Gazette Project

Interview with

Charles S. Heinbockel
Little Rock, Arkansas
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Interviewer: Michael Haddigan

Michael Haddigan: My name is Michael Haddigan, and I am interviewing Chuck Heinbockel. This interview is part of the Arkansas Center for Oral and Visual History, their project on the *Arkansas Gazette*. We will transcribe this interview and make it available to those interested in Arkansas history. We will give you the opportunity to review the transcript, at which point you will sign a release. All I need you to do right now is to tell me your name and indicate that you are willing to make this tape available to the Center and give permission for the use of the tape and the transcript to be made available to others.

Charles Heinbockel: Okay. My name is Charles S. Heinbockel, and I am perfectly willing to have this become a part of the Oral History project.

MH: Okay. Let's see. Chuck, if you could, tell me a little bit about your background. Where were you born, and where did you go to school?

CH: I was born and raised in Bellevue, a small town just north of Pittsburgh. It is just outside the city limits, and spent all of my early through high school years there, and then I went off to college at Oberlin, Oberlin, Ohio, and there I was very

active working on the college newspaper. And when I got involved in that, over the years, some people were interested in going on to newspaper careers, and one of the people who worked on the newspaper, Eric Black, was good friends with a woman at Oberlin named Cindy Reed. Cindy Reed was the daughter of Roy Reed, who was, at the time, a *New York Times* correspondent. I think he was their, maybe, their Southern or chief Southern correspondent, and he was in New Orleans. Eric got to be friends with Roy Reed, and he got an introduction, a letter of introduction, from him and a list of newspapers that he should try out at. So when Eric, who was a little bit older than I was, graduated, he just jumped in his car and took a tour of the South and interviewed at several newspapers, including the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. Of course, nobody wanted to live in Pine Bluff for very long, and so there was always an opening there, and he got a job at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. Then after that, one of his friends joined him at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, Rich Orloff, and then I showed up for a one-month internship, and then some other people went through there, and I actually dropped out of college and worked at the *Pine Bluff Commercial* for about eight or nine months.

MH: What year was it that you had the internship, and when did you start work?

CH: It seems to me it was somewhere around 1974, 1973 or 1974 I may have had the internship. I guess it would have been, maybe, January of 1973 or 1974, and then I probably started working there later on that year. That would have been, maybe, September of that year. And then, of course, once you are in Pine Bluff, the exciting thing to do is to go to Little Rock. And there were people who had

worked at the *Pine Bluff Commercial* who were working at the *Arkansas Gazette*, and the highlight of our social calendar in Pine Bluff was to drive on to Little Rock and associate with people, who were just wonderful people, that worked at the *Gazette*. Ernie Dumas, Brenda Tirey, a number of other people. Of course, in Pine Bluff we would associate with Paul Greenberg, who was the editorial writer, and I was Paul Greenberg's assistant, when I took a more permanent position at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. I helped him transition from the old lead type years to the computer age. He would write his editorials on a manual typewriter, and that would be given to his secretary, who would put it on a scanner writing typewriter, that would go through a machine and would come back all garbled, and then I would have to go back to Paul's original typewritten editorial and fix it up. Meeting all those people was just a wonderful experience, and that was my introduction to the *Gazette* culture. That was something I really wanted to be part of. I thought it was a really interesting crew.

MH: Did, later on, did any other Oberlin people come to the *Commercial*?

CH: Yes, let's see, it was Eric Black, then Rich Orloff. Rich Orloff went on to become a TV writer. And I think he writes for Broadway now. [When] I was at *the Pine Bluff Commercial* [I was] the third one. And then there was Carla Steiger, who was a photographer, and I think she went on to be a professor of photography in New York. There was also Carol Matlack. I am not sure that I overlapped with Carol at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. Tom McGowan, I think, was in there somewhere, and then, afterwards, I think there may be one or two other people

from Oberlin who went to the *Pine Bluff Commercial* and on elsewhere. Then, out of that crew, the people who went on to the *Arkansas Gazette* were Eric Black, Tom Hamburger, Carol Matlack and myself.

MH: You mentioned earlier Tom McGowan. Did you mean to say Tom Hamburger?

CH: Tom McGowan also.

MH: Oh, Tom McGowan also. Did Hamburger go to Oberlin as well?

CH: Yes. Hamburger went to Oberlin.

MH: All right, and that collective group came to be known, in some circles, sort of jokingly, as the Oberlin Mafia, right?

CH: Yes. That is right. Yes, we were known that way in Pine Bluff, originally, and then on into the *Gazette*, that hung with us.

MH: What was it like for you to come from western Pennsylvania and from Oberlin to Pine Bluff for the first time? What did you think you were, you were getting yourself into?

