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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with

Frank Fellone
Little Rock, Arkansas
13 July 2005

Interviewer: Phyllis Brandon

Phyllis Brandon: I am Phyllis Brandon. I'm sitting here and am ready to have a chat with Frank Fellone. [This is an interview for the Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History's project on the *Arkansas Democrat* and the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*.] Frank, when were you born?

Frank Fellone: February 8, 1951, in Bridgeport, Connecticut.

PB: How did you get to Arkansas?

FF: I was in the air force—actually, in Shreveport—Barksdale Air Force Base. I had a blind date with a girl from North Little Rock, so that's why I'm in Arkansas.

PB: Where did you go to college?

FF: UALR [University of Arkansas, Little Rock].

PB: What was your major?

FF: My major was journalism and my minor was English. I went to UALR after I got out of the air force and moved here and got married.

PB: Okay. On the G.I. Bill?

FF: On the G.I. Bill, as a matter of fact. Yes.

PB: Did you work while you were going to school?

FF: I worked in a variety of low-wage, hard-work jobs until a certain sports guy by the name of Wally Hall said to me on campus one day, "Would you like a job working Friday-night football at the *Arkansas Democrat*?" I jumped at that chance. That was my first job in the newspaper business—taking scores and information on Friday nights from high school football coaches around the state. And, of course, the way we would do it was we'd take all the information and we'd pound out one- or two- or three-paragraph stories on each game. I did that in the sports department when it was on the second floor in 1974, I think—on a manual typewriter, of course.

PB: Yes. And was [the building] air-conditioned?

FF: I think it was air-conditioned, actually. Yes, the building was air-conditioned at that time. If Bob Sallee were here, he could reminisce about the days when this building was *not* air-conditioned, and the windows were open and they had big fans. They used to post World Series inning-by-inning scores on some kind of a board outside the newspaper building. We may have a photograph somewhere that displays the posting of World Series scores.

PB: Yes. What made you think you wanted to go into journalism? You majored in journalism. What made you think that's what you wanted to do?

FF: There's a serious answer and a not-so-serious answer. I'll give you the serious one first. When I was a kid, I was unusual in that I enjoyed reading the newspaper. I was very much interested in sports, of course.

PB: And this was when?

FF: When I was growing up in Bridgeport, Connecticut. I was very much interested in sports, and for some odd reason, I was also an avid reader of the editorial page of the *Bridgeport Post*. Who can explain why? So, I always had in the back of my mind the idea that the newspaper would be a fun thing to do or a neat place to work. The funny answer is that the first time I registered for classes at UALR in December of 1972, a month or two after I had gotten out of the air force, my wife said to me, "Now, make *sure* that you sign up for a biology class because you have to have biology. You want to get that out of the way." She had already graduated from college. She was *way* ahead of me. At that time, there was no online registration, it was cattle-call registration, where you went up there with your card and you went from table to table to table. "Okay, over here is the Biology Department and over here is the Chemistry Department," and so on and so forth. I went to the Biology Department to sign up for a class. I went to the table, and they told me there were no more openings in any of the beginning biology classes. So, I said, "Okay, I need another class." I wandered over to the journalism table and signed up for feature writing. The journalism teacher—he may have been the only teacher [in the department] at the time—I don't remember—was A. Heber Taylor. You may remember Dr. A. Heber Taylor. It was a sophomore-level class, but I think probably at that time the Journalism Department had a very low number of students. For some bizarre reason, the very first semester I had a sophomore-level journalism class and managed to get through it and then declared as a journalism major. So, in a way, it was actually that . . .

PB: Okay. So you were then working for Wally Hall.

FF: Well, I was working for Lyndon Finney, actually. Lyndon was the executive sports editor—I think that was his title—which was a remarkable title for a newspaper sports section that was pretty—it wasn't very big. It wasn't nearly as big as it is now. On Fridays I was doing football, and eventually—when it was discovered that I was capable of writing a coherent sentence—putting two or more coherent sentences into a coherent paragraph, and then, subsequently, into coherent sports stories—I started to work more. Rather than just Friday nights, I would work Friday and Saturday. Then, eventually, I wound up coming in a couple of days a week to "strip the wire" at something like 4:00 in the morning. This was an afternoon newspaper, and [the] sports [department] had to do its work and get out of the way so everybody else could do their work. We had a very small computer system and a very limited number of computer terminals at the time. So I'd come in a couple of days a week and do some work—advance work or—mostly wire work at 4:00 in the morning. At that time, there was no security system to get in. There were no keypads. So what I used to do was simply to go to the front door and bang on it and shake it in the hopes that the janitor would see me and let me in. [Laughs] Sometimes he wasn't there, so I would go around to the alley here where there's a fire escape. I would jump up and grab the bottom rung of the fire escape and then pull myself up like Tarzan. I'd climb up to the second-floor window, open it, and come on in and get to work. I did that several times.

