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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with
Leroy Donald
Little Rock, Arkansas
2 February 2006

Interviewer: Brenda Tirey

[00:00:00.00]

Brenda Tirey: This is Brenda Tirey. It is February 2, 2006. Leroy Donald and I are at my home in Little Rock [Arkansas] preparing to do an interview of Leroy for the *Arkansas Democrat* Oral History Project [at the University of Arkansas Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History.] Leroy, you have signed your release to the University of Arkansas for . . .

Leroy Donald: That's right.

BT: To allow them to keep and use this tape.

LD: Right.

BT: Well, tell me a little bit about yourself. When were you born?

LD: August 23, 1935.

BT: Where was that?

LD: New Albany, [Mississippi]. It's where Hugh [B.] Patterson [Jr.] of the [*Arkansas*] *Gazette* was also from.

BT: New Albany, Mississippi?

LD: Yes.

BT: Did you grow up there?

LD: I grew up in Goodman, Mississippi, which is the very center point of Mississippi and it's where the surveyor's mark is.

BT: Right in the middle of Mississippi?

LD: In the middle of Mississippi. Interstate 55 goes right past it now, but Highway 51 went through there, and that was the shot between Chicago [Illinois] and New Orleans [Louisiana].

BT: How long did you live there?

LD: All of my family is there on both sides.

BT: You went all the way through High School there?

LD: No, no, no. I just went through public school. When my daddy got a job at Lion Oil Company, I moved to El Dorado [Arkansas]. That was in 1948, and that's about the only date I can remember. 1948.

BT: And you graduated from high school in El Dorado?

LD: Yes. EHS [El Dorado High School].

BT: What did you think you wanted to do when you were growing up? Did you want to do—did you . . .?

LD: I wanted to go to college and play.

BT: Did you?

LD: And I did.

BT: Where did you go to college?

LD: Well, I went to Sewanee, University of the South [Sewanee, Tennessee] for a year. Then I was on my way back and went by the University of Arkansas [Fayetteville] to [race?] some friends of mine and never made it back.

BT: Did you graduate from the University of Arkansas?

LD: [Laughs] Stayed there. I had plenty of hours, but never graduated.

BT: What kind of courses were you taking?

LD: "Pre."

BT: Pre? Pre-courses.

LD: Yes. Pre-anything.

BT: Pre-anything.

LD: Yes.

BT: What did you think you wanted to do as you played?

LD: I didn't know. I had no idea. Something more with "pre," but anyway, I ended up back down in El Dorado. Let's see, Janine and I, I think, had gotten married by then.

BT: You got married in Fayetteville?

LD: Yes, Janine Harris from El Dorado. We dated in high school Anyway, I went back to El Dorado because I could pick up a teaching certificate—not a degree. Anyway, you could get a teaching something—if I went to El Dorado and lived in El Dorado and worked out of Southern State College over in Magnolia [Arkansas]. Because El Dorado is not that big—about 25,000, I think, when I was there—there are not a lot of places to work at night, except in one of the refineries, or chemical plants, or the newspaper. And one Ernie Dumas—we grew up

together—was working at the *El Dorado Daily News* and *Evening Times*, which was a Hussman Paper. Somehow or another I got connected and they put me on a job there at night. I could work at night.

BT: And it was owned by the same Hussman family that later bought the *Arkansas Democrat*.

LD: Yes. Yes. WEHCO [Media, Inc.] I think owned it. I believe it was WEHCO, then. It changed around some, but anyway—yes, the same.

BT: They were like the parents or grandparents of Walter Hussman [Jr.] who is now the *Democrat* publisher?

LD: Yes, the Palmers. The Palmers. Yes.

BT: What did you do in your first job at the El Dorado paper?

LD: I did about anything he wanted me to do. I didn't know anything about newspapers, so I just did a little bit of everything, and I think I made all total of $1 an hour. I believe that's about right—because after a while I was there and . . .

BT: It was probably the minimum wage.

LD: Probably was. Anyway, they called me into this big meeting one day with all the honchos, and they announced that I was getting a nickel an hour raise. And that I should be very thankful.

BT: Were you?

LD: [Laughter] Yes. I was just working so many hours, it's no telling what I made per week—that way you didn't . . .

BT: I think you got no overtime and no [bonus/benefits?].

LD: Oh, no.

BT: No. And this was in the 1950s, right?

LD: Yes, this would have been in—I went there in, I think, in 1957—yes, it would have been 1957.

BT: Did you get a promotion with your nickel raise? Did you get—or what did you . . .?

LD: Well, I was down there—I think I had been down there about a year by then. I was putting out—they really didn't do promotions, but by then I was putting out the paper at night and—there were two papers. I would go in in the morning and start that paper going—strip the wires, set up the hot type in the back and set up—I had to [do] something; I don't remember what it was. In all reality, I opened up the doors and cut the lights on and then worked through most of another eight-hour day.

BT: Was Ernie there that whole time? Did he leave then after you got there? Or did he . . .?

LD: I think Ernie left shortly after I was there, and I can't remember whether he had gone to school, or he went off to school again, or whether he went to Little Rock. But sooner or later we hooked up again in Little Rock.

BT: How long were you in El Dorado?

LD: Probably two years. Then A. R. Nelson called me in and—I had gone up there in my first year or so at the El Dorado paper to cover a ballgame up here—a Razorback red and white game—and I had no idea what I was doing. Anyway, while I was up here, I went by the *Gazette* to see my friend Rodney Dungan, who was a *Gazette* photographer.

BT: Also from El Dorado?

LD: Also from El Dorado. He took me to the newsroom and took me by to meet A. R. Nelson, who was the managing editor, and also from El Dorado. I got a call one day down in El Dorado from A. R. and he said "We need you; just come on up here now." And I said, "Oh, okay. Nelson, I'm coming but I got— and he called again later on. He said, "Now come on, come on up here." I said, "I don't have any money and I have to have two tires on this old car I got." And he said, "Son, buy yourself some used tires and come on." So, I did. [Laughs]

BT: Didn't offer to send you any money to get some . . .?

LD: Well, he said a—amazingly enough, when I got here he had gathered—collected a lot of money—which was probably $25 for two tires and whatever I needed to eat. I went back to El Dorado and called him back and said, "Okay. I'll be there." And that was the start of the "El Dorado Mafia."

BT: At the *Arkansas Gazette*—when was that? That was about 1959 or . . .?

LD: I never can—no—I never can remember whether it was 1958 or 1959, and it's in another oral history I've done. I came—Nelson said I came as a magazine subscription, and, oddly enough, Griffin Smith said he went to—came to the *Democrat* as a magazine subscription. And all that means is they'd already done the budget and this was a way of getting you in—going around . . .

BT: Paying your salary.

LD: Paying your salary. The strange thing about it is, if I remember right, for the longest time I don't think I ever worked for the *Gazette* itself. I worked for Hugh B. Patterson.

BT: For his magazine?

LD: Because that was how that budget was working at that time. So I didn't find [out] till later, after I'd been there "umpteen" years, that I was still . . .

BT: [Still at the newspaper?]?

LD: I guess I was a magazine subscription.

BT: And what did you do when you first got here?

LD: I worked for the state desk with Ken Parker, doing crap desk stuff. Everybody there at the *Gazette* did the—started out on the crap desk—I don't care who you were.

BT: Taking the obits.

LD: Taking the obits.

BT: Reading proofs.