CH: Oh, well, it was just totally different. I had long hair and a long beard. I would walk along the street and people would honk, and I just thought that they were friendly. It was a shock to me that they would honk at me just because I had long hair and a long beard. In the culture of that news room, it didn't make that much of a difference, but outside we were just really strange people to the folks. But generally when I was dealing with people on an individual basis, they were very friendly. There wasn't a whole lot to do in Pine Bluff, and so, we had a circle of folks that we would just have had a lot of dinner parties. The town itself was kind

of dull, but the circle of friends was pretty good.

MH: How was it that you came to work at the *Arkansas Gazette*?

CH: Well, actually, I went back to college for a while, and then I dropped out again, and I interviewed at the *Gazette*, because they were willing to pay my air fare down there. I interviewed for the copy desk, because there were some openings there. There are generally more openings on the copy desk than there are any place else in the newspaper. And they made a job offer, and I was just going to go ahead and check out my options, and my parents said, "Well, that sounds like a good offer. Why don't you take it?" And so, with their encouragement, I went ahead and took it and started working on the copy desk. And it really was a fun crew on the copy desk at the time. I don't know why this was, but we had Jack Bradley, who was a graduate of Princeton, who was just a real funny guy. Wee had Jon Portis, who was a funny, talented guy. We had Harvey Cooper, who was from the *New York Times* wire service, and I guess there had been a retrenchment there, and so he just ended up in Arkansas because there were jobs available. And Jack Bradley used to kid him and say he was really from Mars, because he landed in Little Rock and would ask, "Where is the subway stop?" And he didn't know how to drive. Some of the basics of Arkansas life were foreign to him. We just had this rich group of characters on the copy desk that just made it a real fun experience.

MH: So, you stayed on the copy desk for how long?

CH: Probably two years. I would say it was from 1977 through 1978. And then I was a

general assignment reporter for a few months under the tutelage of our great city editor Bill Shelton. And then I was put out on a beat, the county courthouse beat.

MH: You worked with George Bentley as sort of partners?

CH: Yes. I was the junior county courthouse correspondent under George Bentley, who had been there since the 1950s.

MH: What was the culture of the *Gazette* like at that point, when you first came to work there on the copy desk? What sort of a paper was it?

CH: I think we talked about it being a newspaper of record a lot. It was trying to be in the mold of the *New York Times*, where we tried to document what was going on in our times and do it in a very serious manner. We took ourselves very seriously, our public role very seriously. But there was also a sense that the *Gazette* was taking that maybe a little bit too far and being too old-fashioned. So, I intended to be a young Turk. I intended to liven it up, to help people. There were things that I thought as a newspaper reader, that would get into the newspaper, which just obviously didn't belong there or were confusing. It just didn't make any sense to me, and I thought of myself as a potential crusader. But I really enjoyed the people and the culture, and so I was less of a crusader as time went on.

MH: Can you give me an example of some of the things that you thought needed to be changed when you first came along?

CH: There were some reporters who would just go on and on on a subject. Carol Griffee was one in particular. On the copy desk, she was kind of looked at as someone who was kind of uneditable, because she believed in what she was doing

so much that she would politick. To get one of her stories changed was just a lot of effort. There was one incident I remember when I was probably just lucky on this, but I questioned a story that she had in the newspaper about some drastic change in environmental policy, and I took it to the city editor and said, "Well, it says that this is going to become law, but it doesn't have anything about what happened to it in the House, what happened to it in the Senate, and all these other things, so, you know, we are missing a lot of details here." And, you know, somehow, I guess he was the weekend city editor, and he was cowed by Carol, and so it just went it as was. And it turned out that her source was wrong on that, and we had to have a big correction. I thought, well, you know, here I am, lowly copy editor. It was a big coup. I'd uncovered serious problems in a Page One story–then it went out unchanged anyway. Of course, as time went on, I understood how it was difficult to deal with certain people at the *Gazette*. And it was kind of a tradition. A lot of them just reported the way they reported.

MH: What was the writing like? You had volumes of copy coming by you day after day and night after night, I guess. How, generally, would you describe the writing?

CH: It was prosaic at best. As a matter of fact, I think that the *Gazette* had a sort of a "dare to be dull" feeling, that we were the newspaper of record, and if you really wanted to get the good stuff, you had to get to the last paragraph, because sometimes we would throw it in there. I remember the police reporter came up with an item where a police officer was arrested for being drunk, for driving DWI

[driving while intoxicated], and you had to get to the last paragraph to find out that his whole mission, in that particular case, was to transport Breathalyzers, and here he was driving drunk. The AP [Associated Press] reporter came in to pick up the paper. I was working late that night and was there when the AP reporter was coming in for his copy of the paper, and he read that, and he said, "I can't believe that is in the last paragraph of the story." And I said, "Haven't you ever heard of a punch line for a joke?" I mean, why put all the good stuff in the first paragraph?

