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# *Arkansas Democrat* Project

Interview with

Alyson Hoge
Little Rock, Arkansas
18 November 2005

Interviewer: Jerry McConnell

[00:00:00.00] Jerry McConnell: This is Jerry McConnell, and I'm sitting here at the Arkansas *Democrat Gazette* with Alyson Hoge. This is November 18, 2005. This interview is being recorded for the Pryor Center for [Arkansas] Oral and Visual History at the University of Arkansas on the history of the Arkansas *Democrat* and *Democrat-Gazette*. The first thing I need to do, Alyson, is ask you, do we have your permission to make this tape and turn it over to the university?

Alyson Hoge: Yes, you do.

JM: Would you start out by giving me your name and spelling it?

AH: My name is Alyson. A-L-Y-S-O-N. Hoge. H-O-G-E.

JM: Okay. Alyson, what is your job here? What is your title and what are your duties here at the *Democrat-Gazette*?

AH: I am the city editor. I am over several news departments, the city desk, state desk, business, religion, capitol bureau, [and the] enterprise desk, which does the Washington bureau. I think that's it. But I supervise those editors, those departments, and their reporters. [Interviewee's note: In August of 2007, I became deputy managing editor/news and took charger of the copy and design desks.]

JM: That's a lot.

AH: Yes.

JM: All right, now let's discuss how you got there. But first, let's just start from the beginning. Where and when were you born?

AH: I was born January 4, 1959, in Hope, Arkansas. My father owned the Western Auto Store in Hope and had decided to move to Little Rock, so six weeks after I was born we moved to—actually, we moved to North Little Rock. Then we moved to the Lakewood neighborhood in North Little Rock. So I'm a product of the North Little Rock school system. I went to college [at] UALR [University of Arkansas, Little Rock]went one year and then dropped out for a little while, and then went back for about a semester and dropped out again. After I graduated from high school, I had gotten a job as a sales clerk at Sears and as a clerk, and decided that—while I was there—what I really wanted to do was write for a living. My mother found an ad in the paper in the *Democrat* for what they called a city desk news assistant, and it said in there that you could, perhaps, write stories for the newspaper. So I applied for the job and got it. Curiously enough, a couple of the people I'm working with here now—one of them, Rhonda Owen, was hired

as a state desk clerk and started the day after I did. I started May 13, 1979 and Terry Austin started as a city desk clerk six weeks before I did, and now he's the Sunday editor. And Rhonda is the family style section editor.

JM: Okay, very good, Alyson. One thing I do want to ask you before we go any farther, though, and get into that, is what were your parents' names?

AH: My father's name was James Lagrossa. L-A-G-R-O-S-S-A. My mother's name is Jeanne. J-E-A-N-N-E. He was a school equipment salesman and she was a guidance counselor for the North Little Rock school system. At the time that I started working here, I didn't really have any understanding of either how newspapers worked—didn't have the understanding of what the newspaper world was about here. I had never heard of Walter Hussman, Jr., or John Robert Starr—didn't have any of this history, so I was kind of a newbie to it. I was really naïve when you think about it because when I started here the ad said that you'd be able to write stories for it. Gee, that sounded like a nice thing to be able to do. And what I found out when I started here—in fact, it was Cecelia Storey who kind of opened my eyes about it, because my first day here, she was the first person I met. I told her I was a city desk news assistant, and she said she didn't know what that was. She'd heard of a clerk, but not a city desk news assistant. She hadn't been here all that long, either, when I started here. What it turned out was, the job was where you wrote obituaries, and you handled clerical duties for the city desk. And you sat pretty close to the city editor and the reporters, particularly in a big wide-open newsroom, so you were able to see the characters of the newsroom and do things for the editors that they needed done. Or you would see reporters who—in those days we didn't have an Internet and we didn't have a computer

system to speak of. We had one, but it wasn't much of one. For example, if you were a capitol bureau reporter and you were writing a story, you'd come into the office and type up your story and feed it into a scanner. You would see these people that seemed to be so serious and so grown up and so professional to my young eyes. Now keep in mind that I had no real journalism training from college. I didn't work on the high school newspaper. The reason I started here is I'd been told in high school that I could write well. During the first six months that I was here, I would ask if I could write stories, and they would let me write feature stories just to see what I could do it—if I had any talent whatsoever. Then after I was here six months a job came open with the Lonoke County bureau that also covered Jacksonville, so I went and covered that for six months and did a lot of traveling and tried to write about what was happening in Jacksonville and Lonoke County. Then, say, after I'd been here a year, and keeping in mind—let's see, if I started here in 1979, I was twenty when I started. At the age of twenty-one, we had some turmoil at our capitol bureau. We had one person get fired. Another person quit. I ended up going to the capitol bureau. I want to back up and say something about the hiring of people in these clerical positions because I mentioned a couple of other people who had been hired here, who are still here. What that was used for during at least the early days of the newspaper war, was it was a way to see if you could find talent to hire here at the newspaper—to see if you could find somebody who would work at minimum wage and who would do stories. Then you'd find out who might—it was a sink or swim kind of a thing. You know, a lot more clerks left than stayed. But that was a way of seeing if you could find some talent. That's why I think the ad was written in such an appeal-

ing way. It was to try to let people have that entry-level type position. It's not the way that we do things now. Occasionally, you might have somebody—you hire somebody as a clerk and you're thinking maybe they might develop into some kind of a reporting talent. But these days, we generally try to look for people who have some proven experience before they come here. Anyway, after I'd been here for a year, this capitol bureau job became available. I worked there for almost four years—a little over three-and-a-half years. During that time period, our capitol bureau first had four people working for it, then three people working at it. During that time period, I went through thirteen co-workers in a little over three years. And I got tired of it because these people would come in, and you would teach them all about who was who and how things worked out there, and then they'd go off to some other job and you'd get a new co-worker. Nobody lasted very long out there except for me. Like I said, I was tired of it and was ready to do something different. There was a night city editor position available. That was the person who was going to run the city desk at night when all the other editors went home and put the paper to bed and that was the job that somebody suggested that I take. In fact, how that evolved was I had lunch with Meredith Oakley, who, by that time, had stopped being capitol bureau chief and was the political writer for the paper—columnist, like she is today—and she mentioned to John Robert Starr, the managing editor, that I was ready for some kind of a change. I don't remember who first came up with the suggestion that maybe I could be night city editor, but it was passed on to the city editor who said, Sure. So that's what I did. I think I was twenty-four at the time that I took that job. I did that for a couple of years and then became the state desk editor, did that for six years.

During the state desk era, I supervised up to nine people in bureaus around the state and had a couple of in-house reporters—did the Washington bureau during some of that time. When we had the legislative sessions, I'd supervise coverage of the sessions. I did a few of those. That was also when the newspaper war really, really was heating up because that was during the time period that Gannett had purchased the *Gazette,* and there was a real monetary battle over trying to get dominance in this market and drive each other out of business. After my other jobs—going down the line—the next job I had after the newspaper war had ended—this was in 1993—I became the assistant managing editor for nights. That put me in charge, once again, at night—except instead of being in charge of city desk, I was in charge of the whole newsroom, and my job was to get the newspaper out on time. I did that for about five years, had a short stint as business editor—specifically AME [assistant managing editor] for business, then became Sunday editor—again, put in charge of the copy desk and design desk, page design desk, and in charge of putting out the Sunday newspaper. Then when David Bailey became managing editor, I became deputy managing editor for production, which put me over day copy desk and night copy desk, day design desk, night design desk, graphics department. It became a daytime job, basically. I did that until April of last year when I became city editor. So I've worked in a lot of different departments in the newsroom and had a lot of different experiences there and seen it from all aspects of the production.

JM: Okay, let's go back a little bit now and talk about some people, and well talk about some other things. Who was the city editor when you came to work here and you started?

