MR: This is an interview recorded with John Lyght on March 13, 1992. The interviewer is Margaret Robertson of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Why don't you tell me a little bit about how your parents came to Cook County. What brought them here?

JL: My parents settled in Cook County back in 1913--December 3, 1913. They came from the western part of Pennsylvania. My dad was born in Alabama, and grew up as a young kid in Alabama. He didn't like the way the state of Alabama treated the black people, and so he left out in the middle of the night, without even knowing a name, address, or anything, and went to West Virginia, where he met up with my mother in West Virginia.

From there, they went to Pennsylvania and settled in. He worked in the coal mines there for a while, and he got to the stage where he didn't like giving all his money to the company store, so he decided that he would try to find something better for himself. My dad was the type of a man that always was out to better his life instead of living a nonproductive type of a life.

They read up on some homestead acts back in the early time--I think it was around 1910, 1912--and so he found out that there was a place here in Duluth, Minnesota, where they could look up for homesteads. My mother wrote to them about the homestead acts. They got two places where there was a place that they could take up homestead. Homestead was, back in those days, that the government would give you 160 acres of land, and you would have to make some improvements on the land within five years' time. Then you could own the land; it would be yours. Otherwise, it would go back to the government again if you couldn't make any improvements within a five-years' period of time. So he looked at it.

There was a spot in Duluth around Hibbing, and also there was one in Lutsen, and the other one was up in Canada. He decided that he didn't want the Canadian, because he didn't want to leave the country completely, so he decided to stay in the United States, so he looked up the one in Hibbing. When he decided to move to Duluth to look up on this land, they already had taken the Hibbing plot, so the only one that was left then was the Lutsen one. He decided, "Well, as long as I'm here, I'll try it." So they came up to the Lutsen one and took that homestead. That was 160 out at Lutsen.
The only means of transportation up through here was by boat. They came up on the old American boat and got off at the Lutsen resort, which, back in the old days, was just a drop in the harbor where they had to get off the boat, crawl down a ladder, get onto a little boat, and come into the land in the harbor there, because the boat couldn't get into the harbor, --the boat was too big. So anyway, they settled there and landed.

There they met up with an old-timer from the area here, a fellow by the name of Alfred Nelson, and he showed them where the plot of land was and took them back there. There was a little old trapper's shack in there. I'd like to say that at the time they got off the boat, they had three children, a dollar bill, a sack of flour, and a sack of sugar. That's all they had when they landed.

So anyway, they went up to the little trapper's shack, which was built there for trapping purposes, and there were no windows in it. Rabbits had been in and out of it, and my mother took [unclear] in those bushes and weaved them together to make a broom to sweep the rabbit droppings and everything out of there, patched it up, and fixed it up. The comical part about it, was that up here in Minnesota in December we generally have about three feet of snow by that time, but there was no snow. The temperature was about 50 degrees and no snow on the ground, so they had a nice slide in there for a while. But he says by the time the last part of December came and the first part of January, they got the winter started setting in. By that time, they had their little shack fixed up well enough where they could house and feed the kids that they had and themselves and make a living for themselves for the winter. With the help of their neighbor, who was about five miles away, they survived the winter.

In the springtime, this old Swedish pioneer came up and helped him, showed him how to make gardens and how to clear land and go through all the work and the process of taking care of a homestead, and each year the land got a little bit wider. They built their gardens and kept raising those children. So we ended up with fifteen of us children, all told. That's how we got settled up here.

Dad worked on the road. He was an ambitious type of person, so he did lots of different things in order to make ends meet. He worked on the roads, worked in the woods. Then later he worked for some other neighbors around the area and bought himself a little piece of land on Caribou Lake. He got an idea for making a resort there, and so that's how we started the resort. I think it was back in 1925 or '26 when they started their resort. That's how they continued on with the resort business. In that way, they did a lot of advertising, because we were the only black family in Cook County at that time, so we did a lot of advertising for tourists. Of course, at that time there weren't too many tourists, because there wasn't transportation very much up this way. But anyway, we got quite a few tourist people from out of Chicago, Iowa, Minnesota, the Twin Cities area, and some were black, some were white. We catered to both parties and kept going until World War II broke out, and that was the end of the resort business. That was in 1941.

**MR:** I know for a lot of resorts, they couldn't survive World War II because of the rationing.
JL: That's right, gas rations. That's what knocked it down and made it kind of rough.