PB: Who else was working here then that you knew? Did you see any of the other guys?

FF: Fred Morrow was, of course, the sports editor. He was a very fine sports columnist and a very eccentric figure. We really didn't see much of Fred. He was in and out—mostly out. I think he used to come in here and write his columns when nobody was here. He preferred it that way. I don't know what happened to Fred. Eventually, he left. Lyndon [was there], of course. And I see in my mind's eye the faces of numerous other people. Rod Lorenzen. I think Rod still runs that bookstore out in west Little Rock somewhere. He has been in the book business for a long, long time.

PB: What did he do?

FF: He was the sports desk man.

PB: Really?

FF: Yes. He would lay out the sports section and assign all the headline writing and everything. He worked with the guys in the back shop who did the paste-up.

PB: Were the computers dependable?

FF: Well, I think they were, but there were so few of them that it was hard to—it was really kind of hard to put the newspaper out, which is why when we first got the computer system, the sports people used to have to come in early and get it out of the way so that the city desk people could do the real work.

PB: When [K.] August Engel . . .

FF: No. When I came to work here I think Walter [Hussman, Jr.] had already bought the newspaper. I'm a little fuzzy on that. Of course, being on the absolute lowest

rung of the newsroom ladder as part-time boy sportswriter, I had no idea who the editor was or the publisher—none of those people. So, I really—I don't know. My memory on that is pretty fuzzy.

PB: Okay. You got your degree at UALR.

FF: Yes, I did.

PB: You have a degree in journalism. You probably [had] a family by [then].

FF: Well, at that time, yes. My oldest son, Brian, was born in the middle of 1975. Of course, I was in school at the time. Kay was working at St. Vincent's Hospital in the lab. Because I had a family to support, I expedited my college education and managed to get through the whole thing in three years, including summers. So, when I graduated—interestingly enough, we had a remarkable turnover in the sports department, including editors and sub-editors of all kinds. They came; they went. They never stayed very long. One of them promised me that when I graduated in December of 1975, I could have a full-time sportswriting job, because I was still a part-timer. Then he left, and his promise was unknown to the next guy who took over. So I was essentially—call it what you want, but I think I was essentially laid off from this newspaper. They did not have a job for me. I probably could have kept on working part-time, but I had a family to support, so I went out and found a job as a reporter and photographer—mostly [as a] reporter.

PB: Where?

FF: At the *Jacksonville Daily News*. Now, let me tell you, Phyllis, that the *Jacksonville Daily News* does not exist anymore, but it's not my fault. When I left, it was still a five- or six-day-a-week daily newspaper. I can't remember. I

think it was six. I think it was Sunday through Friday, and maybe there wasn't a Saturday edition—or maybe they didn't have a Monday edition. I simply don't remember.

PB: Did you do sports there, too?

FF: I did very little sports there. Mostly I did things like cover the city council and cover cops and take pictures of this and that. Absolute general, regular, small-town newspaper work. Jacksonville was more distinct, I think, than it is now. North Little Rock, Jacksonville, and Sherwood have all kind of grown together, but Jacksonville had plenty of its own news to cover. Between the planning commission and the city council and all the other commissions, there was plenty of the routine of journalism to do that.

PB: But it was good experience?

FF: It was excellent experience. Being, I think, young and hot-headed and absolutely right about everything, I eventually became crossways with the general manager, as I recall. I quit and went to Batesville, where I worked for the *Batesville Guard* for about three years.

PB: Did your family move up there?