LD: Reading proofs. Writing the car wrecks.

BT: [Did you do?] correspondence, or did you deal with correspondence?

LD: Started dealing with correspondence, then, yes. Just doing the little chores—like everybody said, "You're going to learn where everybody lives, and the names of everybody in Arkansas, and how to spell the towns right, and you better get it right."

BT: How long did you do that? Did you go straight to reporting, or what did you do from it?

LD: Lets see, I think by then [Bill] Rutherford went over—lets see, [Pat] Carruthers went over to the telegraph desk and—Rutherford went over as assistant, so he was doing part-time state desk and part-time telegram desk.

BT: Okay, was it Pat Carruthers who was the *Gazette* wire editor and became the *Gazette* [editor?]

LD: Wire editor, yes.

BT: And Bill Rutherford, who became like . . .?

LD: Well, in the end, [he was] managing editor finally.

BT: He ended up being managing editor.

LD: Yes. Anyway, I had the desk and Gene Foreman came over from city desk to be state editor, so—by that time Ken Parker had left; I can't remember when. Foreman came over, and I worked with Foreman. And he was—at first it was routine stuff. The state desk didn't do really big news coverage; it just did the routine and made sure we were covering the state, for every kind of little thing that went on. And sometime during the—we started doing—for some reason, Foreman, who was a real—basically, very dull, but he was a great guy and a really good newsman. I started out doing little things and Foreman liked it, so we started doing feature—we were probably early news features for the *Gazette*. I don't think anybody—I'm pretty sure that Shelton, Bill Shelton, didn't do news features and I know he didn't do news features out in the state.

BT: It was just a hard news newspaper.

LD: Hard news newspaper.

BT: News coverage of what was going on right then.

LD: Right. So I started going out, and [the] more I went out the more Foreman said, "I'm just cutting you loose," and, "just go." I was all over the place, and did a lot of stuff there, and in the end, when he went to where he did . . .

BT: *New York Times*.

LD: *New York*—did he go to The *New York Times* first? I don't remember. I became the state editor.

BT: Well, he went to The *New York Times* and then he came to Pine Bluff Commercial.

LD: That's right. That's right. I became state editor and started building a desk. There was just two of us—maybe three with an old bit writer. I started building the desk—adding more desk, and more telephones, and people, and doing more feature coverage—news feature coverage—not features, because we had a features section. These were news features. And we were starting to do a lot of stuff one day and then—I cannot remember who came aboard, but it was a lot of *Gazette* folks, and we built a pretty big desk by then.

BT: Did you have that job when the *Gazette* went out of business? Were you the state editor? Could you?

LD: No. Some way—and, again, Jimmy Jones became state editor, and I became, eventually, business editor. I was trying to do some special project stuff. Did a little bit of that and then became business editor and worked for Leland Duvall. He was a columnist, never was a business editor. We just kind of did the best we could in those years, and finally they did—what did we do then?

BT: When did [Walter?] . . .?

LD: [Bob Camp?] eventually just did—started doing business columns, and I think that was when [Bob Stoberin?] took over the business section.

BT: That was when Bill McIlwaine came in?

LD: It was about that time. Yes. Yes. Bill McIlwaine . . .

BT: When the *Gazette* started responding to the *Democrat's*—the more aggressive *Democrat*?

LD: I never did understand . . .

BT: What they were up to?

LD: What they were up to. No, I understood what the *Democrat* was up to. I never understood what the *Gazette* was up to.

BT: How the *Gazette*—how they were trying . . .

LD: See—now we can move a little bit toward the *Democrat* connection.

BT: Tell me a little bit about your business. How did you get so interested in business or how did . . .?

LD: [Laughs] Hell, I wasn't. It was just something that came up. I always said we weren't covering—well, we really were not covering business. As far as business—business wanted more coverage, and I'm not sure, maybe Carrick, by then, realized that business was an area that should be covered more than it had been.

BT: You knew a lot of people in there?

LD: I knew—see, by then, I knew everybody who was—or was anybody in town.

BT: Because you're very gregarious.

LD: [Laughs] What does that mean?

BT: [Laughs] That you do very well at meeting people. You get to know them.

LD: Well, now, we grew up together. We were fraternity brothers through school. We went to school together. I got around a lot when I was working for the state desk because I was Foreman's connection out into the state. In fact, I was the *Ga-*

zette's connection. Ernie Deane and I were one of the first ones—among the first ones—to get out of the state after the 1957 [and] 1959 [problems?] in which they burned *Gazettes*. A lot of people were just plain afraid to go out there, but Ernie and I—we didn't have a lot of sense, so we thought that everybody liked us. So we went out there . . . [Is this in reference to the *Gazette's* stance in the LR Central High crisis?]

BT: [And sure enough they did, whether or not you were always treated nicely?]

LD: Always treated nicely. We went up there every time a thing there was—[?] suppers, rotary club meetings, and chamber of commerce annual meetings—we did everything whenever we could rub shoulders with people.

BT: You were getting ready to tell me about when you were working in the business section as a columnist—how the *Democrat* connection came in.

LD: Oh, okay. During those later years at the *Gazette*—of course, the so called "war"—the newspaper war came up, and a lot of real animosity for—I gather, I didn't know the *Democrat's* side, but at the *Gazette* there was a lot animosity. But John Robert Starr, who was—was he managing editor? Wasn't that his title?

BT: I believe so.

LD: He didn't have another?

BT: I'm not sure, but he was in charge.

LD: He was in charge.

BT: He was pretty much in charge, other than Mr. Hussman.

LD: Well, see, he and a bunch of AP [Associated Press] guys and—because I was on the state desk and dealt with the AP—because the state desk dealt so much with AP, I dealt with him a lot. We did a lot of things.

BT: Was that when he was the AP—did you deal with him when he was AP bureau chief [unintelligible]?

LD: Oh, yes. I'm sorry that was—yes, when he was AP bureau chief. We did a lot of things together. And I did a lot of things together with my counterparts at the *Democrat*. Then the newspaper war started. That was after Hussman bought it and Starr was the—but since we were still friends, I mean, we raised—started families and raised families together. Folks like [Rick Temple and Bob Shaw and Bill Simmons?]. Anyway, we were friends, and even during the newspaper war Starr and I would—and, I think, Randy Tardy—they would eat at the same cheap lunch places that I would eating at, so we were pretty much friends. And he—Starr—as I understand it, I don't think anybody from the *Gazette* was supposed to be allowed on the second—on the third [floor]—wherever the newsroom was at the time. And I was over there all the time, even . . .

BT: The *Democrat*, because he was—he had been a friend for a long time?

LD: Yes. Yes. We'd been friends and buddies. We talked over what was going on—nothing deep, but just being friends talking over what was going on. After the *Democrat* bought the *Gazette* . . .

BT: What were you doing at the *Gazette* when it sold? Were you with the business—you were a business columnist?

LD: I think I was a business columnist. Somehow or another every time something didn't work out, I got it. And I think Dave Smith [a *Gazette* business writer] was another one. We just started picking up pieces when something didn't work.

BT: He became editor of *Arkansas Business* or something with *Arkansas Business*?

LD: Yes. I think he did. Anyway, there was a whole bunch of us back there in the back [of the new departments] and the Gannett people [the company that bought the *Gazette* were trying all kinds of things like regional conditions and special sections. Nothing ever worked out. And who wound up getting it and doing it? Dave Smith, me, and it seems like there was one other back there. I can't remember who it was. Richard, Richard, Richard—no, it don't ring. Anyway, then we went and folded—when the *Democrat* bought the *Gazette*. I [played out?] a couple of years trying to do some things on my own.

