christian music from the seventies and stayed involved with it. My preference is—I love contemporary praise and worship Christian music. This church, most of the people we have right now in this church prefer hymns. But I've started—well, when I came here, I told the pastor that I wanted to do what most people now call a blended service. So we do a combination of hymns and I guess what people call praise and worship songs. I don't like that term because I think you ought to be able to worship no matter what you're singing. I feel like if you're singing a hymn, you should worship as you sing that song. You should think about what that song is saying. Same with a chorus or whatever you like to call those things. So I like to blend them together. What I've done in this church has been very well-received. I think there's been one person that one day they said to me, "What's wrong with the hymn books? How come you don't always sing songs that are in the hymn books?"

DM:

Is it an older—

LS:

And I just said—yeah. This was an older lady. And I said, "We need to learn new songs occasionally." She's the only person that's ever said anything like that to me. Everybody—and that's one thing that's amazing to me about this church. Everything that I kind of feel like the way that I want to go has been very well-received. And I try to do different things. I always tell people, "I enjoy singing, I love singing solos, but what I enjoy even more is helping other people sing." So like in our church right now, we have a men's quartet, we have a ladies' ensemble, we have a bluegrass ensemble, we have a choir—

DM:

Oh, it's a very active—music program.

LS:

Yeah. So we just have—and right now, we're only running like forty people. Because we've had people move away. We're not running that many people. But we've got so many talented people. It's unreal. It's just amazing because we've got all these different groups. And I'll come home and I'll tell Liz, "Okay, Wednesday night after church I need to practice with the men's quartet, or the southern gospel group, or the bluegrass group," or whatever. That's what keeps me going, all those things.

DM:

That sounds exciting. Now, in the seventies, can you give me some specifics of what you liked in the way of the contemporary music? "Tell It Like It Is," "Natural High."

LS:

I thought—yeah, yeah, all those things. And when you started hearing people like Dallas Holm, Don Francisco, Chris Christian. Jon—in Houston there was a radio station there that started playing contemporary Christian music and I kept saying, "Why don't they have one of those in Lubbock?" Well, they finally got one. KJAK finally came on the air. They were playing contemporary Christian music. That was back in the days when you could go to the Baptist bookstore and the records would have a coupon on them. And after you go four coupons, you could get a record free by turning in all your coupons. So I loved Petra, all the—now, my favorite group is Phillips, Craig and Dean. I think their music is amazing.

DM:

Now, do you still have an interest in secular music?

LS:

My interest in secular music now has evolved into oldies. I still like the oldies of the sixties and seventies, early eighties. When rap started becoming popular, I just kind of said, "Okay folks, I'm sorry, I can't do this."

DM:

I'm right there with you.

LS:

I'm not a rapper.

DM:

Does it amaze you—[Clock strikes four] it amazes me that the sixties and seventies music is so enduring, only because at the time I thought, this is great stuff, but if asked, I would have said,

well, in forty years there'll be something else. But now a lot of people, younger people still listen to it. That's kind of neat.

LS:

And you know, my daughter, growing up—she knew that I was into music. She'll come home sometimes and she'll say, she'll mention a song that she heard on the radio and she'll say, "I thought of you when I heard that, because I know you liked old Beatles music," or whatever. But even back in the sixties and seventies, I never got into the real hard stuff. I didn't like Black Sabbath, all that. I just more or less stayed into the pop field, you know. I used to tell people, back when Barry Manilow became popular, I used to say, I want to be the Barry Manilow of gospel music. I thought that'd be cool and all.

DM:

So besides the Beatles and Barry Manilow, what are some other groups that you liked?

LS:

Oh, the Carpenters. Their harmony was just—

DM:

—amazing.

LS:

Oh, and her voice. And then I actually got to see them in the spring of 1973, you know. I got to go to a Carpenters concert.

DM:

Where?

LS:

They came to Lubbock. I think they were in the coliseum. And then in 1976 John Denver came to Lubbock. I got to go to his concert. I was a big John Denver fan, Carpenters—

DM:

Fellow Tech student, for a little while, anyhow.

LS:

Yes. And one of the joys—I have to say—one of the joys was going to a Tech football game. The band, I loved the band. They were awesome. They still are. The band is still awesome. I get real excited when football season starts.

DM:

It is an exciting experience, isn't it?

LS:

It is, it is.

DM:

I don't go much because it's so expensive, but—

LS:

Right. And that's the reason why we don't go. That's the reason why we don't go. Yes, yes.

DM:

Do you feel like—without vision—do you feel like your other senses are enhanced or that you have more focus in different areas? I read a little bit of what you said and I'd like to hear it in your own words.