FF: Yes, we all went to Batesville for the absolutely *fabulous* small-town reporter newspaper salary of $180 a week. Now, you know J. E. Dunlap of the *Harrison Daily Times*—it has been a few years, but at one of the Arkansas Press Association convention banquets, I bumped into J. E. and was having a conversation with him. He remembered that I had interviewed for a job with him in Harrison. I said, "I remember that, J. E., but I don't remember why we didn't

agree for me to go to Harrison." He said, "Well, Frank, I couldn't afford you," so that must mean that he was offering less than $180 a week, which was not bad pay, I suppose, in 1977 or 1978—whatever it was. It was the best newspaper experience you could have, for several reasons. One was that it was family-owned and still is. I think it may be the only daily newspaper in Arkansas that's still family-owned, except for this one, of course. But this one is different. When I say family-owned, I mean one family, one newspaper, one town. That was a wonderful thing. I got to work for Roy Ockert, who was one of Arkansas's exceptional editors and still is. Roy is at Jonesboro now. He's the editor of the *Jonesboro Sun.* He has spent some time as the editor of the *Russellville Courier* and also spent a number of years on faculty at Lyon College in Batesville. [He is] an exceptional and extraordinary newspaper man who knew that a newspaper's first responsibility was to be accurate. Something I learned there more than anywhere else, believe me, is that accuracy, accuracy, *accuracy* is absolutely essential in newspaper work. I did the usual stuff there, Phyllis. I did photography, covered the city council, covered the cops. It was an afternoon newspaper, and [I used to] call up the state troopers every morning to ask them if they'd had any traffic accidents the night before, which they *hated* because they'd had a night shift, and they got off at something like 7:00 a.m., and at 10:00 a.m. some punk reporter from the *Guard* was calling [and] asking them about what happened last night. Oh, that was tough to do. They tried to be nice about it, but they didn't really enjoy that. [Laughs]

PB: After three years at the *Batesville Guard*, what did you do?

FF: I came back here to . . .

PB: Came back to . . .?

FF: . . . the *Democrat*—it's interesting that at least three times while I was at Batesville, someone from the sports staff here called me up and said, "Frank, we really want you to come back," and I would say, "Well, can you top $180 or $185 or $190 a week?" And the answer was always, "*No*." The sports people here were getting [paid] less that I was at Batesville, so I would say, "Well, no, if you can't match that $180 a week, there's no way." Eventually, after the newspaper war started—seriously started—and this staff was growing and growing and growing . . .

PB: And this paper had switched to a morning paper.

FF: It did. It was morning by then. I came back here on—I think it was January 4, 1980.

PB: And the newspaper war was already going?

FF: Yes, I think the *Democrat* had switched to morning publication in mid-1978 or some time in 1979. So it was really pretty hotly competitive for about a year, I'm sure, before I got here. I was only dimly aware of the fact that there was serious newspaper competition here. When I worked at the *Democrat* previously, we accepted our role as the weak, declining, daily afternoon newspaper. Everybody's aspiration was to get a job at the *Gazette* because that was the state's leading newspaper, and maybe you could make an actual living there. The *Democrat* was a farm team for the *Gazette*, and still was for a long time into the newspaper war. I'm not sure why I came back. Logic would say that if I wanted to come back

here, and I did, [it was] because Kay is from North Little Rock, and we had two kids by then, so we wanted to be closer to family. Logic says that I would have tried for a job at the *Gazette*, but I suppose that—I think it was Lyndon Finney, who I knew from being in sports here—I think he called me up and asked me—I think, for the fourth time—would I like to come back to the newspaper? This time I was really interested in it because it wasn't a sports job. I didn't want to go back to sports, and it was time for us to maybe come back here. So we interviewed. Of course, I had my portfolio with my clips and my photos and everything. I'm proud to say—and I'll sprain my arm patting myself on the back here—that Bob [John Robert] Starr told me that I had the best clips and the best photos of anyone he had seen who had applied for a job at this newspaper. So I came to work here for the unbelievable sum of $250 a week. And what was really interesting about that was I walked into the place not knowing, and later found out that I was—my first day on the job I was the highest-paid reporter on staff. And word leaked out. Some people were really annoyed [with] me over that, but, apparently, they got over it. I wasn't a reporter for long. I only was a reporter for about six months.

PB: Was Lyndon Finney the city editor then?

FF: Lyndon was assistant managing editor.

PB: Oh, still assistant managing editor.

FF: Yes.

PB: Who was the managing editor?

FF: Bob [Starr] was.

PB: Bob Starr. Okay.

FF: Bob McCord had gone by then. I don't remember when he left, but when I got back here, he was gone. The city editor, I think, was Bill Husted, and Lyndon was the assistant managing editor. The sports editor—you know, I don't remember who the sports editor was. Randy Tardy might have been the business editor, although I'm hazy on that, too. Garry Hoffmann was one of our city editors, and Bob Sallee, of course, was. Ray Hobbs—the late, great Ray Hobbs—was in Pine Bluff at the time, I think, although he might have been night city editor when I finally got here. So, what happened from there was—I was mostly a feature writer. About midway through the year—May or June of that year . . .