BT: Doing business kinds of things or freelance writing?

LD: Just anything.

BT: Yes, I did, too. [Laughs].

LD: Yes, I bet we—did we not work together at one time on something?

BT: We may have. I wouldn't—[?][laid out about] a year at least before . . .

LD: I don't know if Starr actually said this, but it was kind of an indication—"Stay out a couple of years and then come back over and see if you can't find something." I ran into Griffin Smith one time. I went up to see Griffin because I was really kind of wanting to something more toward the library, like dealing in the library. I [have] been always fascinated with the morgues, the newspaper morgues. Anyway, that's what I came to see him about.

BT: Just getting organized—combining the *Gazette* and the *Democrat* files?

LD: Well, that and—yes, kind of putting it together. At the *Gazette*, when I was state editor, the way they were filing in our library was not satisfactory. We started our own state desk library system, which was not anywhere near a library system, but it was quick referral and it was there. So we built up a pretty good system. And that [was probably better for certain years?]—than our own library had.

BT: Then you had to ask someone and they had to get it for you?

LD: Oh, the way they filed was just unbelievable. Oddly enough, I married the librarian—one of the librarians. She was not in charge, but she [?]. Anyway, that was when I got interested in the library, and I thought that maybe the *Democrat*—I didn't know their system at all, and it turns out they had some good people and—plenty of sense dealing with that. Anyway, somehow or other Griffin told me to just go out there in the newsroom and find something to do.

BT: Had you been friends—had you known Griffin Smith before?

LD: Yes, I knew Griffin well.

BT: He is not from El Dorado?

LD: No. He is from here—from Little Rock, but I knew him through various contacts and social circles. So, somehow I wound up with Roger Hedges. I think, maybe, Roger was city editor or something around that time? I started doing some little bit heavier projects than just the daily news coverage. I mean, I did some of that.

BT: What did you think when you went to the *Democrat* after having worked for the *Gazette* over the years in the 1950s until 1991 when it closed? What was the *Democrat* like in contrast to the *Gazette*?

LD: Well, okay, then—yes, I can do it from both. When I—the *Democrat* took most of the *Gazette* people, which was kind of—not really a newspaper, and—it was just an afternoon paper that kind of picked up . . .

BT: You mean the *Democrat* was . . .

LD: The *Democrat* was.

BT: An [emulation?] of the *Gazette*.

LD: That's right.

BT: They just rewrote the—they seemed to just rewrite the *Gazette*.

LD: That's right. It was a rewrite city. There were a lot of tall tales involving—for instance, the sports section, at one time, created—they knew that the *Democrat* did not have a sports staff out there really covering things. They created a football team with fictional players on it and carried it all the way through to the playoffs, and, of course, it never existed. As I understand it, the *Democrat* wouldn't staff the playoff game.

BT: It was all fictional?

LD: All fictional—had great names in it. They were doing stunts like that. By the end, it was getting old—at the *Gazette* it was getting kind of funny time. Anyway, my one image of the *Democrat* was that I was with the scruffiest people I'd ever seen in my life. [Laughs] They just—they were just not *Gazette* type reporters.

BT: They weren't paid well.

LD: They weren't paid well. They couldn't buy any other clothes, decent stuff. They couldn't go out during the day and go to lunches and that sort of thing [because of afternoon paper deadlines.]. I knew several of them. Were you over there then?

BT: I was. I was at the *Arkansas Democrat* for six years from 1970 to 1976.

LD: Yes.

BT: But Gene Foreman was the managing editor when I went there. I followed him because I had worked for him before at the Pine Bluff Commercial.

LD: Oh, that's right. And another thing was we—the "Farkleberry Follies."

BT: I was going to ask you about that.

LD: Yes, that was a connection. It had started . . .

BT: Tell the people who may not know what it is.

LD: "Farkleberry Follies" was a production of musical satire of politics and people and anything we could satirize. It was started by Sigma Delta Chi, the Society of Professional Journalists [SPJ], back in the mid 1960s. I had gotten in on it because I was interested in doing some backstage work and scenery. I went over one night to do that and somehow or another got a role as [State Supreme Court] Justice Jim Johnston, which I carried on for many years. Even with Virginia [Mr. Johnson's wife] not standing beside me, standing up for Arkansas.

BT: You were very good at that. [Laughs]

LD: That was the only thing I was ever good at. [Laughs]

BT: That was Leroy talking like Jim Johnson, just now. Folks who read the transcript will not get the full weight of.

LD: I was dealing with a lot of *Democrat* people, because Starr and several of them were in SPJ. And, probably, that was one reason I got to go up into the news-room. I mean, I wasn't playing the newspaper war game .. I was doing more "Follies" stuff.

BT: Also, you became one of the writers and actually the chief producer.

LD: Yes, I became the producer eventually.

BT: Didn't you help write some of the scripts?

LD: We don't know who wrote those scripts.

BT: Leroy, time has passed. Don't you think you can disclose some of them?

LD: [Laughs] We have to know about liable laws here. No. Well, let me see, who from the *Democrat* would have been working at it? Well, a lot of it was mine and Bill Lancaster's, and Craig Douglas's. There were some good ones. They were really good.

BT: Mike Trimble.

LD: Yes, Mike Trimble, another *Gazette* reporter. He was real good at it. I can't think of who all they were. I even got Starr to be a performer. And he said, "Well, I'm no performer." It turns out that he's a good one. He said, "I can't sing," and I said, "Well, it doesn't matter whether you can sing or not," because it really does-n't. Well, he can't sing, but he was a good stage presence and he was a good draw. People wanted to come see him. Some of the stuff he did was really good. I always told him, "Starr, you are a lot better than what you think you are on that stage."

BT: Yes. He had kind of an outrageous personality, anyway.

LD: Yes, but, see, he and I had gone through some problems together after—well, we worked against something. We were pretty successful in that. It was amazing how he and I did. The reason for it was because at first I was representative for A. R. Nelson for something called "The Arkansas Managing Editors Press Association."

BT: "The Associated Press of Managing Editors."

LD: Editors association, that's what it was. Eventually I became president of it, and I never was a managing editor or a publisher. I don't know how it happened. Anyway, Starr and I worked together in that quite a bit.

[00:25:57.03]

BT: At that time, he was the AP Bureau Chief.

LD: That's right. He was the AP Bureau Chief. And eventually, I coaxed him into being on stage, and he did really good. He was a lot of help in other ways in putting that show together that nobody ever gave him credit for.

BT: You mean, in getting people to participate?

LD: Well, no. A lot of that show had to do with the contact of the customer who was going to come to it, and, of course, Starr had contacts all over the state. So, he worked a lot of that and through AP, and through the Sigma Delta Chi, and everything that he dealt with was a real good resource to bring people in, a great source. We used to have surprise guests. He would help coax those people into being the surprise guest. So we dealt together there.

BT: The "Follies" was very popular. I remember when you had to expand to more and more nights just to get everybody in.

