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# *Arkansas Democrat* Memories

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## Personal background

Born January 9, 1950 in Little Rock, Arkansas; raised in Little Rock; a graduate of Little Rock Central High (1968), and the University of Arkansas (1972). Master's degree in English literature from the University of Oregon (1979).

Parents: Charles William Hemingway and Billie Sibley Hemingway. My father ran away from home when I was a baby, and my two brothers and I were raised by our mother. She worked as an insurance secretary.

I worked part-time at the *Arkansas Gazette* 1966–68; was a sports stringer for the *Gazette* at the University of Arkansas, 1969–70; sports editor and general editor/reporter for the *Springdale News* 1970–74; and occasional stringer for the *Arkansas Democrat* and UPI [United Press International], 1972–74. I worked for the *Democrat* as reporter and copy editor, 1974–76, and was assistant news editor at the *Eugene* [Oregon] *Register-Guard*, 1976–80.

Burned out on journalism and excited about technology, I became a technical writer for Oregon Software in Portland in 1980 and learned technical marketing at a time

when few understood it. My job evolved into a 25-year career in high-tech marketing, culminating in co-authorship with Microsoft chief executive officer Bill Gates on a book on business and technology called *Business @ the Speed of Thought* [1999]. Now an independent consultant and executive coach, I have co-authored two other books, *Built for Growth* [2005], about creating a detail business and brand, and *What Happy Companies Know* [2006], about treating your employees well as the surest path to a profitable future.

Disclaimer: Circumstances had me write up this account rather than be interviewed by someone, but I approached it in the spirit of an oral interview. I wracked my memory and tried to organize my thoughts, but I did not go back and research anything; I did not attempt to document my recollections or confirm any specifics with others. Jerry McConnell offered a few corrections and clarifications related to the general timeline. Otherwise, this account may suffer as any other act of memory from a fracturing of details or sequence. The memories of others may differ, or they may have a differing interpretation. It should be read as a deep impression of my time and work at the *Democrat*.

**Journalism in the Not-So-Good New Days**

I arrived at the *Democrat* in the summer of 1974, roughly the dawn of the modern age. The *Democrat* had been upgrading the staff for several years, since the death of [owner and publisher] K. A. Engel, and had hired Gene Foreman and later Jerry McConnell as managing editor. Then the Hussman family bought the newspaper. [Editor's Note: The Palmer Group, headed by Walter Hussman, Sr., and his son, Hussman, Jr., purchased the *Democrat* from Marcus George and Stanley Berry for $3.7 million in March 1974.] They

kept on Jerry McConnell and continued to hire new people as well as introduce other physical improvements, many related to the computer system that was soon to be installed. All that most people knew about computers was that the computer HAL from the movie *2001[: A Space Odyssey]* killed people whenever they interfered with its plans. News people being generally superstitious folk, they assumed that the same would happen here. The real computers, of course, were too primitive to commit homicide, but mental manslaughter occurred on a regular basis. More on that later.

The "modern age" applied to people as well. A number of good people had been hired prior to my joining, and more came later, all part of a wave of "Young Turks." The *Democrat* was making its first serious run at the *Gazette*, then the state's leading newspaper in circulation, news content, and quality. The new journalists were more professionally trained and more full of ourselves than many of the "characters" we replaced. Where we were white-collar professionals with requisite degrees and a belief in the profession, the previous generation all seemed to have been brought up on the movie *The Front Page*, learning their trade by working the beat and proving their moxie through excessive drinking and smoking. Most of these guys were gone, the result of excessive drinking and smoking.

My hiring at the *Democrat* stemmed from having previously worked for Jerry when I was a high school junior and he was the assistant sports editor at the *Gazette*. I followed the usual route for aspiring sports writers, beginning as the sports equivalent of a copy boy and obituary writer and working up to real stories. Jerry had this habit of busting barriers by simply assuming they weren't there. So he hired Wadie Moore, who we all thought was the first black reporter at a white paper in the state; then, after Wadie

had earned his stripes, he assigned him as the first black reporter to cover a game between two white football teams. This left me to become possibly the first white reporter to cover a regular black high school game in the state. (One benefit of this project is that I learned that another black reporter, Ozell Sutton, had worked at the *Democrat* in the 1950s.)

