*Gazette* Project

Interview with

Sean Harrison
Little Rock, Arkansas,
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Interviewer: Scott Morris

Scott Morris: I am here with Sean Harrison. I am to interview Sean as part of the *Arkansas Gazette* oral history project. Sean, what I would just like you to say on tape is to repeat your agreement that you allow this transcript to be used for research purposes at the University.

Sean Harrison: Yes, that is all fine and good with me. I am Sean Harrison. That is spelled S-E-A-N and Harrison, just like it sounds. You said you needed to know about my background and who I am.

SM: Just tell me about where you were born and when.

SH: I was born in 1959 in Nashville. I guess Dad was in graduate school at Vanderbilt. We were only there a short time while I was little bitty. We went to some other places while he continued through graduate school. We moved to Fayetteville in 1964. My parents are Bill and Merlee Harrison of Fayetteville.

SM: Spell Merlee, if you would.

SH: M-E-R-L-E-E. Dad is retired now. He was a professor in the creative writing department at the University of Arkansas. He is also a published novelist and screenwriter. That's part of why I went into journalism. I think I inherited a little bit of the gift for writing, but not for creative writing really, but for non-fiction for

sure. If I could go find the facts and cover the story, I could do an adequate job of writing about it. I enjoyed that.

SM: You did a better than adequate job. Your dad has also done some nonfiction also, right?

SH: He has. I can't think, right off, what he has done. He was a journalist in college. He was the editor of what I think was called *The Skep* at TCU. He inspired in me while I was in high school a love for good journalism. I worked on the high school paper back then. That was the beginning of journalism for me.

SM: Let's back up a second. You grew up mostly in Fayetteville?

SH: Yes, for the most part in Fayetteville. I was five when we came here.

SM: Can you talk a little bit about what it was like back then, as opposed to what it is like now?

SH: Well, it was a lot smaller. It wasn't on the map. It was just basically a sleepy college town. A great town to grow up in. When I was six, I learned to ride my bike and that gave me freedom to go pretty much all over Fayetteville. I went with my neighborhood buddies. The town was ours. We would ride from my neighborhood on the east side of town over to Dickson Street. We are sitting on Dickson Street, by the way. With our pooled allowance and money from collecting Coke bottles, we would order pizza and Cokes. With bikes all stacked up out on the sidewalk on Dickson Street. It was a great place to grow up. There was no crime. There was nothing to be afraid of. I think the population was around 25,000, about half of what it is now. I had a real nice time growing up

here.

SM: You went to the Fayetteville public schools, is that right?

SH: Yes.

SM: When you were in high school, you worked for the student newspaper?

SH: Yes.

SM: What did you do for the student newspaper?

SH: I wrote for it and helped to lay it out and things like that. It was a very part-time thing. I can't even remember how often we put out that newspaper. It wasn't very often. I aspired to be a professional musician. I played the electric guitar and piano. I got into a rock band in high school. That really occupied my obsessions. When it was time to go off to college, I went off to study music. That was in North Texas State University, down in Texas. I ended up dropping out and joining a professional band and doing that for a while. It kind of took its toil on me, and I ended up doing construction work. I got married and decided that I better retool myself for something. In the meantime, through my dad's friendships, I became friends with the folks in the journalism department in Fayetteville. I had been living in Dallas, playing music and doing construction. I hadn't thought about journalism since high school. It always appealed to me at some level. When I realized that my dreams weren't going to happen as fast as I wanted on this whole music thing, I decided that I would go back to Fayetteville and finish school. I was talked into it by three men: my dad, Roy Reed, and Bob Douglas. I had become friends with Mr. Reed and Mr. Douglas. I think they

looked at me as a young Bill Harrison and great material to work with.

SM: When did you return back here to go to school?

SH: In 1987.

SM: You majored in journalism?

SH: Yes. I needed a couple of years to start over with a different degree plan. I got my degree in journalism. I was editor of the *Arkansas Traveler*, the school newspaper, in 1988. I did a summer internship at the *Arkansas Gazette*.

SM: What year was that?

SH: 1988, I believe. The summer of 1988. It was on the recommendation of Bob Douglas.

SM: Let's stop for just a moment. For the record, just identify who Bob Douglas and Roy Reed are.