MR: You said your dad would advertise. How would he advertise?

JL: He would advertise quite a bit. It was advertised by word of mouth, and then also he had the little ads in the different papers in the Cities. Word of mouth got out more than anything else did.

MR: Would he have a lot of repeat business, so that once people started coming here, they would come back?

JL: A lot of repeaters, yes, because knowing that that was the only resort owned by a black person up on the north shore, they got quite a bit of repeaters coming back. And like I say, the word of mouth got out. My folks were very, very tidy,--neat type of people they were, --and it was amazing how people said they had come to that resort and they found it better than some other resorts that they had been to, and they were just thrilled to come back.

As us kids kept the cabins up in shape and kept the grounds in good shape and everything. And then we did a lot of guide work, too, for them, so it worked out real good. It was kind of a family-oriented resort, because we did a lot of the work. My mother did the washing and my sisters were helping doing the washing for the cabins, and this all was done by hand. There was no such thing as washing machines in those days and stuff like that. So that's how it all generated.

MR: Do you recall how many cabins there were?

JL: There were seven cabins.

MR: That's quite a few, isn't it?

JL: Seven cabins, and they had what they called like a little lodge, where my mother would serve meals once in a while. My sisters helped out serving the meals and all that stuff. And us boys, as I say, did a lot of the guide work for the people. I can remember yet, as a little kid about twelve, thirteen years old, rowing boats and guiding people fishing and all this kind of stuff. So it was interesting and a lot of fun. We learned how to treat people and greet people, so we learned how to mingle in and mix with people and enjoy life with people.

MR: You said that your mom fixed meals. Would people generally eat in their cabins and then take a meal in the lodge? Is that how that worked?

JL: Yes, right. Sometimes they would get either their one meal or they would sometimes get all three meals at the lodge there. That's how it worked. Then he sold pop and candy and different trinkets and stuff like that at the lodge.

MR: People primarily came to go fishing with him?
JL: They came to go fishing with him, yes. Fishing, and also just vacationing. Back in those days, that's when fishing was great. You could go back in these lakes and get fish. I remember how the fishing was in those days: go out and catch them left and right, --big ones. Really nice. That's how they ran their resort, and they had a lot of business clear up until 1941. That was the end of it, when the war came and you had gas rationing and your food stamps and all that came up. That made a different story altogether.

MR: People from the Twin Cities, --would they generally drive up, or would they take the train to Duluth and then come here?

JL: No, they would generally drive up, because there was no means of transportation to pick them up here on this end of the line, so they traveled in their cars.

MR: That was quite a trip.

JL: Yes, it was. Back in those days, it was quite a trip. You didn't have the nice highways like we've got today.

MR: You said there were fifteen children in the family. Where were you?

JL: I was the fourteenth child. I'm down almost to the tail end.

MR: In 1941 when the resort closed, how old would you have been?

JL: Let's see, you take 1927 from 1941. What would that be?

MR: So you were born in 1927?

JL: Yes. Fourteen years old.

MR: So you really were young. But I'm sure on a resort there was always plenty of work for you, no matter how young you were.

JL: That's right. In a resort business, there's always work to be done. If it wasn't cleaning cabins and going guiding, then there was maintenance work, and all that kind of work to be done, too. So it kept us busy. And that is the reason why a lot of us kids never got into any problems or troubles, because my dad says work doesn't hurt you. He always ran that into us, and it took me years and years to figure out what he meant. He says, "Work don't hurt you, but [unclear] that kills you." But the work kept us out of mischief and kept us busy and kept our minds occupied with the good things in life instead of all the bad things in life.

I don't know if you saw "Minnesota Blacks." This is what I was explaining to them on that TV
channel that I was on in St. Paul last year. I was down there and explained to the people that blacks always complained about being crucified and all because they're black. That doesn't mean a thing nowadays, because if you have the ambition and have the push for yourself, in today's society you can make a go of it no matter who you are. That's what I keep trying to tell them. If you have the ambition and you have the push, you can make it. I made it, and I was the only lone one up in this area, and I made it. I had the ambition and I had the push for it, and after I got the job that I got, I kept on pushing for better, for better, for better all the time, and this is what helps you out and keeps you going.

MR: You had some extraordinary parents, too. I mean, you had quite an example set for you.