AH: The first person I remember was Bill Husted, who was not here all that long when I started here. He was a definitely Old School kind of a guy and would—one of my vivid recollections was right when I had just started becoming a reporter he had given me a press release to rewrite—and I sat down, I was at my new desk with my new—well, the desk and the typewriter weren't new, but they were new to me—and sat down and some reporter behind me kept talking to me. I was trying to be polite and listen to what she said, and the next thing I knew the news release has disappeared off my desk, and it turned out that Bill Husted had snatched it off my desk and was sitting at another typewriter writing it up. He chewed on me and he said, "You know, when I give you an assignment, I expect it to be done." I have a vivid recollection of that. Plus, not to mention, a lingering resentment against the reporter because I'm sure she saw him come over and take the press release off my desk. So, anyway—but there was Bill Husted. I think he tried a stint at writing a column because he was city editor for a while, then we had-you'll have to excuse me because I'm a little fuzzy on some of this because we had people who had interchangeable roles. For example, our city editor for much of the newspaper war was Ray Hobbs but also in there we had Garry Hoffmann as a city editor and Bob Sallee. Bob Sallee was like an assistant city editor, then a city editor, then an executive city editor. So we had some folks who served in different roles. But, like I said, the person I remember working with the most was Ray Hobbs.

JM: I thought Bill might have been here. When I left in 1978, he was city editor at that time. I guess his wife Amanda was still here and probably on the copy desk.

AH: Right.

JM: When you started in May of 1979, had the *Democrat* already started their morning edition then?

AH: It seemed like—we had two editions, the state and the city, and one of those had gone to morning. And I don't know why they didn't do both of them at the same time, but I do remember it being still an afternoon—part of it was an afternoon newspaper. The state edition, I think, might have been the morning edition first. Then it became the city edition.

JM: I think, maybe, that's the way it started—that they started just the state edition morning, and they had some people who they started working at night to get the news ready. I think Michael Storey was on that crew. There were about five of them, I think. Maybe Lyndon Finney, and as I remember somebody was talking to Si Dunn. There were a couple of people who got hired—because what happened was back in 1978, December 1978, when John Robert Starr was hired and after Walter [Hussman, Jr.] had decided he was going to take on the *Gazette*, one of the things that Starr decided to start doing was start to hire a bunch of reporters. So that was just a common thing. All of a sudden we had people who were from all over the country who were working here in the newsroom, and they were people who he thought were really aggressive news reporters, or that maybe he taught them in a class at UALR or something like that. If you didn't mind the wages, you could get a job here pretty easily because our turnover was pretty high. It was always like a perpetual frustration, if you were at the newspaper among the reporting staff, with how things were—with what they were getting paid and what their assignments were because they certainly would hear about at the *Gazette* that it was a slower pace and you got paid more money. I remember

another reporter who used to work here, who'd gone to the *Gazette*, reportedly said that he didn't—he liked where he was at the *Gazette* because he didn't want to have to work that hard again like he had worked at the *Democrat*. They were frustrated with their working conditions.

JM: When did they start hiring all these extra people? Was it early in 1979?

AH: It was pretty much early in 1979.

JM: Okay, they started signing—at some point in time there they were going to expand the paper and hire more people to try to get more news.

AH: Right. I think I remember that the salary they were offering these bright, young stars was something like $250 a week, which sounded like a phenomenal amount of money to me, who was making $3 an hour, which translated into $120 a week.

JM: You were making that?

AH: That's what I was making as a clerk. Then when I got the job as a reporter covering Jacksonville, it increased by $10 a week, so I was making $130 a week. But, yes, that's what started it. Starr started hiring in a lot of people who he thought might have some writing or reporting ability.

JM: But you were still having a lot of turnover during all that time?

AH: Yes. I mean, we had a lot of turnover through the entire newspaper war. We talk about having turnover today, but its nothing like it was back in those days. What was typical was that if the *Gazette* liked you, a lot of times you could get offered a $50-a-week pay raise by the *Gazette*.

JM: When did the raids by the *Gazette* on the *Democrat* staff start? Do you remember?

AH: Well, it seems like it was something that was always ongoing because it seemed

like it was the perpetual wish of most people here on the staff that they would get a job with the *Gazette* someday. But what I really remember, when it seemed to be most heated, was in the tail-end of the newspaper war. Gannett had bought the *Gazette* back in 1986, and we were all very worried here at the *Democrat* because Gannett, obviously, was a big national corporation and they would have very deep pockets. They would have a huge pool of personnel to choose from; they would have had better equipment; and we were very worried about what kind of stuff they were going to throw at us. The *Gazette*, of course, had been owned by the Patterson family, which I think had grown tired of the newspaper war, so here was Gannett. Like I said, we were worried about it. But then Gannett started doing stuff—like some of the stuff that they would put on the front page that didn't make sense. Feature stories, for example.

JM: What kind of stories?

AH: Feature stories. The couple of cases that stand out in my mind were one time there was [Robert] Say McIntosh, who was a self-proclaimed black activist—this was right after the Supreme Court had ruled that it was constitutional to burn the flag as a First Amendment right—decided that he was going to burn an American flag on the steps of the state capitol. So you had a bunch of white rednecks and a bunch of state police and a few black people at the capitol to witness this event. And, yes, it was a staged media event, but it was still somewhat newsworthy, I guess. In retrospect, I'm not so sure that I would want to cover something like a staged media event like that. But we put that on the front page—you basically had a race riot on the front of the capitol steps. The *Gazette*—I don't know if they ran anything, or if they did, they ran it inside. But what I remember as being their

lead story in the paper that day was a story about a lawsuit over a Little League baseball team in Cabot. Another case was the Pulaski County Sheriffs office had a dog; their first police dog was one named Jubilee. Jubilee died while in a police car—apparently had a heart condition and was in the police car and it got a little overheated and caused the dog to drop dead. The same day that happened, three women were murdered in their home over, I think, somewhere around the state fairgrounds by somebody who'd been a boyfriend of one of them and [he] came into the house and killed them all. You know, [a] terrible triple homicide. So we put that story on the front page, and Jubilee on the Arkansas page because we thought that was appropriate placement for this triple homicide and this dog's death. And the *Gazette* did the opposite—Jubilee ended up on the front page and the triple murder ended up on their section front. They had a rising star over there, Phoebe Wall Howard, I don't know where she came from, but she had written a story about a death row inmate who was mentally retarded and there was a question about whether he should be executed or not. She was just going over the same old ground again. Obviously, the purpose of it was to try to get people to say that maybe he shouldn't be executed. Rumor had it Phoebe Wall Howard had become a favorite of the editors and they would let her write basically whatever she wanted to, and it ended up on the front page, and they just thought that she was so gifted. And that was something that you'd hear through the grapevine as immensely frustrating to the *Gazette* staff—it wasn't frustrating for us, it was more like, I can't believe they are putting that on the front page, and making you feel like maybe this thing is going to turn out okay after all, if they were going to make moves like that—on the other hand, over at the *Gazette*, they were fru-

strated because here was this young person who hadn't paid any dues and all the editors were enamored of her. There was also one period that I was going to mention when, in 1991, I was supervising a legislative session coverage. I was state desk editor at the time, but my assistant state desk editor was supervising the state desk while I was at the legislature supervising coverage out there. Now, back in those days, especially that last year, we would publish eight-page special sections on legislative coverage. We would assign ten to twelve people to go cover the capitol bureau during a session. These days we have four people who go cover it, and we don't publish a special section. We get a lot of copy that comes out, but nothing like we did back in those days. So, at some point during this meeting, we were sitting in a budget meeting. Now, I'm going to give you some history here, some background—Starr always said it was forbidden to talk about how much money you got paid because, obviously, if he hired you at $300 a week, you would go brag about it to somebody who had just been hired at $250 a week—you'd cause staff dissension. So it would cause problems for him, if you talked about your salary. But anyway, Starr dropped kind of a bombshell at one of our afternoon meetings to talk about page one. He and the *Gazette* were fighting over a reporter who was living in Northwest Arkansas who had worked for us—moved up to Northwest Arkansas because I think her husband needed to get a job up there. So she was a freelancer, I think, at first. Then maybe the *Gazette* wanted to hire her, and then we wanted to hire her. So Starr said at this meeting, "Do you think that we can get her for $525 a week?" Well, there was hardly an editor at that table listening to this who made $525 a week. So my assistant state desk editor decided to go to the *Gazette* and say—I don't remember how much it was—"If

you pay me $50 or $100 more a week, I'll come work for you." So, they hired him. And they made him assistant state desk editor over there. One of his good friends on the staff then called up the *Gazette* after her good buddy Mark went over there and said, "Will you hire me?" So they hired her. So now, in the space of about a week or two, I've lost my assistant state desk editor and my capitol bureau chief. Then one of my reporters decided he would call the *Gazette* and go switch sides. So that's what happened.