MH: Well, what was behind that? Like you say, it was a great source of pride, but where did that pride come from?

CH: I think there was really a sense of institution and that the *Arkansas Gazette* had won two Pulitzer Prizes. We were a serious institution, we really were having an impact on people's lives, and we didn't want to kid around with it. But there is also a tradition of having great writers at the *Arkansas Gazette,* so you have all these people who are taking themselves very seriously, and then you have somebody like Mike Trimble, who is just a great writer, and who was respected for being a great writer, and who had some freedom to do some great writing in the *Gazette*. And so there was that. It wasn't all of one mind, but there certainly was the dominant spirit that we were generally a very serious newspaper and took things seriously.

MH: When you made the move over to the city desk, had you had reporting experience up to that point?

CH: Sure, I had been both a copy editor and a reporter at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, and at my college newspaper I was a reporter and then held various editing positions and was editor of the college newspaper. I had done some stringing work for newspapers in Ohio. I also did a summer internship at the *Pittsburgh Press*, which was an old-fashioned afternoon newspaper at the time.

MH: And another newspaper that by the year 2000 was gone.

CH: Was gone, yes. I think it is fairly safe to say that just about any newspaper that I worked for either was sold or went out of business. If it was owned by a family at the time, now owned by a chain. If it was owned by a chain at the time, it is now dead. Not too many of the newspapers I worked for survived in their original form to this day.

MH: What was it like to work for Bill Shelton?

CH: Smiley. Mister Smiley. Well, he was sometimes called the Grim Reaper, because he was just, he was matter-of-fact, to the point. There was the way he taught people how to write. Anyone who started at the *Gazette* was given this large scrapbook of the writings of J.N. Heiskell, who had been the editor from 1902 to 1972. It really was a treasure trove of editing and how to get to the point, and it had different style points. It was one of those rituals—one of the shrines of the institution was sort of dumped in your lap. You know, this is the way things are done at the *Gazette*, and so, that was the introduction. You go through all these dusty clips of how J.N. Heiskell had rewritten things that were overly long down to crisp, short items. A lot of that was good. The rest of the teaching you would

get from Bill Shelton. He would assign you to work on a feature story, and he would bounce it back a couple times with notes where he wanted more detail or things that were said in a general way, he wanted more specific. Of course, he would do that on daily copy, but on these features he had a lot more time to bounce it back and have you rewrite them.

MH: He would do that using notes?

CH: Yes. It was mainly through notes. He was kind of uncomfortable sitting down and talking to people, or spending the time to talk to people at length. So it was mainly done through notes.

MH: You went to the courthouse and worked with George Bentley. George spent a long time there, and you sort of, I guess, initially, trained under him?

CH: Sure, and the style of covering the county courthouse at the time was that we would write up trials and county politics. George covered the county politics more, and I would cover more of the trials. Generally, the way we did that was we would sit in the county courthouse coffee shop, unless there was a really big case on, and we would talk to lawyers about what was going on, and people would come by, and we would buy them a cup of coffee or they would buy us a cup of coffee, and we would talk about different, interesting cases that were going on. So we did a lot of that, and then we would check the court dockets, and if we saw that there was a big murder trial going on, we would actually sit through the entire trial. But for some of the shorter trials, we might just sit through some of it, or talk to a prosecutor afterwards, or, in a civil case, we would talk to the

attorneys afterwards, rather than spend all of our time sitting in the courtroom. There are lots of things that you could say about that. You don't get the whole flavor of the case, but it freed us up to get some other stories, so I guess there are some pluses and minuses in that.

MH: Did you have competition on the *Arkansas Democrat*?

CH: Yes, most of the time we trained our competitors to sit there in the coffee shop with us. There were a few exceptions. There was one guy who insisted on sitting in the courtroom a lot of the time. He seemed to do okay with that approach, although we just looked askance at it.

MH: Were there stories where you were in head-to-head competition on a daily basis with that?

CH: Oh, yes, yes. A lot of the time, the difference was that the *Democrat* was an afternoon newspaper, and so they would have to write up a story sort of midway through it, if it was a daylong court case. If it was something that happened in the morning, they would have the complete story for their afternoon newspaper. And then, our way of competing was to get some additional information, to see if we could find out and get, maybe, a more complete story the next morning. But when it was in that different cycle we weren't really head-to-head competition, and there were certain stories that obviously they were going to be able to get the news out before we could. And then there were other stories, feature stories or background stories or something, that required a little bit more digging, where we would be able to, or they would be able to "scoop" them.

MH: Your byline in the newspaper was C.S. Heinbockel.

CH: Yes.

MH: Why was that?