LD: As a matter of fact, at first the only time we could do the show out there at Murray's Dinner theater, which was where it started, was on the nights they were shut down. On Monday nights they were shut down. So we took this Monday and the Monday a week later. Anyway, he [Starr] was big in helping get things started. I remember, in the case of the surprise guest, that he played a pretty good role in this. On the first night of the show—which was the first time the show had ever been performed, and we were just using anything we had as props—no sets, no backdrops, no scenery, nothing. It was virtually a blank stage, and Betty Fowler on the Piano and whoever was performing. Do you want me to tell this?

BT: Yes, I do. And I want to make sure that we are not running out of tape. We may be getting kind of close. I guess it will pop off. Go ahead. Do you remember what year it started?

LD: I would say 1966. It was the year [Governor Winthrop Paul] Rockefeller went into office. Would that have been 1966 or 1965?

BT: Elections are in . . .

LD: Elections are in even years.

BT: So, 1965. Well, is seems like he was Governor from 1964 to 1970. He was just defeated by [Dale] Bumpers when I came to Little Rock in 1970.

LD: Okay, then, it was 1965. Something makes me want to say 1966, but it was 1965 then. Are you still looking at that? Anyway, George Fisher, the late cartoonist, of course, at the *Gazette*, had—he created—he [had] done this business about a Farkleberry tree being saved or cut down by [Governor] Orval [Eugene] Faubus. It was a political pre-election effort.

BT: He was helping highway crews or something like that.

LD: Yes. Anyway, the show became the "Farkleberry Follies" kind of in honor of Orval Faubus.

BT: How easy he was to satirize . . .

LD: He was great to satirize, and he would cooperate.

BT: Let's see, Leroy, I'm going to stop this just for a moment just to turn it over.

LD: All right.

[00:30:00.22]

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

BT: We just turned the tape over and are resuming—talking about the "Farkleberry Follies," which was a very important thing in the newspaper and in the media community in Little Rock for many years.

LD: Yes. Raised a lot of money.

BT: Whose idea was it to start it? Do you recall?

LD: I understand Bob McCord had a lot to do with it, and I can't remember who is that guy from Benton [Arkansas]—editor from Benton and was the original writer and producer.

BT: Was it Sam Hodges?

LD: Sam Hodges. No, I'm not talking about Sam Hodges. No. No. No. No. No. Sam was the owner of the paper; this was the editor down there. Anyway, it was a pretty tumultuous start to put it together. The guy walked off the show because of some disagreement over some minor thing. We brought in Margaret Carner,

who was a director and known around town and she got us on with the show. So it was called "Farkleberry Follies," in reference to that great story about the Farkleberry bush on the side of the highway. The first night the show began with George Fisher in his costume that he wore all the time, blue overalls and hat, picking a guitar. He had a little twig in the guitar and it was a Farkleberry bush twig. He came on stage singing his old Arkansas songs, and he was looking for a Orval Faubus, but he couldn't find him anywhere. What happened was he came in on the floor of the production area of the stage and there was bench, a park bench with a street lamp on it, which was the only scenery we had in that first show. On the bench was a bum covered up in newspapers. We used the bum as somebody Fisher talked to as he went through the show. And as he went through the show he talked to the bum about how he "can't find Orval Faubus." Before every skit, he would kind of talk to the bum on the bench and kind of explain the next skit that was coming up. We did maybe eight or ten skits. At the end of the show, and each time he went to each skit, the bush had grown. That little twig had grown bigger each skit. At the end of the final skit he came on and the twig had gotten so big it was a tree, and he was having to pull it in a wagon. So he went up to the bum on the bench and under the streetlight said he couldn't find Orval Faubus anywhere so he guessed he must be gone. And he left the wagon and the tree there in front of the bench and walked off. It was very quiet, and people weren't really sure what was happening. And the bum started stretching and started taking the newspapers off from his feet on up. It was Orval Faubus—

the real Orval Faubus—and, of course, this brought the house down and set the tone of the show.

BT: I can imagine.

LD: Well, the next Monday night—same thing, talked to the bum on the bench and you could hear people—in our recordings—you could hear people saying, "It's Orval Faubus. He's a bum under the tree." So, at the end—same thing same routine—he left the wagon at the tree and walked off and everything was really quite. You could hear them saying, "It's Faubus". The bum started taking the papers off and jumped up. And it was Sid McMath, the ex-governor, who was a great Faubus enemy.

BT: He was defeated by Faubus.

LD: Yes, he was defeated by Faubus. McMath got up, and, of course, the applause is just deafening, and he said, "Did you think that they thought I was Orval Faubus." [Laughter]. So, of course, from then on you couldn't buy a ticket to the Follies. I mean, it was sold out. But then we realized that there was such a big demand that we went from one Monday to four days: Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. Then we had to have a rehearsal day—a dress rehearsal day—and that's where we let in people who couldn't afford the price of the tickets—they were going way up—like news media people.

BT: And that raised money for what?

LD: For use by Sigma Delta Chi.

BT: Used for scholarships for journalism students?

LD: Yes. Yes, journalism scholarships. Finally, we actually added another day, which was just a technical rehearsal, and people came to it anyway. I mean, we told them, "This show is being set tonight. It's not a show." They came anyway and loved it. In fact, a lot of people liked to come to those early dress rehearsals in part so they could see how a show is done.

BT: And journalists from both newspapers worked together.

LD: From every publication in the city.

BT: In the city, and also from the TV and radio stations.

LD: TV, radio, advertising, everything—everything that had anything to do with publication—magazines.

BT: You know, it seems you always could bring in a few ringers who could really sing and dance [laughs] who did not really belong to the media.

LD: Oddly enough, we lucked out. The problem was finding enough ringers to sing songs that needed to be sung instead of just talk, but even the ones who couldn't sing did great jobs on the stage. I mean, you didn't really have to have a voice. It was mostly just being a persona.

BT: Being funny.

LD: Anyway, it got to the point people had to give $100 to have the right to buy tickets. Don't quote me on that.

BT: After the *Gazette* closed, did the "Farkleberry Follies" continue?

LD: When I went over to the *Democrat* one of the things they did—and they told whoever I was working for—and I think it was Roger, but then later on I was working with Bob Dunn.

BT: Bob Dunn was the business editor?

LD: He is the business editor. Yes, he is a good guy. They virtually gave me six months to a year off, whatever it took to get that thing done. I worked kind of part-time. I mean, I was full-time at the paper, but they gave—because it was very important to have the handling of that show. By then it had become a real business operation. I mean, it had a huge cast and a huge staff and it was making a lot of money. Yes, it continued, and at the *Democrat*, they kind of gave me time off to put it together.

BT: How many years did it run? When did it close?

LD: I thought it was 2001. It was right in there around 2000.

BT: Were there not enough people to draw on, or was it too much work?

LD: We had great talent. It became too much of a chore.

BT: For one person. For you—you were the driving force, weren't you?

LD: We had a huge staff. The staff was good, too. I mean, all the way from secretaries to business handling. They were good. I was just worn out. And Betty Fowler, the musical director, wore out. It was just time to call an end it, unless somebody else wanted to take over. Nobody else seemed to want to take it over.

BT: That was about 2001, you believe?

LD: I think so. I know—I'm pretty sure we did not do a 2001. One of the skits we did—when did the *Gazette* close?

BT: In 1991.

LD: October of 1991?

BT: Yes, October of 1991.