JM: What were your feelings?

AH: It was terrible. I felt it was one of the lowest moments as an employee here. I really liked the people who left. But it wasn't a feeling like, "Well, heck, maybe I should call the *Gazette* and see if they'll offer me a job?" In fact, I remember my father, at the time, was watching things that were happening in the newspaper war and saying to me, "People are going over there for more money; you ought to go over there." No, I'm going to stay where I am. What I heard through the grapevine, again, about the *Gazette* was that people who worked for the *Gazette*, especially people who were the old-timers there, who'd been there before Gannett, or people who'd come on maybe in the early days there, were watching these newcomers come in, and they were talking about their salaries. And it was really making people upset. "I've been working here, I've been a loyal employee, yet you're paying this new person more than you're paying me. Just because he's worked for the *Democrat*, just because you're trying to take him out of commission."

JM: This was mostly under Gannett?

AH: Yes. But there was also some of it that happened during the pre-Gannett days,

too.

JM: What was the attitude on the *Democrat* staff—and this goes back to pre-Gannett, I guess, and post-Gannett, to a degree, what there—obviously, you were in competition with the *Gazette*, but was there animosity toward the *Gazette* or . . .

AH: It depended. We had--I mean, certainly Starr had a lot of animosity for the *Gazette*, which supposedly stemmed from when he was covering the 1957 [Little Rock Central High School] desegregation crisis and he was working for the AP [Associated Press], they would run his stories without his byline. That was a—Starr had a pretty good-sized ego. He ran the newspaper war about how you would have to do it. You know, you're either going to be loyal to this newspaper or you're not going to be loyal. There were lots of questions that were raised about loyalty. So, yes, you'd have a lot of animosity. There were some people here who enjoyed the battle every day, I'm going to get up and I'm going to see what the *Gazette* has in their newspaper versus what I published. That was something that you would do—every day you had to read both newspapers—at least your stories and their stories. We had to make sure that we had every story that they had. If we got beaten on anything, we had to follow it up. Then those stories that we would have on the same topic—we had to make sure that we had at least the same information that they did. We had a giant news hole; they had a giant news hole. We covered everything that moved. It made for, I would say, quantitative journalism because you had a lot of stuff that was in there. One of the things that Gannett did was they—in *USA Today* they have that page of briefs from around the country. Well, they would do the same thing—briefs from each of the seventy-five counties. They had a whole staff of people who—"Okay, your job is

to call every county every day and find out something that happened." I was supposed to do the same thing [and] it was impossible. I was supposed to do it, but I didn't have a staff. Starr wanted me to go hire college students and say, "Okay, you call in a brief about something going on in the county, and I'll pay you a dollar." Well, who the heck would do that? I never did do it, so I guess I could be fired for insubordination now. But who am I going to be able to hire and pay them two or three dollars to turn in a brief on something? He wasn't being realistic about that. People would want to get paid for their freelance work. But, anyway, yes, you'd have some people who had animosity toward the *Gazette*. Generally it would come among the editors, because they were the ones who were more consistent at being here than the reporters. You had a lot of turnover with reporters. However, you'd have editors who would also become very weary of the way that Starr was. Here it is, you were fighting, you were getting up every day and trying to beat this competition, and when you were successful at it, you probably didn't get praised for it, which is so typical of the business world. You probably didn't get praised for it, but if you got beaten, you would certainly hear about it. After a while you get to a point, where you just say, "Well, who needs that? Why do I want to go and continue working in this business? What's in it for me? I'm getting paid a low salary. I'm getting screamed at every day. What's my motivation for doing it?" For me, I had contemplated going to other newspapers or trying different jobs, but any effort I made in that area was a half-hearted effort. Like I mentioned earlier, I was state desk editor for six years. I had reporters all over the state. It was like supervising a small army of people, and every day our mission was to go try to do the job better than the other guys

did. I think I did okay at it. A lot of times the reporters we had weren't all that good. You do the best that you thought that you could do.

JM: With what you've got.

AH: Yes.

JM: There was a lot of pressure then on the individuals to beat the *Gazette*. When you didn't, I assume that John Robert applied a lot of that pressure.

AH: Right. He used to write a daily critique of the newspaper. I don't know that I have any copies of it left. But he wouldn't hesitate to blast any member of the staff in this critique that was posted on the bulletin board. It was posted on the bulletin board every day, and you'd go read it, and your stomach would turn because you would see how badly you were criticized over something that you had handled. There was some praise in it, too, occasionally, but there would be notes up on the board about some mistake that would have been made. And a note that would say, "Now if this happens again, somebody's going to be fired." Encouraging notes like that [laughs]. I remember at one point something that he wanted to do was to have a daily reading of the newspaper in his office. I was filling in for Ray Hobbs, the city editor—the city editor's the one who most often had to go through this ordeal. You'd go in there and Starr would be reading the newspaper and picking out things that he didn't like. It might be stuff that you had no control over. "Oh, I don't like this headline; I don't like the way this story is; I don't like this; I don't like that." The day that it happened, I was just really fed up with it, and just walked out of here out of the newsroom. Bob Lutgen was the assistant managing editor at the time, and I just told him I couldn't take it anymore—take all the criticism, especially over things that I had nothing to do with. I guess, in

retrospect—I look at it like, I guess, I could have handled it maybe a little bit differently and been—taken it with a grain of salt, or whatever. But Lutgen bought me lunch and I came back to work. I think I was going to mention one of the biggest mistakes that one of the newspapers made in terms of errors that were published. Back in 1983 I was a reporter at the capitol and [Arkansas Governor] Bill Clinton had come back into office. He was going to have a special session on education—he was going to raise taxes and was going to start teacher testing. He was going to try to make some vast improvements in the school system. There was a meeting at the capitol during which they talked about—right before the session was supposed to start—about how much all this stuff was going to cost. I woke up the next day, and I had the lead story in the newspaper. The *Gazette* had a lead story, and their lead story was about this same thing. My lead said something like it was all going to cost $200 million, and the *Gazette* said $300 million—or mine said $300 million and theirs said $400 million—we were $100 million apart. Obviously, somebody had made a terrible mistake. So, naturally, who did they assume had made this mistake? They assumed I made the mistake. It happened to be that day that I was going to be riding with the governor down to Magnolia to cover him while he talked some more about his education proposals, and it turned out that I had the right information. But that just kind of illustrates how everybody would always make the assumption that the *Democrat* was wrong and the *Gazette* was right if there was a discrepancy in what our reports had.

JM: When did the newspaper war really start heating up, as far as that kind of pressure?

