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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with

Ron Burnham
Telephone Interview
4 September 2005

Interviewer: Jerry McConnell

Jerry McConnell: This is Jerry McConnell. It's Sunday, September 4, 2005. [I'm on the phone with Ron Burnham [who is in] San Luis Obispo, California, taping an interview for the [Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History] project on the *Arkansas Democrat* at the University of Arkansas, [Fayetteville]. Ron, first thing I need you to do is to just tell me your full name.

Ron Burnham: It's Roland Putnam Burnham [Jr.]. R-O-L-A-N-D. For many years I went by the name Ron, and developed my writing under the name Ron, but the correct name is Roland Burnham. B-U-R-N-H-A-M.

JM: And the middle name is Putnam?

RB: Putnam. Yes.

JM: P-U-T-N-A-M?

RB: P-U-T-N-A-M.

JM: All right. Before we go any farther, Ron, I need to ask you—do we have your permission to tape this interview and turn it over to the University of Arkansas's oral history archives?

RB: You bet.

JM: Okay. Now, tell me . . .

RB: Yes.

JM: Yes. Right. That's fine. When and where were you born?

RB: I was born in Seattle, Washington, on September 10, 1919.

JM: 1919? Well, I didn't realize you were older than me.

RB: I'm starting to be a senior citizen. Yes.

JM: Yes, you're working on it. What were your parents' names?

RB: Roland P. Burnham.

JM: Okay. You're a junior?

RB: Yes.

JM: What was your mother's name?

RB: Ethel Regina Clare Burnham—not like the gasoline, ethyl. E-T-H-E-L. [Laughs]

JM: Regina Clara, did you say?

RB: Clare. C-L-A-R-E.

JM: C-L-A-R-E. Okay. How did you get to Arkansas?

RB: Well, during World War II I was stationed as an officer in the armored cavalry in Camp Chaffee, now Fort Chaffee.

JM: Oh.

RB: That was my first introduction to Arkansas. Then I decided to go into the newspaper business, and I went to a friend of mine at the *Tulsa World*. He said, "Well, you took journalism at the University of Washington, but you haven't really worked in a paper, so you need to work in a newspaper someplace before I can even think about hiring you for the *Tulsa World*. But I know a newspaper

that needs a reporter, by golly. It's the *Rogers Daily News* in Rogers, Arkansas. He's only got one reporter, and he's off in Korea, and he badly needs a reporter. So why don't you go there? Work six months and come back to the *Tulsa World*." So I went to the *Rogers Daily News* and had a ball. I covered the Benton County Fairs and all the things you do in the city governments. One day, a gentleman was sitting in the lobby and he was the returned soldier from Korea, and my job was over. [Laughs]

JM: Oh. What was his name? Do you remember?

RB: No, I don't.

JM: Yes. Okay. That's fine. So what did you do then?

RB: So then my six months weren't up yet. I was only a couple of months into the program. I heard the *Neosho Daily News* in Missouri was always looking for somebody, so I went up there. The editor and I decided "this is a terrible place to work." We stayed for a few weeks, and we *both* left [laughs] because the guy was impossible to work for. So there I was again, two papers under my belt and still didn't have my six months. [Laughter] I went down [to] the *Fort Smith Times-Record*. I was an afternoon newspaper man, after all, so I stayed with my afternoon papers. And that one was a sleepy paper if I ever saw one. Are you still with me?

JM: Yes, I am.

RB: Oh. We've got a new sound on the phone here. I'm making a long story of just exactly how I got to Arkansas. [Laughs]

JM: No, that's fine. That's what I want to know.

RB: Boredom set in. All we did was recopy the morning paper's stuff and put it in the *Times-Record*. So I left there and decided, "Well, why don't I try the big city of Little Rock?" My six months *still* weren't up, so I went to the *Arkansas Democrat*. Gene Herrington took one look [at me] and decided, "Well, in spite of everything, I'll hire the ol' buzzard." So I was put on the staff at the *Arkansas Democrat*.

JM: Okay. What year was that?

RB: 1955, I think.

JM: Okay. All right.

RB: Well, I should know that. I know everything else. It's either 1955 or 1956.

JM: Yes. Okay. Now, I want to get into all your *Democrat* experience here in a minute—I didn't realize about your background in Seattle—where did you go to school before you ever got in the army?

RB: University of Washington School of Journalism.

JM: Oh, you did? Okay. Did you get a degree?

RB: No.

JM: Yes. Okay.

RB: The war came along and I had to get my one year of service over with. [Laughs]

JM: Yes.

RB: That turned out to be for the duration, so . . .

JM: Yes. How many years [were you in the service]?

RB: Five years.

JM: Yes. Okay. And you were in the army and . . .

RB: Army. Yes. First sergeant in the Corps of Engineers and then I was a lieutenant in the armored cavalry.

JM: Okay. Well, Chaffee was an armored post.

RB: Pardon?

JM: I said Chaffee was an armored post most of that time, as I remember.

RB: Yes. Camp Chaffee was home of the 16th Armored Division.

JM: Yes. And you went to grammar and high school in Seattle?

RB: High school—Hill Military Academy in Portland, Oregon. I graduated from Hill.

JM: Oh, okay. But you went to grammar school in Seattle, then?

RB: Yes.

JM: Yes. Okay. All right. What did your father do?

RB: He was in the lumber business.

JM: Yes. Okay.

RB: And my grandfather also.

JM: Okay. Then you got to the *Arkansas Democrat* in about 1955 or 1956. What did you do at the *Democrat*?

RB: Well, when I first went on the daily—the Rotary Clubs and all that [laughs] and got a feel of the city and the various things on general assignment. Then when Pratt Rimmel was the mayor of Little Rock and either ran for governor or his term was up or something—I don't remember—I went on the police beat. While he was in office, I had a little ruckus with Longstreth, the city attorney, fixing tickets. [I] got kind of a reputation for being an investigative reporter, in a way, because we found that O.D. Longstreth had helped all of his friends for years. If

they got a parking ticket, he would just *nol-pros* it [short for *nolle-prosequi*, the Latin term that means “we shall not prosecute”] and away we went. So I uncovered all those *nol-pros* tickets [laughs], and Longstreth never quite got over it. [Laughs] We had a lot of interesting *Democrat* stories regarding the police department. [They] thought that I'd kind of infringed on their territory and so forth, so for a while I was on the outs with the police department, too.