JL: That's right. This is one of the other things I can say, too. My parents never were drinkers, nor smokers, and they always believed in what was right. They were a religious type of people. I remember back years ago when we were just kids at home, every Sunday if we couldn't get out to Sunday school, my mother would have a little Bible session, a little church session, right at home. Most all of us kids played instruments, so we'd sing hymns and had ourselves our own little gathering. We gathered ourselves, and sometimes we had some of the neighbor kids come in and play with us and also get in on our singing groups.

They were really strict parents, and I was very thankful that my parents moved to this part of the country, because it made more out of me than I would have ever thought I would make out of myself by being up here by ourselves like this. A lot of people ask me, "Aren't you lonesome up here by yourself?"

I say, "No, because I know how to blend in with everybody else and make myself feel as one of those that keep going on with life."

MR: Obviously, your dad only ran the resort during the summertime. What would he do the rest of the time?

JL: He would do logging in the wintertime or else be working for somebody else that was logging in the wintertime. He was never unoccupied.

MR: No, I wouldn't think so.

JL: He believed in working, and he believed in supporting himself. He didn't believe in any handouts, no welfare handouts or anything like that. I remember years back when things got kind of tough, sure, he got surplus commodities and looked to the county for help. But in the meantime, they had this program, called at that time, WPA, and he went to work and worked there. He also got some assistance from the county from it, but, still, he was working and making his way, though. He believed in getting out there and supporting yourself. He didn't believe in laying back and looking for a handout or looking for help. He was a go-getter. I was really proud of him.
I was seventeen years old when he passed away, so from then on that's when I had to leave school at the age of eighteen and start chipping in and helping the rest of the family. I still had one more brother that was wanting to go to school yet and my mother was home, and I think we had about a $3,000 or $4,000 debt yet over our heads, so I quit school and came out and got one of my older brothers. He came back home and helped us out and squared away all the bills that were left over after he passed away, and that's how we got into the trucking business.

**MR:** Right. Lyght Brothers.

**JL:** Yes, Lyght Brothers Trucking business,--we got working on that business. From there, we branched out and got into the trucking field. I worked with them for quite a few years. Then I went out over the roads for about eight years myself for another company, another owner, and got to know more about the countryside. Because of the education that I missed from high school, I took correspondence courses and got my schooling that way, and also through the experience, and that's how I survived it.

I went into the service in late 1945 and spent my year in the service. That gave me another boost to go on with more correspondence schools. I went in fire fighting schools and got my diploma in the fire fighting school, structure fire fighting school. You just keep pushing on and pushing on, and that's how you gain. Like I keep telling a lot of people, if you don't have the self-esteem and the push, you're not going to make it. But if you do that, you'll make it through this world, because the opportunity is out there.

**MR:** Did you ever consider leaving this area? Because you, as you said, were in trucking and you were in the service for a year.

**JL:** I have been all over quite a bit of the country. I've been out West, I've been in the southern part of Minnesota, all through Minnesota, Chicago, Illinois, in that area. I've been out East, down South, and down in Texas when I was in the service. I have never found anything like Minnesota.

Minnesota is a great state. I like the four seasons. I like the snow, I like the spring, and I like the fall. Fall is the time of the year that I really like. I like this area quite a bit. Then I married a Canadian lady that's from Canada, Thunder Bay, Ontario, and she doesn't want to leave too far from her home state and her home country, and so I guess I'll be here the rest of my life. No, we enjoy it here. So when I retire, I'll still be sticking around.

Like I say, I've been down in the warm countries, and I don't like the heat that well. I like it back here where there are nice snowfalls, there's nothing better than seeing a pretty snowfall. It also is nice to see the fall of the year when the leaves are turning. So it's a beautiful country. I like it.

**MR:** I'm trying to get this straight. You were working for the trucking company, and then you went into the service? Or you went in the service before then?
JL: I was in the service before then. I didn't get into over-the-road trucking until about 1946, because in 1945 I was in the service, and I didn't get out of there until a year later.

MR: Lyght Brothers Trucking was based here?

JL: Lyght Brothers Trucking was based out of Lutsen.

MR: What kind of trucking would you do?

JL: They did a lot of steel structure hauling, a lot of forest product hauling, because this was a big forest products area at that time. Logging was going on very strong. We'd truck during the summertime, and then do a lot of cutting and logging, in the wintertime. During the breakup in the spring of the year, we'd do a lot of timber cutting and that kind of stuff. Then as soon as the roads opened up in the summer, we'd go back and truck on the road again. We'd haul livestock, structure steel, sand, gravel, and all that kind of stuff, freight.