I worked for Jerry again in college, initially as a sports stringer for the *Gazette* covering Razorback sports. Several years later, I did other work for the *Democrat* when Jerry moved over there. He was beginning to build the staff at the *Democrat*. When I was ready to leave Fayetteville, he offered me a job in Little Rock.

Another way the *Democrat* was entering the modern age was the influx of women. My college years paralleled the emerging equal rights movement. In the genteel South, it was more about upgrading women than downgrading men. Talented young women were flooding into journalism. I worked with several in northwest Arkansas, including Brenda Blagg, who is still the region's ace reporter. At the *Democrat* were Carol Stogsdill, Patsy McKown, Julie Baldridge, Amanda Singleton, Sheila Daniel, Teri Thompson, and Connie Hoxie (brilliant, gorgeous, and troubled), among others.

Being an awkward young man, I sometimes showed my admiration for these fine women by blurting out, Tourette-like, stupid and gauche things to them. I hope such ravings were lost in the noise of the stupid and gauche things that other awkward young men said to them.

This shift to women in communications was startlingly rapid. When I was hired at the *Gazette* in 1967, there were only one or two women in the general newsroom. By the time I joined the *Democrat* seven years later, women represented close to half the

newsroom. By 1987, when I joined a new high-tech PR [public relations] firm on the West Coast, all four partners and 90 percent of the employees were women. We white, middle-class males only half-joked that we should form a male minority caucus. That's how much the industry changed in a generation. Jerry encouraged the trend to women early, but the changeover was inevitable.

If women didn't make a ripple in the news department by the mid-1970s, they did in sports. Fred Morrow hired Teri Thompson as a sportswriter. Teri may have caught more grief breaking into the all-male sports culture than Wadie had in breaking into the all-white sports culture. After all, Wadie was a guy, and a fair basketball player to boot. The University of Arkansas had had its first black football player, Jon Richardson, in 1969. By the mid-1970s, the state had accepted the notion of integrated sports. Especially when non-integrated teams were getting their butts kicked by teams with black athletes.

But women—*mon Dieu*! They were not jocks—they did not even wear jocks! All Teri ever did was strike out with the bases loaded to lose a *Democrat* softball game—proof sufficient that she was no inhabitant of jockdom! The idea of a female presence in the locker room raised a hue and cry. It was impossible to believe that male athletes could make a radical change to their lifestyles such as wearing towels before and after showering! World-class athletes, forced to screen their private parts, would suffer fatal blows to their self-esteem, not to mention to male camaraderie!

Having spent most of my young professional life covering sports, I knew a lot of people in the business and heard a lot of the complaining both within the paper and without. I was blown away at the catty reaction. Sportswriters usually root for the

underdog. They like upsets, the come-from-behind kid. You think they would have given her a chance to show her stuff, the rookie from nowhere taking on the big leagues. Myself, I wouldn't have minded a few more towels and a little less groin in locker-room interviews. Maybe male sportswriters of that era liked gawking at man-flesh more than they wanted to acknowledge. When I made this point to a couple of them, they spun on their heels, swished back to their desks, and pouted for the rest of the afternoon. OK, this is an exaggeration. But I couldn't understand the fear. How did a female sportswriter threaten them any more than a male sportswriter? It would all come down to the words, not the chromosomes.

Eventually the PMS [premenstrual symdrome]-like reaction to Teri's hire faded. When she turned out to be just another sportswriter, when her presence at sporting events did not render all males instantly impotent, she was grudgingly acknowledged as a regular reporter, and a pretty good hand at that.

**Writing and Editing**

In my two years at the *Democrat*, I did several stints on the copy desk, worked the North Little Rock city hall beat, and served as a business reporter. Unlike most journalists, I routinely went back and forth between reporting and editing. I liked both, and found that understanding an editor's problems with long or disorganized copy helped me to structure pieces in ways that made them easy to edit; and understanding a writer's perspective helped me edit others' work in a respectful way. Usually. Under deadline pressures, I blew a few. You remember the blunders. I once rewrote a "poor" lead about a couple of hunting organizations, only to realize when I saw the article in print that I had taken a clever bit of juicy original prose and reduced it to dried-out jerky. It was too late

to repair the damage, but I kept my hands off the writer's work ever after.