JM: Okay.

RB: I had the police beat, and that's where I got into the . . .

JM: Okay. You were on the police beat, then. Okay.

RB: So then when Woodrow Wilson Mann became the mayor, Gene decided that I needed to get away from that police beat because I had caused so much trouble. So he put me on the city hall [beat] where it would be a peaceful thing. [Laughs]

JM: Yes, he *thought*. Did you replace me covering city hall?

RB: No, I don't recall. Were you with the *Democrat* then?

JM: No, I was there then. No, see, I was there doing city . . .

RB: Mr. [Jason] Rouby was the [Arkansas] *Gazette* reporter, and I was the city hall reporter knocking heads with Jason.

JM: Yes. Okay. But, see, I had been the city hall reporter and I had been a police reporter, too.

RB: Oh.

JM: And then I went to city hall, I think. I was covering city hall during part of Pratt Remmel's administration and, in fact, when Remmel ran for governor, they assigned me to cover his campaign.

RB: Oh.

JM: So when the campaign was over, they shifted me to the state capitol.

RB: Oh, along with [George] Douthit?

JM: No, Douthit wasn't there yet. R.B. Mayfield was the other guy out at . . .

RB: Oh, yes, R.B. Mayfield. [He was a] nice guy.

JM: Yes. Yes. He was the other guy at the state capitol, and I replaced Marcus George.

RB: Oh, yes.

JM: Marcus came back into the office, I think, to be assistant city editor to Herrington. So you must have replaced me on the city hall . . .

RB: I guess I replaced you. I'm completely—I had no idea of who was there before me, because the day that Woody Mann went into office he had heard of me because of the Longstreth ticket-fixing thing and was kind of leery of me.

JM: Yes.

RB: I said, "Well, I'll help you out." [Laughs]

JM: Yes.

RB: "If you ever need it, don't worry about a thing. Just do right, and we'll get along fine." [Laughs] So I don't recall who I replaced at all. In fact, there was a new regime. When I went in, there was a new deal altogether.

JM: Yes. And, of course, I remember Jason. I knew Jason well and became good friends with him. We're still friends.

RB: What a nice little guy. Where is he now?

JM: He's still living in Little Rock.

RB: Oh, really?

JM: Yes. He's still percolating along pretty good. He volunteers at a lot of stuff and everything. He left the paper after a while and went to Metro-Plan—the Metropolitan Planning Agency for Central Arkansas.

RB: Oh, yes. I remember.

JM: How long did you cover city hall?

RB: Well, until 1960, I think—1959 or 1960. The city government changed, you know.

JM: Yes.

RB: That's where the *Democrat* really scored—in the change of that city government. Almost immediately after Woody [Mann] came in, it was my good fortune to find some corruption and things going on there. Ted Hood selling his houses and the garbage collector getting bribes—offers to buy certain new garbage trucks. So we had a series of daily headlines about the misdemeanors of the city government.

JM: Now, Ted Hood was a city councilman, right?

RB: He was a councilman. Yes.

JM: Yes.

RB: And Franklin Loy wanted to be mayor, and [laughs] he kept stirring up stuff.

JM: Yes.

RB: Between them all, we had an interesting series of headlines for many, many months.

JM: Yes.

RB: In fact, we met with [K.] August Engel and he got with the publisher of the

Gazette and the business people, and they formed this Good Government Committee, and put some money into ads. They were instigators of the change of the city government.

JM: To the city manager plan?

RB: To the city manager plan. Yes. When the council was—mayor council . . .

JM: Yes.

RB: . . . with their little fiefdoms and so forth. I don't know where you want to go with this story.

JM: Okay. Well, that's okay. Do you remember what year they went to the city manager plan? About what time?

RB: Yes, that was 1957.

JM: 1957.

RB: Here's how it happened. In the year 1957, we had numerous stories about how poorly the street lights worked. The traffic was terrible. The city was in—potholes were all over the place. We had a worthless city government. The mayor got \$5,000 a year. The councilmen got \$25 a meeting or something like that.

JM: Yes.

RB: And they earned every penny of it, I guess, because [laughs] there wasn't—they didn't do much. So our paper reflected that to such a degree that, finally, the people rose up in arms. In the summer of 1957, they held a recall election as a result of this Good Government Committee.

JM: Yes.

RB: They ousted the mayor and the city council form of government in favor of the city manager/board of directors type of government.

JM: Yes.

RB: The state law provided that the change of government under these conditions could not take place until November of 1957.

JM: Yes.

RB: The election day. The normal election day. That was the day that the new government would take over.

JM: Yes.

RB: This was in July or August or something like that.

JM: Yes.

RB: Here we had this lame-duck mayor and lame-duck city council for several months between the time of the election and the time of the actual takeover. So along came [the 1957 Little Rock] Central High [School integration] situation.

JM: Yes.

RB: And the governor [Orval Faubus], who was having a little trouble getting up much enthusiasm for a second run, decided that this would be a good cause. He would defy the federal government, and he would put in his national guard to keep those nine Negroes out of the Central High.

JM: Yes.