MR: Almost anything that needed to be hauled.

JL: That's right, anything to make a living. That was one of the things that we've always fought for is something to make a living. We always did. My brothers, after I got out, ran a logging camp for three or four years and did a lot of sawmill work, lumber cutting and stuff like that. But I got out of it in the spring of 1950. I came out of the woods, I came off the road, and I went to taking care of a private summer resort, and did that for twenty-two years.

MR: Is that right? Where was this?

JL: This was right here in Lutsen, too. It was the old Brown & Bigelow resort. Charlie Ward, at that time, had a place on Caribou Lake. He had that resort on Caribou Lake for quite a few years, and my brother used to be a caretaker for it. Then after he sold it to a firm out of Marion, Indiana, I operated it for twenty-two years. It was the Foster [phonetic] Bottle Company, a glass company, out of Marion, Indiana. I took over after they bought it out and ran it there and managed it for twenty-two years. From there, I came into this job, and I've been here now, it'll be twenty years in July.

MR: Tell me a little bit about this resort. You said it was owned by a bottling company?

JL: Yes. It was considered a private summer resort. You see, this is where your salesmen, distributors -- they did a lot of bottle work for your beer companies out of Milwaukee, Wisconsin --Pabst, Blatts, Miller's High Life. They also did the big bottles for big whiskey distilleries out of Louisville, Kentucky, Tennessee, and all that. So they used to send their salesmen and their representatives and some of their higher-ups in the business, send them up here for a week of entertainment and enjoyment.
That's when the government had that tax write-off deal going on, and they could afford to send them up here for that. They used to have a luxury time up here. I used to have to wine and dine them up here and make sure that they had a good time. That would boost business back into their company, the glass company, because the salesmen would enjoy it, and so the sales got bigger.

They spent a week, and they had a means where their expenses were paid in full when they left their home down there until they got back home again, and I was the man who was supposed to entertain them when they got up here. My sister cooked for the lodge at that time, and we just wined and dined them and made sure they had a nice time while they were here.

**MR:** Would these businessmen come by themselves or would they come with their families?

**JL:** No, they would mostly just come by themselves. Once in a while they would send family groups up. Once in a while, but not very often. Some of the employees out of the glass company in Indiana used to send some of their families up that way when they couldn't get a fill-in for some of the company representatives to come up, but most of the time just the men came up. They liked the sports, the fishing. They enjoyed that.

**MR:** So you would generally do guiding and kind of arrange activities for them?

**JL:** Yes, arrange activities and keep up the grounds, keep up the buildings, and all, do a lot of maintenance work. I met the planes and trains, and brought them back up here.

**MR:** They would come out of where?

**JL:** They would come out of Chicago, Kentucky, and Tennessee. I had them from California, I had them from all over, see, because they were dealing with even the Smucker's canning company, and then we had some with the Ball Bottling Company that sent them from some of the different pickling companies. So I had them from all over. And that's how come I got to know so many people, through that resort. I know people from California, Tennessee, Kentucky, Wisconsin, and all that area, quite a bit. That's where they traveled around from. It makes life interesting.

**MR:** What got you interested in law enforcement?

**JL:** Off the record. Off the record.

**MR:** Okay. [Tape recorder turned off]

**JL:** No, how I got involved in law enforcement, see, I was the type, just like my dad, I always took any kind of a job that I could find. As long as it paid the bills, I took it. I ran this private summer resort, as I said, for twenty-two years. In the meantime, I used to drive a school bus, just
to fill in between the summertime and the wintertime, so I drove a school bus in the wintertime.

Well, then that wasn't enough. I decided that I wanted to make some extra money, so then I used to sell tickets at the main gate at the Lutsen ski area. So then to make more extra money, I used to work night shift up there at the chalet, working for dances and stuff up there. I used to be a bouncer at the dances. So then they decided that they better deputize me and put a badge on me and put a gun on my side, so that's how I got roped into it.

We had a game warden here by the name of Dan Ross, and he thought that that was a pretty neat deal. He said, "Well, why don't you have your boss (at that time was Emerson Morris) deputize you and go out on road patrol, too, in the meantime."

So I said, "Well, okay, I'll try it." So that's what we did. I and another gentleman who worked for the mining company, we worked as part-time deputies at that time.