CH: Well, I think it started out originally because something had to go. With a name like Heinbockel, you couldn't fit all the Charles or even Chuck in, and so the initials seemed like they were necessary, and rather than just C. Heinbockel, I chose to go with C.S. It echoed some literary figures—C.S. Lewis, E.B. White. It seemed like it was very *New York Times*y thing to do, and so I went with it.

MH: But initially, the concern was getting all that in.

CH: To get Heinbockel to fit in there, you had to give up a few letters on the first name, yes.

MH: Let me ask you first about some of the trials that you covered during that time, and then, in a minute, I will ask you about the politics. But are there any big trials that you, that come to mind that were important during the time you were at the courthouse?

CH: Oh, when I was at the courthouse, there were some. Tommy Robinson was sheriff, and he was an outlandish kind of character, and he was always getting into confrontations with other politicians, and in criminal cases there would always be something going on. They would be high profile cases just because Tommy Robinson was affiliated. And the biggest one was the Alice McArthur murder case, and that intertwined with some other murder cases, but that was just a huge case. And when that was going on, really, people just couldn't get enough

of county courthouse news. We would write something up on the case just about every day. And it was politicized within the *Gazette* news room. The two schools of thought were that basically Tommy Robinson was taking the philosophy that Bill McArthur had arranged to kill his wife, Alice McArthur. At first there was an attempt on her life with a car bomb that was unsuccessful, and then she was shot in an execution style manner by some people who brought flowers to her front door, flowers bearing a note saying "Have a Nice Day." From all this Tommy Robinson had deduced that Bill McArthur was the likely suspect, and there was a woman who had apparently murdered her husband, a woman who Bill McArthur defended, that Tommy Robinson got very close to, Mary Lee Orsini, and, apparently, he believed, or found it useful to believe, what she was saying about her relationship with Bill McArthur, which was basically that Bill McArthur wanted to get his wife out of the way so that he could hook up with Mary Lee Orsini. Those of us at the courthouse, who had interviewed Mary Lee Orsini and followed the murder case involving her husband, thought that she was kind of zany. I mean, she would just come up with some of the most off-the-wall stories about how her husband died because he was involved in drugs or organized crime, or all these wild conspiracy theories. By the time Alice McArthur was killed, we really didn't believe much of anything that Lee Orsini said. So when the Little Rock police cracked the case and said that they believed Lee Orsini was behind it and arrested her, we couldn't believe that Tommy Robinson was pursuing his own approach to the case and trying to arrest Bill

McArthur for the crime. As the courthouse reporters, we were very skeptical of Mary Lee Orsini, but then Carol Griffee was close with Sheriff Tommy Robinson. And she really tended to believe some of the things that Mary Lee Orsini was saying and some of the things that Tommy Robinson was saying, and, on the face of it, there was some sense to it. I mean, policemen often look to husbands when a wife is murdered. I mean, that is kind of a natural way to go. Except that there were some things in this case that just didn't quite make sense, as far as that went. For a while there was a battle in the stories. Carol Griffee would report something that showed that Bill McArthur had a motive for killing his wife, that is that he would inherit some oil income, and then we would talk to Bill McArthur or one of his attorneys, and we would come up with a story that said, well there really wasn't an incentive for that, because whatever money that was going to come from the oil wells would actually go to the kids, wouldn't go to Bill, and so there wasn't a real money motive for him to do that.

MH: So all this is in this highly charged atmosphere, where everybody is very interested in the story and sort of the same atmosphere we would see later on in the O.J. [Simpson trial] period.

CH: Yes, yes, that was our O.J. case of the day. It was a murder case, it was a murder mystery that was evolving before your very eyes. There were so many dramatic elements. There was this love story. It was a soap opera, and I think in Mary Lee Orsini's mind, she loved the idea of being involved in a soap opera. You know, probably, something about her childhood and all. She just wanted to be the evil

heroine of a soap opera, manipulate people around her. You could see that in the criminal cases involved, that she was having a good time manipulating these people, these hit men, to go ahead and kill Alice McArthur without getting paid, and then getting Tommy Robinson to follow her line, her storyline, on the case. It just kept her in front of the news cameras. It didn't matter to her what kind of publicity, as long as she got attention. It was just very important for her to stay active in the case, and so, it was fascinating, from a lot of angles, to watch.

MH: How did Tommy Robinson manage his handling of the case? Did he also gain something from the high-profile nature of the case?

CH: Oh, yes. He already had a reputation as a glib populist, and there was some popular following for his theory of the case. You know, the other theory of the case was a little bit more complicated and involved kind of a strange psychology. His political star rose some during those years. He was certainly a high profile guy, and he was elected congressman after that. And we were a little bit safer, because he wasn't wearing a gun any more.