SH: At the time, Bob Douglas was the chairman of the journalism department. He was better known as the managing editor of the *Arkansas Gazette*. He was a legendary managing editor. Roy Reed certainly had a legendary reputation. He had been at the *Gazette* back in the 1960s. He found his way to some pretty prestigious bureau positions for *The New York Times*. He worked down in New Orleans for *The New York Times*.

SM: At the time that we are talking about, he was on the faculty here, right?

SH: Yes, he was teaching reporting and the upper journalism courses. Those two men became my mentors as I retooled myself as a journalist. The *Gazette* hired me before I graduated. My hiring is maybe the only interesting part of this that I

have to tell. Whether it is interesting or not, I will leave it for you to decide. I had interned through Walter Lundy. He was editor of the *Gazette*.

SM: I guess he was the first Gannett editor, right? The first editor that Gannett brought in after purchasing the paper.

SH: True.

SM: . . . after Carrick was dismissed or quit.

SH: True. The newspaper war was very hot and very active. It was very scary for a lot of people. The newspaper war was very well under way. We were, even as I was hired, getting towards the end of the war.

SM: It would have been nice to have seen it at the time.

SH: Yes, it would. Walter Lundy, at least with certain circles of journalists, did not have a very good reputation. He had hurt the *Gazette* by sort of gearing it more towards a "fluff and garbage," as some people called it. He softened the news and played up photos and human-interest stories on the front page. He gave it a *USA Today* feel and look. At least this is what his critics had to say.

SM: You knew this coming in?

SH: I knew this coming in. Because of Mr. Douglas and Mr. Reed, I wanted to work for the *Gazette*. I had some other possibilities. I just wanted to work for the *Gazette*. I wanted to be like those guys. I think you were like this, too.

SM: Yes, I was.

SH: I kind of knew from my internship where Walter Lundy's head was from all of it. When I went down for my interviews to be hired, everybody signed off and it

came time to sit down with Walter Lundy. He asked me a few questions. My perception of it was I wasn't doing very well. I wasn't answering the questions very well. I thought I saw him shake his head. I wasn't really engaging him the way that I had hoped I would. He seemed unsure about hiring me. Somewhere near the end of the conversation, I fabricated that I was a pretty hotshot photographer. I didn't know anything about photography. I thought, "I have to score somehow with this man." He wanted to place me with the Searcy bureau. This was part of a central Arkansas newspaper war strategy to boost circulation in the central six counties. They were going to put a bureau in Searcy to cover White County. You would work the north central part of the state. They also set up bureaus in Conway to cover Faulkner County, Pine Bluff. Some of these had already been established for a while. Where else?

SM: There was one in Benton.

SH: Yes, and there was one in Fayetteville and in Jonesboro. They set up these central Arkansas bureaus to publish stories in certain sections. Mr. Lundy wanted a lot of people stories. He invented this thing called "Arkansas People." Every week I was supposed to find this interesting person or just some "Joe Blow" to profile and make it sound interesting. I was a little confused. I just wanted to cover the news. I wanted to do what Bob Douglas and Roy Reed had done. I still wanted the job. Frankly, I didn't know what else I was going to do anyway. I wanted the job and thought, "At the very least, it is a good place to start. It is the *Arkansas Gazette*, by gosh." I told him, "Hey, I am a pretty hotshot

photographer. If you give me a camera, I can bring in some good shots along with stories." This was a complete lie. His face changed completely. It was like the lights were turned on behind his eyes. He stood up and said, "Hang on just a second." He left the room and came back. He offered me three hundred dollars a week. I said, "Well, I need four hundred." He said, "Done." I was hired just like that. At least that is the way that I perceived it and remembered it. I thought, well, "I pulled my trump card and sold out to the puffery machine here. I told him I could shoot some really great photos. He fell for it." I moved myself and my little family - my wife and newborn baby - to Searcy. We were there for eighteen months. It seemed like eighteen years. There wasn't much going on there. I was expected to turn out a lot of copy.

SM: Let me ask before I forget. Some of the questions that Walker asked in interviews were sort of legendary. You said you had job interviews and said you got the sense that you weren't making a good impression early on. Do you remember any of the questions that he asked?

