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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with

Bill Terry
Telephone Interview
31 May 2007

Interviewer: Jerry McConnell

Jerry McConnell: This is Jerry McConnell. This is May 31, 2007. I'm in my home in Greenwood, Arkansas, preparing to do a telephone interview with Bill Terry, who is in Golden, Missouri—his home in Golden, Missouri. This interview is for The [David and Barbara] Pryor Center for [Arkansas] Oral and Visual History at the University of Arkansas [at Fayetteville] on the history of the *Arkansas Democrat*. The first thing I need to do, Bill, is to ask you if I have your permission to tape this interview and turn it over to the Pryor [Center] archives?

Bill Terry: Sure. Go ahead. [Laughs] I hope I don't make too big a fool out of myself.

JM: Oh, you'll do great. Okay. Give me your full name.

BT: It's Fred William Terry, Jr.

JM: Fred William Terry, Jr. Okay. And Bill, as—I'm sure there's a lot more that I

don't know in particular since then, but one time you were news editor or what was wire editor, right?

BT: Yes, wire editor.

JM: Wire editor for the *Arkansas Democrat*. Later, you were the editor of the *Arkansas Times*.

BT: Right.

JM: And you now are a freelance writer. Is that correct?

BT: Yes. I still write a bit piece every once in a while for the [Arkansas] *Democrat-Gazette*. I've published a couple novels and [?]. Pretty good review in the *Democrat-Gazette*.

JM: Okay. Can you speak up just a little bit louder?

BT: Oh, okay.

JM: Okay. Yes. All right. Because I want to make sure—I want to stop in a minute and make sure my tape is getting it. But let's just start at the beginning, Bill.

Where were you born?

BT: In Little Rock.

JM: In Little Rock. Okay.

BT: In 1931.

JM: 1931?

BT: Seventy-five years ago.

JM: Yes. Okay. Well, you're still younger than I am. [Laughs] But . . .

BT: I go back to the Neolithic [Age], you know?

JM: But of course, we know your father's name. What was your mother's name?

BT: Cornelia.

JM: What?

BT: Cornelia.

JM: Cornelius? Cornelia?

BT: No, Cornelia. I-A.

JM: Yes. Okay. And where did you go to school?

BT: Yale [University, New Haven, Connecticut].

JM: Where did you go—did you go all the way through school in Little Rock?

BT: No, no. I went to a prep[aratory] school in Exeter, New Hampshire, called Phillips Exeter Academy.

JM: Oh, okay.

BT: And after that I went to Yale.

JM: You went to Yale after that. Okay. Where did you go to grammar school?

BT: Rightsell in Little Rock.

JM: Okay. Then . . . ?

BT: It was East Side Junior High School then. It's kind of a disheveled old building now. I guess it's still there on—it's on Scott Street, wasn't it?

JM: I think so.

BT: And I went to Little Rock High School [which became Little Rock Central] for one year.

JM: Oh, did you?

BT: Yes. It was called Little Rock High School then.

JM: Yes. Okay. Then you went to Phillips Exeter.

BT: Yes, right.

JM: Okay. Then—did you say—after that, you went to Yale?

BT: Right.

JM: Okay. And what did you—did you get your degree at Yale?

BT: Yes, in English.

JM: In English. Okay. At what point did you get interested in writing and in journalism?

BT: Well, I was in the Air Force. I was the editor for the base newspaper at Travis Air Force Base.

JM: At Travis Air Force Base?

BT: Yes, in California. It's between San Francisco and Sacramento.

JM: Yes.

BT: And after that I went to work for United Press.

JM: Oh.

BT: Well, in those days it was just UP.

JM: Yes.

BT: While I was working there, they—the UP merged with INS—International News Service—and that's where the "I" came from in UPI.

JM: That's when they became United Press International.

BT: Right.

JM: Yes. Okay. So where did you . . . ?

BT: I worked there for, oh, about three years.

JM: Where were you with UP?

BT: In San Francisco.

JM: In San Francisco?

BT: Yes.

JM: Okay. Now, then, you were working in San Francisco, and you worked with UP for about three years. Then what happened?

BT: Well, I got in the electronics business, regrettably. I lost a bunch of money out there. [Laughs] I went from being a wire filer and reporter for UPI to suddenly the CEO [chief executive officer] of this little bitty company. And it's no feather in my cap. We went broke after about three years.

JM: Yes.

BT: I did that about three years, and—and then I didn't do much of anything. I moved back to Arkansas.

JM: Yes.

BT: I went to work for the *Stuttgart Daily Leader* for, oh, I guess six months, eight months, and then Gene Foreman hired me over at the 'crat—the *Democrat*.

JM: Yes. Okay. So you worked at—what did you do at the Stuttgart paper?

BT: I was the—gosh, I don't know—they had an editor—I was, oh, the general factotum. You know, I made up the paper.

JM: Yes.

BT: And I was a reporter. I covered the football and the basketball games.

JM: Yes.

BT: And, oh, the city council meetings—city board meetings and that kind of stuff.
And put out the paper. It was a one-man show.

JM: Yes.

BT: I had to answer to the publisher, of course, but I was the one who did the work.

JM: Yes. But you were basically *it*. You did everything.

BT: Yes, I was the general factotum. [?]

JM: Yes. Okay. [Laughs] Gene Foreman hired you at the *Democrat*, right?

BT: That's right.

JM: Okay. Do you remember what year that was?

BT: Well, let me think about it. It was—oh, wait a second.

JM: I remember Gene—Gene came to the *Democrat*, I think, in 1968, because that was the year that [*Democrat* owner and publisher] Mr. [K. August] Engel died, and . . .

BT: Well, that's what I was thinking. Right. In 1968. Yes.

JM: Okay. So what did—did you come as wire editor at that time, or did you start out as something else?

BT: I came as wire editor.

JM: Okay. So you—Gene hired you as wire editor at the *Democrat*. Explain to me—to our listeners—what the wire editor does.

BT: Oh, he selects all the copy from the wires. We had the AP [Associated Press] and *The Washington Post*,/[*Los Angeles, California*] *Times* news service.

JM: Yes.

BT: [?]. And you sort of cull out the stories you think are good for the paper that day.

