Gazette Project

Interview with

Paul Nielsen
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Interviewer: Jim Barden

Jim Barden: This is Jim Barden of *The New York Times* national desk, interviewing Paul Nielsen of *The New York Times* metro desk on February 21, 2001. All right, Paul, now, to start with, where are you from?

Paul Nielsen: I was born in Durham, North Carolina, in 1940 --- August 30, 1940. I grew up in Durham, and, in fact, we were an academic family. My father was a professor at Duke University in Durham. I graduated from Duke in 1962, taught English for two years in Connecticut in a girls' prep[aratory] school, and from there went into the news business. My first job in the newspaper business was in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, working for the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. I was there from May of 1964 until about May or April of 1968, with two years out for the Army. I was drafted in 1965 and came back to Pine Bluff in 1967.

JB: Let me go back here just a minute. I'm very interested. Did you major in journalism?

PN: No, no. I have never taken a journalism course. I majored in English. I have two degrees, a bachelor's degree in English in 1962 from Duke, and rather recently, I got a Ph.D. in English from LSU [Louisiana State University]. I got that degree in 1995.

JB: Wow, that was recent. I didn't know about that. First of all, though, how did you find your way from Duke to Connecticut?

PN: How did I get to Connecticut?

JB: Yes.

PN: Well, it was 1962 and I was graduating from Duke. It was near the end of my senior year, and I was looking around for a job. The English department chairman at St. Margaret's School in Waterbury, Connecticut, was a Duke graduate and was on campus taking a course that summer. She needed to fill three of the positions in a four-member department. She interviewed me, and I got one of the positions. So that's . . .

JB: Took you to Connecticut.

PN: Yes. I should say, too, that the idea of going to Connecticut was doubly attractive because it meant that my wife would be going home. She's originally from Connecticut, so it meant that we'd be near her mother and younger brother and we'd be in places she was familiar with.

JB: And then how did you get from Connecticut down to Arkansas?

PN: Well, I came home from Connecticut in 1964 after I had decided to leave that. I came home, and I went back to campus and prevailed upon the people who ran the student placement office at Duke to help. [Laughter] They sort of were friends of the family --- the large, extended Duke family. They said that I seemed rather unusual and that they had received a rather unusual letter recently by another Duke graduate, describing a newspaper job in Arkansas. I don't know what they found unusual about me or the letter. All I recall telling her was that I wanted to try the newspaper business now, since it involved working with words, and I had been working with words in all my time as an English student and an English teacher. Long before this, in the seventh grade, I can recall the teacher asking us to make a list of jobs we'd like to have when we grew up. I remember I said I thought I might like to be in the newspaper business, since things were always happening and you got a chance to know about what's current, what's new,

what's happening. Now, I never gave a thought to that seventh-grade list while I was talking about a new job in 1964. I was just very pleased to have a specific place to go to and a specific address to write to. The letter describing the job at the *Pine Bluff Commercial* was left by a reporter named Harry Pierson. He was the star reporter at the *Commercial* in those days, and he was a Duke graduate. As a matter of fact, the letter concerned a reporting job, but by the time I got around to answering the letter, they had already filled that job, with either Bob Lancaster or Richard Portis. Now, quite clearly, either one of those two was doing a lot better at it than I ever could. Fate spared me <u>that</u> embarrassment. However, Gene Foreman, who was the managing editor of the *Commercial*, did have a job on the copy desk. So, I got on the bus and I went out to Pine Bluff, Arkansas, where I became a journalist, and a copy editor. I remember very well, very vividly, what a wonderful experience it was to discover journalism. I just drank in all the new information. And it was like rain on parched ground for me to be able to see in black and white what I'd done each day. One of many great, lingering frustrations for me as a teacher was that I was never really sure what I had done --- what I had really achieved, how much of the students' achievement was anything that I had done, but a newspaper was an observable achievement. Every day, in black and white, there it was. You could read what you had done, so that was truly a revelation and a discovery. Plus, there were all sorts of interesting secondary jobs to take a whack at. This was a small newspaper where everybody got a chance to do everything. If I had wanted, I could have covered football games in southeast Arkansas on Friday nights, since the sports department was swamped, but I didn't want to. So I just went down to the paper and hung out on Friday nights, since it was open and it was filled with interesting people, and I didn't know about any other place in Pine Bluff that was.