AH: That started the minute that Starr was hired. Starr was hired in December of

1978. I was hired in May of 1979. Like I said earlier, I was a clerk when I was first hired, so I was kind of oblivious to the newspaper war aspect, but it didn't take me long to get involved in it. As much as I talk about the pressure and so forth, I also will mention that a lot of aspects of it were a lot of fun. I had no personal life, so the newspaper was a great thing to consume my time. It was exciting; it was different. I'd never experienced anything like that before—never participated in competitive sports when I was in high school, so this really seemed like a lot of fun. And it had a lot of ups and downs. Starr started in 1978, and he decided that, like I'd said earlier, the way to tackle the *Gazette*—well, let's back up. What had happened was Walter Hussman, Jr. had owned this newspaper for a few years and basically was trying to figure out what to do with it. He had gone to the Patterson family and said, Do you want to have a JOA [joint operating agreement] with the *Democrat* and the *Gazette*? And the Patterson family . . .

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

JM: This is Jerry McConnell here again with Alyson Hoge. This is side two of this tape on the history of the Arkansas *Democrat* and *Democrat Gazette*. Now, Alyson, you were talking about [how] Walter Hussman had owned the paper for a few years [and] had gone to the Pattersons about a JOA.

AH: Right. A JOA being a joint operating agreement where generally your production facilities are owned by one company and you have two newspapers that have different newsrooms, but everything else they share. But the Patterson family was not interested in a JOA, so Walter decided it was either time to sell the newspaper or shut it down or get into a newspaper war with the *Gazette*, so what he decided

to do was [to] get into a newspaper war. So he hired John Robert Starr, who was an Arkansan who had worked for the AP here in Little Rock once upon a time, and was at that point living in Memphis and teaching college over there. [Hussman] asked him to be the managing editor. Starr's philosophy was that there were several things that you had to do in order to be very competitive. You had to have aggressive reporters. It didn't matter so much if they could write as much as if they could ferret out news. You had to have at least as much news as was in the *Gazette*. You had to actually try to have more news than they did. So you needed to make sure that people would have to come to your newspaper if they wanted to get the complete report. The *Gazette's* reputation at the time was that some people considered them to be like a *New York Times* of Arkansas—their stories were well reported and well written. It was, you know—if you wanted to know what was going on, you read the *Gazette*. You didn't read the *Democrat* because the *Democrat* had suffered from staffing issues over the years. It was also an afternoon newspaper, so if you wanted to get up in the morning and read your newspaper, you had to go to the *Gazette*. The *Gazette* did not really in those days have much in the way of turnover; they were known for having reporters who covered the same beats for twenty or thirty years Federal court, city hall, county courthouse. Those were people who by virtue of that they had great sources—while maybe they didn't have to crank out as many stories as we did, it was just easier for them to get stories. Their sources knew them. Whereas let's say at the county courthouse, for example—I think it was George Bentley who covered the county courthouse. People knew him for such a long time, and they would tell him stories all the time. If he had something interesting to report, he'd go and re-

port that. Whereas on the *Democrat* side—the *Democrat* seemed like it was changing out the county courthouse reporter every six months. Well, you can't build sources if you keep having turnover. So it was—we weren't getting the same kind of stories. So if you wanted to get the same kind of stories, you had to work two to three times harder than the *Gazette* person did. The *Gazette* person—I remember being at the capitol bureau and John Brummett had worked at the capitol bureau, too. He could just sit at his desk and not go visit with anybody and people would just come in there to talk to him all the time about stuff. Whereas nobody would give us the time of day—especially because in the Bill Clinton-Frank White era, we were so associated with Frank White and so anti-Bill Clinton, so people who liked Bill Clinton wouldn't want to talk to us at all. Anyway, you had to overcome the effects of turnover. You had to overcome the negative attitude among many of the staffers that they were underpaid and overworked—which they were—and that it didn't seem to be worth it. That was an aspect of this war. [00:51:54.27] I don't remember at what point this happened, but our news hole eventually became larger than the *Gazette's*. In fact, we would give ourselves the slogan that we were Arkansas's largest newspaper, which is kind of funny because normally that refers to your circulation, [and] we were not the biggest circulating newspaper. But in terms of sheer volume, yes [laughs], we were the biggest newspaper. There were other things that were tried that didn't involve the newsroom. Like, for example, one that stays to this day is the free classifieds. I remember when the *Gazette*—I think this was under Gannett—had a slogan where they dropped the price of their classified ads. They were trying to make the pitch that you could get more—get your ad in more places because they

had bigger circulation at the time. You could buy three lines of advertising for three days and it would cost you $3. So their slogan was "3-3-3." Then we came back with, "Why do 3-3-3, when you can get free-free-free?" I remember the buttons that we used to get whenever there would be, say, an announcement that the *Democrat* had actually made a profit. Because the monetary losses were historical. One of your goals with the advertising is you want to have about fifty or sixty percent of your news hole or news pages filled up with advertising. We had far less than that. We were having to charge a lot less than what we probably normally would have if there had only been one newspaper in town because we were trying to be competitive. And our circulation rates—both sides we were practically giving the paper away. So there wasn't as much income coming in as there probably could have been because we were trying to drive each other out of business. [00:54:00.02] Anyway, back to what Starr's basic philosophy was—the only way that you're going to beat the *Gazette* is they've got to think that they've got to read it first in the *Democrat*. And, like I said, with all the turnover that we had and the news staff unfamiliar to Arkansas, for the most part, you did have a lot of—it was kind of hard to do that. Every day you'd get up and try to read the *Gazette* with dread to see what they had—read our paper with dread to see maybe your story didn't make it, for some reason. Sometimes we held stories over because of lack of space. You just would get up every day and try to be better than they were. Try to make sure—I was night city editor and one of our goals was to try to get all the stories in the newspaper. I remember a note I got from Starr one time. He was complaining about the number of holdovers. He said that we needed to figure out some way of getting all these stories in without cutting them.

Well, if you only have a limited news hole, you can't do that. It just isn't physically possible. But what we needed during the newspaper war was that real strong kind of personality. Even though he really frustrated a lot of people to death, you do need to have somebody who's very clear on what their mission is. And he was very clear about that. This is what we had to do. It's a lot easier mission to say, "Were going to beat the *Gazette* every day and you're going to get yelled at if you don't beat the *Gazette*," than it is to say, "Well, I want you to have a very well-written story." Today in the newsroom we get concerned if we don't think that our stories are well-written enough to give the information to the readers in the order in which they need to have it comprehend their story. Now we worry about the writing of a story, how it's structured, and are we complete in our information? Versus the attitude back then, which was, if you had a fact that the *Gazette* didn't have, that was great. And if they had a fact—it didn't matter where the fact was in the story, you just, by golly, better have had all the same facts that they did.

JM: Was there some pressure to get it first, more than to write it well? Or even necessarily to get it completely right?

AH: There was something that way at the end of the newspaper war. We would think back in those days how great it was going to be when the newspaper war ended, and there were sometimes you didn't even care if it was you or the other guys who went out of business. How great it was going to be to have more than a day to work on a story. I think the most number of stories I ever wrote in a day was nine. Maybe a couple of them were briefs, but I would have had—I also look back at my clips, things that I had treasured for years. In the light of over twenty-

five years in the business now, going back and looking at it and thinking, I can't believe they put that story on the front page. I had a story that I wrote when I was a capitol bureau reporter on the start of the legislative session and what the session was about. I don't remember if it was the education session or not. I wrote this story about the session starting and what was at issue and all this stuff. I never interviewed a single person for that story. I don't have anybody quoted. I look at that—and the other funny part of it is, is that it was accompanied by, I think, a drawing of the capitol building. That was our lead art that day; we didn't even have a photograph to go with it. Today, if I went to the managing editor and said, I'm going to put in a story in which we don't interview anybody on the front page, he would fire me. And he should. So that's why I say I can't believe that somebody would actually put that story—not question what it said, or whatever.