LD: I think it was one that was—that year we did a skit that was just devastating to Gannett, [which then owned the *Gazette*]. And, as I understand it, the hotshots had heard about it and let the big shots in Gannett and some of them here know to come, because that skit received such a response from the audience every time the punch line kicked in. They were bad—and the audience would stand and applaud greatly. I understand they [the Gannett officials] went home that night—that satisfied them—they were going to close the paper.

BT: Did they not let their staff participate anymore?

LD: Some of them—a couple of the honchos were going to be in it and thought it would be fun to do. I'm not going to name them, so they won't get in trouble, but then they said, "Um, this is pretty rough, and we're afraid we'll get in trouble." It was so devastating to them. The "Follies" played a great role in politics throughout its history. I mean, I've seen potential governors and senators being put down so bad in it that that ended their . . .

BT: Their careers?

LD: Their careers. And you've been in enough of them . . .

BT: Yes. I was in a few myself and it was fun. It was a lot of fun to be in it and do . . .

LD: Yes. It wasn't really created to do a show. It was created to bring people together at a bad time. And we could do it. I never heard of Starr objecting to any of his people being in the show.

BT: It gave people a chance to laugh at themselves, and we did.

LD: Yes. Yes. Because we did a lot of laughing at ourselves and the newspaper war, some of the biggest skits were done on the newspapers.

BT: Did you think it helped the political climate of the state, too?

LD: Oh, certainly, it did. Someone said when we were about to pull out—earlier on before we did quit, they said, "You can't do it because it's the one chance that the state of Arkansas gets to laugh at itself." Now, we were playing to several thousand people every time we did the show.

BT: As I recall, the "Follies" always alternated with the Lawyers Gridiron Show.

LD: Well, it really wasn't intentional, but it did happen. They did theirs on the even years, and we did ours on the odd years. But it wasn't intentional, it just happened to be that way. In fact, I worked with Griffin Smith, Sr., the lawyer. He had the same job at the Gridiron as I eventually did with the "Follies," and, of course, he was very helpful to me, telling me how to make the thing work.

BT: That was the father of the current *Democrat* editor?

LD: Yes. And I had meet Griffin Smith, Jr. when Griffin Smith Sr. was doing Gridiron. He was very, very helpful. And I appreciated that.

BT: Well, then, when you went to the *Democrat*, at first you got to do whatever you wanted?

LD: Yes.

BT: What did you want to do?

LD: We were kind of looking for things at that time. I was trying to get more of an overall look at things. I'm trying to think of what we did. Oh, I did a bunch of stuff, but I didn't do that very long before they—I met Bob Dunn, the business

editor. He and I used to drink beer together with some friends, and we got to talking one night about business. Of course, I knew him when I was the business editor at the *Gazette* and he was business editor at the *Democrat*. We got to talking about some things that he wanted to do more coverage of. I said, "Okay, I'll come in and try to do whatever you want to do there." We did a little bit of it and then Bob left. We started doing columns, and more and more columns. One of the editors who came in—we called them "fonkies"— they were the kind of business stories that didn't really have a news peg on them, but they were interesting. We got a bunch of fonkies going. In fact, they wanted a backlog of them so they could put them anywhere. They had a spot on the front page of the business section daily.

BT: Give me some examples. What were some of the "funkies"?

LD: The "fonkies"?

BT: Oh, the "fonkies."

LD: F-O-N-K-I-E-S. Oh, we did so much of them I just started writing them and stacking them up.

BT: Were they about people mostly, or about little odd things?

LD: People, odd things, odd businesses—for instance, there is a company down in Southwest Arkansas somewhere that does picture puzzles—and I cannot remember the name. It still exists. I mean, that would be something people didn't know about it.

BT: Yes.

LD: By then, the business section, like the old state desk at the *Gazette*, was beginning to get outside of just doing routine and started going after stuff. We brought in several young folks that liked that.

BT: You were writing most of them, then?

LD: Yes. Yes. I was just writing whatever it was that they wanted. They really liked the "fonkies." We had some stuff that needed to be written about, but that didn't need to be news stories. So we started putting that together. Finding places where those could go and doing the "fonkies."

BT: Like a little brief about people getting promotions and things like that?

LD: Yes. Yes. That was a big one. There were two or three columns—I can't remember what all they were. Somehow or other they—my columns started picking up. That column I did—I think it was called "Everybody's Business" from the start. It was a little bit more than the other things were.

BT: You got a lot of scoops. You still do.

LD: Oh, yeah. [Laughs] [I] got one today that nobody has.

BT: Oh, really? I haven't read today's business section. What is that?

LD: No, for tomorrow.

BT: Oh, for tomorrow. I guess we'll just have to wait for the paper.

LD: No. Holcomb Heights has been sold.

BT: The big apartment complex on the Arkansas River?

LD: Yes, the first big apartment complex. I'll call them, because that would be a daily story, not a column. That was what was tying me up this morning. But we still get a lot of scoops, and I put a lot of them in my column here. When I got to the

Democrat, Starr had gone. Bob Lutgen, who had been managing editor for the Texarkana newspaper and went from there to Chattanooga [Tennessee, to a paper acquired by Mr. Hussman] was there. Bob was such a good guy. Actually, he was the one who set up whatever we were going to do. I found the *Democrat* people to be really, really nice and enjoyed them thoroughly from the moment I joined them there. When I came to the *Democrat*, they had remodeled the news-room by then and the people were making more money and better . . .

BT: Benefits? We hardly got any benefits when I was there.

LD: Yes. There were benefits. I just thought it was a nice feeling all over. Anyway, they started giving the business section a little bit more. What we were doing was not the routine. Finally, I just wound up doing the column. All of us who came over from the *Gazette*, plus some from the *Democrat*, like Randy Tardy, were all getting up toward retirement age, and they gave us good deals as they were trying to trim. And they gave me the column.

BT: So now you're a part-time employee?

LD: "Everybody's Business." It's part-time [and] full-time. It's kind of hard to ex-plain, but let's make it part-time for the record.

BT: You do your column—and it's a Sunday column—once a week?

LD: Yes, once a week.

BT: But you have to work on it every day? Gathering information for it all the time?

LD: I can't work more than twenty hours.

BT: You can't work more than twenty hours a day?

LD: A week.

BT: And get paid for it? But you can work as much as you want to?

LD: Well, if I felt like more than twenty-five [or] twenty hours a week, of course, I'll turn it in and get paid overtime, or whatever it is now.

BT: Were you in charge of the *Democrat* Business Section at one time?

LD: No. No. It was always whatever they needed.

BT: A columnist, or a writer of "fonkies," or whatever?

LD: Yes, "fonkies" and then, of course, I also wrote whatever routine there ever came in. But in all truth, my eyesight was getting to bother me a lot, so a lot of stuff like company reports were more trouble to me when it comes to seeing.

BT: How long had you been doing just your column on a part-time basis?

LD: I want to say at least . . .

BT: It must have been 1993 when you went over there.

LD: To the *Democrat*? Yes.

BT: With the *Gazette* closing in 1991.

LD: About 1993. Well, I did the column the whole time, but just doing it on a part-time basis, probably about five years.

BT: How do you think the *Democrat* today compares to the *Gazette* when you were working for it? Or do you—do you see any comparison? The *Democrat* is now the state paper, right?

LD: I like it. And a lot of people I've talked to, who have been in the same position I've been in over the years, think it's pretty good. Of course, the *Gazette* people don't think it's very good at all—the former *Gazette* people are—it's a good effort.

BT: They have a much larger news hole than a lot of papers.