MH: Did you have reason to question his actions in that investigation? The methods of investigation that he used?

CH: Oh, yes. There were a lot of things that he alleged that didn't make any sense. There was one time that he was trying to charge Bill McArthur with being involved in a conspiracy to kill him, the sheriff. His evidence was two guys, who were kind of down on their luck, who apparently had just made up a story. Maybe they were under pressure from the sheriff, but they made up a story about

meeting Bill McArthur in, it may have been in Arkadelphia or something, it was some place south of Little Rock. It happened to be that meeting, that the sheriff alleged, happened at a time when Bill McArthur was actually in the county courthouse and was seen by judges and, all the time that he was supposedly having this meeting, all these people were seeing Bill McArthur in the courthouse. He stopped at a restaurant where a lot of people saw him. It just didn't make any sense. If you had gone the extra step of investigating this case, you would have known that these guys just made up this story. And it turned out that they did just make up the story.

MH: These guys made up the story. How did that come about?

CH: Well, apparently, they were, the sheriff's office picked them up, and one of them gave this, recounted this session where he was being interviewed by the sheriff, and the sheriff was making these sort of threatening gestures that, you know, like wrapping a tie around his hand, you know, indicating that they could beat them up, you know, without leaving marks because the tie was on their hand. You know, there was these sort of things that he felt were intimidations and directions to, that he had to come up with some sort of story to please these guys.

MH: Tommy Robinson also sort of bleeds over into that other area which you talked about, the coverage of the county politics of that time. Is that correct?

CH: Oh, yes. At the time, Tommy Robinson wanted to get as much money as he could for his sheriff staff, and he was doing some high profile things. He had what they called Robinson Roulette. He was having deputies hide with shotguns in

convenience stores, you know, under the theory that criminals wouldn't rob convenience stores any more, because they were afraid they would get the wrong one, and the sheriff's deputy would be there to blow them away. He was doing all these sorts of things, and some of the things he did required money. I mean, he, for example, he had a series of escapes from the jail, and he said it wasn't the poorly trained staff or, you know, screw-ups by his staff, it was the fact that they didn't have enough money. And so, he would engage in brinksmanship, where he would overspend his budget, and then if the county comptroller or the county judge tried to stop him from getting more money, he would allege that that was obstruction of justice and, in one case, he actually arrested the county judge and the county comptroller for this. So, all of sudden, what was basically politics, he put in the criminal arena.

MH: The county judge, the Pulaski County Judge at this period, was Don Venhaus, right?

CH: Was Bill Beaumont.

MH: Was Bill Beaumont?

CH: Bill Beaumont was the one who he had arrested. And the comptroller was, uh,

MH: Jo Growcock.

CH: Jo Growcock.

MH: How was it, watching all this unfold? It must have been somewhat bizarre for a reporter.

CH: It was. It was a bizarre time. It was one of the craziest times, and really, one of

the things that I look back on and regret is the rise of Tommy Robinson—and how he would play us as a newspaper of record. I mean, he would say things that were so dramatic and so newsworthy, you felt that you couldn't ignore them, but, in some ways, it seemed like the responsible thing to do was that every time he came up with something outrageous was that you had to go ahead and deconstruct it. You know, that you had to do almost an analysis piece immediately afterwards to show where he was off on a tirade or his emotions ran far away from where the facts actually were. So it seemed to me that it was crying out for a different kind of journalism to respond to him, because by the normal rules, most of his utterances were newsworthy. He would call people names, and he engaged in a creative kind of wordplay. He would call the prosecuting attorney a bubblebutt, or he would have all sorts of colorful phrases that just made interesting copy, and it was something that the public really wanted to follow, because here was somebody who was just talking directly to them, but really, you had to have that extra dimension. You had to have the stronger analytical part to really show what was going on, and, in a lot of cases, that was just sorely missing.

MH: Did the paper do a good job in terms of public service in covering the McArthur case and Tommy Robinson's tenure and the political problems that resulted?

CH: Boy, you know, as a participant, it would be hard to say, but I would say, after the fact, that we probably didn't. We didn't expose Tommy Robinson's darker side the way we should have. Because, obviously, the people didn't get it, since they elected him to Congress. It wasn't made obvious how, what a bizarre character

he was during that time. And so, in that sense, I think we failed.

MH: So, do you think that, as you say, a different kind of journalism might have been more appropriate?

CH: Yes, I think so. I think so. And also the fact that in the newspaper at least some people sensed that there was a battle. You know, some people at the newspaper thought Tommy was kind of a hero, and other people thought that, "Well, he looks like he is being a dangerous character here." And somebody reading the newspaper wouldn't necessarily know which was the true story, because the newspaper would be kind of of two frames of mind on that. It is not necessary that there be consensus in the newspaper about every political character. It is just that you seem like you are getting a stream of facts that are in direct conflict: Tommy Robinson discovered this and discovered that, and, on the other hand, this is fact that Tommy Robinson made this stuff up. You know, two clashing sets of facts.