[00:58:48.14] JM: I don't know that that necessarily—from my experience working inside the newspaper, working on the newspaper, you always detect the attitudes outside the newspaper. But was there any period of time when you could detect that things were changing? That the *Democrat* was making progress and the *Gazette* might be losing ground?

AH: I wish I could give you an example of a defining moment when I realized that we might be turning the tide. There was a point in the mid-1980s when you would see circulation figures, and you realized—because I think when I started here our circulation was in the forties [40,000]. And when you realized that we were gaining circulation, and you were beginning to realize that maybe we were making some progress here, and this wasn't just that people were enjoying the changes. I mean, obviously, we changed a whole lot more than the *Gazette* did. The dramat-

ic changes in the *Gazette* came when Gannett bought it and it started being less like The *New York Times* and more like *USA Today*.

JM: Which is not a good change.

AH: But the two things that I remember as kind of like a measure, other than maybe reader comments—yes, you would hear people say things like—they would like what John Robert said about certain politicians that really made an impact on them. You began to realize that there were a lot of readers out there who didn't consider themselves to be really intellectual, they were just common, everyday people. They hated paying more money for taxes; they hated seeing their tax dollars wasted—the ones that they had given up. And they liked that go get 'em attitude that the *Democrat* had. And not only just about taxes, but about anything. So when you realized that maybe [it was] not so much that we were going to win the war, but maybe we were getting some respect. Like I said, when you saw the circulation figures increasing—I'm trying to remember when it was, but, yes, there was a point where we realized that our circulation was exceeding the *Gazette's*. And what a tremendous moment that was.

[01:01:27.16] JM: That would have possibly been in the late 1980s after Gannett was over there?

AH: Yes. Yes, something like that. And it might have been only city circulation, which, of course, is kind of the bread and butter of the operation. It may not have been total circulation, but there would be—somewhere out there—it might have been state circulation. I don't remember what it was in particular. But you would see charts that would list their circulation and our circulation in each county, or for each edition, or for certain regions. You would just start to see that we were

making inroads in a lot of places. So those were two of the factors. People would start speaking favorably of the coverage and feeling like they were going to be complacent and you weren't. The other was seeing our readership go up dramatically, which, as low as it had been, it had nowhere to go but up. But to also see that *Gazette* slippage. The third thing would be, as I mentioned earlier, the occasional announcement that we'd made a profit—that Walter had made a profit. Walter had taken a lot of his money and poured it into this operation. I'm sure you've heard this somewhere else, but the rumor supposedly was that—I think maybe Walter said this—that the last year of the newspaper war, they were losing $20 million a year and we were losing $10 million a year. When I mentioned earlier the free classified advertising—another one of the things that Walter came up with to try to battle the *Gazette* was to try to get the newspaper to homes that weren't subscribers. We had something called the Total Market Coverage edition, which, I think, was in Pulaski County. Basically, every home got it. It might have gone to just non-subscribers, but it may have gone to everybody. It was basically, "Take a look at our newspaper if you're not a subscriber, maybe you'll like what you see." Well, it was really a throwaway newspaper. It was something that we had to do every Tuesday. It was something that we had to do before the regular newspaper. I remember on election days we were supposed to write election stories before the polls closed and put them in the TMC edition, which, of course, was dubbed here in the newsroom as the Total Mass Confusion edition. We would try to fill it with something. The worst were the elections, where we would have to try to tell readers what they would have already known. It was a total throwaway there. "There was an election for governor yesterday, and we can't

tell you who the winner is, but it doesn't matter because you've already seen it on TV who the winner is, and I don't know why we're writing this story for you that tells you the governor was in an election yesterday."

JM: That had been designated ahead of time that it was the Tuesday paper they were going to get?

AH: It was the Wednesday paper.

JM: Oh, the Wednesday paper, put out on Tuesday.

AH: Yes, put out on Tuesday. So there was that. We tried other different things, too. We had an Arkansas magazine, which, I think, throughout the papers history there's been a magazine done on Sundays. I think one of my relatives wrote for one of them one time. So we had a magazine, and we used to have tabloid-sized magazines over the years. Then you had neighborhood editions, which today that's sort of regional—let's cover this—its not the same thing as covering an area with the state desk bureau, its more like, "We're going to write these nice little stories about people in this area, or businesses in this area, and its probably not going to have hard news." It's all aimed to try and get more advertising from specific areas. We had something that we did for North Little Rock, West Little Rock, maybe Southwest Little Rock—they were the neighborhood editions. And those were editorial department products. Those would come and go.

JM: What do you mean, they would come and go?

AH: Oh, what I mean is we started them up and then they went away. Usually when something like that died, it was because they didn't have the advertising to support it.

JM: That was probably a pretty good challenge for the newsroom, though, to fill it,

wasn't it?

AH: Right. And when there were actual staff [positions] in the budget—editors and reporters and maybe a photographer in the budget—they were supposed to take care of filling those sections up. I also remember one time the Jacksonville paper was sold—it was still operating, but it had new owners, and Starr saw that as an opportunity to try and make some inroads into Jacksonville. Our circulation there at the time was 6,000, and he thought that maybe we could increase it. So he had—he told our Jacksonville reporter at the time, "I'm going to go speak to the Rotary Club up there, or some city club up there. I'm going to go speak to them, so be sure to cover the speech." The reporter came back and talked to the editor here in the newsroom, and said, "Where do you want this story about the Jacksonville page?" And they said, "What?" And he said, "Starr's decided that—he told this group of people up there that were going to publish a page of Jacksonville news in the paper every day. They said, "Okay." So he wrote up this story. I don't remember where they played it. But it turned out that Starr had gotten this idea that we were going to have a Jacksonville page, but he hadn't talked to anybody else in the newspaper about it. And the production folks said, "No, there's no way were going to do that. Were not going to stop the press, put on these plates for the Jacksonville page, run off 6,000 copies, and you have to make sure that circulation gets those and delivers to the people in Jacksonville." So it never came to pass. But, in the meantime, we'd increased the number of people in the bureau from two to three, so this happened when I was state desk editor. I ended up having a three-person Jacksonville bureau, and they were just crawling all over themselves trying to come up with stuff to do. I mean, there wasn't enough to

keep them busy. When it became obvious that the Jacksonville page wasn't going to come to pass, two of the three people got dispersed to other areas.

JM: Was there ever any point before the sale of the paper happened—before the *Democrat* bought the *Gazette* assets—was there any point before that that you realized that the *Democrat* was likely to win the newspaper war?

AH: Well, there were all those discussions that were going on. The Gannett folks had started making noises that they wanted to get rid of the newspaper, and the rumor started going out about that time. The newspaper folks here—the management folks—couldn't say anything about it, of course. Neither could they at the *Gazette*. But prior to that—and I was talking earlier about losing those three staffers in the spring of 1991. That really seemed like a very dark period there. It just seemed like, "Were losing a lot of people over there." Even though when you would see what Gannett was doing with the paper every day, we knew that our circulation was—whatever it was at the time—either the same or better as theirs and that we had more news hole, and we were beating them on a regular basis, and their coverage was not as good as it had been at the beginning of the newspaper war. Even though all those things were going on—oh, and you had victories like, I believe, Orville Henry and Randy Moss came over to the *Democrat*—some really high-profile type people. You had things like that, but, still, it did seem like the old saying, "It gets darkest right before dawn."

JM: So not too long before it ended—and the war did end in 1991, didn't it?

AH: Yes.

JM: Was it October?

AH: October of 1991.

JM: But earlier in the year it looked pretty bleak for a period of time.

AH: Right. Because if they were losing more money, they were getting more desperate. They were doing more of that thing of trying to hire people away.

JM: This has been something that you might have noticed. I've heard in some of the *Gazette* interviews that the *Gazette* had some people come in from Gannett and say, "Hey, you all are spending too damn much time covering politics and covering the state capitol and everything." Could you discern that over here that they were easing up on their coverage of the state capitol, et cetera?