JM: Yes.

BT: And you recommend those stories in the budget meeting. We had a budget meeting every morning, you know, as the news conference. Then you go about editing the copy and sending it to the slot guy.

JM: Yes.

BT: It's just the basic accumulation of all the copy, and you give it the first editing run-through.

JM: So basically what you were doing was going through all the wire copy, which would be, in some cases, maybe state news, but mostly national and international news and everything, and selecting what you thought were the most important stories.

BT: Well, yes, but not state—not state or city.

JM: Oh, okay.

BT: National and international [?].

JM: Yes. Okay. So . . .

BT: I was part of the “Foreman Renaissance.”

JM: Yes. Tell me a little bit about that—what you remember about that.

BT: Well, you know, when I came to work for the *Democrat*, it was the number two paper in Little Rock.

JM: Yes.

BT: But Mr. Engel and [*Arkansas Gazette* publisher J. N.] “Ned” Heiskell had been fighting for centuries—not centuries [laughs], but certainly for decades.

JM: Yes.

BT: And it had been Mr. Engel's decision that we take on the *Gazette*, you know . . .

JM: Wait just a—hold just a minute. Speak up just a little bit louder, Bill.

BT: But his honesty [?]—I remember that Mr. Engel’s philosophy was to take on the *Gazette* in central Arkansas, but to concede—you know, like Little Rock—oh, Conway, Hot Springs, and so on.

JM: Yes.

BT: But to concede the rest of the state to the *Gazette*.

JM: Yes.

BT: Because the *Gazette* had greater resources, and so on. So it was a pretty good competition, but the *Democrat* was failing—well, not failing—that’s not right. But it was lagging behind.

JM: Yes.

BT: You know, the old regime of Engel and—oh, you remember old Stanley Berry and Marcus George [Engel’s nephews].

JM: Yes. Right.

BT: And remember the reporter George Douthit and [all?] those old-timers.

JM: Yes.

BT: Well, they weren’t cutting it against the *Gazette*. And when Mr. Engel died, Marcus George decided to do something dramatic and significant, and so he hired Gene Foreman. And Gene Foreman brought *his* guys. You know, Gene was the editor at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, and he brought a bunch of his people over.

JM: Yes.

BT: And this was sort of—well, appeared [to be] a Renaissance for the *Democrat*.
And that’s when I came to work for them. I came to work during that period of

time. During that period of time, the *Democrat* circulation increased, I think, against the *Gazette*, and the morale was pretty good around there. You know, occasionally—you know, the *Democrat*—do you remember that old spiral staircase on the second floor?

JM: Yes.

BT: The copy had to be lugged up there, and the walls were yellow. There was a kind of defeatism sort of built into the paper. But after Foreman was there, things changed a lot. I mean, it was getting around, and he had some good reporters, you know? Oh, you remember Martin Kirby and Mary Lowe Kennedy and . . .

JM: Yes.

BT: Bob Lancaster?

JM: Yes.

BT: I mean, I was pretty good. [Laughs] We had an Ivy League contingent, even.

JM: Yes.

BT: You know, Bob McCord—well, he came a little bit later, but he was all for this Renaissance here.

JM: Yes.

BT: He was from Columbia.

JM: He was what?

BT: He was from Columbia. He had done some work at Columbia University [New York].

JM: Yes. He had gotten his master's [degree] at Columbia.

BT: That's right. And Fred Cowan—he was a reporter and he worked on the rim. He

was from Dartmouth [College, Hanover, New Hampshire], and, of course, I was from Yale. So we had our own little coterie there.

JM: Yes. Cowan was C-O-W-A-N, wasn't it?

BT: C-O-W—yes.

JM: Yes. I had forgotten him. I wonder whatever happened to him.

BT: Well, he went on to become the attorney general for the state of Kentucky.

JM: Did he really?

BT: Yes. You know, I think I saw his wife's [Linda Scholle] in the paper somewhere here. It was a couple weeks ago. It was a wire copy and then an editorial. I think the [Arkansas] *Democrat*[-*Gazette*] ran it, but I'm not sure. She kept her own name when they got married. They got married in Little Rock.

JM: Yes.

BT: He was my best man.

JM: Was he? Okay. And what was her name?

BT: God, Jerry, I can't think of it. I can look it up, though.

JM: No, that's all right. But you think Fred is where now?

BT: Well, he's in Kentucky.

JM: Yes.

BT: He's up—I guess he's in Kentucky.

JM: Yes.

BT: He was the—you can find him through the attorney general's office.

JM: Okay. I may track him down because I'd forgotten about him.

BT: If you do, tell him I recommended him. [Laughs]

JM: Yes, okay. Okay. Good.

BT: He started a—oh, it wasn't an environmental—it was sort of “honesty in politics” little company there in Little Rock. And after that, he ran for the state legislature in Little Rock and got beat.

JM: Yes.

BT: And he left to return to Kentucky.

JM: Yes.

BT: And he was elected attorney general there.

JM: Yes. I'll be darned. Well, that's great. Yes, I remember him now. I think he was there for a short while after I came over.

BT: Yes, I think he was.

JM: Yes.

BT: We had a good crew. We had a bunch of good reporters, and we gave the *Gazette* a run for its money. We sort of had a—you know, you worked at both papers around there.

JM: Yes.

BT: And there was kind of a conceitedness to the *Gazette*.

JM: Kind of a what?

BT: Kind of a conceitedness.

JM: Yes.

BT: Kind of high and mighty. They kind of looked down on the *Democrat*. But we sort of made them sit up and take notice. Well, the *Arkansas Times* did also.

JM: Yes. But, yes, Foreman brought a bunch of those people from Pine Bluff with

him, I think, or hired some of them outside. I think he may have hired James Scudder, too.

BT: Well, but—and Scudder and Lancaster [?].

JM: Yes. Right.

BT: Scudder didn't come from Pine Bluff, I don't think.

JM: No, I don't think so either.

BT: No. And Mary Lowe Kennedy did and Lancaster did and . . .

JM: Yes.

BT: Tom Parsons did.

JM: Yes.

BT: Oh, and there's that kind of chubby guy. [Laughs] I can't think of his name right now, but a bunch of pretty good guys that he has over there.