SH: No, I think they just confused me. I can't remember them now.

SM: You went to Searcy for eighteen months?

SH: Yes.

SM: What happened at the end of the eighteen months? Was that the closing of the *Gazette*?

SH: I started telling my editors that I wanted to be in Little Rock. I needed some newsroom experience and camaraderie. I think, looking back, that they realized

the end was near and thought, "Let's get Harrison in here instead of leaving him stranded in Searcy, Arkansas."

SM: You came back into the main newsroom?

SH: Yes, in July of 1991. It was just months before we shut down. They said, "Well, come on into Little Rock. We are ready to have you here." They put me on the Pulaski County Court beat. Adam Weintraub was moved up to some kind of section editor or assistant editor. I started covering Pulaski County Courts. I felt so good about that. It was a good beat. It took the confusion out of it. I don't know whether I really earned that. I did have some good stories out of Searcy and White County.

SM: Are there a couple you could talk about? Was there anything in your attempt to please Walker?

SH: I came up with one story that he and everybody else loved. It was about the Washington County Animal control unit getting rid of unwanted dogs in a very inhumane way.

SM: You said Washington County, do you mean White County?

SH: Yes, I mean White County. It was White County Animal Control. There had been a problem with cats in the town. The cats were running wild, and there were some complainers at the City Council meeting. It was the city of Searcy Animal Control. I got with the animal control officer and just in some loose conversation, I asked him, "Are there some problems with dogs, too?" He said, "No, we have to pick up strays pretty often and euthanize them." I said, "How do you euthanize

them?" He said, "With my truck." I said, "With your truck? What do you mean?" He said, "Oh. . ." He wasn't very bright, and it made for a good story to get this. Nobody else would have wanted me to get it. He said, "Well, I hook up a hose to the exhaust and stick it in this box. You know, it only takes about thirty seconds, maybe a minute for some of the bigger ones." We were able to get a photo of this and play it up. It was a section front story with photos. The city of Searcy was totally humiliated. It was a story that everybody liked.

SM: Did the city officials know he was doing it that way?

SH: They did, but they didn't know it would be so frowned upon by the rest of the state.

SM: Did they change the way?

SH: Oh, yes, they changed the procedures immediately. I interviewed the animal rights folks. They thought it was unbelievable. The whole state came down on Searcy about this. The police chief, who was the supervisor of the animal control, wouldn't talk to me for a while. That was a big score on a small scale. Covering Searcy was a small-scale thing, anyway. I didn't get front-page coverage very often. The biggest story that I ever worked on didn't get much play on the *Arkansas Gazette,* and I was frustrated. I felt like I didn't get a lot of support from the newsroom or from my editor to pursue this more and to put more into it. It was about military suicides. There were some very questionable suicides. It all came about from a call I received one morning from some couple in rural White County. They said, "Can you tell us how to get hold of '60 Minutes'?" I said,

"Sure. I can tell you how to get hold of '60 Minutes.' What is this about?" It took them a while to get around to telling me what it might be about. I convinced them to let me come down and sit with them and talk a while. Their son had died in a very questionable, so-called suicide. He was in the navy. After I published the story about the strange circumstances of this so-called suicide, I started getting calls from other parents. They were saying, "That is a lot like what happened to our son. I want to tell you about it." I got real busy with this and started trying to get some answers from the Department of Defense. I tried to go through all the normal channels. I started getting stonewalled. More strange cases came up. I did some follow-up for the *Gazette*, but I was never really released from having to answer to this central Arkansas section and my duties to cover White County to pursue what looked like a really interesting story. I followed it even after the *Gazette* shut down, when I went to work for the Donrey Media group, covering the Capitol. I eventually collaborated with the *Philadelphia Inquirer* about it. They did a very fine job on it, and I got a little reporting credit on it. They even did a four-part series and put it up for nomination for the Pulitzer Prize. It didn't win. A long story short, it was a great story. It was a story of quite a bit of importance.

SM: Who was the editor who declined to give you the support?

SH: I don't really feel like I need to go into that. It was all of them in a way.

SM: Without naming personalities, why do you think they weren't interested?