It all worked out real fine and everything. Then the old sheriff decided he was going to retire, and so when he retired, the public said, "Hey, seeing that you worked so good and got along good with the school kids and all this kind of stuff, why don't you apply for his job?" So that's what I did. Then the call came July 14, 1972. I get a phone call from the county board, and they said, "You got the job." This is where I've been ever since 1972.

It's quite a job. It was quite an experience for me to walk in like this. But one thing I can say, I had good help from fellow sheriff members that came up and helped me out and showed me how everything was supposed to operate. So I'm in the swing of it, and, like I say, I was always a pusher, and I can push now.

Here I am after twenty years,-- went through five elections. The lowest score I've come out with is 69 percent of the vote, and I've always had competition except for the last two years. So I must be doing something halfway reasonable to be hanging in there that long. I enjoy it. I've seen a lot of changes in law enforcement, though, over the years, but I enjoy law enforcement.

MR: How do you think law enforcement has changed?

JL: Law enforcement has really changed a lot. When the Miranda warning came out, that was the downfall of law enforcement. Yes, that was the downfall. Law enforcement started going downhill when the Miranda warning came out. It's starting now to take another turn going back the other way, and I'm glad to see it, too, because society is getting tired of criminals getting away with everything and the poor victims are the ones that suffer. And it's the poor middle man that wants to work every day that has to pay the bill for the criminals, and they're getting tired of it. So this is the start of the change. I can see that pendulum starting to turn back the other way.

MR: Has Cook County changed much ...?
**JL:** Oh, yes. Cook County has changed a lot. The population hasn't changed that much. I think we've gained maybe about 500 to 600 more people in the county, but we have gotten a different change of types of people that are here, too. We've lost a lot of our old-timers which were of Scandinavian descent. Cook County always was known for its Scandinavian-descended people, and they were a fishing type of people. There's been a big change in that. There is more of a mixture of people in the community. Not to feel lonesome, but we're not getting too many more blacks in here. We're getting more of a mixture like Polish and German and those types of people. Irish, more Irish people coming in the area.

And then it's getting more modern. Businesses are starting to pick up more. We're getting more resorts, we're getting more restaurants, more commercial stuff going on in the community. We're getting a lot more tourists than there used to be in here. Tourists are really [unclear].

We have a population of only 4,000 people of regular citizens in the community, but in the summertime, I would estimate we have anywhere from 15,000 to 20,000 people in the county in the summertime.

And now things have turned around in the last few years. It's turned that we're getting more winter business, which has run our population up high again, because we have the ski area now. We have snowmobiles, --one of the big things that's come in, and cross-country skiing, it's really starting to boom in Cook County. And then with all the new condominiums and that ski hill that did a big change down there, it's really booming.

Our economy up here is really great. They had the recessions in all other parts of the United States, --we didn't feel that crunch here at all, because we were still in the growing end of it, so it made it real nice. In the last couple of years, we've noticed that the recession has kind of hit us a little bit, but it hasn't hit us like it did other areas, because most of the people here pretty well got their businesses. They deal with the tourists, and so it just keeps rolling right along.

**MR:** The tourism adds a lot to the economy, but doesn't it also increase some of your problems?

**JL:** No. To a certain extent, tourism does create some new problems, but most of all my problems lie within my own local residents. Well, their biggest problem is that they don't like law enforcement to start with, and it's hard to get them convinced that they need law enforcement. This is one of the things that has happened over the years. They never had too much law enforcement in the county.

I'm not bragging or I'm not being boastful or anything like that, but they really hadn't had real good strict law enforcement until I came into the office. Because years ago, we used to have murders every year, but now we get them maybe once every five years, sometimes every six or seven years, homicides and that kind of stuff. But we don't have too much big serious crimes anymore.
The drug field right now is hitting us pretty heavy, and that's all over the United States. We keep on it. That's all you can do. Once in a while we get quite a few drug busts. A lot of that is coming through the border. We're right next to the Canadian border. The international highway goes into Canada. So we're about to be on that track where the drug traffic is really heavy, and it keeps us busy.

As I started out when I came into the office, I only had just myself and one deputy at that time, and now I've increased my department up to six deputies and myself, plus a secretary and also a dispatcher now. So we're gradually growing and hope next year to add a couple more to the department and keep the department growing, because with the population and the increase that we're getting with tourists coming into the area, we need more people, and we should be running twenty-four hours a day instead of sixteen hours a day like we're running. We should be up twenty-four hours a day.