JM: Yes.

BT: Then he hired some other people.

JM: And so—well, I think he hired Tucker Steinmetz, too.

BT: Tucker. Right.

JM: Yes, and [I] think he . . .

BT: Whatever happened to him?

JM: Tucker is now—I interviewed him not too long ago. He is now—well, he's sort of semi-retired. He started a—he went back and got a degree—maybe a doctoral—I know at least a master's degree in social work. I think a doctorate degree in social work. He started his own agency in Benton in which they dealt with people with mental disabilities and stuff like that. He ran that for a long

time. And he's sort of retired, but he's now sort of doing consulting work for them. He's still doing some work with drug addicts and things like that. So he's still around.

BT: I'm glad to hear that.

JM: Yes. But as I understand—and I don't know if you know about this—part of the Renaissance, I think, was that they got rid of some of what they considered the dead wood on the old staff.

BT: Well, yes. George Douthit didn't get along very well with the new regime as it was—with the new management. But he stayed around for a while and finally quit.

JM: Yes.

BT: And Leon Hatch—Leon stayed around for a long time. Finally, Leon, I think, quit or got fired. He was a very good newspaperman.

JM: Yes.

BT: You know, it was just the old guard—the old team against the young Turks, you know?

JM: Yes, right. But did you notice any resentment from the old hands right at first?

BT: Oh, yes. Well, of course, I came in May. The Renaissance, as I referred to it, had already started.

JM: Yes.

BT: But some of those old guys were still there, like Douthit and Leon.

JM: Yes.

BT: Yes, there was definitely—well, you remember Si Dunn.

JM: Yes.

BT: Well, Si and Gene didn't get along all that well. I mean, don't put all this in there, Jerry, but there was some resentment. Si was a good newspaperman.

JM: He was—Si was what?

BT: He was a good newspaperman.

JM: Yes.

BT: The thing about Si was he didn't care as much about *The Washington Post* or *L. A. Times* as Gene did.

JM: Yes.

BT: But he could get the paper out.

JM: Yes.

BT: And one time I asked Foreman—having noticed that he and Si didn't get along very well and that, you know, maybe somebody else could be a—would be a—don't put this in there—let me retract that. I asked him about his feelings about Si.

JM: You asked him what?

BT: And Gene said, "Well, you know, Si has his faults, but he can get the paper out."

JM: Yes.

BT: If something happened to Gene, you know—I mean, if he got sick or had to go out of town, Si could get it out.

JM: Yes.

BT: He said that they had their basic disagreement over quality control, really.

JM: Yes.

BT: That's kind of what it was.

JM: Yes.

BT: And Si could get the paper out. That's important. You've got to get it out every day.

JM: Yes.

BT: You got your bulldog—what they used to call the first mail. Remember?

JM: Yes.

BT: That was their bulldog [early] edition.

JM: Yes.

BT: The city edition and the home and the [?].

[Taped Stopped]

JM: Okay, now. Resuming here, Bill. What else do you remember about the *Democrat* under Foreman?

BT: Well, mainly that we were making inroads against the *Gazette* and had them kind of worried, and he [?] was giving us [?] a kind of a look over his shoulder, you know? We weren't quite good enough—well, I wouldn't say that—we weren't quite advanced far enough to take the circulation away from them.

JM: Yes.

BT: But, listen, there's an important thing here. After—I mean, Gene was there, what, four or five years? And although things were going well—you know, the *Democrat* still wasn't making the money that Stanley Berry and Marcus George—so—and we had a very important meeting. Jerry, I don't remember where this meeting was. This was before you came. Gene was there, and

Marcus made a big speech. There were going to be some cutbacks. He sort of—the gist of his speech was the Renaissance—the new look. The revolution down there to reform the old paper was not working out as expected.

JM: Yes.

BT: We had a whole meeting of the staff, and, of course, this was a downer. I remember telling Marcus at the meeting—all of us stood up and our—well, most of us stood up and had something to say—and I told him—I said, “Look, Marcus, if it hadn’t been for Gene and all of us here, the paper may have folded years ago. You know, the new look—the new energy infused into this paper is what kept us going all this time. So you ought not to cut back. You ought not to pull in your reins. You ought to keep it going.”

JM: Yes.

BT: But it was kind of expensive because, you know, we were paying—I say we—they were paying—oh, reporters got a pretty good salary for those days. It was costing a lot of money, and there had been some changes made. And, oh, we were slowly going into the [?] stuff—away from the Linotype stuff and all that, and it was an expensive deal. Well, anyway, we had this important meeting. I’m thinking it was at the Lafayette Hotel or at the Old State House downtown. It was not at the newspaper. [?]

JM: I think the—I heard that story. It was before I came, and my recollection is that whoever told me said it was at the Lafayette.

BT: Okay. That’s where I remember. It was at the Lafayette. Well, after that meeting there was a kind of a—oh, a downdraft . . .

JM: Yes.

BT: . . . to euphemize it a little bit. That kind of knocked a little wind out everybody's sails.

JM: Yes.

BT: And shortly thereafter, Gene left. He went on to the—where did he go first?

JM: He went to *Newsday* [Long Island, New York], I believe.

BT: That's what I'm thinking—he went to *Newsday*. And Mary Lowe Kennedy followed him to *Newsday*, and then Paul Nielsen followed him up there.

JM: Yes.

BT: And so—and that sort of left us, oh, you know, betwixt and between. And—is that when you came on?

JM: Yes, that was when I came on. Let me ask you one other question about the meeting over at the Lafayette. Was that the meeting that Marcus told the—I use the word in quote marks—”joke” about how to make a dead baby float?

BT: Oh, that's right. Yes. I had forgotten about that.

JM: [Laughs]

BT: Dead baby float. That's right.

JM: Somebody—I've heard that from three or four sources, and most of them say they really cringed. But it's said that he started out by saying, “Do you know how to make a dead baby float? Well, you take two scoops of ice cream,” or something like that, I think, and—but, nevertheless—was that meeting called? Do you remember—was that meeting called by Marcus, or had the staff started pressing for more benefits?