SH: Maybe I didn't sell it enough or maybe I made some mistakes in not pursuing it

better. I was young in terms of my reporting experience. This was close to the end of the *Gazette*. What we know now that we didn't know then was that maybe they knew it. For whatever reason, they didn't want to free me up. I won the battle that no one else would. I can't really remember what happened. I kept following it whenever I could. Certainly after the *Gazette* closed down and it paid off in a way.

SM: Did you ever get to the bottom line of the story?

SH: I never got to the very bottom of it because we kept hitting a wall called, "That's a matter of National Security." That makes for a pretty good copy, right there. It got the attention of the United States of America. Some funny things happened along the way. I talked with Vince Foster in the White House Counselor's office numerous times about this. He was helping me as he best could. After his suicide death, there were certain elements across the country that started raising all these questions about the circumstances of that suicide. I thought, "This is weird." I think they were barking up the wrong tree. If there was something strange about his suicide - Well, for a little while I thought that the bad guys had got him. There is some dark shadow government. I came into contact with a lot of weirdos out there who believe in some New World order and shadow government. I heard all kinds of crazy stuff from pursuing these strange military suicides. It was all a huge conspiracy. I remained skeptical. At most, some of these suicides were murders that were covered up simply because the military couldn't afford that bad PR. They needed to keep their funding coming and their recruiting going and

these kind of black eyes they couldn't afford. There was certainly shoddy investigative work on the behalf of some of the military investigators. That is just about as far as this went.

SM: Before we digressed to talk about this, you said you came into the *Gazette* newsroom from Searcy about July of 1991. You then took over the county courthouse beat. What was it like in the newsroom when you arrived? Was it like you expected? Were people apprehensive? What was the mood?

SH: I guess that morale was low. I couldn't really tell. I was glad to be there and to be part of the team. I was glad to be out of Searcy. I was glad to be around some of my friends in the newsroom, like you and John Reed. Morale was high for me. I wasn't one of the real insiders who heard all the rumors that turned out to be true. I just sort of stayed busy and enjoyed working there for those few months.

SM: I guess being on the county courthouse beat that you weren't actually in the newsroom much of the day?

SH: That's true. I was at the courthouse a lot.

SM: What was that like and did you enjoy working at the courthouse?

SH: I think it is a difficult beat. It takes a while to learn. There are so many new names, divisions, and procedures to learn. I had some good stories. How long was I doing that? Just a few months. It wasn't really long enough to really get it down. It is amazing to think that George Bentley did it for thirty something years.

SM: I know most of the time that I was at the *Gazette* we had two people on the

courthouse loop. Did you have a partner, or were you there by yourself?

SH: Pamela Strickland sort of trained me, sort of. She was supposed to train me. She covered some of the courthouse, too. I think I, in short order, pretty much took it over and handled it. It was a busy beat.

SM: Did you cover any spectacular trials?

SH: A police rape case. It was a police officer who had been pulling women over late at night and raping them. At least one murder trial during those months. I can't remember.

SM: Were there any particular news characters in the newsroom that you remember being especially funny? I personally don't remember that time being humorous, but I was trying to recall anything entertaining that happened around the *Gazette* during those last months.

SH: I would have to meditate on that for a little while. Leroy Donald always amused me. I got to know Leroy some. We went to lunch a few times. I can't really think of anything right now.

SM: Did you have any more contact with Lundy after you moved into the newsroom?

SH: No, Lundy was gone by that time.

SM: Who was the next editor? I guess Moyer would have been at that time.

SH: Keith Moyer.

SM: Did you have any contact with Moyer?

SH: I did. My predecessor at the *Arkansas Traveler* was a fellow named Ray Minor. He succeeded me as editor. The *Traveler* did some kind of special promotion

with some special story about collegiate date rape. No, it wasn't date rape. It was the average sex life of a co-ed. I don't really know. They did distribute condoms with the newspaper. It seemed very gimmicky. The *Gazette* picked it up and ran a story on it. Keith Moyer came and was walking quickly to my desk one day to meet me and was introduced by a sub-editor. He was told I was the editor at the *Traveler* just before this editor did this crazy thing with the condoms that were distributed with every copy. He said something about what kind of editor I had been at the *Traveler*, whether I would have done that. I said, "Well, I don't know." I was bold and I was wrong sometimes, but it didn't keep me from being bold as an editor. I said, "I don't know, maybe I would have done something like that." He seemed to be satisfied with that answer. That was about it. The sub-editor came and told me later that Moyer had been very impressed with me. That I was his kind of guy. I didn't know what to make of that. I think that was my only contact with Moyer.