Of the hundreds of stories I cranked out, I can recall only a few.

One was an analysis of how the new North Little Rock mayor was doing his job. The city charter required the mayor keep "regular" office hours. The new mayor, Eddie Powell, continued to work at his family business during some office hours, while finishing up his time for the city on nights and weekends. Some people felt being the mayor meant what we would now call "24x7," with the mayor always available in his office. Powell was decent, honest, and competent—traits that were not usually associated with NLR mayors—and none of the aldermen or city powerbrokers wanted to look too closely at the specifics of his hours or the charter wording. (The previous mayor, [Robert L.] Rosamond, was in jail for financial misdeeds, and the longtime mayor before that, [William F.] "Casey" Laman, had had a reputation for "carelessness" in all manner of dealings, including how he spent urban renewal funds.)

My piece attempted to balance the concerns of those who wanted the mayor in the office from nine to five with those who were glad to have someone they could trust and who would do the right thing for the city, regardless of when he put in his hours. Ralph Patrick, the city editor, complimented me on the piece because it was the closest to muckraking I ever did; one of my favorite aldermen chewed me out for undermining the progress the city had made under the new regime.

Another story had to do with major land annexations by both Little Rock and North Little Rock. In annexing large sections of mostly rural land surrounding them, the cities were wisely seeking to control their futures in terms of roads, development, and tax bases. They were promptly sued by various "annexees." In press meetings, in the trials,

and in hearings before the state legislature, both cities maintained that the current annexation laws were complex, confusing, and detrimental to long-term municipal planning and growth. Broadcast and print media—including me—gave the cities' positions a great deal of space. Both papers, I believe, came out in support of the causes of the aggrieved municipalities.

But I did something a bit unusual: I went to the city lawyers' offices and read the statutes. Expecting to have to parse arcane language for intricate legalisms, I found instead simple, clear English that was neither complex nor confusing. The main provision for an involuntary annexation was that the land in question had to be largely urban in nature. Yet both cities were annexing huge swaths of undeveloped farm and timberland. It was a land grab, pure and simple. I wrote an article contrasting the wording of the law and the claims of the cities. I left the paper before the lawsuits were concluded, but meanwhile the legislature amended the laws to make it easier for cities to annex undeveloped land.

My last story of interest was about grease. Good old-fashioned grease from McDonald's and other fast-food joints. Thirty years before the biodiesel craze, used grease could be profitably rendered for various uses. As happens with anything valuable, thieves soon arrived. They would hit restaurants and other grease generators in advance of the trucks of the legitimate grease purchasers. The crooks would sell it to unsuspecting purchasers or uncaring companies. Because the grease had been set out for disposal, it was not clear that unauthorized taking of it constituted theft. My story led to legislation that made such takings a crime.

Ralph Patrick showed me a lot about writing on that story. I knew it needed a

light touch, but I could never make the lead work. So finally I wrote the introductory paragraph in more or less straight news style and hoped for the best. Ralph rewrote it to give the story the humor it needed, without making the situation trivial. I studied his simple rewrite for months to learn how, when the story required it, to get away from the "just the facts" style.

Ralph played a less happy role in another story, one that landed on my desk when I was the night editor for the Sunday morning edition. The story was a feature by Bill Husted, one of our best writers. Bill was a young man, but he could write as if he were a wise old country seer reflecting on the foibles of his neighbors. He had the kind of touch with feature stories that I, among others, lacked. But if Bill had the human touch, I had the analytical, and there was something about the story that bothered me. I finally realized what it was: In telling a good story, Bill had been taken in by a good story.

The piece in question was a feature on a local doctor who had gone to Saudi Arabia to practice medicine. American professionals could make huge salaries while working in Saudi Arabia for a year or two, assuming they could cope with the desert. This doctor has recently returned from Arabia, and Bill interviewed him about his experiences there. The doctor said that he had become quite close to the royal family, had been taken into their confidence, and had even given advice to the king. It was a compelling story about the royal family's inner sanctum. An Arkansas Doctor in King Faud's Court. Absolutely mesmerizing.