MH: Can you describe for me your assessment of how the newspaper war between the *Arkansas Gazette* and the *Arkansas Democrat* developed?

CH: Hmmm. In the early years, it was, during my tenure back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it went from being one where the *Democrat* as the afternoon newspaper had to more or less be a little bit more sensational. They had to take a different approach to the news to attract readers. And then, when they converted to head-to-head, then the difference was that the *Democrat* reporters were, had a younger, less experienced, the editors the same way, and it seemed that the

Gazette, as the traditional newspaper with more experience, greater resources, would be the dominant voice when they were going head-to-head in the morning. But as time went on, the innovations that the *Democrat* came up with—color, some of the things that they were doing, offering free classified advertising, all these things that were beyond the realm of journalism—were really taking hold and really developed into quite a head-to-head competition. And journalistically, I think, in the early days we always felt that the *Gazette* was winning it, but that wasn't the only battle. And, of course, within the *Gazette* itself, we were going through a lot of things at the same time. The transition from the newspaper of record to being a more modern newspaper and trying to do the things that attract readers and trying to figure our how the traditions of the *Gazette* and the traditions of family ownership would fit into a world of newspapers where it really is more and more of a business than a family tradition. You know, how do all those things work so that you can transition for some of the best things of what the old *Gazette* was into a new *Gazette*, and I think, during a lot of the time that I was there, we really didn't have solid, consistent leadership that really understood that and was able to make that transition and that translation. We were a family newspaper that was struggling with how to make money, while with our competing newspaper had other sources of money—that is, cable and other interests and other newspapers around the state that would bring in enough income so that the other newspaper could lose money, whereas we couldn't. When you are faced with that kind of struggle, it is really hard to locate what it is

that you are willing to fight and die for, you know, in the old tradition. I don't think we ever had a clear understanding of what kind of newspaper we wanted to be in that transition.

MH: Can you give me the continuum of editors who were running the paper during the time that you were there?

CH: Well, when I first started Bob Douglas was the managing editor. And, at some point, and I am not really clear on how it evolved, at some point Hugh Patterson took on the title of editor, which was kind of odd, because he never, never really seemed to be involved that much on the journalistic side. And then there was an effort to get a transition from the Bob Douglas era to the time when Carrick Patterson, Hugh Patterson's son, would take over as editor. It was hard to believe. He wasn't really steeped in the journalism traditions, so there were times when he was asking, "Is it really a newspaper's role?" One example was when Eric Black, my friend from Oberlin, had a series on union corruption that I thought was amazing. It was unlike anything that we were seeing from the staff. It was solid, enterprise reporting, where he was doing what was maybe a five-part series or even longer, about how there were all these threats, all this criminal activity going on in the struggle for control of the union. And it just seemed like it was amazing journalism. When it got to Carrick's desk, his question was, "Well, is this the kind of thing we are supposed to be doing?" I know it was heartbreaking for Eric. He thought he had this series that was the crown of his career up to this point, and Carrick said, "Well, we are not really sure that this

belongs in the newspaper at all, because it is not about government, it is about this union." So, that story got bandied about, back and forth, and, basically, was put into a blender and ended up being a three-part series with, I believe, no byline on it. I don't think Eric wanted his byline on it in the end. He left the newspaper over it. As a young journalist, I thought it was strange that a tremendous story just didn't find the place of honor that it deserved at the newspaper at the time.

MH: About what year was this?

CH: I am a little bit hazy on that, but it must have been somewhere around maybe 1979 or 1980. Somewhere during that era, Bill McIlwain was brought in as an experienced editor to try to liven up the newspaper and give it some direction. Apparently, he didn't work that well. He didn't have a strong face-to-face relationship with the entire staff, but he did what I thought was a great thing. He would put up the front page, and he would mark it up and say the things that he thought were good and things that he thought were bad. And, at the time, that was kind of revolutionary. Before, I didn't get the sense that anybody who was an editor was actually reading the newspaper and had opinions about what was good and what was bad. And so that effort was very helpful. I mean, it was great to know that somebody actually read the newspaper and wanted to encourage this thing and the other. So his departure was part of what you might call the ongoing crisis in leadership.

MH: At some point, you left the paper and then came back. Why did you leave and what did you do in that interim period?

CH: Oh, I left for the newspaper for a while because I had a sideline in real estate, just fixing up old houses and apartments. I would spruce up old apartments and raise the rents. I did that for about two years with mixed results. It was hard to do that kind of thing without having the income from a job, so I decided to come back to the newspaper. And I came back as a business reporter, and it was great. I just really enjoyed that. That was a lot of fun.