AH: Well, not during the legislative sessions. They didn't reduce the number of the people they had at the capitol bureau during the off season, you might say. Certainly during the legislative sessions they had as many people or more than we did over there. So, no, I wouldn't say that there was a cutback in terms of coverage. However, that comment wouldn't surprise me, based on the kind of stuff they were putting on the front page. They did seem to be more interested in putting a feature story on the front page in the middle of the week of the newspaper.

[01:11:31.24] JM: What was the reaction here when the *Gazette* sued the *Democrat*?

AH: That was another kind of—I remember that being another bleak moment. When was the lawsuit filed? Was it 1984?

JM: I think the trial probably was in 1986, maybe 1985. I'm not sure.

AH: Yes, I know, I'm sitting here thinking trying to remember what time period there was between the *Gazette* losing that suit and when Gannett bought the *Gazette*. Because I'm thinking—didn't Gannett buy the *Gazette* in 1986? Because it wasn't too long after the trial was over.

JM: I think that's correct.

AH: Anyway—oh, the reaction to that was like you'd been sued. But I also remember a feeling of, "This is actually kind of preposterous that they're doing this." Because the little guy sues the big guy in an anti-trust case, not the other way around. At that point, they had more circulation and probably more advertising. And they were probably getting more for their circulation dollar-wise—what they were getting for subscriptions and advertising and so forth. So it was really a puzzle as to why they thought they were going to win. I remember Mr. Patterson's reaction—Hugh Patterson's reaction on TV was, "It was a difficult case for the jury to understand." I remember the photograph that we had on the front page that showed Walter Hussman walking up to the front of the building and all the cheering employees out front. [01:13:14.00] And while this doesn't have anything to do with the newspaper war, I guess I ought to bring this up. I wrote the cut line for that photograph and here was a picture of a couple hundred people, and I was trying to identify Walter Hussman, who was wearing a suit, which, of course, a lot of people in there would have been wearing a suit, too. I identified him as standing next to the woman in the white blouse, because there was just one person there doing that. Well, it turned out the woman in the white blouse was Walter's secretary—not the same person who's his secretary now. She called me up the next day and chewed me out—you know, she'd been a loyal employee of the newspaper, and here it was that I simply referred to her as the woman in the white blouse. I suppose I could have put her name in there, but his role in that was probably a lot more important than hers was. [01:14:14.24] But, yes, it was just really kind of shocking over the lawsuit. And, yes, you did have the concern that we were going to lose the lawsuit—and what was that going to mean? I al-

ways liken the newspaper war to being like the Vietnam War, and we were the Vietcong. You know, we used guerrilla war tactics; we didn't have the same kind of equipment that they did; and we had to work a whole lot harder, but we ended up being successful. [01:14:45.17]

JM: How was the feeling here when the people—and maybe this is near the end, when the people here started going to the *Gazette*. Was there some resentment here toward the people who left?

AH: It would depend on what people we were talking about. The general consensus was, I'd say, among anybody, whether you liked that person or not—I mean, like the three people that I lost there at the end. I liked all of them, and it was very sad for me when they left. It was viewed as a defeat in the battle because you felt helpless. You felt there wasn't really much that you would be able to do about it. The only way to be effective in fighting that kind of thing would have been to raise everybody's salaries and make it so that they got paid more than the *Gazette* employees were paid and it wouldn't have been quite so tempting to try to go over there. Money was the main thing that was driving people; it wasn't so much of a disloyalty to this newspaper. Although somebody listening to me say that would probably disagree with me. Yes, there were people who thought that the *Gazette* was a better newspaper. And, yes, there were many times that the *Gazette* was the better newspaper. In a lot of ways it had more quality. In the beginning of the war, it had more quality that this newspaper had. You'd go work over there not only because of the pay, but just because you knew things would be better over there. If you were left behind over here, it would make you feel helpless and sad, and like this thing was inevitable and it was going to—you knew there wasn't an-

ything that you could do about it. But not everybody who left here went to the *Gazette* either. A lot of people went and found jobs elsewhere.

JM: There was, as I recollect—and I don't remember what point in time this happened, but probably in the late 1970s [or] early 1980s—there was maybe a slow but steady stream of people here leaving. A lot of them went to the *Gazette*. I could think of, you know, Steele Hays, Mark Oswald, Garry Hoffmann, and people like that. I guess, James Scudder and some of the copy desk. But, I guess, that was just sort of a—it wasn't a flood all at once, was it?

AH: No, not typically. It would be one or two people at a time. The episode that I was talking about—that I've mentioned several times about the three people who'd left within a two-week period—that was probably the worst part of it. Maybe I remember because it happened to people I was close to. But, no, I mean, people would trickle over there. I'm trying to remember. Garry and I talked about this, but I think that Garry went over there—he for sure went over there toward the end of the newspaper war. He went over there in 1990 or 1991. I remember one time that Starr accused me of fraternizing with the enemy because some people who worked for both newspapers would meet at a local bar after work and visit. Somebody—another manager of the newsroom—came in there and saw all of us, and the next thing I heard from Starr was, "Well, I hear you're fraternizing with the enemy." "What are you talking about?" "Well, you were at that bar." So then you learned not to—but I am kind of surprised he didn't fire me over that. If he sensed in any way, shape, or form that you were being disloyal to him or the company, you would hear about it. Sometimes you wouldn't even understand what it was he was talking about. I remember one time he said he'd heard that I

was aiding and abetting the enemy. I said, "What are you talking about?" I mean, I couldn't think of what it was that I had done that would cause that comment. Well, there was a friend of mine who used to work as a copy editor here, and then an assistant city editor, who'd gone to go work for a paper in Missouri. She had come back down here to visit for a while and stayed with me. Unbeknownst to me, she had filed a sexual discrimination complaint with the EEOC [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission] while she was here during that visit, which I found out about after the fact. And, like I said, she never mentioned it to me.

JM: She filed it against who?

AH: The *Democrat*. I had no idea that she'd done this. She didn't mention it to me. So Starr was accusing me of aiding and abetting the enemy, and I had no idea what it was he was talking about. Her case kind of illustrates some of the ways in which Starr created some turmoil inside the newsroom. He didn't have much respect for copy editors. One of his sons who was in the newspaper business had met [this copy editor] at another newspaper and had told his dad this woman was a really great copy editor. So Starr decided to hire her, and then he made it known to the copy editors here that he'd hired this person who was going to be a really great copy editor, and she was going to show them all how to do their job. So when she hit the door, she was already hated by everybody. Not that she was Starr's favorite, but that Starr had signaled to everybody that he didn't like them, but he was going to like her. So it was just kind of ironic later that she ended up filing a sexual discrimination complaint.

JM: Did he cut back on the copy desk staff for a while?

AH: I don't really remember that. I can't answer that question.

JM: I remember that he told someone—and I think maybe it was Bob McCord—that well, "The problem was the *Democrat* had coddled their copy editors, they were just paying their copy editors too much money, and they weren't all that necessary."

AH: Well, copy editors ARE necessary. We probably had an increase in the number of editors who handled reporters. Not anything near what we have today, but you had to because of how green [inexperienced] some of the reporters were that we were hiring. We had to hire editors who could work those green people and try to turn their copy into something that was readable. So you had a lot of editors who dealt with a lot of problems on the front end.

JM: I remember—I think that I was out of state at that time—but the time you were expanding the paper, of course, there was also a big expansion in the sports department, too, right?

AH: Yes.

JM: Putting in a lot more sports news and everything else. Did you see any impact from that? I don't know whether you would notice that.

AH: I don't remember that myself, because I was in the news trench not the sports trench, even though I was buddies with a lot of people in the sports department. Certainly, its proven in studies that sports news is possibly the first thing that people will go to when they read their newspaper. So anything that we could have done there that would have added to the product we were offering would have resulted in better circulation.