BT: Well, I'm sure that was part of it, but I remember that meeting—it was to sort of put a new—sort of put a lid on things there as far as advancement goes.

JM: Okay.

BT: But going back on the attack against the *Gazette*, it was a [?] . . .

JM: It was a—? Okay. Go right again. Slow it down just a little bit.

BT: Well, it was an advisory meeting that the paper was going to become more cost-conscious.

JM: Yes. Okay.

BT: And that this may mean some—I don't think he used the word *layoffs*, but you got the impression that the former revolution had run its course and the *Democrat* was not going to continue its strong resurgence.

JM: Yes.

BT: It was going to sort of put a—well, rein in the—rein in the horses.

JM: Yes. Okay.

BT: Because taking on the *Gazette* that way was expensive.

JM: Yes.

BT: You know, paying the reporters and covering news all over the state. That takes money.

JM: Yes.

BT: Of course, there were changes going on in the composing room, and so on.

JM: Yes. What kind of paper was the *Gazette* at that time?

BT: Oh, well, pretty good. It was leading in, of course, in circulation, and reputation—they'd won two [Pulitzer Prizes] in 1957, you know . . .

JM: Yes.

BT: . . . for [Editor] Harry Ashmore's stand on the—or his editorials on the integration crisis in Little Rock. And they also won a Pulitzer for the coverage of that event down there.

JM: Yes. Okay.

BT: And this is what's sort of confusing to their conceitedness and their high-and-mighty tone that a lot of us at the *Democrat* had decided to take on and to challenge.

JM: Yes.

BT: But that meeting sort of took the wind out of everybody's sails.

JM: Yes. Okay. Now . . .

BT: People started leaving the paper after that.

JM: Yes. Okay. And Gene—at that point, Gene left and went to *Newsday*, and they hired me to replace Gene.

BT: Yes.

JM: As managing editor. Okay. How much longer did you stay after that?

BT: Well, don't you remember?

JM: Well, I remember you left. [Laughs] I just didn't remember—well, why—? Let's go into that. Why *did* you leave the *Democrat*, Bill?

BT: Well, you *fired* me.

JM: I did? Oh. [Laughter] Okay. Why . . . ?

BT: It's not that I didn't deserve it. I—you know, I was still having my trouble with Si Dunn over the news copy.

JM: Yes.

BT: But one thing sort of brought it—and you remember the time I got pissed off and I threw the typewriter in the copy barrel?

JM: Yes.

BT: That old typewriter was—it was a vintage, around 1895 or 1905.

JM: Yes. [Laughs]

BT: It weighed about fifty pounds. I was lucky to be able to pick it up. But the cost of lead—remember when [Nikita] Khrushchev died? [Editor's Note: Khrushchev was premier of the Soviet Union from 1958 to 1964. He died in September 1971.]

JM: Yes.

BT: Well, he died on my lunch break, and I was over in the sports department playing chess with Fred Morrow.

JM: Yes.

BT: And I should've been at my desk and noticing what was going on because that was about—the state edition—you know, the first mail deadline.

JM: Yes.

BT: We should've had that story in the paper.

JM: Yes.

BT: Anyway, [laughs] it was kind of funny. But like I said, I certainly harbor no ill feelings over [that?]. In fact, don't you remember when I was at the *Arkansas Times* I had you as a speaker—remember?

JM: Yes, yes, you did. Yes, you . . .

BT: [?].

JM: Okay. So that was—I have some recollection of it, and I remember us having some words over something, but was that what it was over? The first instance might have been—as I recall, you picked up that huge, heavy typewriter and just threw it into the big barrel, right?

BT: Yes, and it almost turned—and, in fact, I think it turned over the barrel. It made a hell of a sound.

JM: Yes, it did. [Laughs]

BT: [?].

JM: Yes, okay. Then did I fire you over the Khrushchev thing?

BT: Oh, I don't know, Jerry. It was a—actually, the decision came from Marcus, I think.

JM: You think what?

BT: I think the decision probably came from Marcus.

JM: Oh, that's possible. I don't remember that for sure, but . . .

BT: No, I don't either, but . . .

JM: . . . yes.

BT: . . . but there had been several incidents. I had—I guess I wasn't all that happy in my job, you know, and I suppose it showed.

JM: Yes, I think that was perhaps—I just don't remember all the details. I did remember us having a problem, but I didn't remember for sure that I had fired you. [Laughs] But I take your word for it. Of course, you would remember that.

BT: Well, it's just like a marriage—sometimes it just runs its course, and it's

over.

JM: Yes, okay. So after I fired you, what did you do?

BT: Well, I went on unemployment. [Laughs]

JM: You did what?

BT: I went on unemployment.

JM: Okay.

BT: And let me tell you something—that is a humbling experience.

JM: Yes.

BT: [I hope you?] never have to do that. Anyway, after my unemployment ran out, I went to work for the state. I was the PR guy for—the public relations official for Juvenile Services in Little Rock.

JM: Yes, okay.

BT: And I was also a stringer and a special correspondent for *The Washington Post*. They picked me up, and they sent me on, oh, three or four stories around the South.

JM: Yes.

BT: And that—you know, they didn't pay a whole lot, but it sort of resuscitated my self-esteem a little bit and gave me something to do. It got me out of town so I wouldn't sit around feeling sorry for myself.

JM: Yes.

BT: And I had something to do, you know?

JM: Yes.

BT: Then I went to work for the state job.

JM: Yes.

BT: Then, of course, Alan Leveritt and I started—well, *he* started the *Arkansas Times* in 1974.

JM: Yes.

BT: And I went to work for the *Arkansas Times* then. Well, actually, I wrote one of the first stories in the . . .

JM: You did what?

BT: I wrote one of the first stories in the small magazine [?].

JM: Yes, okay. So what year would that have been that you left the *Democrat*—about 1972, maybe?

BT: No, 1973, I think.

JM: 1973. Okay.

BT: Well—or maybe 1972. It was during the Watergate crisis.

JM: It was during Watergate?

BT: It was during Watergate. [Editor's Note: The Watergate scandal involved members of President Richard Nixon's administration who broke into the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate Hotel in Washington, D. C. in June 1972. The resulting cover-up of the incident led to Nixon's resignation on August 8, 1974.]