But as I reflected on it, the story began to lose plausibility. This was shortly after the 1974 oil crisis. Major newspapers and magazines had written many in-depth articles about the Saudi royal family. They were notoriously private, especially to people outside

their faith and culture—not a lot different than today. Even given that a doctor would have access to the family in ways other outsiders would not, was it plausible that an American doctor who was there for a short time, who did not speak the language, did not practice their religion, had become their confidant? That he had advised the king and other senior leaders?

Jerry McConnell, who normally would rule on such things, had the weekend off. I took my concerns to Ralph, who was the decision maker in Jerry's absence. He had already seen the story and loved it.

I asked if there were any way to confirm what the doctor had said. Were there photographs of the doctor with the king (or with anyone else of note among the royal family), others who had been in Saudi Arabia who could confirm what our interviewee had said—anything?

It's a great story, Ralph said. Run it.

But it doesn't seem likely that it's true, I said.

If you can find any way to disprove it, fine, Ralph said. Otherwise, run the story.

As it happened, I had just met through a good friend a doctor who had a senior position in the local medical society. I found the doctor's number and was able to reach him at home. I told him the name of the first doctor, whom he knew. I gave him the essence of the story. I tried not to influence his reaction, simply saying that because we had no other source we were doing a routine check. As innocently as I could, I asked what he would do with a story like this, unconfirmed except by the doctor's own statements.

"I would quietly dispose of it," this local doctor said.

"So you think it's possible the doctor might not be telling the truth?" I asked.

"Why do you think he was in Saudi Arabia in the first place?" the local doctor said. "He had worn out his welcome here."

I knew that if I took these comments back to Bill Husted, the writer, he would have pulled the story—Bill wouldn't have cared about his pride but about his correctness. But after filing the story, Bill had also left for the weekend and was out of contact. Ralph had been glaring at me balefully as he saw I was not giving up. I told him whom I had talked to and what the second doctor had said about the first doctor's story and the first doctor's reputation for veracity.

Ralph barely listened. "Run the story," Ralph said. "You know it's very likely this is nothing but a story," I said. "Fiction, I mean. Made up."

Ralph's attitude was, the guy has been to Saudi Arabia, where few Arkansans have been. He saw and did things the rest of us haven't. He's got an interesting story to tell, let him tell it. If he's embroidered it, we'll never know one way or the other. My attitude was, entertaining or not, the guy's story doesn't hold up. We have a responsibility to our readers to print what we reasonably believe to be the truth. Let's at least hold the story until Bill can follow up.

"Run the story," Ralph said.

This incident has stayed in my mind for all these years because it was, to me, a classic example of the two schools of reportage that have fought for ascendancy in journalism for newspapering's entire history. The two had been well represented in Arkansas's past between the *Gazette* and the *Democrat*.

As first a reader and later a reporter, I had been schooled in the *Gazette* way, that

the "story" was first and foremost solid in both fact and substance and that the "angle" was the unique aspect of the story that made it interesting as well as truthful. Sometimes it was hard to find the interesting as well as the truthful, which is why *Gazette* stories—not to mention a number of mine—tended to be duller than some editors like. Historically, the *Democrat* had been of the sensationalist school, that the "angle" was whatever approach made the most interesting headline, and the "story" was whatever truths—including at times half-truths, exaggerations, and unsupported surmises—could be logically assembled to support that headline, even if the conclusion was possibly or likely wrong.

I thought all of us—Bill, Ralph, me, and the rest of the staff—had been brought on to lift the *Democrat* above the previous standard of "print whatever they say, as long as it's interesting." I saw this story as a test of whether we were committed to reach the level of professionalism we professed to strive for.

Ralph had the deciding vote. We ran the story.

Perhaps if I reread the story after 30 years, I would find it a good deal more innocuous than I did at the time. Perhaps the "go or no go" decision was closer than I remember. I hope I was overreacting, quibbling in order to prove I was right. But if I read the situation correctly, I still think we made a terrible mistake.

**The Stillbirth of the Computer Era**

Hussman, [Jr.], attempted a "Great Leap Forward" via the installation of computers. Every newspaper publisher wanted to go from labor-intensive, hard-type operations to the soft-type approach, which began with paper tape that fed electronic readers and was beginning to include computers for editing and typesetting. Big

newspapers were constrained by labor contracts that kept them from using new technology, so most of the advances were coming at smaller papers. Like all computer technology of the time, the new installation of Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) PDP-11s [minicomputer system] was seen as a cost-cutting tool. There was no sense of the machines being a productivity tool. Computers were a way of dramatically cutting headcount among typesetters, plain and simple.