I keep on my board about hiring more people, but with no industry in the community, it makes it kind of hard to get a tax base, because there's no industry income, it all stems on tourism, and that's what's bad. But they're going to have to find some other means of getting tax revenue money in order to hire more help, because, like I say, we're swamped. We work ourselves night and day at times. I remember years ago we used to work ourselves to death in the summertime, but in the wintertime we used to be able to coast right around. It was really nice. But not anymore. We got just as much work in the wintertime now as we do in the summertime. It just keeps you going.

Our one big help to us is also that our population all runs along the lakeshore out on Highway 61. We got Gunflint Trail, which goes back in about seventy-some miles inland, but most of the time, after the first snow falls it gets pretty deep back there, and then we don't have too many problems back in there. But there's a lot of people that live there the year-round. They're all pretty well law-abiding type of people, and they're all looking out for the interest of the community and the county. They're a help to us quite a bit, those people that live back there the year-round.

Then we've got the Sawbill Trail, which goes back in twenty-four miles, and then we've got the McFarland Lake Road which goes back in sixteen miles. So we have about 279 miles of road that we have to cover. We have 1,364 square miles of county to cover. Our county is eighty-five miles from one end to the other end along the highway. It's a long county. But we manage it pretty well. We have about three state troopers, one border patrol, three game wardens, and this past year now we just got forestry law enforcement personnel to help us out, and then the city here has their three employees. So we kind of have it tied down for law enforcement, but we still need more because the population of the tourists coming in and it makes it kind of high. As I say, we should be running twenty-four hours a day instead of just sixteen hours a day as we are running.

**MR:** You had said that you felt that when you first came in here that there wasn't a lot of respect for law enforcement.
MR: Someone had suggested on the Gunflint Trail that part of it is because this area is pretty isolated and that a lot of people were kind of like pioneers in this area, kind of that frontier mentality that you might not have with someone whose family has lived in the Twin Cities all their lives.

JL: That's right. That's one of our biggest problems, that with these pioneer-type of people, that they think the law's their own law, and it doesn't work that way. We have the Minnesota state statutes that you got to go by, and that's what the law is. That's what a lot of my conflicts were with a lot of the people, that they figured that the law was in their hands, that they could do it and operate on their own, but it doesn't work that way. The law is what's on the books, and that's what we have to go by. After they got pretty well understanding that there was going to be a law and it was going to be enforced, they kind of start to come around pretty well. But like you say, those old pioneers, they believe in their own way of living and their own way of doing things. It was "my" way of doing it; otherwise, it wasn't going to be done. The pioneers in those days used to handle their cases all by themselves, and it doesn't work that way anymore.

I was one of the only sheriffs that ever went safari hunting. This is one of the pictures. We had to kill a lion up here one time. That's an African lion, that is.

MR: What's the story behind this picture?

JL: It's quite a story. [Laughter]

MR: I know there must be a story behind that. [Laughter]

JL: There's quite a story about that one. That's quite a story. That was when newcomers had moved into the area and they brought a little cub lion up here. And then he decided he was going to raise it up here, that great big old lion. That lion at that time weighed about 500-and-some pounds.

The sad part about it was he was starving the poor animal. That was real sad. So it broke out of the cage one day. I guess he had threatened his wife about the lion, so she thought, well, maybe it was time for the lion to go. So she called us. He wasn't home, and so she called us and wanted the lion killed because it broke out.

There was no way she could put it back in the cage, and the cage wasn't that great, anyway. It was just a slab fence, and it had no big bars or nothing around the fence or anything like that, and he just broke through. He got hungry and broke out and went looking for food. So she called us right away, and we went up, one of the state troopers and my deputy and I there went up, and we got rid of it. That was it.
MR: That probably isn't in your job description.

JL: No, that was not in my job description. I'll tell you one thing, too, Margaret. Looking down the sights at a lion isn't like looking down the sights at a deer or a bear. It's a different story altogether. No, that was quite an experience, that was, but it was something that no other sheriff in the state of Minnesota ever did, though.

MR: No. I think you have a pretty unique claim to fame there.

JL: Right.

MR: Have you noticed, also--and I've talked to other law enforcement people--that the profession is becoming more professionalized in the past twenty years in terms of equipment and knowledge and training and that sort of thing?