MH: Let me just clarify one thing here. Your incarnation as a real estate redeveloper, this took place in the Quapaw Quarter of the general area of the governor's mansion?

CH: Yes, yes.

MH: During a time when a lot of young professionals were moving into that area, trying to rehabilitate old houses.

CH: Yes, basically, we were trying to be part of the rebirth of the downtown area, and I had some mixed success, but, obviously, I wasn't able to do enough to support myself, and so, at one point, I was editor of *The Chronicle*, which was the newspaper for historic preservation downtown. I was enjoying that enough that I thought, "Well, maybe I really should go back to full-time journalism," and so, I signed back on in the *Gazette* as a business reporter.

MH: A lot of newspapers have a policy, either spoken or unspoken, that once you leave the paper, you can never come back. Did you encounter any opposition?

CH: Oh, no. People just loved having me back. I mean, at least, I loved being back, and it was just like old home week. It was almost like I never left, so there was

nothing like that at all.

MH: So there was sort of a family relationship.

CH: Oh, yes. It was kind of a family reunion, and some of the newer reporters, you know, would ask me, "Now who are you? Because it seemed like you walked in here, and everybody knew you."

MH: So you came on as a business reporter. Who was the business editor?

CH: Bob Stover.

MH: And do you remember what year this was?

CH: It would have been, say, 1985, maybe, somewhere around there.

MH: And this was still during the time when the Pattersons owned the paper?

CH: Yes. The Pattersons owned the paper, and Carrick Patterson was more firmly in place as the editor at that time. When I came back, I was much more dedicated to having fun as a newspaper writer and trying to capture in print a real slice of life. Sometimes in business news you see puff pieces. But that is not what business is really about. There is struggle. There is failure. And sometimes a failure breeds success. And sometimes a failure breeds more failure. It seemed to me it was a lot richer field than a lot of business reporting, or at least the *Gazette* business reporting at the time, was letting on. A success story was written up as if it were nothing but success. Like there were no errors made along the way. We all know from our everyday lives, that just isn't the case. I tried to be a little bit more real and lively.

MH: During this time, the newspaper was still struggling through the newspaper war,

and, at one point, the Patterson family decided to sell the newspaper and found a buyer in the Gannett people, and in the change of ownership, Carrick Patterson continued to be the editor of the paper. During that time, what was the atmosphere like at the paper?

CH: Well, I think there was a lot of feeling that the newspaper had to be different, but we didn't know exactly how we had to be different. And, among the staff, we knew that we didn't want to be like the other Gannett newspapers, but there were also some things about the Gannett–*USA Today* approach that made sense. Making some stories shorter and to the point made sense. The *Gazette* was known for having longer stories in the old days. We went on far too long on some stories. Making things more concise and more reader-friendly made sense to me. But I also wanted to identify what were the precious traditions of the *Gazette* that we wanted to save. The real struggle was figuring out how to change things to attract more readers without dealing a blow to some of the great traditions of the *Gazette*. And I am not sure we ever figured that out.

MH: Did that, what was the effect on the business desk of that interim group?

CH: Well, one of the toughest things was that one of our big business stories was ourselves. We had to report on the competition between the *Gazette* and the *Democrat*, and that was a highly politicized thing. That is a big test for a newspaper: how it covers itself as a news story. Is it willing to report things that are not so positive about itself? Initially, I think we had a freer hand in reporting on the newspaper war. As time went on there was more review. The editor

would want to look it over or maybe even the publisher or somebody working with the publisher would want to look over the story, and that, to me, was kind of a sign that we were losing.

MH: Losing the war or losing the?

CH: Losing both the war and the kind of separation you want to have between the advertising side and the editorial side.

MH: Let me ask you about the story that you worked on that involved Dillard's, and describe to me how that began and how it ended?

CH: Okay. At the time of that story I was a business news reporter after serving a stint as business editor. I had a new baby at home, and I really wanted to spend more time at home, and so I had stepped down from being business editor. I had been inside editor's meetings when people were looking for stories. When this story came along, it was a slow news day. There wasn't anything local that seemed like it was developing to be a page one story. One of the editors, Max Brantley, had received the proxy for the Dillard's company, the report where they disclose a lot of things to shareholders. And there were some footnotes about some things, about a large amount of taxes that would be due if they lost a particular tax case, and there was something about firing their accounting firm, and those seemed to be very interesting. Of course, the way to get to that information is to call the company and have them explain. Dillard's had a tradition of not returning phone calls. In this particular instance, I called, I don't know, three or four times during the day, asking with increasing urgency for some explanation. No one returned