We white-collar journalists struggled with the same dilemma and guilt that other professionals in other industries faced later in the computer age. We identified with the blue-collar guys in back who would lose their jobs in the name of efficiency. But while we didn't understand how computers worked, we did understand that they could save the newspaper a lot of money. And that was bound to be good for the rest of the employees in the long term. Also, we didn't have any choice. It wasn't as though publishers took a poll among the news types to see who favored the new technology and who didn't. Computers were the coming thing. Jump on or leave the business.

I'm embarrassed to admit that I don't recall exactly when the hot type went out and the cold type came in. Some of this is because I'm getting old, and some is because of my rotations on and off the copy desk for different periods. Some of the changes occurred when I was out in the field as a reporter.

When I first came there, we must have still had hot type, because I recall the guys still working the old heavy plates for the pages. For some reason I recall that production was doing some hot type and some cold type at the same time—maybe using one for advance printing (Sunday supplements and advertisements, classifieds?)—and the other for real-time work. This kind of transition made sense, but I can't be sure.

I do recall when we first made the change in the newsroom. We began with a scanner, which took typed pages from IBM Selectrics and converted it to electronic form. There were certain conventions you had to follow as you typed your story. A certain symbol—now lost among millions of other computer commands I have had to learn—indicated the start of a story. Another symbol signaled the end of the story. I don't think it was the historical "—30—" symbol used to sign off old-fashioned typewriter stories. If I recall, a single pound sign (#) meant to delete the previous letter; two pound signs (##) meant delete the previous word; three (###) meant delete the sentence to that point. That's about all reporters had to know to make the transition. Of course, some of the reporters had to greatly improve their typing skills.

Initially, the city desk and copy desk would still edit the text in hard copy and send it upstairs for the corrections to be inserted electronically. Before long, however, we got computer terminals on which we would be directly editing the text coming from reporters. The impact this had on the news staff was not unlike that of the monolith appearing before the pre-human apes in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In 1975, computers were still room-sized edifices limited to major universities and large multinationals. People involved with computers were, almost by definition, light-years smarter than any of us reporter types. Yet now we had computers in our very same building, their lights blinking mysterious coded messages. And then we had these terminals, which could pull up stories from some ethereal electronic bin.

Change! Change is the definition of news: What's different today. Journalists love change, except when it applies to them. We gawked at the four terminals. We poked and prodded them. We randomly typed out phrases on the keyboards to see the

words phosphoresce on the screens. We didn't take our stone hammers to the machines, only because their electrical nature constituted a certain danger. Because neither reporters nor city editors had terminals, the copy editors had to insert by hand all of their edits along with ours. As a result, copyediting took a great deal longer than before. You also had to wait; there were more editors than terminals. It wasn't cost effective to have a terminal for each human being. In addition, the typesetting commands were painfully explicit: You had to type in something like "[fl1p916w12]" which to the computer meant a certain font, a certain type size, a certain leading (spacing between lines), and a certain width. If you got anything wrong, the entire story could come out in headline-sized type or two-columns wide instead of one. Just as the # sign had a special meaning, so did other seldom-used characters (the uppercase on the upper row of the keyboard). If someone accidentally left one of these special characters in the file, the computer might swallow the entire story or get indigestion and spit out all kinds of garbage.

On the first day the terminals came live, Jerry, Ralph, and Si Dunn (the news editor) were hanging over the copy desk. A lot was riding on our ability to get out on time. We had pushed through a lot of copy early to give ourselves a buffer, but we had one story come in right at deadline from the state capitol beat. It was from Brenda Tirey, who was a terrible speller/typist. I don't think we understood the disorder then but in retrospect she must have been dyslexic. I got her story with two or three misspelled words in each sentence and was frantically making corrections while my three bosses stood over my shoulder urging me to work faster. I had been there since before 6 a.m., struggling along with the other editors to plow through all the copy.