JM: One other thing, you mentioned the sections, and everything, that they'd tried. I

know one thing that they tried and apparently were very successful with, was starting [the] High Profile [section] and I think that was started just to appeal to people in West Little Rock.

AH: Right. That's precisely right. Walter will look at how other newspapers operate and see what ideas they had that seemed to be successful. I believe it was the Dallas Morning News [that] had a High Profile-type section. He thought that that would be something that would appeal to people in West Little Rock. For example, a lot of these organizations around here are run by women who do volunteer work. They're married to influential people. In addition to volunteer work, they might have very successful careers because they're bright and they have a lot of energy and intellect. They also have a huge circle of friends who spend a lot of money on goods and services, so you'd want to try to come up with a vehicle that would be about those people, and that would attract advertisers to that section. There's prestige that comes from being in the High Profile section. It's been going on since the mid-1980s, and it's been run by Phyllis Brandon, and she knows everybody and everything that they do. They not only have a big profile every week of some prominent person; they'll have a secondary story that will talk about somebody else and what they're doing, or some event coming up. Inside, you'll find high-profile weddings, in addition to the regular weddings. And they're high-profile not just because that's the name of the section, but what I mean is prominent people, well-known people, perhaps, at least in their community, and then social gatherings. It's a big deal to get your photograph in there. That's been, I think, a successful vehicle for this newspaper.

JM: I understand—I've heard that at one time there was probably a little resentment

around the newsroom toward it as being a lot of fluff and not hard news and everything like that.

AH: There was a lot of resentment for that because it seemed like it was really emphasizing one class of folks over other classes. But you've got to understand the logic of it. You want to have—in West Little Rock, the paper that had the penetration there was the *Gazette*, not the *Democrat*. The *Democrat* had always been one that appealed to the lower income folks and not so much the high-income folks. Like I said, when I referred back to that *New York Times*-type of reputation that the *Gazette* had was the kind of thing that, if you lived in the Heights or Hillcrest or West Little Rock, you'd want to read the *Gazette* because that was like reading The *New York Times*.

JM: Also, I guess, it would be a natural assumption that the advertisers or people who controlled the big ads lived in West Little Rock, too. So if you were going to start getting those ads, you had to appeal to those people, too.

AH: That's right.

JM: You said that one time you were in charge of production, I think—getting the paper out and everything. Did that ever become less of a struggle? Was it pretty much a struggle through most of the time?

AH: I had that job post-newspaper war. I was here in the early years of pagination. I think had some influence on how we do things today. Then there was also, as we started up the Northwest edition, another newspaper war. There were the technological challenges: how do we get what were doing down here up to Northwest Arkansas? We had copy editors and page designers here working to produce these pages. We had to be done with our pages by a certain deadline in order for

the newspapers production department to pick it up and get it on the press.

JM: In the early years, though—and you mentioned the scanners and the reporters having to come from the capitol to type a story—that was probably a struggle at that time.

AH: It was. There was not a computer on everybody's desk. There was no Internet to go to look up facts and check out news stories. I don't even think we had cable in the newsroom then. We had this device—a big machine called a scanner.

JM: I remember.

AH: You would type your copy on an IBM Selectric. If you had a place where you wanted to make corrections, you would mark that with a black pencil, then you would take a red felt-tip pen and write what you wanted to type in. You fed the pieces of paper into this machine. It had a thing like an eyeball in it that would go across the pages. It was an optical scanner, and it would pick up the text and put it in the computer system. We had maybe ten or fifteen computer terminals in the newsroom for news, sports, and the copy desk. Most everybody worked off of a typewriter. The editors would call up the stories; they'd edit them [and] the stories would go to the copy desk. The stories would come out on a slick piece of paper with the headline attached to it. In the composing room, they would wax that piece of paper and put it on a big piece of poster board with a grid on it. Somebody on the copy desk would have designed the page and determined where the art and the stories were going to go, and the headline counts, and so forth. Composing room employees would paste it together like a puzzle every night. The whole newspaper. Of course, that's different from the hot lead days when, I think, it was actually much more complicated to put together a newspaper. Any-

way, composers would put together this whole page, pieced together with little pieces of waxed paper, and then a giant camera would shoot page-size negatives and use that to make the plates for the press. Then, in 1993, we started evolving into pagination. Let me back up. After we bought the assets at the *Gazette*, we got the *Gazette's* computer system. In fact, let me back up from there.

JM: Okay.

AH: The *Raleigh News & Observer* [in North Carolina] had upgraded their computer system, and they had the same kind of computer system that we did. Their original computer system—earlier computer system was. They had . . .

JM: DEC.

AH: Yes, the DEC system. Walter was able to buy all their stuff for a song and move it here. So it got to a point where everybody still didn't have a computer, but you had a lot more computers for people to use. We did away with the scanner. We had a bank of about ten computer terminals for people to use. I use the term computer terminal kind of loosely. All you could do with this computer was type in a command like, "Get my story." Your story would have a name, the only way you could find anything was by the name of it. So if you lost the name of your story, you might be out of luck, unless you had the knowledge of how to look for things that you didn't know all the letters to. It really didn't have much security. It was slow, and there were limited terminals for everyone. After the *Gazette* shut down, one of their assets was a Coyote computer system. That meant everybody could have a computer terminal. It was fairly new. It lasted us about four years. When we got the Macintosh system, we had the Internet.

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[Beginning of Tape 2, Side 1]

JM: This is Jerry McConnell again. I'm here with Alyson Hoge. This is tape two of an interview about the Arkansas *Democrat* and *Democrat-Gazette*. Alyson, you were talking about the computers, and everything. I asked somebody in one of my chats with people who work here now, "When did you ever solve all of your production problems and computer problems and everything?" And they said, "Well, we really didn't solve them until we won the war."

AH: Yes, that was one of the areas where we had a disadvantage. Of course, at that time, cell phones were not nearly as common as they are today. We had some pagers for the staff. On the computer system, I had already talked about how there were not too many computers for use for the newsroom in general when I started working here. I also remember scary episodes like one time when we had decided to rearrange the newsroom. All the computers were disconnected and hooked back up, and nothing worked. We had talked earlier off the tape recorder about the fact that there was no back-up system, which was true. If any part of that computer system were going to fail, then that was it. You were sunk. I remember horrifying things like the computer system had such a limited capacity in it that the day wire editor had to erase the previous day's stories. If it had been sent, it was going to be deleted. What I mean by sent was, sent to the composing room for use in the paper. Anything that was held in the system for later use was retained. But sometimes a wire editor made a mistake; he meant to delete the previous day's files but started deleting the upcoming edition's files. I think they were able to stop it. The day that they had moved all the computer terminals, and we couldn't get the system to back up, we ended up having to publish the same

paper two days in a row. There was one other time that we did that, too. I don't remember what happened. It was another computer failure. That scanner that we were talking about had a tape machine to it, kind of like a ticker tape thing that you see stock investor's using in the old days—where people used to read stock prices. The way it used to work was it would spit out this tape with these holes punched in it that would be the code for whatever was in the story. And the computer guys, when the system had a problem, would take that tape and feed it into a machine, and that's how we would get a newspaper out. There was another time that we had to fly people down to Texarkana and use their computer—of course, it's one of Walter's papers—because of a computer system breakdown. The biggest production problem we've had in recent years is when the power went out in the newsroom right before we were getting ready to put the paper to bed, and we had to scramble. We had help from the papers in Conway and Hot Springs, which let us use their equipment to finish our paper. We were able to finish the job in Little Rock.

JM: Let's go to one subject. You've been here through a lot of time. How has the paper changed since the end of the newspaper war, and what have been the significant developments?