PB: That year is . . .?

FF: 1980. The Cubans were being shipped to Fort Chaffee near Fort Smith. More and more of them were going over there. Of course, nobody really knew what was going to happen with the Cubans. The Vietnamese had been there a few years earlier, and everything was fine with the Vietnamese, as I recall. Several thousand of them came there, and, eventually, they integrated into American society. The Cubans were a tougher nut to crack, Phyllis. They were about 95% men who were twenty to forty [years old]. They were volatile. It seemed like things were not going well there, so because I was both a reporter and a photographer, Starr decided we should send me to Fort Chaffee and spend maybe a week or two and write some stories about what was going on. I was there for two or three or four days when the Cubans rioted. In fact, I was in the press building when a mob of them came in[to] the press—they came into the

building—the old barracks where the press had its offices, and I think there were only something like three of us there. I was there. There was a reporter from the *Miami Herald,* and there was an AP [Associated Press] reporter there. An army sergeant hustled us out of there. In fact, I climbed out the back window and hopped into his VW [Volkswagen] Beetle and we drove off to safety. There had been a mini-riot previous to that. I remember walking out the front gate following a herd of 100 or more of the refugees who walked down the street and who were eventually herded back into the camp by the state police and the army. Of course, these were the days before electronic transmission of photos and stuff. I had a bunch of photos. I took the film out and I gave the film to a cameraman from Channel 11 and said, "Please get this back to the *Democrat*," and he did it. I mean, as far as I knew, he could have driven it back and dropped it in the creek or simply never brought it over. He was good enough to do that. I do not remember his name. I wish I did. After a few more days of that, I got relieved. We sent another reporter out there. In fact, more than one reporter—probably a couple of reporters and a photographer. After the riots, it settled down. The security was a lot better, and there simply weren't any more riots, to my recollection. But, apparently, I acquitted myself well enough for Starr to decide that he should make me an editor. By this time—let me think—I had two kids and one on the way. He promised to bump me up from $250 to $275 a week. Now, that's a 10% pay increase, and I had mouths to feed and mortgages and car payments, so I took the job. I was state editor for a while. That was a lot of fun. We had bureaus scattered around the state. Starr was kind of a tough cookie. When I took over, I

had real problems in every single bureau, including alcoholism, total incompetence, mass confusion among all those reporters—most of those reporters in all those bureaus—and I wound up firing one, two, three of them in fairly rapid order. And, God, he [Starr] loved that! [Laughs] But I fired them strictly on merit. Of course, this was—again, before everybody had a computer, a lot of times they would call in and dictate their copy. Of course, Mabel Berry would take that. We had a bunch of clerks who would take that. We had that scanner—when I tell my journalism students at UALR about dictation, for instance, they just don't know what we're talking about here because everything is electronic [now]. When I was a sportswriter, I used to dictate stories from football and basketball games. You would scratch out on a piece of paper the elements of your first two or three paragraphs, and from there you would wing it. You would simply look at your notes and write verbally on the fly with some poor guy stuck back there with a phone in his ear.

PB: So did you still have the U-shaped editor's table?

FF: The "rim"?

PB: Yes.

FF: I remember the "rim" in the 1970s. I think it was gone by the time I came back in 1980. We had an actual copy desk, and it had computer terminals. It wasn't exactly the same thing.

PB: So how was the feeling here as far as the *Gazette* was concerned during that time?

FF: Oh, the feelings were multiple. Those of us who were committed to making this newspaper a success—and I think we were very intense about it—I think it's