Finally I turned to them and said, "I'm just fixing the typos. I can ship it the way

it is, or you can get off my back." They all retreated, and we went to press only a few minutes late.

Sadly, the best part of that week was finishing each day exhausted and overwhelmed. With word that we had successfully produced a newspaper using the new computer system, Hussman in short order fired a ton of people in the job shop related to type production. I don't recall the exact number, but it was substantial and premature. We on the copy desk were ill-trained, and there were not enough of us to make up for the additional work created by the computer's primitive and error-prone commands and the pile of unedited material that fell on us. In the haste to get to press, we were reduced to data-entry clerks. There was no sense of this being short-term chaos that would get better as we learned from the experience. It was "this is the way it will be forever." So the laid-off employees had the hell of unemployment. The copy desk had the hell of unrewarding work piled on unrewarding work. We had a job and couldn't complain about that; but it wasn't the job we were trained to do or much enjoyed doing.

Very soon, the pressure of the work and deadlines began to get to the copy desk staff. We began to lose people, often with little notice. At the end of one grueling day shift, a copy editor announced that he was not coming back tomorrow, not ever again. "Why?" I said, more astonished at the extra work it would mean for us the next day than at his decision to leave. "Because I can't keep doing a job that leaves my eyes too tired to focus," he said. He never returned.

This is where some of the *Democrat*'s other policies began to catch up with us.

Hussman had decided to consolidate all the health plans from the chain's various newspapers. You might think that the publisher would have brought up the plans of the

small-town newspapers to the modest level represented by the flagship publication. Instead, the *Democrat*'s mediocre health plan was conformed to that of the others, raising out-of-pocket costs for the staff. (Jerry reminds me that the company also put in some kind of pension plan at the same time, but I didn't work there long enough to benefit.) The most irksome factor was the attitude of the people explaining the new program. As they cut our benefits, the *Democrat*'s representatives—the formal expression is "toadies"—acted as if they were doing us a favor by providing any health benefits at all.

Some of the new policies were bad business of the "penny wise, pound foolish" variety. I recall that we earned three days of sick leave every quarter but could not carry over any days from quarter to quarter. So when you really needed sick leave with the flu, or (in my case) dental surgery, you did not have enough days and had to take vacation days or unpaid leave. Needing the paycheck, people who were genuinely ill would often come to work anyway, infecting others and costing other lost days. At the same time, you had three "free" days a quarter whether you were sick or not. Worn out from the excessive demands of the new computer system and the lack of enough experienced people to produce a quality paper, people began calling in sick the last week of each quarter in order to use up whatever remaining days they had that could not be carried over. They considered it the one decent benefit they had under the new program. "Hussman flu," I called it—perhaps more cynically than I should have.

To his credit, Hussman had directed Jerry to hire good people, and recently he had also instituted a new, higher pay scale. To this point we had been a good, tight team with high esprit de corps. But as people began to leave, the pressure of cost cutting led to replacements being hired only at the entry level. Despite a theoretically higher salary

scale, the *Democrat*'s net salaries were decreasing with the hiring of more and more inexperienced people.

This influx of less-experienced employees put more pressure on the experienced staff, who also began to leave, which further increased the pressure on everyone else who stayed. The turning point came with the departure of a fairly senior editor. His replacement should have gotten a nice salary boost based on the new scale. Instead he was given a slightly different title—though the same responsibilities—and maybe got an additional ten dollars a week instead of the substantial raise he had earned.

He was soon gone, and the remaining senior staffers were demoralized. What started as a trickle became a torrent. Soon many of the Young Turks had fled. I was one of these.

Ironically, I got my next job at least partly because of the computer-based suffering we all had endured. Applying for a job in Eugene, Oregon, I put on my resume that I had experience with the DEC PDP-11 computer system. When I was called out to Eugene for an interview, I learned that they were putting in the same system. My rundown of the system's inadequacies put the editors into a panic. They called in their senior computer guy, and we had an hour-long debate. Here was probably the first newspaper guy the managing editor had ever seen who could (by now) speak the language of the computer guys and go toe-to-toe with them over the system's usefulness and drawbacks. The impression I made helped land me the job, which ultimately led to my overseeing the newspaper's transition to computers in the newsroom and to what was probably the first all-electronic newsroom in the world.