RB: And it was at that point—so he did, and their bayonets were out and they were jostling the people out there. There were people shouting, and some people were unhappy that the governor had taken over the high school. That was one day that

I went into the mayor's office [laughs]—and this is what is embarrassing, really—I went into the poor mayor's office. He was there by himself. His secretary was out looking for work. The council hardly ever came by the city hall anymore because they were all lame ducks. They were waiting for November to take over, and they had nothing more to do. The mayor took one look at me—we weren't on the best of terms because I had been pretty vivacious when it came to reporting on his activities. I said, "How's it going, Woody?" [He said,] "How do you think it's going, you son of a bitch! The governor has taken over Central High out there. My stupid police department is ill-trained and not able to do anything, and they're outnumbered besides that and outgunned and everything else. How do you think I'm doing?" [Laughs] I said, "Well, you need help." He said, "Where do I go for help? Normally, I'd go to the governor and say, 'Hey, I've got troubles here,' but I can't go to him. He's the one who's *causing* the trouble." I said, "Yes, I know. So now where do you go?" And he said, "Well, there's no place I can go. I'm stuck right here with this horrible situation and need help, and here you are sitting here." I said, "Woody, you have only one place you can go, and that is you've got to ask the president of the United States [Dwight David Eisenhower] to send federal marshals. He's got them right here in the federal courthouse. All it takes is *one* out there. One federal marshal could control a thousand redneck people." He said, "You think that Woodrow Wilson Mann—a name like that—could get anywhere in the Republican White House?" I said, "Republicans—it doesn't make any difference. You're an American citizen. You vote and you pay taxes. He's your president. Go to him." He stood up from his desk, and he said, "*You* do

it." And he traded chairs with me. I sat at the mayor's desk. [Laughs] I said, "All right. You want me to do it?" He said, "*You* do it. You know so much. *You* do it." So I dialed the operator, and I said, "I'm Mayor Woodrow Wilson Mann, from the city of Little Rock, and I would like to call the president of the United States in the White House in Washington City [D.C.]." The operator had to connect me through Chicago and various places, but we got to the switchboard. "This is the White House." I said, "I'm Mayor Woodrow Mann. I'd like to talk to President Eisenhower." "Well, the president isn't here right now, but let me have your telephone number and I'll have someone be back in touch with you very shortly." I didn't even know the number, but thank goodness they used to have them in the little slots on the telephones.

JM: Yes.

RB: [Laughs] I looked down and there was the phone number, and I gave it to her. And she said, "Now, what is the nature of your call?" I said, "Well, I'm being invaded by the governor of the state with his armed militia, and there's blood in my streets. People are out there rioting, and I've got to ask the president for federal marshals to quell this thing before it gets to be a riot." [She said,] "Well, we'll have somebody back in touch with you very shortly." So, I hung up. I looked over at Woody. He was so pale. He had dropped into his chair and just slumped [laughs]. He couldn't believe what he was hearing—that I was talking to the White House in his name. So in a few minutes, the phone rang, and he motioned me, "You answer it! You son of a bitch! I don't want it. *You* answer it." I answered it, and it turned out to be a gentleman [named] Maxwell Rabb. He

said, "I'm the secretary of the senate, and the assistant to the president in charge of minority affairs.

JM: What was his last name?

RB: Rabb. R-A-B-B.

JM: Okay.

RB: Maxwell Rabb.

JM: Okay.

RB: He had quite a record. He was a millionaire New York lawyer and everything, but here he had been appointed—because of his Jewish background, he was in charge of minority affairs—a presidential assistant.

JM: Yes.

RB: And this Negro situation fell into his category. [Laughs]

JM: Yes.

RB: I said, "Well, we have a horrible situation here, Mr. Rabb. We need the president to—it isn't so bad that it takes a whole *bunch* of people—just a couple of good federal marshals is all we'd need. But we need somebody to go over there and put the governor in his place, to take away his army, and restore order to my high school." So he said, "Well, I'll have to confer with the president, Mr. Mayor, and we'll back with you very shortly. Please don't let anything interfere on the telephone because we'll be back very shortly."

JM: Yes.

RB: And I'm talking to the White House. At that time, they had a very hard-nosed press secretary, [James] Haggerty, who didn't let anything out of that White

House unless he okayed it and so forth. [Laughs]

JM: Yes

RB: But we were bypassing Mr. Haggerty. So I didn't dare call the *Democrat*.

JM: Yes.

RB: It was 3:00 or something in the afternoon by this time. I didn't want to interfere with an incoming call. If the president called—for Pete's sake, we didn't know who was going to call and we didn't know what was going to happen. I've regretted it to this day that I didn't just alert Rod Powers or somebody on the desk and say, "Hold the presses. We've got something going on, but we don't know what." [Laughs]

JM: Yes.

RB: It's not nice to not know what. [Laughs] And I didn't know what. So we waited for forty minutes or so. Finally, the phone rang again, and it was Mr. Rabb. He said, "Mayor, the president"—it turned out that the president was in Paris [France], so they had to do long-distance calling between them, and Attorney General Brownell, who was in Washington—they arrived at this—and they said, "Mr. Mayor, we want to tell you"—oh! there was one other phone call. He [Rabb] asked me to send it in writing. I had to send a telegram. So I had to call Western Union and dictate a short telegram outlining what I had said on the phone. [Laughs] So when they got the telegram, then he called and said, "We're sending the 101st Airborne." I thought, "Oh, my God! That's not what I asked for at all! That's overdoing it!" For a nice city like Little Rock to have crap like that—it was an outrage. "We're sending the 101st Airborne. They will be

arriving in your city this evening. Thank you very much for your trouble. Work with them, Mr. Mayor, and everything will be fine." And that was it. So Woody and I together just about died because somebody was overdoing it, you know?

[Laughs] We couldn't believe the 101st Airborne.

JM: Ron, hold on just a minute. Just start up again there when you said, "We were overdoing it."

RB: Well, yes, I thought the president was overdoing it. That's not what I had asked for *at all*, and there was only—well, I guess you don't tell the president what the hell to do, but this just seemed a little disgraceful to have it happen to a nice city like Little Rock because Little Rock didn't deserve all that.

JM: Yes.

RB: Anyway, it was going to happen, and, here, I had done it. It was my stupid idea.

JM: [Laughs]

RB: I went into the poor beleaguered mayor's office, and I said, "Hey, you've got to do something," so he said, "Well, *you* do it," and so I did it, and here we go. Sure enough, then I called the city desk. I don't even remember who was there. Rod Powers had left for the afternoon. Everything—it was too late even for the Bulldog edition for editing. So we could only wait for the [101st] Airborne, and we didn't know if they were going to drop in on parachutes or something else.