important to ask ourselves or to try and speculate on why some of us were so committed and intense. I think part of it had to do with Starr, that even though he was a tough son-of-a-gun, he was, in his own way, kind of inspirational and a leader. I think of a friend of mine in Batesville who used to say that "Everybody is good for something, including to show others how not to be." And you could apply that to Starr at least once a day. On the other hand, he was a determined rascal, and you had to admire that. So some of us responded in equal parts—anger and commitment—working for Bob. But the other element of it was that it was so much fun, Phyllis, that we knew there were really relatively few two-newspaper towns left in America. Covering the news here was wide open. I'm not saying it was the Old West, but it was certainly wide open. It was a tremendous challenge. Anybody with any kind of competitive nature would naturally take to that kind of challenge or opportunity, so a lot of us did. I think Garry Hoffmann was a good example. If we sat here long enough we could think of a lot of other people. Of course, we had a huge staff turnover. It was *unbelievable*. We were practically dragging people in off the street, making them reporters and editors and copy editors. Oh, the copy editing! They'd burn out after six months or a year, and then the next cannon fodder would be brought in here. The staff went from something like seven city desk reporters to thirty-five city desk reporters in the space of a couple of years. And, of course, we had to have corresponding growth in the number of city editors, and a corresponding growth in the number of photographers, and everything else. So, this thing just mushroomed and mushroomed and mushroomed. But if you were competitive in

any way, you really wanted to be part of what was going on here or there. I don't know what it was like over there. I had no friends at the *Gazette*. I knew nobody over there. I had applied for a job over there once and didn't get the job. I wanted to work for Orville [Henry]. I'll tell you a funny story about that. I interviewed with Orville. This was probably 1975 or 1976. I went over . . .

PB: Orville Henry?

FF: Orville Henry.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

FF: Then he [Orville Henry] said, "When I look at some of these clips, I'm always looking for one thing, and it's in here." I think I was either stupid or terrified because I didn't have the sense to ask him, "Well, exactly what is *it* that you find here?" I think maybe if I had said that, he might have offered me a job. But I didn't, and probably stumbled out of there mutely, and never heard from him again or anybody else. Oh, man. But back to . . .

PB: That was a stroke of bad luck.

FF: That was a stroke, I suppose. I never once in the roughly twelve years that I had worked here during the newspaper war—I never once got a phone call from anybody at the *Gazette* saying, "Frank, would you consider coming to work for us." I don't know why that was. Probably because—first off, I didn't really know anybody over there—only very, very casually. But the other one was that I suspect that I was known to be an absolute partisan for the *Democrat*, and that it would probably have been a waste of time. I don't know what my reaction would

have been. You know, some people we worked with here for a long time went over there. They continued to raid us and over and over again. They took practically—it seems like—every experienced reporter we had. They raided our capitol staff. They raided the sports staff, the business staff . . .

PB: The women's [section] staff.

FF: The women's staff, the city desk staff—raided and raided and raided. I don't know what would have happened had someone made the offer or extended the idea or the opportunity. I think probably I would have turned them down.

PB: What about when the lawsuit came along? Did you cover any of that? Did you go to any of that?

FF: I never went to a single minute of that trial. All I knew about it was what I read in the newspaper every day. I don't remember what my job was at the time. For a long time I was sort of a Sunday editor. I was editor of the Sunday "Perspective" section and the Sunday magazine, if you remember the magazine. It lived for three or four years in the eighties [1980s]. And, at that time, I was also a columnist, so I wasn't involved in the coverage of the trial, except, of course, to keep up with it and read about it.

PB: Were you teaching at UALR at that time?

FF: I think the first time I taught at UALR, I'm guessing, Phyllis, was in 1990. The reason I think it was 1990 was because that was the one year I had as political editor of this newspaper. [During] Bill [William Jefferson] Clinton's last statewide campaign in Arkansas, I got to be political editor. That was right at the absolute crescendo of the newspaper war, and I don't know why I agreed to teach

that news-writing class. But I did. It was an afternoon class. I used to come in here at 7:00 in the morning and start the coffee pot. We had a clerk who would clip every political story out of both newspapers for me and give them to me in a stack. I would read them *all* on the spot there, and then make assignments. I had five or six or seven reporters. [I] would go out there to UALR and teach two days a week and then come back. It was a twelve-hour-a-day thing it seemed like every single day. By the time it was all over, I was some kind of completely frazzled. But I did have the absolute pleasure of being in the newsroom—political editor—on the day that we got a fax from the *Arkansas Times*, which was a weekly newspaper. I don't remember if it was a monthly at that time. In any event, it was a press release—an announcement—that John Brummett had resigned as political columnist at the *Gazette,* and I like to think that our intense political coverage here had something to do with him throwing in the towel over there. Now, that's probably simply not true, but that was a big moment toward the end of the newspaper war when he quit.

PB: He came to work here, right?

FF: He eventually came to work here. Yes.

PB: Yes. When Walter announced that the war was over . . .