my calls. And so, what we ended up doing was running a story that included those footnotes and included an analyst saying, "Well, if, you know, that could be a large amount of money. That could be significant for Dillard's, if they have to come up and actually pay for it, because it is about as much as they would earn in a quarter." And then we had some other information that I picked up from a Cleveland newspaper about something that might have been behind the accounting problem, and I don't really think I credited the Cleveland newspaper. The Cleveland newspaper quoted some court documents, and I said that there was a court case in Cleveland about how the accounting firm had been involved in a potential Dillard's takeover of a chain in Cleveland or in Pittsburgh, and that turned out to be a bad deal and Dillard's got out of it. Getting it from the other newspaper is not the best source. You want to have the original documents. And it turned out that that story, ambiguous as it was, was put on page one. And so, when a business story like that gets on page one, it is almost like saying, we have something here that you really should be interested in. It made it seem like we knew a lot more about this situation than we did. Because all we really knew was that there were footnotes on this report. So having it on page one gave a distorted impression of it. The business editor was opposed to putting it on page one, because we really didn't have that kind of information. But since it was the only local story that was anywhere close to being page one material, and we were dedicated to having local stories on page one, the editor at the time, Walker Lundy, was more than happy to put it on page one. You know, as a matter of fact,

his summary of the story of the week or his summary of the week sort of praised the fact that, you know, we had this story and the other newspaper didn't, and it was a local story, and it saved us that day. But, as it turned out, Dillard's took offense at the newspaper's playing this story up, and there were parts of the story that they contended were in error or didn't represent their position. We went back over it, and there was so much ambiguity about it that I think the story could have been read a couple of different ways. It was not journalism at its best. If there was something wrong in it, Dillard's needed to come forward and point it out. They still wouldn't return the phone calls. All we knew about what Dillard's was upset about came from people on the advertising department or the publisher's office or from the other newspaper. Around the same time, the publisher of the other newspaper had been providing William Dillard, Dillard's founder and chief executive, with the information about how advertising rates for some of the advertisers in the *Gazette* were lower than the rates that he was paying. Of course, he felt, by right, that as a big advertiser he should have the lowest rates offered. It was hard to tell whether Dillard's anger came more from the article or the advertising rate. But the day after the story appeared, Dillard's pulled their advertising.

MH: The day after the second attempt to sort all this out appeared?

CH: No. It was the day after the original story appeared. I don't know whether we were just unlucky in that the story hit at the same time that he was finding out about the advertising rates, or maybe he already knew about the advertising rates

and that story was the final straw, but he pulled all advertising from the *Gazette*, and it never came back. Normally what we would have done is we would have done a follow-up, even if Dillard's didn't comment, we would do a follow-up story where analysts say, "Well, you know, apparently these things that were in these footnotes are not significant, that they have set enough money aside so that even if they lose this tax case, it is not going to have an impact." You know, we would have had that kind of story, but the editors said, "We don't want to write anything else on this until we get a response from Mr. Dillard himself." And so, it took maybe a week or so until that actually happened. That interview with Mr. Dillard was given prominent coverage in the business section, and still, the Dillard's advertising didn't come back. It never did come back.

MH: And that was a significant blow to the [paper]?

CH: Yes, it was a significant blow. Dillard's account was a million dollars a year, which is, in and of itself, a good piece of money. Then there was the symbolic nature of it, too, since Dillard's was a leading retail advertiser. That prominent an advertiser was saying, "I can get by without advertising in the *Gazette*. And I can get by with just running circulars and advertising in the *Democrat*."

MH: You left the paper before the newspaper closed. What year did you leave?

CH: It would have been, I think it was probably, it was 1990. Early in 1990.

MH: You then went into, you did some business as a financial advisor? Is that what you went into?

CH: Yes. I went into financial planning.

MH: [In] the final days of the *Gazette*, when it became apparent that the paper was not going to continue operating, how did that strike you as an ex-member of the newspaper staff?

CH: It was sad. It was frustrating. I wanted to be there. It was hard to believe that the *Gazette* could be closed down. Just the way it is hard to accept the death of a dearly beloved person. It was frustrating to be on the outside. And it was even more frustrating that the *Gazette* wasn't allowed to put out its final edition, to review some of its fine traditions and put out maybe a commemorative issue. That was an additional frustration. It was heartbreaking to see that happen.

MH: Well, as we close the interview here, is there anything that you want to mention that I haven't asked you about?

CH: Well, you would think that a huge corporation like Gannett would have the superior strategic position in the newspaper war. But Gannett is a publically held corporation. Even though it had vast resources, it was responsible to its shareholders, and it had to act rationally to produce profits. In contrast, *Democrat* publisher Walter Hussman had a freer hand. He could take short-term and medium losses and only answer to himself and his family. So really, he was in a better position, and was able to follow a longer-term strategy.

[End of Interview]