JM: Okay. Well, I know when that crisis came to an end—it was in 1974, but I don't remember for sure when it started.

BT: It started with that break-in in . . .

JM: Yes. Well, yes, I remember it started with the break-in.

JM: So Leveritt, who had actually worked at the *Democrat* for a while, started this—
what would you call the *Times* at that time?

BT: Well, it was called the *Union Station Times*.

JM: It was called the *Union Station Times*, and then it was—a magazine?

BT: Yes, it was a pulp—it was pulp paper—tabloid, but not quite the size of—you
know, it was a weekly tabloid.

JM: Yes.

BT: It wasn't that big. It was about, oh, I don't know, about fourteen inches by eight
inches. Something like that.

JM: Yes, okay. And it was—was it a monthly?

BT: No, it was—what is it? Bi-weekly is every two weeks.

JM: Every two weeks. Yes.

BT: Yes, right.

JM: Yes, okay. And you say you wrote one of the first stories for it?

BT: Yes. Actually, it was a repeat of one of the stories I had written in *The
Washington Post*.

JM: What story was that?

BT: Oh, it was about the southern jury system and how it was sort of weighted
toward . . .

JM: Okay.

BT: . . . [International Harvester?]
—that guy on the jury [?] a racist or he'd look at
[racism?].

JM: Okay. Well, didn't you soon become editor of that publication?

BT: Yes, almost right away.

JM: Yes, okay.

BT: January of 1975, and I had to leave—that's when I got fired from the state.

JM: Yes, okay.

BT: I've been fired quite a few times. [Laughs]

JM: Okay. [Laughs]

BT: I was fired from the state because—oh, my boss was—well, I won't go into this—but there was a pretty ugly situation going on. Can you cut this stuff out if you want to?

JM: Sure. You can cut it out if you want to. Yes. You will get the last shot at it, and before they ever put it online or anything, you'll get a chance to edit the hard copy of your transcript.

BT: Well, yes, it's not really germane to this.

JM: Yes. So you then became the editor of the *Union Station Times*.

BT: Yes. Right.

JM: And how long did you have that job?

BT: Oh, about nine years.

JM: About nine years. Okay. So how did—explain to me the evolution of the *Union Station Times* while you were there.

BT: What year was it?

JM: No, I say—had it already changed to the *Arkansas Times* before you left?

BT: Yes. Well, yes. Before I left, we were—we had a circulation of 30,000, and we were a slick paper magazine.

JM: Yes.

BT: And we won two prizes, too. Sigma Delta Chi [Society of Professional Journalists] investigative reporting prizes.

JM: Yes, okay.

BT: Don't you remember those stories on the Hastings tapes, Jerry?

JM: Tell me—say that again. Speak up a little bit more.

BT: Well, there was a series of stories I wrote on the Hastings tapes. You know, Harry Hastings was—oh, he was a 1930s gangster-type guy. He controlled the gambling—several gambling joints in Hot Springs.

JM: Yes.

BT: The FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] and the local cops had put a sting operation on him.

JM: Yes.

BT: They caught him stealing some stuff.

JM: Yes.

BT: We ran that story—and, by the way, you know, the *Gazette* had the first shot at that story and turned it down.

JM: Yes, okay. Did he also run a liquor distributing outfit?

BT: Yes.

JM: Yes, I thought he did. See, I do remember. Yes.

BT: I think Harry is still the [boss?]. It's called Hastings Liquor, I think.

JM: Yes. But, at any rate—so you all ran a story on that. Did you write the story?

BT: Yes.

JM: Yes, okay.

BT: A series of three stories.

JM: What?

BT: Three long stories.

JM: Yes, okay. And you won the Sigma Delta Chi prize over that?

BT: Yes, right.

JM: Yes, okay. And at what point in time—was this still a bi-weekly at this time?

BT: No, it was a monthly.

JM: It had gone monthly. Okay.

BT: The first—the evolution, print-wise—the *Arkansas Times* was about a—as I say, about a twelve-by-eighteen [?] . . .

JM: Yes.

BT: Tabloid. And that remained for several years. During this period of time, Alan Leveritt and I didn't get paid at all.

JM: Say that again, Bill.

BT: During this period of time—1974 to, say, 1976 or 1977—Alan Leveritt and I didn't get paid anything.

JM: Oh.

BT: We worked for free, and we had a couple of other writers there. Do you remember Arlin Fields?

JM: Arlin Fields? Oh, yes. I saw Arlin about a month ago.

BT: Well, he worked for us for a while, and he and I worked on some stories. You know, we were sort of making some inroads against the *Gazette* on our own.

JM: Yes.

BT: And having them look over their shoulders a little bit at *us*. But the first couple of years, none of us got paid anything. Alan—this is pretty interesting—this isn't about the *Democrat*, but to help make ends meet at the *Times*—you know, to pay for our publishing costs and newsprint and pay the rent on the building, Alan drove a cab. And one night he was driving the cab, and he got robbed. A couple of guys robbed him out there on John Barrow Road and put the gun to his head.

JM: Yes.

BT: You know, that would've ended everything had Alan been shot. Luckily, he had \$50 or so in his glove box, and he gave it to them. But Alan was driving that cab to pay Arlin Fields. We paid Arlin Fields \$50 a week. Can you imagine? Fifty bucks a week.

JM: [Laughs] Yes.

BT: Arlin worked pretty hard. I mean, he'd come in, oh, three or four days a week, and he'd work at night. He and I worked on several stories together for \$50 a week.

JM: Yes.

BT: That was the genesis of the *Arkansas Times*, which was pretty modest to say the least. [Laughs]

JM: Yes. And, of course, it's still going strong, but . . .

BT: Yes.

JM: Yes. Okay. So at some point in there did you start making money?

BT: At the *Arkansas Times*?

JM: Yes.

BT: Yes. Oh, gosh, you can ask Alan about this, but somewhere—oh, God, I don't know, around 1980 we were in the black.

JM: Yes.

BT: And they got a lot of money down there now. They've got so many people, they're leaning on each other.

JM: [Laughs] Yes.