FF: Well, no, let's talk about—we'll talk about that in a minute. Let's talk about when Walter announced that Gannett had bought the *Gazette*—I think that was maybe 1986—a lot of us thought that it was a bad thing for us because, let's face it, Gannett is a *huge* organization. A huge company with billions and billions of dollars in its back pocket. The day Gannett took over and big Al Neuharth came

to town in a limousine and, I think, went into the *Gazette* newsroom—probably scared the living daylights out of everybody there. He expressed their desire to hotly compete against us in the newspaper war and expressed confidence that Gannett would eventually emerge victorious, as it had emerged victorious practically everywhere else. Well, Walter came in here—we were on the second floor. And if you remember the second floor, it was extremely crowded. It was dirty. It was noisy. People smoked in there. You can't do that anymore. It was a *madhouse all the time*. Walter got up on a desk and he talked to us about Gannett. He essentially said, "Stick with me. This is going to be hard—harder than it has been up to this point." And everybody's thinking, "Oh, God! It's been *brutal* to this point." [Laughs] If you got beat on a story—oh, man! You just might as well get a whip and perform some self-flagellation right there before Starr got out there and did it to you. He also said, "I hope you'll stick with me, even though I know Gannett can pay each and every one of you $100 a week more." I think at that time that the idea that we could make $100 a week more was a stunning revelation to practically everybody in that room. I think that the staff raids intensified after that—they took more people away from us after that because they really did ratchet up their salary structure. It was really tough. But when he said that $100 a week more—I swear you could hear the machinery clanking in people's minds—Clank! Clank! Clank! "$100 bucks a week!" Clank! Clank! Clank! "I'm making such and such!" Clank! Clank! Clank! "That's $5,000 more a year! Holy cow!" So he might have inadvertently started the stampede [laughter] by telling us that.

PB: The exodus.

FF: The exodus. Yes. Then he got off the desk and we all went back to work. We just kind of played it out from there. Jay Friedlander. Do you remember Jay? He was the chairman of the journalism department at UALR for a long time. He was wise. He told me, "Frank, if Gannett doesn't win in five years, they'll get out because they won't want to lose any more money." Five years. He was right. He was right almost to the month, it seems like, because they came in here in 1986 and departed in October of 1991. Five years later. Now, you asked when Walter came up here and announced the end of the newspaper war.

PB: Yes.

FF: I was there. I remember that. I hardly remember a thing he said. I do remember some of the details of the day the *Gazette* closed down. Michael Storey, who was graphics editor at the time—a day or two before the *Gazette* completely closed, I saw him hunched over his desk putting together a mast head that said, "*Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*" with the state seal between *Democrat* and *Gazette*. I'll be honest with you—I became outraged at the idea that our newspaper—our victorious newspaper—would be called the *Democrat-Gazette*. I thought that was an *awful* thing—we had killed the bastards, why would we take their *name*? I am sure there was good, logical, sound reasoning behind that, but I can tell you that, in my opinion, this remains the *Arkansas Democrat*. It is *not* the *Democrat-Gazette*. One of the reasons I said it—there are really very few people from there [who] came to work here. We have Karen Martin, Terry Austin, maybe . . .

PB: Irene Wassell.

FF: Irene Wassell. But mostly anyone who survived the newspaper war still works at this newspaper and is a survivor of the *Democrat* side of the war, and not the *Gazette* side. So I am fond of telling people that this really is the *Democrat*.

PB: [Laughs] What is your title now?

FF: Deputy editor. Now, when Walter got up on that desk and said that we won and here's why won, and here's what we're going to do, I was there. I also have in my file cabinet a copy of his speech—or a copy of the memo that he sent out to everybody. Every once in a while it's kind of fun to pull it out and read it. Actually, I have a file labeled "historical documents." In fact, I have a copy of the original Walter "puke" memo. Are you familiar with this?

PB: No.

FF: He banned the word "puke" from the newspaper, mostly I think because one of our sports columnists was using it all the time.

PB: And in the morning, people at breakfast do not want to read that.

FF: It did not pass the breakfast test.

PB: [Laughs] Yes, exactly.

FF: Now, one of the things Walter said, though, was that he wanted to make this as good a daily newspaper as he possibly could. I think that we still try to do that. I think that if Gannett had won the newspaper war that the *Gazette* would have been a thin, useless, worthless rag of a newspaper. That's all I probably need to say about Gannett. Sorry.

PB: But Walter continues to try to make this the best newspaper.