[Laughs]

JM: Yes.

RB: It was a terrible feeling. Woody never quite recovered. He just looked like he had died.

JM: Yes.

RB: He was pale. He'd lost all of his tan during this process, but he did recover the next evening. He was all right. So, sure enough, the federal troops arrived by car from Tennessee by troop carriers, so there wasn't any dramatic drop-in with the parachutes or anything like that. Thank goodness for that.

JM: Yes.

RB: But it was bad enough. And, of course, then they took over. They stayed, you know, until—they stayed for a long time. School started in September, and they were there all the time in September and October and into November. Then in November the city government changed, and the new—Dean Dauley took over as the [city] manager and this and that. So, come December, for the holiday—I went to Gene Herrington and said, "You know, I know a man in the White House." I had never told Gene that I was the character who had been acting mayor for a couple of hours. [Laughs]

JM: Yes.

RB: I said, "I know a man in the White House. This idea of these troops staying here during the Christmas holidays and everything else—the fact that they're here at all is disgraceful. Why don't I tell him that we'd like to change the troops to federal marshals and have the marshals come in after the holidays? There's no need for them to be out there at Central High School right now. Have marshals. Maybe two marshals or something. One marshal. It doesn't matter. And we'll run a trial article about it in the paper and quote an unnamed White House source."

JM: Yes.

RB: And Gene said, "Well, if you *know* somebody there, why, we could sure try it."
So I said, "So I can call?" He said, "Yes, you can call." [Laughs] So I called for
Maxwell Rabb . . .

JM: Yes.

RB: . . . and told him that I knew of him with his contact with Mayor Woodrow Mann.

JM: Yes.

RB: He probably detected that I had a Northern accent, rather than a Southern accent
for a mayor [laughs], but, nevertheless, that I was probably the guy that he had
talked to in the first place.

JM: Yes.

RB: I said, "Here, we have this situation where federal marshals would have been a
perfect solution. You had them right here in the courthouse. You didn't have to
go anywhere. Anyway, now that the Christmas holiday is here, how about us
running a trial balloon article in our paper saying that you are *considering*
replacing the federal troops with federal marshals come the new school year after
this Christmas holiday." He said, "Well, that would be all right. Just don't quote
me by name." I said, "Oh, no, you'll just be 'a White House source,'" and this and
that. So Haggerty loved stuff like that, you know? [Laughs]

JM: Yes.

RB: Anyway, he said, "That would be all right." He said, "I don't have much hope for
it. The president is pretty determined that you should have the troops there.
Anyway, try that and just see what your public thinks." So, sure enough, that
Sunday we came out with this article that the federal government may replace the

troops with federal marshals. The *Gazette* had a fit. Haggerty had a fit. Nobody was talking in the White House without his approval [laughs]. So everybody had a fit, but nobody did anything about it. Sure enough, the troops stayed there and were not replaced with the federal marshals *ever* until that spring when the schools finally let out.

JM: Yes.

RB: So it was a dismal failure. Faubus, at the time of our call, had been attending the Southern Governors Conference in Florida, and he had taken his national guard plane down there. When Eisenhower federalized his national guard, his national guard plane was suddenly a federal plane, and he had to hitchhike back on it.

JM: Yes.

RB: And we thought, "At least we've gotten rid of Faubus. How could he possibly survive after humiliating—not just the plane, but the idea of all of his . . ." Faubus went ahead and got reelected several times [laughs] as the governor and did fine.

JM: Yes.

RB: Oh, man. So, anyway, that's the long and short of how the federal troops got here and how it should have been federal marshals.

JM: Hmm. That's a really interesting story. Gene Herrington told me that you told him later that you had actually made the call [laughs], but he didn't know it at the time.

RB: Yes. I had wanted to tell him, you know? You tell your editor *everything*.

JM: Yes.

RB: But this was so humiliating, and it turned out so badly. If it had turned out *right*, I probably would have been bragging like crazy. But to send the federal troops, I thought was the worst thing that could happen.

JM: And all the time—were you still covering city hall all through the crisis?

RB: All through the crisis, and with the installation of Dean Dauley . . .

JM: Was it Dean Daley? Was that his name or . . . ?

RB: Dean Dauley. D-A-U-L-E-Y.

JM: Okay. Oh, you're right. It was D-A-U—or D-A-W, wasn't it?

RB: No, it's D-A-U, I think.

JM: D-A-U-L-E-Y. Okay.

RB: L-E-Y. Yes.

JM: Yes, you're right. Okay.

RB: He'd been the city manager of a little Texas town [Arlington] near Dallas, so the board hired him. I prematurely announced it in the *Democrat* and the board got mad at me for that. It was a brand new board. [I thought,] "Oh, God, is that the way it's going to be?" [Laughs]

JM: So did Woodrow Mann stay on as the . . . ?

RB: Oh, no. I guess he sold his house and went to Texas. During all the fracas he did fine. He recovered great and held press conferences and wrote a column for the *New York Herald* . . .

JM: Yes.

RB: . . . which he had me write for him.

JM: Yes.

RB: Yes, but after that—after November, he was gone. He went to Texas and died, I think, a year ago.

JM: Okay. Being the city hall reporter, you didn't actually cover stuff on the ground out at Central, did you?

RB: No, not out at Central. I stayed at the city hall.

JM: Okay.

RB: I went out there a couple of times, but I didn't cover anything.

JM: Yes. Let me ask you this question about all that. Aside from your actual [laughs] involvement in Woodrow Mann's telephone calls and everything—how did you think the *Democrat* covered the Central High crisis overall?

RB: Oh, I think they did a *marvelous* job.

JM: Yes.

RB: They helped me in every way they could. [K.] August Engel was particularly good to me. You know, here I was, a reporter, and he didn't really hobnob too much with the reporters.

JM: Yes.

RB: But with me—he treated me like a million dollars.

JM: Yes. Well, good. So how did you think—the *Gazette* won a Pulitzer [Prize] for its coverage of the Central High Crisis.