One thing I learned from the Eugene visit was that a number of the problems with

the *Democrat*'s system had been fixed. I learned that the *Democrat* had DEC's very first commercial release. That's right, the *Democrat* was using version 1.0 of a software product. How bad was it? How poor was our support? Jerry would have to come in on nights and weekends when the system went down to personally reboot it. Management was afraid of letting anyone below his level touch the sacred machinery, but I believe I also did this once on a late Saturday night shift when Jerry was out of town.

When I returned to Little Rock, I talked to my computer guys about why we didn't have DEC's current release with the many upgrades and greater reliability (crashes were a routine problem). After much hemming and hawing, the computer guys finally told me it had to do with what Hussman had done with the backup system. What backup system, I asked?

Exactly, they said. DEC sold every PDP-11 system with a complete backup system. It would take over whenever the main system failed. Only the DEC contract did not specify where the backup system had to be physically located, so the company had it installed at one of the other newspapers (Texarkana, I believe), where it served as the main system. In essence, the chain got two systems for the price of one, though neither was as reliable as it would have been paired up. DEC was none too happy with his ploy but could not argue with the contract wording.

However, the contract did not specify that DEC had to provide Hussman with any software updates. So DEC said fine, you can run the crappy software for as long as you want and pay for all the lost time and extra maintenance. Evidently, the powers-that-be were fine with this arrangement. They weren't the ones busting their ass over a computer system that, if it were human, would have been fired for gross incompetence.

(Technically, the Story of the Missing Backup is hearsay, but I got it from the guys who ran our computers every day; that is to say, from a reliable source, the way a reporter gets most of his stories. The anecdote answered a lot of questions about the fragility of our system and its difficulty of use. I can testify that at the same moment in time the DEC system in Oregon was considerably more robust and had many more usable features. For example, a simple command such as **1c9** stood for one-column, nine-point Roman type with proper spacing, and you could program a special key to insert that command for you. No more hunting and pecking for hard-to-type commands.)

In my first year at the Eugene newspaper, I not only learned how to make the transition to computers more rational from a technical standpoint, but I also learned from the Baker family, owners of the Eugene paper, how to make the transition from the human standpoint. When the computers went in, the Baker family did not do massive layoffs. Instead, they kept several typesetters in the back shop to handle tasks that were more typing than editing. They offered early retirement to as many other typesetters that wanted it. They gave the typesetters first crack at any other job in the plant, whether on the press or in makeup. The number being laid off was modest, if still regrettable.

Nor did the Baker family dump an additional 30 percent workload onto their already taxed editors. They hired an additional editor for each desk (news, features, sports). They took one newsman, me, to work alongside the computer staff to automate many of the rote computer chores that were driving the editors crazy. We commercialized the first spelling checker and the first automatic headline counter. The work we did provided the real benefit of computers, which is not so much cost savings as obtaining a lot more production with the same number of people. Once we reached a

critical mass of trained people, we were able to scale up our newspaper production dramatically. As the paper grew, we could fill more news space with no additional headcount—and do quality work. The result was that the Baker family made a much more seamless transition to the new age. They saved a number of people their jobs. They kept their best people in all departments. They earned the loyalty (which translates to productivity) of the remaining employees, in both production and news. The *Register-Guard* spent more money on the transition in the early years, but they got sustainable and more profitable growth in the long term.

How does this relate back to the *Democrat*? The official history says that the "newspaper war" between the *Gazette* and the *Democrat* began in 1977, when the *Gazette* rejected a joint operating agreement and Hussman decided he had to either close the *Democrat* or become more competitive. In fact, the war began much earlier under managing editors Gene Foreman and Jerry McConnell. Hussman allowed Jerry McConnell to bring in all kinds of creative newcomers—some of whom had little or no experience in journalism but almost all of whom were quick studies and highly energetic.

However, the cost-cutting focus and disregard for the human element in these years led to wholesale turnover of this gifted team, including the loss of Jerry, who left in 1978. A bit more temperance and long-term thinking on Hussman's part and he would not have squandered five or more years in the drive to create Arkansas's leading newspaper.

Nor would he have lost a great number of journalists who went on to become stars at many of the country's leading publications.

[Edited by Pryor Center staff]