LD: Yes. They have a large news hole. I've had people come into town—because I am dealing constantly with what is happening—and they'll say, "That's a good newspaper." They say it's—the *Democrat* is better to read, and easier to read, and stuff like that.

BT: When you travel, I think you find out that there are not very many newspapers that have the coverage and amount of news hole.

LD: That's right. That's right. I'd like to see more telephones.

BT: When I worked at the *Democrat* in 1970, we had three reporters to a telephone. [Laughs]

LD: Well, I can remember that. And when y'all [you all] got the computers over there they just had one computer to the newsroom.

BT: I didn't stay until the computer age. When I left, we still had to type our stories on typewriters, but we had a scanner they went through.

LD: Well, see, that's a neat thing about it. When I went over, everything had been changed, so it was a nice operation. I mean, it was a going jessie then. The only problem you had was deciding whether you wanted one of the newer computers. They had a good computer for us, and it came—were talking about the *Democrat* now. Of course, the *Gazette* was so far ahead in how—in front of everybody on [getting] computers.

LD: In fact, I can remember over at the *Gazette* one day I was typing on the typewriter [and] the next day there was this machine in front of me I had no idea how to operate. [Laughs] Carrick [Patterson, the editor] hollered out and said, "You're too stupid it to work it anyway!"

BT: Well, did the *Democrat* use some of the *Gazette's* old equipment, or did they already have their own equipment and just sell the *Gazette's*?

LD: Didn't they acquire it, but not really use it?

BT: I'm not sure.

LD: I think they did get it, but then found out it was really antiquated.

BT: So you had to learn a new system when you went to work at the *Democrat*?

LD: It was pretty much the same system. They were the same, but they were not the same machines. They decided to go ahead to a next generation at the *Democrat*. They were good computers.

BT: Can you single out one story, or a few stories, that your proudest of that you've done since you've been at the *Democrat*, or even at the *Gazette*? You've done so much and you've been around so long.

LD: Well, at the *Gazette* I enjoyed—I chased Joe, Joey [Hildebrand]. Oh, this was another thing John Robert and I were both doing when he was with AP. There was an old boy who lived up on the mountain up toward Booger Hollow above Russellville and Dover. He'd held up a tourist couple who had gotten out of their car at a scenic point. There wasn't anybody hurt. Anyway, they sent him down to prison. The prisons were run pretty loosely in those days. He had gone on to see his sick daddy, and ran off with his cousin. Anyway, he didn't show back up at the—anyway didn't show back up in prison and became known as "Joe Hildebrand: Outlaw of the Ozarks." Well, Starr, I think, at that time was a correspondent at Life Magazine. Life Magazine did a lot. They had a ballad of Joe Hildebrand and it was all kinds of hoopla more than anything else. I went up looking

for Joe Hildebrand [and] wrote a great two piece series on how Joe's heroics and admiration was indirectly proportional to how far away [people were] from his home. Those who lived around his home thought he was a piece of trash, and others thought he was a hero.

BT: Was he just hiding in the woods?

LD: He wasn't really hiding in the woods. He and his girlfriend were just wandering around. He was a hill boy.

BT: Just kept moving? Did you ever meet him in person?

LD: Yes. Well, the time I met him—I saw him in person—was the night they were caught and brought down to Little Rock. Actually, this was when I was working at the *Gazette*, and we had to change the—one of the parts of the series, because he got caught. The series was coming out Sunday and he got caught, like, on a Friday; so we had to change it because it had already been set. Nelson just real quickly did it—just changed the tense. Later on, he walked out of a prison again. So, this time I went hunting for Joe. I knew Joe would sooner or later go to Frances Standridge, his girlfriend. I found Frances on top of a mountain picking peaches. I was not a photographer, but I did this great picture of Frances up in a tree with a cousin picking peaches with the sun behind them. And when she got through I said, "I know Joe is going to show up here around some time." She said, "Well, he might be right there in them trees going to shoot your ass right now." [Laughter] I said, "Well, tell him not to. [Laughter]

BT: Do you think he was?

LD: No. He wasn't like that, anyway. She would say anything. That was a good story. I liked that. Then I wrote stuff like the "Clarksville Painter." Remember, there was a big lion loose up in Clarksville [Arkansas] area. I went up there and went out in the woods, in the deep forests back in there with somebody—this old boy lived deep—he had a great name like [Delce?] Williams or something. Every afternoon he would sit out on the log out in front of his house and wait for the school bus to bring his daughter home so he could escort her so the painter wouldn't get her.

BT: The "painter," meaning how they pronounced panther.

LD: That's right.

BT: Sounds like a P-A-I-N-T-E-R.

LD: Yes, "painter." I said, "How big is a panther?" And he said, "It's bigger than a big dog."

BT: Did they ever catch a panther?

LD: They never caught it. They saw it. It was—it was probably just a mountain lion. We have a lot of those up there. They killed some chickens or something. That got picked up by wire services everywhere. The best thing I remember about that was Bon Cary, who was UPI [United Press International] bureau chief, called me and said he would like to pick up the story, and I said, "Sure." He said, "Well, I can't rewrite it. You can't rewrite it. The lead is too good." So he said, "Is it okay if I use it as is?" I said, "Sure."

BT: He gave you a byline? Maybe?

LD: I wrote so much and wrote in so many papers and publications that I just never paid much attention. Once they were gone, they were gone. I don't know. I'd see them every now and then.

BT: When you work on your business stories, do you call people? Do you go see people? You know so many people.

LD: You know so many people, I just make myself available.

BT: People just like to tell you stuff, don't they?

LD: Yes.

BT: I've always thought of you as the kind of person that people like to talk to and tell things to.

LD: Well, I just make myself available, where they know I'm going to be at such and such a time, and they'll come if they've got a story or they'll call. I get a lot of calls.

BT: A lot of tips and check out.

LD: Tips and check out. There is always something going on, always pretty good news that's not going to anywhere else.

BT: When you did the story about U.S. Pizza Company going to build its headquarters up here at the Masonic temple. No one else would have gotten that, and they wouldn't have announced it, either.

LD: I try to do more—that's the only thing I would recommend to the business section of the *Democrat*—the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, today—that they do more on people. For some reason, they don't realize that people are still news. Not just

because they got put in jail, or whatever. They could do a little bit more of that, but I think the business section is great.

BT: Yes. And people in business are usually the reason that businesses are successful, or fail, or get into trouble.

LD: Yes. Well, you are, obviously, going to do pieces on the big ones—Sam Walton and Don Tyson. But there are a lot of little stories in business, and the problem is that, of course, a business news section has only got so much room, and pretty much the routine is that you take up that room. But I would like to see them have more room to put in more stories about the little business man, because that's what people read. When I was at the *Gazette* creating that column on business people, that was the best-read thing not only in the section, but in the whole paper every Sunday. I mean, that was the first thing that people did. What I did was I wrote the thing to the car lot boys. In other words, people—car boys are some of the most knowledgeable people around.

BT: The people that sold cars are?

LD: The people who parked your car when you park.

BT: Oh, the valet parkers.

LD: Valet parking—well, do you remember at the *Gazette* we had a parking lot boy?

[01:00:40.13]

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[Beginning of Tape 2, Side 1]

BT: Okay. You were talking about if you could more.

LD: I would recommend more stories on people in business. I think they pretty well got coverage all the way down to the type. In other words, the stuff I do is the information that is going to drop between the cracks, or not quite be worthy of spot news.