BT: I tell you, this is between us—well, there was a disagreement here not too long ago [laughs] between some of the people [?]. Hey, Jerry, this can't go in this interview.

JM: Okay, hold on a second and I'll stop.

[Tape Stopped]

JM: We're back. You said, Bill, at some point in time the paper did start making money.

BT: Yes.

JM: You started getting a salary, I assume.

BT: Yes, yes, but not a whole lot. When I left I was making about \$18,000 [a year].

JM: Yes, okay.

BT: Bob Lancaster came in, and I hired Bob.

JM: Yes.

BT: Bob came in and replaced me and then Mel White and, oh, [Max] Brantley. It seems like there was somebody between Mel White and Brantley, but I'm not sure.

JM: And Lancaster replaced you?

BT: Yes.

JM: Yes, okay. And Mel White did the job for a while and everything? Okay.

BT: Yes, [right—Mel did?].

JM: That's another guy that I hired [laughs] originally—Mel White—out of Hendrix College [Conway]. But, at any rate—so why did you leave the—what did you do when you left the *Times*, Bill, and why did you leave?

BT: Well, you know, I didn't actually leave. My wife and I had built a home up here near Berryville on the Kings River.

JM: On . . .

BT: We were spending our weekends up here and maintaining two houses. It was kind of onerous—kind of a burden, you know, to drive up here every weekend and drive back.

JM: Yes.

BT: Particularly on my wife. So what I decided to do is not retire, but become editor—the *Arkansas Times* editor-at-large.

JM: Yes.

BT: And I did that for, oh, a year or two.

JM: Yes.

BT: But I was living up here. You might remember I wrote that story about Gordon Kahl. Do you remember?

JM: About who?

BT: Gordon Kahl, the tax protestor who—oh, he killed some marshals—some U. S.

marshals up in the Dakotas.

JM: Yes, okay. Yes.

BT: He was traveling around and all this stuff.

JM: How do you spell his last name?

BT: Kahl. K-A-H-L.

JM: Yes, okay. Right.

BT: He was finally killed in a police-FBI shootout up in—oh, well . . .

JM: Up in north Arkansas somewhere, wasn't it? [Editor's Note: Kahl and Lawrence County Sheriff Gene Matthews were killed in a shootout in June 1983 near Smithville] I'm sure I've got that somewhere. But, at any rate—so you say this home is on the King River?

BT: Kings. K-I-N-G-S. No apostrophe.

JM: Kings River. Okay.

BT: So that's why I left, but I didn't actually leave. As I say, I became editor-at-large for a couple of years and then finally I just got—well, I had a novel published, *The Watermelon Kid* [1984], and I sort of got into writing . . .

JM: You say you had a novel published?

BT: Yes, called *The Watermelon Kid*.

JM: Yes, okay.

BT: I started writing novels and freelancing. I did a lot of work for Bob McCord at the *Gazette*. I wrote—I did pieces for him and . . .

JM: Yes, after he went to the *Gazette*. Okay.

BT: Yes, when he went to the *Gazette*. And I wrote some stories in magazines and

stuff.

JM: Yes.

BT: Finally, my last—and, you know, to this day I'm still a consultant at the *Arkansas Times*.

JM: You still do what?

BT: I'm still a consultant at the *Arkansas Times*.

JM: Oh, okay.

BT: I don't do any real work. It's just kind of a tax dodge.

JM: Yes.

BT: I better be careful about this. [Laughs] My accountant—that consultant work just sort of offsets some IRA [individual retirement account] income.

JM: Yes. Alan has turned out to be quite a promoter, hasn't he?

BT: Oh, yes, Alan has done well. Alan always was. The *Arkansas Times* never would've made it without Alan.

JM: Yes, yes.

BT: He could sell the ads [advertisements] and, you know, at that time, Jerry, the *Democrat*, the *Gazette*—and there were about fifteen radio stations and two great big TV stations.

JM: Yes.

BT: Or three.

JM: Yes.

BT: But he was tough.

JM: So have you moved? Do you still have your home on Kings River?

BT: No, I got divorced a second time. I've been down that marital road twice—twice, only to end up both times in the ditch.

JM: Yes.

BT: My first wife and I got divorced back in the 1960s, and my second wife and I got divorced around 1992.

JM: Yes.

BT: And after that I moved up here on Lake Table Rock.

JM: You're on Table Rock Lake? Is it Golden, Missouri? Is that correct?

BT: Yes.

JM: Yes, okay.

BT: [?].

JM: But you're still writing.

BT: Yes. Well, not as much as I did.

JM: Yes.

BT: When I was at the *Arkansas Times*, I had a deal—I had to write at least 1,500 words a week to get that thing out. That was a lot of work because we had a hard time finding writers in the beginning. And some of the writers we had weren't very good, and they needed a lot of work done on their copy.

JM: Yes.

BT: Anyway, that doesn't have anything to do with the *Democrat*.

JM: Yes.

BT: But, you know, after—the Foreman Renaissance has kind of fizzled a little bit—I remember when you came in—shortly thereafter, you know, [Walter] Hussman,

[Jr.] bought the paper.

JM: Yes.

BT: And, you know, this turned out to be the Hussman conquest.

JM: Yes.

BT: I've got kind of an interesting story about that.

JM: Yes. Well, tell me.

BT: Well, the paper was sold for around \$54 million, as I recall. [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] I remember my mother and Hugh Patterson were—you know, Hugh owned a major share in the *Gazette*. I remember [laughs] Hugh told my mom—he said he was actually thunderstruck . . .

JM: Okay. Wait a minute. Speak up a little louder.

BT: Well, it was about the *Gazette*, and this is kind of hearsay because I wasn't there . . .

JM: Okay, tell me.

BT: . . . but my mother told me—my mother and Hugh Patterson were good friends. And the price of the paper, as I recall, was \$54 million. That was a lot of money back then. That's a lot of money *now*. I remember my mother said that Hugh was actually floored—thunderstruck—that they offered that much money for the paper. Because at that time, you know, the *Gazette* had sort of been—well, it hadn't been beaten by the *Democrat*, but the *Democrat* was really knocking on its door, you know?

JM: Yes.

BT: And the *Gazette* was not really—well, I think it *was* kind of in trouble, Jerry.