RB: Yes, because of their editorials. [Laughs] Yes, they won the Pulitzer for their coverage of the—this was awkward because both of these things happened in the same year—both in 1957.

JM: Yes.

RB: The 1957 Central High crisis and the change [of] the city government in the same year.

JM: Okay. Yes, they won two Pulitzers. One for their editorial stand and one for their coverage of the crisis. But my question is, how did you think the *Democrat's* coverage on the site out there compared with the *Gazette's* coverage?

RB: Well, of course, I was biased because I felt that the *Democrat* led the way in all respects. We led the way in the change of government. We led the way with our articles in almost all respects. We led the way.

JM: Yes.

RB: The *Democrat* should have gotten at least one of them. [Laughs]

JM: Yes.

RB: Maybe not for the editorials because that's what Ashley or—what was his name?

JM: [Harry] Ashmore.

RB: Ashmore. Ashmore wrote some pretty meaningful editorials, and they got a Pulitzer for that. But I didn't realize they got another Pulitzer.

JM: Yes, they won two Pulitzers. They won one for their editorial stand and they won one for their actual news coverage of the crisis.

RB: Well, the second one was undeserved. The *Democrat* should have—the *Democrat* had many advantages because of the fact that it was an afternoon paper, so anything that happened during the day got into the paper. And the *Gazette* was a follow-up by nature of its being a morning paper. In most respects, the *Democrat* led the way—certainly in the change of government thing and certainly in the arrival of the [federal] troops and things like that.

JM: Yes.

RB: Although the *Gazette* got the darn story, of course, for the arrival of the troops.

JM: When the troops arrived. Yes.

RB: But that's the only place I think that they got ahead. [Laughs] And if I'd had my wits about me, we would have stopped that if I'd known what the hell I was going to do.

JM: Yes. Let me ask you this. How long did you keep covering the city hall?

RB: Oh, I think through that year, which was the end of 1957 and into 1958. They thought maybe I could be the business editor, and I flattered with that, I think, for a minute. But we didn't do much, and the city hall was interesting because it was all different, you know?

JM: Yes.

RB: Finally, we were getting street lights and they were getting traffic signals corrected and things like that. Oh, and we lost our traffic director. He got killed on Broadway Bridge after a few months. Boy, what a nice guy and a nice family and everything.

JM: What was his name? Do you remember?

RB: I can't think of his name. McKay or something like that.

JM: Okay. I don't remember.

RB: John McKay.

JM: Yes, it's possible. I can't remember, either. They brought one guy in—it seems to me like his name was Garver—who was going to do something about the traffic signals, or maybe that was—maybe I'm wrong. They came in with the Denver

traffic light system, but I don't remember what time that was. Anyway, how long did you stay with the paper after that span through there?

RB: I left in 1959, I think—1959.

JM: Okay. So you were there about four years—something like that?

RB: Yes.

JM: Okay. What did you do after you left the *Democrat*?

RB: I got into an advertising company. I formed my advertising company with city bus advertising and city airport lobby advertising in association with a Dayton, Ohio, company that had several airports. I worked with them. You know, this was in the old city airport.

JM: Yes.

RB: Then when the new one was built, we were there for a while. But they decided they could do their own advertising, and I don't know how well they've done since then [laughs], but I lost the airport. I had [the] Fort Smith Airport and the Pine Bluff Airport and the Pine Bluff buses and the Fort Smith buses.

JM: So this was your own advertising firm?

RB: Yes.

JM: Did you have any partners?

RB: No.

JM: What did you call your company?

RB: Burnham Marketing Systems.

JM: Okay. So then how long did you stay with that?

RB: Well, until 1963, I guess—1964—something like that.

JM: Yes.

RB: When the bus company changed hands and changed ownership and I lost the contract with the bus company—with the new ownership—the airport decided they could do their own, so my two biggest airports [laughs] and buses collapsed. So I gave up and went into the real estate business.

JM: In Little Rock?

RB: Yes.

JM: And how long did you do that?

RB: Let's see. It wasn't in Little Rock. It was North Little Rock.

JM: North Little Rock.

RB: What was the name of that real estate company? Rock Realty. I became the vice president of the real estate company. We had more than 100 air force retirees, mostly [laughs], who held their licenses and . . .

JM: More than 100 agents? Is that what you were going to say?

RB: What?

JM: More than 100 agents?

RB: More than 100 agents had their licenses hanging on the wall, and about 3 of them produced business.

JM: Yes.

RB: So it was maddening. And then they went out of business.

JM: Yes.

RB: So I joined a Little Rock company. I can't think of the name of that company, either, now.

JM: Okay.

RB: Anyway, I . . .

JM: So when did you leave Little Rock?

RB: I left Little Rock in 1975.

JM: Okay. Where did you go then?

RB: To Santa Barbara [California].

JM: Okay.

RB: My father had died in 1975, and I went there and just decided to change—go back to my West Coast.

JM: Yes. He wasn't in Santa Barbara, though, was he?

RB: He was in Santa Barbara. Yes.

JM: Oh, I see. Okay. Was your mother still alive then?

RB: No, no. My mother died when I was twelve.

JM: Oh, okay. So you went to Santa Barbara and then did you—I know at one time . . .

RB: I was in the real estate business and the investment business there.

JM: Okay. Okay. Then at some point did you start a travel agency there?

RB: Yes. In 1977, I decided—I had a real estate client who wanted to buy a travel agency. I scoured all over town and couldn't find anybody who wanted to sell their agency.

JM: Yes.

RB: So I decided it must be a pretty darn good business. [Laughs]

JM: Yes.

RB: So my client finally bought something in Los Angeles [California] or something, but I found one that I could buy in Santa Barbara, so in 1977 I became a travel [agency] owner.

JM: Okay. How long did you keep that business?

RB: Ten years. In the process, I traveled to eighty-three countries [laughs] if you can imagine such a thing. Eighty-three countries.

JM: Yes. Okay.

RB: Usually when you're in the travel business, you're stuck [at] your desk and you send other people to exotic places.