SM: Who did you report to when you were covering the courthouse in Pulaski County?

SH: Bob Stover. I guess he is still down in Florida. For a little while I answered to Gary Hoffmann, when he was temporary state editor. I answered to Max Brantley, obviously, quite a bit of the time. I guess it was all a good experience. After the *Gazette* shut down, I drank heavily. A lot of us did.

SM: In general, how would you describe the folks in the newsroom at that time, either in terms of their skills or interests?

SH: We were a good group. I think there were some cliques, but overall a group that

wanted to do right. They were frustrated with some of the changes that were going on. Morale was low, but it never diminished the level of effort. Everybody wanted to do their little part to make their next day's newspaper to be as good as it could be. I appreciated that.

SM: Did you see or sense any tension between the old *Gazette* folks and the Gannett imports? Did you have a sense that there were two camps?

SH: I knew about that. As far as witnessing it, I don't think so. I would get notes from Roy Reed occasionally and hear his frustration. He was really trying to encourage me. I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't get the same kind of notes. He would send me a little handwritten note about keeping my head up and fighting the good fight. I spoke with Mr. Douglas from time to time and would get the same kind of thing. I don't think I was around the newsroom enough to witness any of the strife between the two camps.

SM: Talk a little bit about the competition. As you said, this was the heat of the newspaper war. The courthouse is a pretty competitive beat. Do you remember who you competed against? Do you remember who covered the courthouse for the *Democrat*?

SH: No, I just can't remember.

SM: Do you recall doing anything special to preserve a scoop or to get a scoop?

SH: I can remember hanging around places until I was sure the *Democrat* reporter had left. I remember driving around the block to avoid them.

SM: You are right. That was a standard operating procedure. We always kept one eye

on what the other guy was doing. That is for sure. If we were waiting for a decision from a jury, we weren't going anywhere. There was no leaving just because your shift was over.

SH: Oh, no. I didn't know any other way. After the *Gazette* and into my next job, I didn't know any other way. There was no laziness allowed.

SM: Did you feel pressure as a newspaper reporter as a result of the newspaper war in any form? Did you worry about whether you were going to get beaten?

SH: Constantly. There was always pressure. If you did get beat, it was a sinking feeling. I don't think anyone had a real hard talk with me. You just knew without being told, "That's not good. Let's make up for this somehow. There is another newspaper coming out tomorrow, and that means there is an opportunity to even the score again or to get the upper hand again." We were always keeping score, and I feel it was a pretty intense newspaper war. I read about what was going on in Dallas and San Diego. We all kept an eye on Detroit. I don't think there was another newspaper war quite like Little Rock because of the intensity of that battle. In the morning we would go and grab the *Democrat* first thing. We would want to see what they got. You would go rifling through the pages of the *Democrat* and find what your direct competitor had done and read it furiously. Your eyes were scanning and your heart was pumping. You would either say, "Yes!" or "Oh, no!" It was exciting in that way. I remember when I first went to the *Gazette*. Because I was so excited to be there, I would read the story that I wrote because it felt so good. The longer that I was there, the more I was worried

about what was in the other paper. It pretty quickly became an obsession.

SM: Talk a little bit about what you recall of the last month or the last few weeks of the paper. What do you remember about the closing of the *Gazette*?

SH: Gosh, I think I was too busy to pay that much attention to it.

SM: You knew that we were in trouble, right?

SH: Yes, the rumors were going around. The rumors had been going around for a year or two now. Why should it mean more now than it did then? I think we all felt it coming, but I didn't pay that much attention to it. To me, on the day that it was announced that we were bought by the *Democrat*, I was surprised. I wasn't a real insider and wasn't privy to all of that. I kept my head down and did my job.

SM: Do you remember where you were? Were you in the newsroom?

SH: I was at the courthouse.