LS:

Well, it's kind of hard to say because I've never had vision. So I don't know. I think sometimes—I'll just give it to you from my perspective. I don't know—I don't think I can hear any better than anybody else can. I think sometimes I may focus on things. I'll just give you an example. If you and I went fishing and we were out on a lake somewhere and we were both sitting there trying to catch fish, I might say, "I didn't know there was a train track close by." And you might say, "Oh, you heard a train?" And I'd say, "Yeah, didn't you hear that train?" And then you'd say, "Oh yeah, now I hear it." Well maybe, you were concentrating on what you were looking at, like where your fishing pole was. Maybe you were looking at the bobber on the end of your fishing pole so you didn't hear the train. That doesn't mean that you couldn't hear the train. That just means that I heard it because I wasn't looking at my fishing pole or whatever. So you know, I don't know that my senses are better than anybody else, I just think maybe I use them more than other people do because I can't see things. Does that make sense?

DM:

Yes, it does. So using the same example, you don't remember situations where you said, "Oh, hear that train?" And someone said, "No, I can't hear a train." So it's more a matter of focus, or the distraction of seeing things, if you want to put it that way.

LS:

Right. Right. Right. And you know, I can't say that I miss a lot of—I've had people say to me, "Don't you wish you could see a sunset?" And I'm like, "Well, no, not really, because I've never seen a sunset." I'm sure they're beautiful, but I don't sit around going, "Oh, I wish I could see a

sunset.” The only thing that I wish sometimes that I could do, that I can’t do, is drive. I think I would really enjoy driving down the road. But I can’t, so I don’t worry about. I tell people, if I could see, I would have me a Chevy pickup. Because my dad was a Chevy man and he wouldn’t drive anything but Chevys. So if I could see, I’d have me a Chevy pickup. And the next car we get is going to be a Chevy.

DM:

Console yourself with the fact that you don’t have to deal with traffic.

LS:

Exactly. Exactly.

DM:

Which is where my patience problem comes in. I’ve noticed that you use the same metaphors as most people do that have to do with vision, like “see you later,” “looking forward to it.” Are there any things like that that you’re sensitive to or ever have been sensitive to? Or do you just take all this in stride?

LS:

I just do it. I just say all these things. I don’t—I don’t get offended very easily at anything. I got—I got offended one time at a lady, at a person in our church in Idaho that I didn’t even know. But it didn’t last very long, because this lady worked in the nursery. I never went back in the nursery because I didn’t have a reason to. But this lady worked in the nursery. She was planning her wedding. And somebody in the church asked her, “Why don’t you have Lon play at your wedding? He plays and sings at a lot of weddings.” She didn’t know me and I didn’t know her and her response was, “Why would I want a blind person play at my wedding?” and when I first heard that, I was offended. I thought, “How rude!” And then I thought, she doesn’t know me. She doesn’t know me, and that’s probably a very candid response.

DM:

It’s a fear of the unknown, kind of, “I don’t understand how he can do it, therefore”—

LS:

Right. I didn’t dwell on it, I didn’t lose any sleep over it. At first, I was offended because I thought that was a very rude thing to say, but I didn’t let it bother me. When I worked at Hewlett Packard, I was there for a while. This did not offend me. Somebody asked me one day, they said, “So Lon, when you got hired at Hewlett Packard, did they hire you because they could get a tax break because you were blind?” And without even thinking about it, I said, “I don’t know and I don’t care. I’m just glad they hired me.” That did not offend me. Because if they got a tax break, that’s fine with me. I don’t care. I’m just glad they hired me. I was just thankful for a job. I

didn't care if they got a tax break or not. If they did, that was fine with me. If I met their quota, cool. That's fine with me. But you get people who say the funniest things. There was a girl when I first started working there, she was in a wheelchair. I was single back then. This girl was in a wheelchair. I think she had multiple sclerosis or something. She was not a pleasant person. She was bitter. She used to run into people with her wheelchair because she wanted a donut and somebody was in her way. But this lady came to me one day. This girl's name was Becky. She said, "You know, Lon," and of course, they were always trying to set me up with somebody, "you and Becky should get together. You'd make a great team. You're blind and she's in a wheelchair." And I said, "Why would I want to date her? She's mean." It's funny the concepts that people come up with. "Your blind and she's in a wheelchair. Y'all would really make a good team." "Uh, I don't think so. Not with her disposition."

DM:

"How do you figure that?"

LS:

Right. And I wasn't trying to put her down by saying that. I'm sure—I'm glad I'm not in a wheelchair. I might be mean too, I don't know. It was funny to me, the concept of that.

DM:

Well, tell me, if you don't mind, about your deepest-held beliefs. Tell me about your spiritual beliefs if you don't mind.