JM: Yes.

RB: But I had a good staff, so I was able to go to a lot of places that I never dreamed I'd be able to go to.

JM: Yes.

RB: I've been to Copenhagen ten times. Can you believe that?

JM: Is that right? You must like Copenhagen.

RB: Oh, Copenhagen is wonderful. And Hong Kong—I've gone twelve times to Hong Kong.

JM: Yes.

RB: Twice to Beijing—Taiwan. Oh, well, anyway. Don't let me get carried away.

JM: That's okay. So when did you retire?

RB: I retired and sold my agency in 1986, and I stayed there a few months to be sure they operated it right and this and that. So in 1987 I left.

JM: Yes. Okay.

RB: But I had sold it in 1986.

JM: Okay. At what point—I know you're in San Luis Obispo now. When did you move to San Luis Obispo?

RB: Ten years ago. I remarried. My wife died in November of 1995, and I remarried in 1996 and moved to San Luis Obispo.

JM: Yes. Okay. Let's see now. You still have some ties to Arkansas, as I remember. You still have a son, at least, in Arkansas, don't you?

RB: Yes. I have a son, Robert, who is the art director with—oh, my gosh . . .

JM: Cranford and Johnson [advertising agency in Little Rock].

RB: Cranford—yes! [Laughs]

JM: Yes, and the other . . .

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

JM: Here we go again. This is the other side of this tape recording with Ron Burnham. Jerry McConnell here with Ron Burnham. Do you have any other ties to—any other children or relatives in Arkansas, Ron?

RB: Yes. I have another son, Roland III. He's out on Benton Highway near Benton.

JM: Okay. What does he do?

RB: He works for the school district of Benton County.

JM: Okay.

RB: Benton County. That *is* it, isn't it, out there?

JM: No, that's Saline County.

RB: Saline County.

JM: Yes. Benton is in Saline County.

RB: Benton is up in the northwest corner . . .

JM: Yes. Benton County—that's where Rogers is and everything.

RB: Okay. [Laughs]

JM: Now, then, let's go back to the years that you were at the *Democrat*. Ron, what kind of paper did you think—overall—skip your role—overall, what kind of newspaper did you think the *Democrat* was at that time?

RB: Well, I thought it was a wonderful paper. My background, of course, was journalism at the University of Washington, but after that I had been in various other activities, from the army to operating restaurants in Oklahoma, and this and that. So I decided to use my education in journalism and go into the newspaper business, which I had thoroughly enjoyed. I had been the editor of my school papers and my school annuals, so I was acquainted with writing, somewhat.

JM: Yes.

RB: So when I had this opportunity to join the *Tulsa World*, which I never got back to [laughs] . . .

JM: Yes.

RB: I saw this small paper in Rogers, and another small paper in Neosho, Missouri, and the papers in Fort Smith—when I arrived at the *Democrat*, I thought it was just *heaven*. It was just exactly the size paper that I had hoped for—100,000 circulation at that time—and a competing daily paper across the town, which, most cities at that time did not have and don't have now.

JM: Sure don't have now.

RB: What?

JM: I said they *sure* don't have now.

RB: No, they sure don't have now. Even then they were getting scarce. They may have had two papers in a town or more, but they were all the same papers off the same printing press—this and that. Here we had a marvelous, competitive news opportunity, and I just enjoyed every minute of it.

JM: Yes. What did you think of the *Gazette* at that time? How did you think the two papers compared?

RB: Well, when I was [with] the *Rogers Daily News*, we used to get the *Gazette*—their first editions, you know, went up to northwest Arkansas.

JM: Yes.

RB: And I never saw so many mistakes—horrible-looking mistakes in their headlines [laughs] and mistakes that I couldn't believe. Anyone who could let go of a paper and have it—so, of course, they were corrected in subsequent editions.

JM: Yes.

RB: But the one we got up in northwest Arkansas—I thought, "My God, the *Gazette* is something I would *never* think of joining if they write like that." And if they allowed stuff like that.

JM: Yes.

RB: So I had a warped conception of the *Gazette*, and all my experience had been with afternoon papers in all of my four or five months. [Laughs]

JM: Yes.

RB: So I didn't even think about going to the *Gazette*. I went right to the *Democrat*.

JM: Okay. But after you got to Little Rock, then, did you find the *Gazette* was a pretty good newspaper?

RB: Well, it was a well-respected newspaper. Yes.

JM: Yes.

RB: Yes, there was nothing wrong with the *Gazette*. Many years later in Santa Barbara, I went to a funeral of a prominent man, and there was Harry Ashmore, who had been lured into a think-tank there in Santa Barbara. [Laughs]

JM: Yes.

RB: So I introduced myself. I had never met him before or anything like that, but he was kind of snobbish. And the fact that I had been at the *Democrat* at the time that he was with the *Gazette*—that didn't hold too much enthusiasm for him.

JM: Yes.

RB: So I thought, "Well, up yours." [Laughs]

JM: Yes. Yes, if I remember, he went with the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, or something like that, which was in Santa Barbara.

RB: Yes. Sounds correct like that.

JM: Okay. What do you remember about the *Democrat* at the time that you worked there? The newsroom, the facilities, the pay, the people—tell me a little bit about that.

RB: Well, we always laughed about the pay. It was always considered substandard, and the *Gazette* [employees were] always paid higher than we were.

JM: Yes.

RB: And the only retirement was the candy stand after you got old enough. [Laughs]

JM: What was the woman's name who ran the candy stand?

RB: I don't remember. I don't remember the woman who had the library, either.

JM: That might have been Gladys Fearnside.

RB: Yes. That's correct.

JM: Yes.

RB: [Laughs] But I don't remember the woman's name that . . .

JM: I don't either. I had forgotten that, and somebody else brought that up—said that they thought that was kind of the *Democrat* retirement policy—you got to run their Coke stand or their candy stand when you retired. [Laughter]

RB: Yes. And there was only *one*, so I don't know how that could take in large numbers.

JM: Yes.

RB: But anyway, it never really happened.