JM: Yes.

BT: They were maybe losing a little money, and that Gannett offer—the offer came from Gannett for \$54 million—and Hugh took it.

JM: Did you say—and maybe I misunderstood—did you say your mother owned stock in the *Gazette*?

BT: No. My mother and Hugh Patterson were real good friends.

JM: Oh, okay.

BT: And Hugh told her that he was just bowled over by the high price of \$54 million.

JM: That Gannett had offered him? Yes.

BT: Yes. Fifty-four million dollars. That's a lot of money for a newspaper.

JM: Yes. Would you have ever thought in your earlier days that the *Democrat* would win the newspaper war with the *Gazette*?

BT: Well, you know—yes, when Foreman first came to work, we had a pretty good shot at it then. But—and this is not to take anything away from Marcus or Stanley Berry, for that matter, but they just kind of ran out of money.

JM: Yes.

BT: I mean, if they'd had a little deeper pockets, I think back then we could've challenged the *Gazette*, and successfully.

JM: Yes.

BT: But, you know, like I said before, the so-called rebirth of the *Democrat* was just too costly—expensive [?].

JM: Yes, they got . . .

BT: Yes, well, with the expenses of paying better reporters.

JM: Yes.

BT: And a better look for the paper.

JM: Yes.

BT: Gene Foreman sort of remade the format of the paper.

JM: Yes.

BT: He changed a lot of things.

JM: Yes, he did.

BT: But back in those days, I mean, we sort of had a chance. And I think maybe if Marcus could've held on and . . .

[Tape Stopped]

JM: Okay, I just turned the tape over to side two.

BT: Hey, Jerry, here's what I want to say, too—you know, when I went to work for the *Democrat*, it was a p.m. [afternoon distribution] paper.

JM: Yes.

BT: Some time—was it during your tenure there or Foreman's that it became an a.m. [morning distribution] paper?

JM: No, that was a few months after I left. I left in August of 1978, and I think that they switched to a.m. in January of 1979.

BT: Yes, okay. That was kind of the handwriting on the wall there, you know?

JM: Yes, that was a *big* development, wasn't it?

BT: Yes, a big development—yes, because that showed Hugh Patterson or Gannett,

anyway . . .

JM: Yes.

BT: . . . whoever it was—that Hussman and the *Democrat* were going to take them on full bore, you know, and they were going all the way.

JM: Yes.

BT: I think—oh, I’ve heard some stories about that, too. I mean, you know, I think maybe—had the *Gazette* and Gannett really acted like they were really going to fight back, maybe Hussman wouldn’t have been so aggressive.

JM: Yes.

BT: The *Gazette* sort of keeled over a little bit there, and Gannett was losing money on the paper.

JM: Yes.

BT: They decided, well, they’d go ahead and sell it out to Hussman.

JM: Yes. You know that Walter originally decided he was going to have to close the paper—that they weren’t going to make it. He went to Hugh and offered him a joint operating agreement, and Hugh kept turning him down. So that’s finally [laughs] when Walter said, “To heck with it. I’m going to fight them.”

BT: That’s right. And—well, you know, I think that’s the story behind the story.

JM: Yes.

BT: The *Democrat* might’ve folded, if the *Gazette* had really decided to move [editor?] down here full-time and then take them on like [?].

JM: Yes, and been a little bit more aggressive. Yes.

BT: Yes, and been a little bit more aggressive.

JM: Yes.

BT: And they had a little bit more perseverance, you know, if they could just

[?] . . .

JM: Yes.

BT: . . . fire in the belly, you know?

JM: Yes.

BT: That's one of the things the *Democrat* has sort of always lacked—but, you know, until [Managing Editor] John Robert Starr [laughs] came along.

JM: Yes.

BT: Remember that picture we had of John Robert?

JM: Oh, yes, on top of the box of . . .

BT: Yes, that was right. That was it right then.

JM: . . . with the knife in his teeth or something. Yes.

BT: Yes. Willie Allen and I set up that picture. Old John Robert was . . .

JM: Who set that up?

BT: Me and Willie Allen. Remember the photographer, Willie Allen?

JM: Oh, yes. I knew Willie well.

BT: That was a great picture. [Editor's Note: The *Arkansas Times* published a picture on its cover in May 1979 of Starr crouching on a *Gazette* newspaper box with a knife in his mouth and declaring war.]

JM: Yes.

BT: It went around the country, I think. [Laughs]

JM: Yes. Did you—at that point in time—you had mentioned it earlier—but do you

think that the *Gazette* might've got a little overconfident over time, and maybe there was a little arrogance involved there?

BT: Well, yes, that's what happened to them. That was one of the things that was a drawback to them. They didn't look over their shoulder soon enough.

JM: Yes.

BT: And pretty soon they didn't—at first there was Foreman, and that didn't quite go all the way, but—and then Foreman more or less passed the baton to Hussman. When I say Foreman I'm talking about, Foreman as the editor, and [though? so?] he was gone, there was the Marcus George and Stanley Berry meeting there and all that.

JM: Yes.

BT: And you sort of skip over that and the baton is passed to Walter Hussman.

JM: Yes.

BT: And Walter carried it on to victory.

JM: Yes.

BT: It sounds a little trite, but that's the way it happened.

JM: What's been your impression of the way that the [*Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*] has evolved since they became the only newspaper in town?

BT: Oh, you know [laughs]—oh, hell, Jerry, I'm not a real critic. I—they depend way too much on the Associated Press, I think. Some of their—maybe this is the computer age—some of the reporting raises more questions than . . .

JM: I can't hear you.

BT: Oh, some of their reporting, I think, raises more questions than it provides

answers.

JM: Yes.

BT: But I'll say this—I think—I'll say this for sure—I think the *Democrat* has been pretty fair and pretty even-handed. It's, of course, a Republican paper. But, you know, the news is not as slanted as it was in the *Gazette* back in those days.

JM: Yes.

BT: You don't have the—it had an agenda. And sometimes that agenda made its way into the news column.

JM: Yes.

BT: And I think being the only paper now, the *Democrat-Gazette* has handled this bias and fairness—that whole issue—pretty damn well.

JM: Yes.