JL: Yes. In the last fifteen years, I would say, it's gotten to be more professional. Even in our association, the Minnesota Sheriffs Association, we push for going out and getting more education and we lobby for more laws and better types of laws, and also we give out scholarships to the schools and that kind of stuff to get better law enforcement people in. And the more education we get into this, the more professional we get. Four years after I got into this job, they sent me out to the University of Southern California for three weeks for business managing and budgeting, --the school out there at the University of Southern California. I spent three weeks there at that school out there, and I graduated from there.

They keep pushing for better and smarter law enforcement people, and they want to make this more professional. They're trying to get it so that you have to have a four-year college degree, which I do not believe in, but I do believe in two years of college, criminology and scholarship, and also education of your deputies and everybody, because where the catch is, it's getting to the point where you're running into more court problems. Your public defenders are making you testify better in court, your county attorneys want better reports, and they just want a more professional type of work done out by law enforcement. So I believe in sending them to the schools and keeping them well educated, because it's easier on the department and it's much easier on the public and it's much more professional for the whole organization. This is one of the things I believe in.

MR: You mentioned drugs being one of the problems that you face. What are some of the other law enforcement things that crop up in this county?

JL: Drugs and alcohol. Chemical problems are one of our biggest problems. In this community here, we have quite a domestic problem, --child abuse and other domestic problems. We have our share of that. As I said before, we have a small population of people here, and so our percentage runs very high. If we have two or three cases in a year's time, our percentage is way up there, because we don't have that many people.
But I think what our biggest problem is -- with drugs and the domestics, is the education of the people. I've got kids in here that have never been out of the county, and this is no good. They need to get out and see what the other side of the world is like. I've talked to some people who said they've never even been as far as Minneapolis, and that's no good. They don't even know what the world looks like. And the comical part about it is, when they do get out of this area and get out into the metropolitan area or get out in another state or something like that, they do real well for themselves.

I was telling a lady I had here in jail just a little while ago... She was picked up on DWI last night, her second go-around, and she was asking why she had to be fingerprinted and all this. I said, "Hey, it's a gross misdemeanor now. The second time around within a five years' period of time, it's a gross misdemeanor, so you have to be fingerprinted." I said, "You got tangled up with some of my associates around town here."

"Yeah."

I said, "Leave that barley corn alone. Leave that booze alone. You've got a good job and everything. Leave that stuff alone, because it's no good. It's no good." I was telling her, "I have some kids that were born and raised here that have gone out now and made good for themselves when they got out of the county and got out of this area."

There's one boy I know that was here--well, he wasn't born here, but he grew up here--and he was having a problem with alcohol. He finally got up and got out of here. Now he's flying planes down here from Duluth to Michigan. He's flying airplanes now--a pilot.

But, see, they have to get out of the county in order to do that, because if they stay here, they just go stagnant. And we've got generations--one, two, three, four generations now coming in here that want just to hang here and just go stagnant, and you can't move them out of here. They think I'm being hard on them. I say, "Get out of the county. Get out of the county." The only way they're ever going to amount to anything, is to get out of the county.

Their lack of self-esteem, that's what the problem is. It's bad. Like my daddy always said, "What's born in the blood is hard to beat out of the flesh." If you get out of the area, you can do it. But they don't want to get out. They're afraid to get out. They're afraid to get out on their own. I wasn't. I love traveling around. I'm a goer. I like to mingle in with people. I'm a people mixer.

But as you say, law enforcement has changed a lot in the last few years. In this community, it's really seen a lot of changes. We've had some good law enforcement people that have come in here and they've retired out of here, and there's some that came in here and just left. But we do, most of the time, try to keep good law enforcement people in here, and if any of them gives me any problem, I soon get them either moved out or transferred out of the area. We're small in population and we've got a small department, so we have to have the best. I can say it for myself.
that I do have a real nice staff with my department. You go through all of the southern part of Minnesota and you'll hear them say that the Cook County sheriff's department has grown pretty well on its own. I'm not a bragger, but that's what you will hear.

MR: When I was coming up here, I stopped for gas in Tofte, and there was a woman at the gas station who was very inquisitive, I guess because she saw my state car, and asked what I was doing. I said I was coming up here to talk to you, and she remembered going to dances in the fifties with some of your brothers. She said, "Oh, the Lyght family," and she was going on and on about the Lyght family. She felt that there hadn't been a lot of problems with discrimination with your family, that everybody knew you and considered you a fine family, and it wasn't a problem. Did you see it that way, too?