BT: When the newspaper war was going on, did you feel a lot of pressure like a lot of the rest of us did, or were you sort of in a different mode?

LD: I was in a different environment, and I never did.

BT: Has it made any difference being not in a competitive situation now that the *Democrat-Gazette* is the only paper?

LD: I don't know whether I could have worked under Starr or not. There might have been too much. The thing about it is I had been around so long and knew so many people that there wasn't going to be many people who were going to be competing against me.

BT: Because you got your story and nobody else could get it.

LD: Nobody else. In fact, I could even block it. I could even say, "Let me have this. I'm going to put it in Sunday and don't release it so anybody else could get it." And they would say, "Okay."

BT: Well, now, is there anything that competes against you? Television and radio—nothing else does?

LD: I don't think so.

BT: I guess that *Arkansas Business* ?

LD: The *Arkansas Business* does some and *Arkansas* . . .

BT: *Arkansas Times*?

LD: *Arkansas Times* does some.

BT: They're both weekly newspapers, and specialized.

LD: See, *Arkansas Business* can beat us on some stuff, because they can jump it in their paper and it comes out—some people get it on Saturdays, I think. So they can beat us a little bit on it, if it's a release of some sort. But usually I don't use releases unless I get them well ahead of time and get them exclusively.

BT: And you use your sources.

LD: Yes. Yes.

BT: You have good sources.

LD: One of the things I had problems with at the *Gazette* was that I wanted to use "a source." And, you know, they had a big thing about saying "a source." They would say, "Well, who is your source?" I said, "The source, and I'm not going to name him, but you can bet you are not going to get a better source."

BT: And that was okay? They trusted you enough on your—because you always paid off? You always turned out to be truthful?

LD: Yes. Yes.

BT: Did you ever have to tell Bob Douglas, the managing editor, or Carrick?

LD: No. They knew pretty well.

BT: They would trust you.

LD: They would trust me. You know, they knew. In fact, they would ask me what was going on in the world, and I would tell them. I had a little bit of a problem over at the *Democrat* when I first got there. God, I can't remember when it was.

It couldn't have been much then because it didn't register much on my mind about "a source" or "the source." I just call it . . .

BT: You still use "a source".

LD: Yes. But you can bet that they're the best.

BT: They're the good ones?

LD: Oh, I know what it was. It wasn't over the source. They wanted me to give them my sources.

BT: Oh, so they could get their own tips.

LD: I said, "Oh, no."

BT: [Laughs]

LD: Well, that didn't go over real good. I said, "No, my sources are my sources." They are the best and I'm not going to have it screwed up.

BT: And that's the way you still operate.

LD: Yes.

BT: Is there anything else you would like to say about working for newspapers—at the *Arkansas Democrat*, or just working . . .?

LD: Yes. I love doing what I do. I'm getting to a point where it'd probably be more fun to play in a garden. That's the real reason I went to school, to college in the first place and went to the university. It was to make contacts and build that net-work and sources, because, about that time, people were leaving the state. And a lot of us said, "We are going to stay." In fact, I think we had a story the other day about somebody who said they were going to stay—about my age. There were a lot of us, particularly in media, advertising, and public relations that stayed. And,

of course, the big shots knew they were staying—Tyson, whoever. We started bringing a lot of people my age that had gone to Texas or St. Louis [Missouri]—whatever—started bringing them back.

BT: Were you bringing them back into journalism, or were they coming back to do whatever . . .?

LD: Just coming back to Arkansas. Oh, yes, we brought in journalists. Some of them came back, but mine was just business and life in Arkansas in general.

BT: And that was partly outgrowth of going to the University of Arkansas and the people you knew there that were lifelong contacts.

LD: That became lifelong—I mean, those networks are power. They really know what is going on politically, business wise. Of course, one of my greatest sources that I can reveal today is an old boy from down in Prattsville, Arkansas, named Witt Stephens. You'd think he didn't know everything there was to know, and he'd tell—I knew about the *Democrat-Gazette* a long time before it happened.

BT: Who was going to win the newspaper war, and how it was going to end?

LD: It wasn't the winning, it was about timing.

BT: You knew who was going to win and how it was going to end.

LD: Yes. How it was going to end, because Witt understood things.

BT: For those of us who don't—those who read this and might not know, who is Witt Stephens?

LD: W. R. Witt Stephens, pronounced Whitt. W-H-I-T-T.

BT: But spelled W-I-T-T?

LD: He was an old country boy from down around Prattsville. He created one of the great businesses in the state of Arkansas, starting with the Arkansas Louisiana Gas Company [ARKLA]. Then he created Stephens, Inc., which he turned over to his brother, Jack Stephens. They're both dead. Jack just died earlier last year.

BT: That was an investment . . .

LD: An investment banking house.

BT: Fully family owned?

LD: Fully family owned. It was always said to be the largest investment banking house off Wall Street. I asked Witt one day and [impersonating Witt] Witt talked liked this—he had a real old gravelly voice.

BT: The transcriber will get all the full flavor of this. [Laughs]

LD: I asked him, "Mr. Witt, tell me, are you really the second largest investment house off Wall Street?" And he said, "No. I'm probably the biggest." [Laughter] I said, "Bigger than what?" He said, "What's them Merrill Lynches? Yes. I'm bigger than Merrill Lynch." And he was, but he was counting all his gas reserves over in Oklahoma in Arkoma basin. But, yes, he was a great source.

BT: He was a very influential man and very influential in business, politics.

LD: Very influential. Yes, in politics and you name it. He was a good guy, too. Anyway, I would go to lunch with him a lot. Starr claimed he only went once, but I could have sworn he was over there all the time.

BT: But you would go to lunch in Mr. Witt's office, right? Or in his building, his Stephens, Inc. building? He would invite people—certain people on certain days to get their views and give them his, is that right?

LD: Yes. Yes, everything from judges, newspaper people, investments, lawyers, everything. Of course, you would learn so much sitting there and—but the thing was, you never betrayed the . . .

BT: The source of your information.

LD: Right. If it was not for publication, you didn't betray it. Of course, so many of those "bankers" were my fraternity brothers that I had pledged during my years up there; so at one time every major bank in the market was a fraternity brother.

BT: So, your ambition when you were in college was to be able to play, and you still got do a lot of that as well as a lot of work.

LD: I do a lot of kidding around about the "pre." I knew what I was doing all along. I mean, my life has been a lot more calculating than I want to remember.

BT: Then you realize that you want people to know.

LD: It's fun. In fact, we still have a group that meets every afternoon at 5:00. You know, you have these groups that meet every day somewhere or another.

BT: You do? These are like still your old college contacts, and new ones, too?

LD: These are people that I've gotten to know over the years.

BT: I've seen you with a Friday luncheon group that you meet always . . .

LD: Yes. Yes. Always.

BT: . . . mostly people with newspaper and other . . .

LD: Media.

BT: . . . media connections.

LD: That was like the late Pat Walsh, who just recently died, and Randy Tardy, Jim Cleveland, Herby Bird, and Charlie Scarborough.

BT: These are radio personalities, right? Well, several of them.

LD: Yes. Jim Hunt. Ed Dozier comes in every now and then. Ron Oliver [former] head of the State Democrat Party, is one of them. Jon Kennedy was. He and his son Brad were members, but Jon's health problems have gotten so bad that he's not there anymore.