JM: Yes.

RB: So there were a lot of jokes about the salary index, but we didn't care about that. It was certainly the finest paper I had ever been on [laughs] . . .

JM: Yes.

RB: . . . because most of mine have been minor league.

JM: Yes. Who else do you remember on the staff at that time?

RB: Oh, Rod Powers and that great guy who went up to Modesto, California—what was his name?

JM: Martin Holmes?

RB: Martin Holmes. Yes.

JM: Yes.

RB: The news editor, Butler. Wasn't his name Butler?

JM: It could have been. I was gone by that time. I think it was either Bill or Bob Butler, but I can't remember which. Bill.

RB: Bill Butler, I think.

JM: I think you're right. Yes. Okay.

RB: Yes. He was a good guy. Well, he was not a pleasant guy, but he was a good guy. He was a good editor. They were all darn good editors, I thought.

JM: Yes. Herrington was the city editor . . .

RB: One day I went into the—one day during the height of all the city government thing, I went into the city room and there on the wall were six editions with my story and different headlines for six different ones [laughs]. I had really driven those typesetters crazy, I guess, that day because every one had to be remade over again. [Laughs]

JM: Did you change your lead every time?

RB: Yes, I changed the lead every time and some of the body.

JM: Yes.

RB: Most of it was the same story, but a different headline on every one.

JM: Yes.

RB: But six of them. They covered the whole wall. [Laughs]

JM: Yes. Anybody else you remember at the paper at that time?

RB: Oh, Gene was my—wonderful Gene Herrington.

JM: Yes.

RB: I thought he was terrific. Powers was a good help. Marcus—we got so we knew Marcus George after a while, but he was not one you could get warm to or anything.

JM: Yes.

RB: But he was fine. He didn't want me to resign from the paper. He wanted me to stay.

JM: Yes.

RB: I felt that I could do better with advertising.

JM: Yes. And, of course, I'm sure Douthit was on the staff at that time.

RB: Yes. Douthit? Oh, yes, Douthit.

JM: Yes.

RB: Let's see, who—oh, and the courthouse—oh . . .

JM: Bud Lemke?

RB: What?

JM: Lemke?

RB: Lemke. Lemke. Yes.

JM: Yes, Bud Lemke.

RB: Bud Lemke. Yes. His father [Walter J. Lemke, former head of the journalism department] was with the University of [Arkansas]. Yes.

JM: Yes.

RB: He was a great guy—a good reporter.

JM: Yes. And I think maybe at that time that Sy Ramsey was probably the police reporter. Do you remember Sy Ramsey?

RB: Sy Ramsey.

JM: A little, short guy.

RB: Yes. What did he do?

JM: He was the police reporter, I think.

RB: No, I don't think so. Not in my time.

JM: Not at that time? Okay. Maybe it was before you . . .

RB: It must have been before me.

JM: Yes, it could have been. You started out on the police beat. You might have replaced him on the police beat.

RB: Yes. I may have replaced him. I don't remember him at all.

JM: See, if you came in 1955 or—I think he must have come in 1955. See, I was there—I left in August of 1955 and went to the *Gazette*.

RB: Oh, that's what I thought. Yes. That's why I'm trying to temper what I say about the *Gazette*. [Laughs]

JM: Yes. Okay. At any rate, I left there in 1955 and went to the *Gazette*, and I'd been on the state capitol beat at that time. So somebody had taken over the city hall beat—no, wait a minute. Wait a minute. Okay. I know who took it over first, and then you replaced him, probably. It was Charlie Rixse. I don't know if you remember Charlie Rixse.

RB: I don't remember him.

JM: Okay. Charlie Rixse was my college roommate. He replaced me on the city hall beat when I left and went to the state capitol.

RB: Oh.

JM: And then I left and went to the *Gazette* in August of 1955, and it wasn't long after that that he left the *Democrat* and came to the *Gazette*, also. So you probably replaced Rixse on the city hall beat.

RB: Probably did. Yes.

JM: Yes, I think so. It wasn't me. I think it was probably Charlie Rixse that you replaced.

RB: But I really have no idea. I don't remember who did it before me because Pratt Remmel was the mayor and . . .

JM: Yes. I had done it part of the time when Pratt Remmel was there. Now, R.B. Mayfield had started out covering Pratt Remmel. I was the . . .

RB: I've forgotten what Mayfield covered. What did he . . . ?

JM: Well, he covered city hall.

RB: Oh, city hall?

JM: He was covering city hall and I was doing the police beat, and then R.B. went to the state capitol.

RB: Oh, yes.

JM: Then I replaced R.B. out on the city hall, and then later, after the election in the fall of 1954, they sent me to the state capitol. So R.B. and I both were covering the state capitol in the last part of 1954 and most of 1955.

RB: Oh. Well, where was Douthit?

JM: Douthit was on general assignment when I left. I think he came to the capitol at some point after I left. I don't know at what point, but he came . . .

RB: He was at the capitol when we had our city government conflict. Yes.

JM: Yes, because he was covering Faubus a lot.

RB: Yes.

JM: But the newsroom, as I suspect you remember, was not air-conditioned at that time. [Laughs]

RB: Oh, no. And we had manual typewriters. [Laughs]

JM: Yes. Well, everybody had manuals then, just about. They had the newsroom down on the second floor of the city hall, as I remember, above the police station—on the floor above—on the same floor that the city government offices were on.

RB: Yes. The same floor as the mayor, except down at the other end of the hall.

JM: Yes.

RB: During that time of my afternoon as "Mayor," I was wishing I could get down to the newsroom and talk to the desk . . .

JM: Yes.

RB: . . . but I didn't dare, because Woody was favoring Ashmore, and I didn't dare trust the guy out of my sight before he would break the story to Ashmore.

JM: Yes.

RB: And here I let it happen to Ashmore after all. When the troops arrived, it was on the *Gazette* this time.

JM: What do you mean, you say he favored Ashmore or Jason Rouby?

RB: Ashmore.

JM: Oh, yes. Okay.