JL: I see it that way, too, yes. We had a little wrangle-tangle--I think you read it in the Minneapolis paper--here just a few weeks ago. You're bound to run into some of that, you're bound to. No matter where you're at, you'll always find somebody that doesn't like the way you walk. I crack the whip a lot of times. A lot of them don't like it, but that's the way they're going to have to be. But that's where that came in, there was a whip cracked. It was against my nephew, and so I couldn't take the case because it would be a conflict of interest. So I put my deputy on the case. He went in and solved it all and got it all fixed out and everything.

The comical part about it, the kid's father that I knew, he's a little bit that way himself, see, so that's where it bred down to the kid; that's how it started. But then with some of the other members of the family, it's different again, because his sister came to me after -- I made sure I sat in on that hearing, because I and the judge will go round and round if he doesn't want it the way I want it to go. This is one of the things I do, tangle with my judge once in a while, because he's not strict enough for me.

But anyway, I sat in on that hearing in that case, and after, if the judge didn't find him guilty, this kid's sister did get up and she turned around, because I was sitting right behind her, she turned around and she looked at me and she said, "John, I want to apologize." She gave me her hand and she said, "I want to apologize for the way my brother acted and carried on. That was uncalled for." But then down the hallway a little bit later, the father said, "Oh, well, that was bureaucratic. That was all pure bureaucratic stuff." That's how easy the court system is.

See, that's just the way it is. You automatically will find that some people are that way, and you can't please everybody. It would be a cruel world if you could please everybody. But at least it goes to show you that you're doing your job when they complain like that. But that's how that went.

Other than that, I've had people call me and say, "John, we feel sorry that this ever happened to you, right here in your own neighborhood. We hope nothing like that will ever start and we hope they put an end to it right away, because we don't feel that way."
No, I don't have a problem. I walk around the same as everybody else. And that's the way it was even when I went to Texas, down at Houston. I mingle with people. My attitude is that there's nobody better than me and I'm no better than anybody else, and that's how I believe in walking through the world. When you walk around like that, with a pleasant smile on your face or look like you're ready to greet somebody, you don't run into that problem. And I have a daughter that's the same way. She feels that same way. She's been out in Washington, she's been to Texas with her husband, and all around the countryside, and she says that's the way she is. She says, "Dad, the minute that you see one of those that want to go the other way, you ought to walk around him, because you can tell right away who's who and who isn't." So that's the way I am with a lot of the people.

I've had that question asked me a lot of times. They say, "Being in law enforcement, don't you ever get harassed or something like that when you stop a person for speeding or something like that?"

I say, "No, because you walk to the person, you treat them the same way you would like to be treated, and that's the way it goes."

Sure, one day I stopped a car with an Illinois license on it. Before I could get up to the car and get to him, he already had his license out and handed it to me. When he handed his license to me, I could feel something a little bit different on that driver's license. So I grabbed the license; I could feel it. I looked underneath, and here it was a $20 bill. I handed the fellow back the $20 bill and I said, "Listen, sir. Do you want to end up in jail?" That's what I told him right to his face.

He said, "No. What do you mean?"

I said, "We don't play that game here in Minnesota. I don't play that here in Cook County. Minnesota doesn't allow it, Cook County doesn't allow it. I don't play that game. Here's your $20 back, but if you pull that again, you're going to end up in jail, because that's bribery." That's how I am. Other than that, he took it. I said, "The next time you're going through Cook County, just slow it down a little bit," and I let him go.

He was just shocked completely. He was completely shocked. But I don't play that game. The one thing I want to be is a fair-operating law enforcement person, and I think if you will check with a lot of the tourists and a lot of the businesses here around town or some of the people around town, they'll tell you the same thing, that I play the game fair, across the board even, because the minute that you start this number, you're in deep trouble. I don't care if it's my own mother or my brothers. I served papers on my brother. The sole reason I served them on him was to make sure that people know that I don't play favoritism, that I won't play favoritism. And they can't buy me out, because money doesn't mean that much to me. No way. And politics, that's one of the things I hate again is politics. Don't pull that politics on me right now, nuh-uh. If you can't be honest with yourself, I don't want to be with you.
MR: Well, good. Mr. Lyght, thank you very much for your time.