BT: Do people come to you now? Asking you to be a source? Are you a source now?

LD: Institutional memory is what they look for. Because I've done so much over the years, I try not to know it. In other words, I'll say, "Okay. I know what you're asking. Let me confirm this with Randy Tardy or with Bill Cravens." You know, somebody that really knows. I know who they are. I know the telephone number.

BT: You know where to tell people to look for information.

LD: Yes. But not—yes, right. I do a lot of business section—I'll kind of guide them on something. Lately—I remember because it just happened—the Fayetteville shale situation that a major something . . .

BT: Maybe they can get petroleum products out of shale oil.

LD: They can get it out. There is no question at all we've been able to get it out; it has always been up there. It's just the price. Now, the price in there is justified. There are literally hundreds of millions of dollars being poured into the area there.

BT: But did you get that story for the *Democrat* from sources, or lead them to that story?

LD: Well, I mean, I sit everyday. I'm sitting with somebody who is doing something. [Pulaski County Judge] Buddy Villines is one of my Sunday night people. I meet

at lunch every day down at the Faded Rose. If they are not the source, they know what is going on.

BT: That's why I've had such a hard time catching up with you, Leroy, to schedule this interview, because you're meeting with your other sources—with your friends and networking, your extensive network of friends and sources.

LD: And it started at the university. I mean those networks—of course, David Pryor used his SAE, Sigma Nu—whatever, he used that network to launch himself.

BT: His success in politics?

LD: Yes.

BT: What was your fraternity?

LD: Sigma Nu. I was Sigma Nu. The Sigma Nu turned out a lot of bankers and men in the advertising media—the Jim Johnsons, the Jim Hunts, the Ben Combs were all in Sigma Nu.

BT: All those are public relations people, aren't they?

LD: And advertising. Through them—of course, it's odd, I guess, how it just expands. It just goes out and out and out.

BT: Because they get clients and then they extend their influence.

LD: Yes. There are a lot of my acquaintances I met on the fringe—right on the edge, but they were sure good sources. They know what's going on.

BT: Well, Leroy, I've enjoyed this. Is there anything else you would like to say about the state of journalism and Arkansas? You've enjoyed journalism always.

LD: Yes. I've had a big time with it. Yes. I think it is doing good. I think the *Democrat* is doing great at being the only daily newspaper. Doing great. Watch out for Stephens.

BT: Yes, the Stephens successor to Witt and Jack Stephens and their company has invested in a lot of newspapers.

LD: Well, it's their newspaper division that is the old Donrey connection.

BT: Well, where do they own newspapers now?

LD: Northwest Arkansas. North Little Rock. Pine Bluff. Small papers, like up in the valley.

BT: The Arkansas River Valley?

LD: Yes. They now have a connection to the *Arkansas Times*.

BT: I did not know that.

LD: I didn't know that until the other day. The *Times* has a website as I understand, and they're using the Donrey, the Stephens—Donrey Capital Bureau, which I understand doesn't publish anything daily. They say it's the biggest bureau out there—news bureau at the state Capitol. They are putting it on their website. I just saw this the other day, and I may be . . .

BT: The *Arkansas Times* advertises its blog, and a blog has a lot of news stuff.

LD: They're using Stephens media stuff, too. It's going to be interesting to watch. I saw it with the *Arkansas Gazette* and the *Arkansas Democrat*. Oh, another thing that I skipped on the *Democrat* was when I was state editor . . .

BT: Of the *Arkansas Gazette*?

LD: Of the *Arkansas Gazette* for years. Our first line of coverage was "stringers" out in the state. You see, the state has to cover everything but Pulaski County [Arkansas]. We also had [a] Washington, DC bureau.

BT: And you use many people from newspapers as well just as people in the community.

LD: Right. Coroners were big. We used coroners, funeral home directors who were usually coroners. The *Democrat* never quite figured that out. They'd say, "How are you getting this information?" I wasn't going to tell them, but it was through the funeral homes.

BT: And you paid them a little bit of money because they were providing information.

LD: Yes. That was the reason they were called "stringers." They sent in [and] measured the little copy that had been written up, and they—instead of sending in all this newspaper, they would measure—they would lay it out and measure the column up with a string. They would wrap up the string and put it on a postcard or in an envelope and paste it down with a piece of cellophane. Then, when I got it, I would take it out and measure it and you could tell, "Well, that was a yard of news," and you paid so much for each. That's the way the stringer idea came up. But we also used a lot newspaper people. And they were really good. Most of them were afternoon papers, so we were not in competition. They could get their paper out and have it in their afternoon—and call as soon as they could get loose from getting their paper out—call us at the state desk, and we would have it the next morning. A number of them worked for the Hussman papers. At that time, I think that Hussman let them do that. I began to see—one year I saw it start to

close down a little bit. I got real curious about that, and I told Bob Douglas—seemed to have gotten nowhere. One night they had a situation on something down in southwest Arkansas. Our real good stringer down there didn't call us. I mean, we called him. We knew what was going on, and we said, "Have you got something?" He said, "Yes, I got a lot. I'll call you." Then he never did. And yet, the Hussman papers had a bunch in it, and I realized they knew. They shut us down.

BT: When was that? Was that right before the newspaper war? Was that right before Walter Hussman bought the *Arkansas Democrat*?

LD: Right. Right. Right. Or maybe he had bought it and they hadn't changed over yet, but I saw it.

BT: They hadn't changed to a morning paper yet.

LD: I think that was about the time.

BT: There aren't many afternoon papers left now, are there?

LD: No.

BT: The other Hussman papers were in what community?

LD: El Dorado, Hot Springs, Texarkana. I think there was one in Camden.

BT: And Magnolia? Was there one in Magnolia?

LD: Magnolia, yes. I'm trying to think about Camden.

BT: Does the *Democrat* use stringers now, do you think? Or do they use people out in the field?

LD: I don't know. The *Gazette* cut out stringers when Jimmy Jones took over the state desk. He didn't want it.

BT: You just had your own staff do everything?

LD: Yes, and they didn't cover it very well.

BT: It's more professional, I guess.

LD: Yes.

BT: [Laughs]

LD: Of course, a lot of times stringers were about as professional as you could get. You know, they were good people. They were loyal. We used to have whole weekends where we would have all the stringers come in. Since you were covering seventy-five counties, you know, you hit probably fifty of them.

BT: Have a party for them?

LD: Yes. Let them go through the paper and Mr. [J. N.] Heiskell or somebody would talk to them, or Nelson. But that's the first inkling I got that the *Democrat* was coming down the pike.

BT: That they might be real competition?

LD: They might be real competition. Well, there were those of us who thought they would be from the start. Then, of course, we were getting from the higher ups that—"Nah, this is not a newspaper war."

BT: But you thought it was.

LD: I saw it was coming.

BT: Why did you think so?

LD: Because I had the contacts. I knew everything.

BT: You knew everything, and you knew that they were willing to do what it took to win that war.

LD: That's right. I mean, my contacts on that were—it was like the source; those were the sources. It was kind of fascinating.

BT: But it is still an interesting business working . . .

LD: Yes, it's still—I think today—man, it's changing out there right now.

BT: Okay, Leroy. Well, I guess I'll let you get to it. [Laughs] Is there anything else you want to say?

LD: I can't think of anything. If you think of anything you need to answer or you need to ask me, call me and I can come back.

BT: Okay.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Geoffery Stark]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]