LS:

Well, when I was eight years old, I realized one night in church that I was a sinner, and I was empty, I was undone, I was lost and I realized that night that I needed help spiritually. I went down to the front and the preacher said, "I want you to pray and ask Jesus to come into your heart." Because I was only eight years old, I didn't know what to do. So I did, and that was the beginning of my spiritual pilgrimage. God—Jesus that night became my best friend. And He still is. I love my wife with all my heart, I love my daughter with all my heart, but they can't compare with the relationship that I have with the Lord, because I can tell him things that I can't tell anybody else. He and I talk about things that I can't talk about with anybody else. And he knows about it. He knows everything. And he's done some amazing things in my life that only God could do. He took me through college. The first day of class, I knew where I needed to go, but I was in the room by myself that morning and it was time to go to class and I was literally scared out of my wits and I said, "Jesus, take me. I can't do it by myself." And it was like he took my hand and said, "Okay Lon, let's go. Let's go to class." And we did. We went to class. We went through college five years. Whoever thought I would've lived in Idaho? The only thing I knew about Idaho was that they grew potatoes. God wanted me to move to Idaho. God wanted me to marry this lady. Who would ever think that a doctor would call you and say, "I have a lady that

wants to give her baby up for adoption, she's due in three months. You're the first two people I thought of." That doesn't happen very often. God did that. Who would've brought us through two years of chemotherapy with a four-year-old? Only God could do that. Who would've moved us here to Big Spring? This guy looks at my resume, somebody I didn't even know, looked at my resume and said, "This is who I want." I didn't put on my resume that I was blind. Sometimes when you do that, people look at that and they throw your resume away. So finally the interviews escalated and finally, they said, "We want you to come and look our church over." I said, "Okay." I said, "Before I come, I need to tell you something." And I told them why I hadn't told them. They said, "That's okay, come anyway." They hired me. That was a God thing. In 2002, I was going to a doctor because I was having severe heartburn. In 2002, he said, "Your esophagus is in the early stages of cancer. We need to do something." I said, "What do we need to do?" "Well, we can do a lot of different things. One of the things that we can do is remove—we can remove your esophagus." I said, "You can what? I didn't know people could live without an esophagus." "Yeah, they can. They remove it and they move your stomach up into your chest and that's how you survive." That was ten years ago. I'm still here. I've known three people since then that have had esophageal cancer. And one of them is still alive. The other two didn't make it. That's a God thing. I'm sorry folks if you don't believe, but that's a God thing, okay? In 2011, this guy showed up at our church one day and said, "My name is Yun Ki Lee. I'm from Korea. I brought a children's choir to your church several years ago." I told him who I was. "Oh, you sing and play the piano?" "Yes, sir." "Let me hear you sing?" I sang. "Oh, I want to meet your pastor." He met my pastor. "I want you two to come to Korea and sing and preach. We'll let you go into churches and schools, Christian schools. You sing and preach." The church voted to send us to Korea for twenty-four days. I never dreamed I could go to Korea. That's a God thing, okay? I'm still here. I mean, after all that stuff. I attribute that to God. That's all there is to it. I don't know what else to say. Life, to me is so exciting. It's exciting that I have a wife and daughter. It's exciting to me that I have a church that I can say, "Choir, let's do this." And they do it. That's exciting to me. "Guys, let's get a bluegrass ensemble together." "Oh, that sounds like fun." And we do it. That's exciting to me. It's exciting to me that I can order recordings of music and go in my office and listen to it a thousand times and we learn it and present it in church. That kind of stuff is exciting to me. Life is exciting. And you know, I knew that day when the doctor in Boise, when he discovered my esophagus—sent me to Seattle to have the surgery. Seattle, Washington. I knew pretty much what they were going to do. But I remember that day being wheeled into the operating room and I thought, I'm not scared because I know one of two things is going to happen. Either I'm going to wake up on a bed or I'm going to wake up in heaven with the Lord. And I went to sleep, I wasn't scared, I wasn't nervous. The surgery lasted eight hours. And I woke up and I was in a bed and I was hurting, but I knew where I was. It was—

DM:

You knew you were still on this Earth.

LS:

Exactly. So it's just—it's amazing. I'm just—and you know, people—I've had people say before, "I'm amazed at what you do." And I say, "Don't be amazed at what I do. Be amazed that God has given me—" to me, what I do is not a big deal. It's not a big deal—anything that I do is not a big deal. What is a big deal is what God has allowed me to do, and I thank him for it.

DM:

You've done a wonderful job of telling me who Lon Sitton is this afternoon, just wonderful, about your beliefs and all about your life. I really appreciate that. I have exhausted my questions and I invite you to add any additional information that you would like to add at this time.

LS:

Well again, I'm amazed that God has put us together. I mean, I never dreamed in my wildest dreams that anything like this would ever happen. If you can take the little input that I've given you and do something with it, more power to you. I don't know what all is going to happen because of this. If it's preserved—if anybody can benefit from this, then let them benefit from this. I take—I take things what I say, and I'm like, "Hey, if God can use this to help somebody, then let him do it."

DM:

That's a very inspirational life. This recording will be around for, we know, hundreds of years, so you never know who's going to listen to this and when. But it will be there and it will be listened to.

LS:

Well, if it'll help somebody, that's why I'm doing it.

DM:

I'll go ahead and turn it off at this time, then.

End of interview.