BT: I think they're pretty fair.

JM: Okay.

BT: Although sometimes I think the reporting could be a little better. But I think the best parts of the paper are the editorial section—the op-ed pages [?].

JM: Yes.

BT: There are not very many typos [typographical errors] in it.

JM: Yes.

BT: And, frankly, I learn a lot about what's happening in the world by reading the editorial section.

JM: Yes.

BT: But, I mean, you don't have to use this if you don't want to. I mean, that's my

idea. But they have been fair.

JM: Yes.

BT: I'll say that. A lot of newspapers, like in the East, are not particularly fair.

JM: Yes. Bill, I've neglected to ask you this. Have you published any other novels since *The Watermelon [Kid]*?

BT: Well, yes, [?] and I published a couple, in fact. I'm getting ready to—I formed my own little company called Precipice Books.

JM: Called what?

BT: Precipice—you know, like a cliff is the edge of a precipice.

JM: Yes.

BT: It's called Precipice Books. But these are self-published. *The Watermelon Kid* was a commercially published . . .

JM: What's the name of them?

BT: Oh, *The Husband* (2003) and *Scions* (2008).

JM: *The Husband* and what?

BT: *S-C-I-O-N-S*. It's not out yet.

JM: Yes, okay.

BT: I've got an agent representing me on that.

JM: You're still working on . . .

BT: Oh, yes, I'm still writing books.

JM: Yes.

BT: And trying to put out another novel.

JM: Yes. Okay, Bill. Well, this has been really enlightening. But let's go back a little

bit, since this is on the *Democrat*. Anything else that you remember about the *Democrat* and your time at the *Democrat* or before or after, but just about the newspaper itself?

BT: Oh, let me see. I made a few notes on this thing. I told you about Mama's story—what Hugh Patterson said when he got that big offer.

JM: Yes.

BT: We talked about, you know—Foreman was a task manager—a real [professional?].

JM: Yes.

BT: I remember one time he came out there—Bob Lancaster, you know, did that “Column One.”

JM: Yes.

BT: He was off that day, and he came up and tapped me on the shoulder. He said, “Bill, I need a ‘Column One.’” I said, “Well, fine. Can you buy one somewhere?” [Laughs] I gave him some flippant answer. He said, “I want you to write it.”

JM: Yes.

BT: I said, “Well, hell, I've got to *do* it in the next thirty minutes.”

JM: Yes.

BT: He stood there, and I said, “Well, if I'm gonna do it, you gotta go back in your office and leave me alone. You can't *stare* at me.”

JM: Yes.

BT: So, you know, he did, and somehow or another I cobbled it together. I had

studied Chinese in school, and China was at this particular moment a kind of an issue.

JM: Yes.

BT: I don't remember exactly what it was—maybe [President] Nixon's trip to China or something. Anyway, I put together a column. He said, "I want you to do this whenever Bob's not here."

JM: Yes.

BT: And I said, "Well, okay." After that, I needed to write something up in advance or I'd get some wire copy and [?].

JM: Yes.

BT: Because Bob did it [?]. He did it—oh, not on Saturday night—on Monday. He did a Sunday column, and then Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. So in that interim I provided some "Column One" stuff, and so did *The Washington Post* and the *L. A. Times*.

JM: Yes. But I . . .

BT: That's the way Gene was. I mean, [he would] come in and [say], "I want it now." He had kind of [laughs]—he had sort of thick eyebrows.

JM: Yes.

BT: He had thick eyebrows. He kind of reminded me of John L. Lewis. He had that—you know, John L. Lewis, the great AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations] . . .

JM: Yes.

BT: No, United Mine Workers.

JM: Yes.

BT: And he could look at you with that demanding boring—and by boring, I mean like staring into you.

JM: Yes.

BT: Those eyes. And he could be kind of intimidating. [Laughs]

JM: Gene was a hell of a newspaperman.

BT: He was. He could get a lot of work out of you.

JM: Yes, but he also was a stickler. I remember somebody telling me a story, and I don't remember—you might remember this—that he knew—and the way the paper—the hot type originally—how much space he wanted between the subhead and the deck and everything else, and he wanted so many points in there. And, by golly, they'd better put that many points in there. Is that correct?

BT: That's right. That was engrained in him at *The New York Times*. You know, he went to work for *The New York Times*.

JM: Yes.

BT: One time—he was a copy editor up there.

JM: Yes.

BT: And you know how *The New York Times* is pretty much—they're obsessed with, you know, that kind of format . . .

JM: Yes. That's why they went on strike at *The Times*. They went on strike at *The Times* not too long after he went up there, and that's how he wound up going back to Pine Bluff and then to the *Arkansas Democrat*.

BT: Yes, that's right. We had Freeman—Ed Freeman went to Pine Bluff.

JM: Yes.

BT: And, of course, later [Paul] Greenberg was over there . . .

JM: Yes.

BT: [?] won a Pulitzer for . . .

JM: Yes.

BT: The *Pine Bluff Commercial* was a damn good paper.

JM: Speak up.

BT: The *Pine Bluff Commercial* was a damn good paper. The *Pine Bluff Commercial* was a very good paper, and I think it probably still is.

JM: Yes. Yes. I wouldn't be surprised. I don't seem it very much over here, but . . .

BT: [?].

JM: Okay.

BT: Lookie, if I think of something else, I'll give you a call.

JM: You can do that or you can do this either—you can add it, but at any rate—I'll give you a little—I'll explain a little more about it when we get through here. But I guess at this point we'll go ahead and end this interview, Bill, and I've really appreciated it. And I appreciate you taking the time to work on it.

BT: Okay. I think it was kind of fun, really. I think it would probably work out pretty good, don't you think? I mean, it's not too incoherent or anything.

JM: No, it's fine. I think it's going to be fine. And you explained something that I was not completely aware of, which was Marcus's talk to the group over at the Lafayette. I was not aware that he had told everybody, "We've got to retrench," and everything else. Or maybe they weren't going to tell me that. But, at any

rate, I was not aware of that. So I think that's important, and I'm glad to hear that. I had heard some stories about that, but never a full explanation. But, at any rate, thanks, Bill, and hold on a minute.

[End of Interview]

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