RB: He was on speaking terms with Ashmore. I think he was.

JM: Yes. Okay.

RB: And he tolerated Rouby. [Laughs]

JM: Yes.

RB: For that reason, he leaned toward the *Gazette* all the time, and here I was, hammering him with the *Democrat*, in a way.

JM: Yes.

RB: He wasn't—he and I did not hit it off too well, although he took me to the [horse] races at [Oaklawn Park in] Hot Springs one day after he'd made a haul with the parking meters and—he bet thousands of dollars that day, you know? [Laughs]

JM: Yes.

RB: For a mayor who had a \$5,000 [per year] income.

JM: Yes. Well, what was he? He was in the insurance business or something, wasn't he, before he ran for mayor?

RB: Yes. Starving to death in the insurance business.

JM: Anyway. All right. Anything else you remember about your *Democrat* days, Ron?

RB: No. They were the happiest days of my life, really.

JM: Were they?

RB: Yes. I left because I wasn't making enough money.

JM: Yes.

RB: And, besides that, the city government had settled down to a business-like operation [laughs] and there weren't any more interesting things happening.

JM: Yes. Yes.

RB: New street lights can only go so far in a daily paper, you know? [Laughs]

JM: Yes. I understand. I understand. Well, that's why I left—money and working conditions and everything else.

RB: Yes. I had gotten many, many raises. I started at \$50 a week, I guess, like everybody did.

JM: Yes.

RB: But before I was through, they treated me just wonderfully. I got \$10-a-week raises every time I turned around, it seemed like, I guess because of the work I was doing.

JM: Yes.

RB: So it was great. But, still, I think Douthit was making about \$140 a week and I was making \$130 or something.

JM: Oh.

RB: So I was doing pretty well.

JM: You were doing well. You were cleaning up because Douthit had been there a long time . . .

RB: Yes.

JM: . . . because he was there when I came in 1951.

RB: Oh. Yes.

JM: In fact, he was a veteran by then.

RB: I think he was a veteran, and he was at the state capitol. He had the good beat.

JM: Yes.

RB: I did really well, but I started out at a pretty low basis.

JM: Yes.

RB: But then I got married and started having children, and started to be a little more needy.

JM: Then you decided you needed to make some more money.

RB: Yes.

JM: Yes. I understand. Okay. So you still read newspapers a lot?

RB: You're dying out on me. Can you hear me?

JM: Yes.

RB: Oh, all right.

JM: I said, do you still read newspapers a lot?

RB: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

JM: Yes. Okay.

RB: I take the *Wall Street Journal* and I take our local paper here and sometimes *USA Today*—things like that.

JM: Yes. Okay. All right.

RB: The news these days—how are you doing with your next-door-neighbor, Louisiana?

JM: Well, we're getting a lot of refugees from that. [Reference to Hurricane Katrina, which hit the South on August 29, 2005]. In fact, they're putting a bunch of them at Fort Chaffee.

RB: Out where?

JM: Fort Chaffee.

RB: Oh, my God. That's a good reason to do it. Yes.

JM: See, because they had a lot of spare . . .

RB: Those barracks.

JM: Spare barracks out there that they weren't using, so they're going to put [about] 3,000 to 4,000 out there.

RB: Oh, yes. Oh, it's a terrible situation.

JM: Yes, it really is. Yes, it's bad.

RB: I know all the answers, but I have no idea what to even tell the president about this. [Laughs]

JM: Yes. [Laughs] Yes, that's been a horrible mess down there.

RB: Well, really, it's beyond belief.

JM: Yes, it is.

RB: Absolutely beyond belief.

JM: Yes.

RB: Well, Jerry, what else can I help you with?

JM: Well, I think you've about done it, Ron. I think we've about covered the ground. I really appreciate it. I really appreciate your help on it and cooperation. As I said, you'll be getting the transcript, and one of these days we'll wind up getting this on the Internet where everybody in the world can read it.

RB: [Laughs] Well, that will be fun.

JM: Okay.

RB: It's really about time that they knew the whole story—the fact that most people have forgotten that Little Rock went through a crisis with their city government, to begin with, in that same year.

JM: Yes.

RB: And a crisis in the Central High. But the *Democrat*, I think, led—with all due respect to your *Gazette*, I think the *Democrat* . . .

JM: Well, I went back to the *Democrat* later.

RB: Oh, did you?

JM: Yes. I went back to the *Democrat* as a managing editor in 1971.

RB: Oh, well, great!

JM: And I stayed until 1978.

RB: Oh, yes.

JM: So I spent a lot of time at both newspapers.

RB: Well, that's great.

JM: Yes. Well, at any rate, Ron, I really appreciate it. Thanks a lot. I'll be in touch with you.

RB: Well, I thank you.

JM: Okay. Bye-bye.

RB: Let me know if I can help on anything.

JM: I'll sure do it. Thanks a lot.

RB: Bye.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Cheri Pearce]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]

RB: There were a couple of points I thought we made that I missed in the transcript. This being about the *Democrat*, I thought the following points needed to be included:

- 1) Forgotten by most, the *Arkansas Democrat* was nominated to receive the Pulitzer Prize for civic government reporting for its role in changing the form of government for the city of Little Rock. This was in 1957. The subsequent events of federal troops at Central High School overshadowed any consideration for winning the prize, but material was submitted anyway. Leading citizens of Little Rock made the nomination.

- 2) Unbeknownst to the *Arkansas Democrat* owner and editors, the city hall reporter, without meaning to, brought about federal troops entering a southern city for the first time since the Civil War. It was damaging to the city and to the state and considered a substantial “overkill” reaction on the part of the President of the United States. The *Democrat* reporter, at the behest of the mayor of Little Rock, contacted the White House and asked that the president federalize the Arkansas National Guard and its plane carrying the governor; send the guard to their homes and put one or more federal marshals to control the demonstration at Central High. Instead, it will be recalled, the president ordered paratroopers from the 101st Airborne to enter the city. The reporter and the mayor considered the president’s reaction extreme overkill and a definite detriment to the city. But the deed was done.