FF: I think we have a pretty good newspaper. When I go [to] other places, I compare what we do to what other people do. I think our newspaper holds up very well against newspapers this size and newspapers that are bigger than us. The primary thing we give people in the newspaper is a big news hole. We've got more news in this newspaper than most other newspapers do, and I think people appreciate that. These aren't easy times for newspapers. We used to think, naively, that when the *Gazette* went out of the business—that "when we win the newspaper war, we won't have to be as fiercely competitive anymore." Actually, that was wrong because all these hundreds and hundreds of newspapers that went out of business actually created a void, and to that void came all these other news organizations—mostly electronic news organizations. More TV stations. More radio stations. More weekly newspapers. And, now, the Internet. We're hyper-competitive now. It's just that we don't have a single competitor to focus our minds against. We have a million competitors. It's sort of like being nibbled to death by ducks. We're the state's largest and most credible authoritative news organization, but there are *lots* of news organizations out there that want to take a small bite out of our franchise, and do it constantly.

PB: Are you making more than $150 now . . .?

FF: You mean $250–or $150? Yes, I am, I'm happy to say.

PB: [Laughs] You managed to put those boys through school.

FF: I managed to get them all pretty much out of the house successfully. Yes.

PB: Yes. And you've got a pretty good staff. Are you happy with your staff?

FF: Oh, I think that our staff here is *outstanding*. We have the best copy desk we've ever had. We have a really good business reporting staff now. We've had some trouble over the years, and I think getting the right people in the right places over there–with Roger Hedges and Jack Weatherly, man, we're really *solid*. We've got a very fine sports staff. I'm happy to say that in addition to being solid, aggressive newspaper journalists, sports people remain casual, crazy, eccentric–kind of like Peter Pan. They're still—as I was at the time as a sportswriter—they still are delightfully infected with "Peter Pan syndrome." We've got a great photo staff. The photos and the graphics in this newspaper are really good. I think the city desk reporting staff is pretty darn good, too. The feature staff—we're probably as good as we've ever been. I can't think of anybody—well, no, there have been a lot of defections. There are a lot of people leaving for bigger newspapers, but I think we hold our own.

PB: Do you read all the newspaper every day?

FF: Pretty much everything in the newspaper every single day. You'd be amazed at what's in the newspaper that leads to other news stories. For instance, what's in the real estate transactions or in the building permits—what's in the marriages and divorces—that minutiae of journalism often leads to significant news stories we can get. The bankruptcies, for instance—I'll give you an example. Somebody here noticed that the bankruptcies seem to get bigger and bigger in the newspaper over the years, so we decided to take a look at it and discovered that Arkansas has, I think, the second-highest rate of personal bankruptcy in the country. And we produced a very fine series on personal bankruptcy in Arkansas. What we did

was we looked at the agate and extrapolated from there and created journalism—committed journalism, in that case. We do that sort of thing all the time here. Little things tend to grow into big things.

PB: Yes.

FF: Did I say anything about the capitol staff? Man, we've got a good capitol staff. I'd probably say that in the newspaper war, one of the most intense areas of competition was state government—state politics and legislative affairs. Even though we don't have the *Gazette* barking [at] our heels anymore, we're still intensely competitive in legislative coverage. Very much so. Probably more legislative coverage in this newspaper than in any newspaper in the country. It's incredible how much we devote to the legislature.

PB: What have we not talked about?

FF: I think you should ask me if it's still fun to work for a newspaper.

PB: Is it still fun?

FF: Oh, man, *yes*, it is! It's a different kind of fun.

PB: Are you still teaching?

FF: I'm still teaching. Yes. In fact, I've gotten into—it's not a rub—it's a habit. It's a routine. I'm now *the* guy who teaches reporting principles at UALR, which is a good thing because that's the first *real* reporting class they have in the journalism curriculum. I'm happy to say that my reputation precedes me, and that on the first day. . .

PB: And your classes are always full.

FF: Not only are they full, they are *frightened*. Those students come in there, and you can probably hear their knees knocking those first couple of days. [Laughter] I *love* that! I mean, usually, we work it out, and most of them wind up being successful students, if not successful reporters.

PB: Yes. So, you're still having fun.

FF: Yes. Yes.

PB: You still like to get up every morning and come down to work.

FF: Yes. The good thing is that I can come in the front door. I don't have to climb up the fire escape.

PB: [Laughter] Oh, that's good. What else?

FF: That's it. I don't know what else—if you ever want to look at my . . .

[Tape Stopped]

[End of Interview]

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