AH: Well, probably the biggest significant development was that once the war ended, Bob Starr stayed here for a short while and then decided to retire. So Walter decided—considered a few candidates to be the editor of the paper. Now, Bob Starr had been managing editor, which, at that time, was the top position at the paper while he was here. So—not as necessarily Starr's replacement but as executive editor, which is a higher position—Walter hired Griffin Smith [Jr.]. Griffin is a

lifelong Arkansan. His grandfather had served on the Arkansas Supreme Court. Griffin had worked for National Geographic. He helped found Texas Monthly. He's a world traveler. And his family would be known to some of the circles that Walter would want to appeal to. He had more of an intellectual approach to the operation of the paper than Starr did. I mean, Starr's was in-your-face kind of journalism. Griffin's approach is more of an intellectual type of journalism—you know, "Let's think carefully about the words that we use." Precision in language is very important to Griffin. Correcting our inaccuracies is very important to Griffin. He's a lot quieter person. He doesn't rule by force and by anger; it's more like logic and thinking. Maybe we're not running over people like we were, but we are trying to think a lot more about what happens when were putting the newspaper together.

JM: Has there been any change in the type of stories you're doing or how you approach the stories?

AH: I remember, once upon a time, a lead story in the newspaper was about a bus driver who had hepatitis, I think. Today, a story like that might end up on our Arkansas page at the bottom of the page, unless he's infected students. We really try to put on our front page what we think are the five most important things that happened that day, or the things that we think readers ought to know, as opposed to—the things that we were lacking in the newspaper war was depth and scope and perspective. Yes, you might put in a couple of paragraphs of information about something like when Gene Simmons killed sixteen people. This is the biggest mass murderer in the history of Arkansas. But I'm just talking about other stuff, like the bus driver story that I just mentioned. Why would you make that

the lead story of the newspaper?

JM: So, in effect, I think what you're saying is that you're less sensationalistic now.

AH: Oh, yes, that's a good word. [Laughs] Yes, that's a really good way of putting it. I've been using the word aggressive all day, but, yes. Were not trying to be anywhere near sensational. Were actually trying to be the opposite of sensational. You'll see in the media these days, the new—speaking of sensational, you'll see on Fox News or CNN [Cable News Network] or whatever—their big stories will be something that we will make a brief out of, if we run it at all. Let's say people are getting bitten by sharks off the coast of Florida. You had these big dramatic stories, "My God, somebody has been bitten by a shark!" Okay. But, you know, if somebody got bitten by a bear or an alligator, or whatever, I don't think they would make quite the same fuss about it.

JM: Yes, but the TV stations have to have it on there—interview the person who got bit and who pulled them out and they make a big production out of. I'm editorializing a little. Then they beat it to death for days.

AH: Something else they're doing these days that we don't do, for example, is when a woman disappears and the networks will go bananas over that. If we run anything, we'll run a very short story on it. There are lots of people who go missing. That's where the perspective comes in. Lots of people are missing throughout the country every day, so why single out a young blond, white woman, but we're going to skip the black people and Hispanics and Asians, and so forth?

JM: Your thrust today is the important stories, the stories that you think are important for the people to know about.

AH: Right.

JM: If you will pardon me, it sounds a little bit like the same goal The *New York Times* has.

AH: All the news that's fit to print?

JM: No, putting the really most important stories on page one.

AH: Right. Yes, that's what we're trying to do today. A lot of times people will see when they read a front page story a lot of different reporters and wire services who contributed to that story, whereas in the old days we would use just the AP story. We have editors these days spend a lot of time going through wire stories and piecing together what they think will give a complete and balanced report. The wire editors get a lot more guidance from Griffin, and he has a perspective that goes back a few decades on the history of something, whereas a wire editor may not be as experienced as Griffin. But anyway, you might run across somebody who would seize upon something and say, "This is too sensational," and they might want to throw that out. But Griffin is going to want to temper it and say, "Well, yes, but there's all [these] other things that you don't know about the history of this place that affects the significance of maybe a particular event." As far as the local coverage goes, yes, we still have people complain that maybe they can't get in the news releases they used to be able to get in during the newspaper war. Or maybe were not covering the same kinds of events that we used to cover. And, yes, we're being a lot more discriminating about what it is that we'll cover. We're trying to exercise news judgment these days that we couldn't exercise many years ago. We have more reporters, but we're trying to use them to give more complete coverage of things and to try to put things in the proper perspective. I was going to mention here one of the things, when we talk about how sen-

sational TV will be versus what we do. When somebody dies, TV may go bananas over it—somebody who's famous. A lot of times you'll look at our newspaper, and depending on who that person is, they don't get nearly the same prominent play that the TV station gives to it. Like I said, that gets to the sensational issue. You know, were trying to tell people what we think is really important, and we are going to try to make a judgment about how important somebody really was, like entertainers a lot of times who end up on the front pages of papers—we don't always put on the front page here.

JM: Speaking about editing, do you have more editors? Is there a lot more careful editing about how you use words and facts and stuff like that now?

AH: Yes, there is. Even though sometimes it seems like—and if you don't come from that background of what it was like here during the newspaper war, yes, there's a lot more careful editing. I wish that editors that I'd had—some of the editors we have here today, I wish that they had worked here when I was a reporter here. I think they would have pushed me harder. We try not to have one-source stories. I'm not talking about unnamed sources; I'm talking about named sources. We try to get information from more than one person. In the old days, it used to be, we'd interview you, and you would blurt out this stuff, and we would just put it in the newspaper. These days we try to confirm what it is that you say. If you say that there's a bird flu pandemic in Arkansas, we don't just write that and put it in the newspaper like we would have in the old days. We try to go to other sources and confirm that information.

JM: Okay, very good, Alyson. We've covered a lot of ground here, and very well, I think. I just wondered if there's anything we haven't covered that you feel like

you should add.

AH: Well, I will throw in this because I've been listening to myself talk about how painful it was and wearying it was during the newspaper war, but it was a great experience. Actually, I've now worked at the newspaper post-war longer than the newspaper war actually existed when I was here. But it was a great experience, and I wouldn't have traded it for anything else in the world. It caused—there were a lot of good times here; there were a lot of bad times. I don't know that I want to go through something like that ever again. I'm glad that it's over. There are some aspects of it I do wish we had today. Sometimes—back in those days you wished that you had more time to work on stories. Sometimes today, I feel like we need to poke people and . . .

JM: Go a little faster?

AH: Yes, get going there a little faster on your story.

JM: Do you miss not having competition, though? Do you miss not having another newspaper in town?

AH: Frankly, no. I mean, you see sometimes stuff in the *Arkansas Times*—of course, we have a newspaper competition in Northwest Arkansas. The TV stations have stuff in their news reports—like they'll lead off with a fatal accident, which we'll, for the most part, have written three inches on. I don't understand where the TV stations are coming from in their news coverage. Whatever they think that their viewers want—I think they think that their viewers want an explanation of, "Well, I saw this weird thing when I was out driving around, what was it?" I think that's what they're trying to shoot for. We want to do some of that, too, but we also want to try to provide a lot of depth for what were doing.

JM: My theory is they only want stories in which they can make a picture of it.

AH: Yes. Exactly.

JM: There are some thoughtful stories that you can't make a picture of.

AH: That's exactly right. Or talk about in two or three minutes, which is about all they have.

JM: Okay. Let me ask you one other. Is the *Democrat-Gazette's* newspaper coverage influenced any at all by the editorial policies?

AH: No. We have a very clear division between the opinion pages and the news pages. There will be conversations that go on between Paul Greenberg and Griffin Smith, but they may be of a procedural thing, like who's going to take over this conference room or something like that. But, no. Even though we're all here in the same room together, there are no conversations where we're trying to take opinion and put it in the news pages.

JM: Okay. Anything else you can think of?

AH: No, afraid not.

JM: Well, that's very good. Very thorough and very excellent, I think, and I thank you very much.

AH: You're welcome.

[01:59:09.02]

[End of Interview]

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