SM: How did you get the news?

SH: Somebody called me on my pager. When I answered the call, they said, "Come on over to the newsroom. There is going to be an announcement." I said something like, "No, I am in the middle of something. I can't leave right now." They said, "No, come on over. Don't worry about it." I thought, "Hmm, that isn't good. Okay." That is how it happened for me. I was pulled from the middle of working on a story, as most of us were.

SM: Can you explain that last day? Your impression and what were the people doing in the newsroom.

SH: Some people were already drinking. I was all in favor of that. I had to quit

drinking some time after that, and I haven't had a drink in a while. I was ready to drink then. I think most of us were. There was an unusually large crowd in the room. I knew obviously that something was going on. I knew what it was, as everybody else did. Everybody was sad. It was really like being at a funeral or some kind of sad memorial. There was a large crowd, but it was quiet. The announcement was made, and all of a sudden there was a lot of activity. There was a lot of scrambling, people talking, people breaking out bottles, six packs, and somebody got on a desk and started shouting things. It seemed chaotic there for a little while. It turned into kind of a wake.

SM: Do you remember if anybody said anything to you that may have been memorable?

SH: I wish that I could remember something. It is a blur.

SM: What were the circumstances of your leaving the building? Did you box up your stuff? How did you physically leave the building?

SH: We weren't allowed to come back the next day. As I recall, they had a guard there. They were checking things we were taking out. They probably had spies inside watching what we were doing. I gathered up my things that I could get under one arm. I filled up a grocery sack with reporter notebooks. I got my little tape recorder, dictionary and thesaurus, a Rolodex maybe. I don't know. It was pretty late in the day when I finally left. I stayed up drinking with John Reed that night. We were neighbors. Instead of going to sleep when the sun came up, we decided to get some golf clubs and go play around with golf. It was more like

"let's take a little vacation here." Drunk and no sleep, we went to play golf. When I got back to the house, there were messages. There was a lot of fellowshiping going on.

SM: In general, is there anything else that you would like to say about the *Gazette* or your time there that we haven't covered? What it meant to the state or didn't mean? What has it been like in Arkansas without the *Gazette*?

SH: I am going to leave that to people better suited for those profundities. It was a great experience and a great newspaper. I miss it.

SM: Just in general terms, you said you worked for Donrey after the *Gazette* closed. What have you done since?

SH: After six months of unemployment, after the *Gazette* closed, I think I was the only reporter left in town. The Donrey Media Group decided they needed to open a Capitol bureau. It's not that I deserved a nice assignment like that, I was the only one left. I was very pleased, needless to say. My unemployment had run out. It came not a moment too soon. It was a great little job for a while.

SM: You were a one-man bureau at the Capitol?

SH: I was the first Donrey media group Capitol bureau. I was a one-man show and used a Radio Shack portable computer on the trash 180s. You could see three lines at one time, I think. If you wrote anything longer than ten inches, which I had to do, it was kind of weird because you could only see three lines at one time. I did that for a couple of years. I then freelanced for a while. I found my way into public relations work. I have been doing that ever since.

SM: Just briefly, what are you doing now?

SH: Now, I have a fancy title. I am Vice President for Forza and Northwest. Forza is a marketing group. It is a Little Rock marketing advertisement agency. They hired me to strengthen their public relations capabilities and open up a northwest Arkansas office. I am a homeboy from up here and have some good contacts. I have been eager for an opportunity to move from Little Rock back to Fayetteville. This is it. I am running an office for a marketing group and doing public relations work.

SM: For a wrap-up, your wife is who?

SH: Debbie Harrison is my wife of eighteen years. She is an assistant administrator at the Anthony School in Little Rock. It is a private school. I have one daughter who is twelve years old. Her name is Rachel Audrey. She is named after one of the characters in my dad's books. She is a seventh grader at the Anthony School.

SM: Well, Sean, I think that is about everything that I had. Is there anything else?

SH: It was a pretty thorough interview. I appreciate the opportunity to talk about the *Gazette*. My stories are just a very, very small piece of it all. It won't add much, but it has been a nice time for me to be able to do this.

SM: Just adding one more voice to the story is a good thing. Sean, thank you very much.

[End of Interview]