Eventually, I got a chance to write an editorial column or two, and to write some book reviews. The most exciting of the secondary jobs was working in the back shop, the composing room --- making decisions on the fly, trimming stories in type, redoing headlines that didn't fit. Once in a while, we'd have to run like mad back to the presses to kill a page. This was a Gene Foreman paper, and we chased like mad to get every last detail fixed, if we could. This was the day of hot type, remember. Hot type, paper copy and pencil editing. It was just a mesmerizing and intoxicating experience, as it remained by the time I went from there to the *Gazette* in 1968.

JB: Lancaster and Pierson, were they working for the *Commercial Appeal* then?

PN: This was not the *Commercial Appeal*.

JB: Sorry.

PN: The *Commercial*.

JB: The *Commercial*. Right. And not the *Arkansas Democrat*. This was Foreman and the *Pine Bluff Commercial.*

PN: I was at the *Commercial* from 1964 to 1968 and, yes, they were there throughout that time. Yes.

JB: You left there to go to the *Arkansas Gazette*, is that correct?

PN: Yes, I did.

JB: And now, had Foreman gone on by that time? Had he already gone on to the . . .

PN: No, he left three months after I did. I left in about April or May of 1968.

The man who had been in the slot when I started at the *Commercial* was a fellow named George Carter. He had come down from the *Gazette* to work there in the slot and then had gone back to the *Gazette* and had mentioned to the managing editor there that I was someone they might like to pick up. Eventually, when they did get in touch with me in 1968, I was ready to move on. I had been at the

Gazette about three months when Foreman was hired to be the managing editor at the *Democrat*. The *Democrat* had recently --- the man who had owned it for many years had died, and the paper had been turned over to two younger men who had married his daughters or his nieces or someone. The man who became the editor was named Marcus George, and the other fellow, I don't know. I don't recall his name, but he was the publisher, I guess. But Marcus George was the name of the guy who was just above Foreman. Anyway, Foreman talked me into coming over to the *Democrat* in October or November of 1968. It was a chance to make a real difference. I wasn't at all unhappy at the *Gazette*, but I knew Foreman, and I knew I'd be running the copy desk in time, and it was a chance to make a real difference. We were able, in a fairly short amount of time at the *Democrat*, to make it into a credible newspaper. We changed that paper awfully fast. I was the second person Foreman hired. He hired a reporter named Tim Hackler out of that little school in Conway.

JB: State Teachers College, it used to be called, wasn't it?

PN: No, there was a . . .

JB: There was another there? Hendrix?

PN: Hendrix. Hendrix College. Right out of Hendrix.

JB: Well, you obviously have a unique experience here. One of the few guys who has worked both for the *Arkansas Gazette* and the *Democrat*. So you saw a beginning of a real change, obviously, at the *Democrat*. But to start with your *Gazette* years --- when you went on the copy desk, who was the slot person at that point?

PN: The man in charge of the desk, who worked the slot most nights, was Bob Douglas, and a wonderful editor he was, too. He didn't say much, had a very dry sense of humor, and was obviously very fond of the people who had been there for quite a while. He got on particularly well with Ray Kornegay, who was the

oldest man around. I also remember Douglas was quite close to the guy who ran the wire desk. We used so much wire copy at the *Gazette*, it was amazing. The guy's name was Pat.

JB: Pat Crow?

PN: It wasn't Pat Crow. By the time I ever met Pat Crow, he was at the *New Yorker*. This was a different fellow.

JB: Pat Carruthers?

PN: Pat Carruthers. He was a very likable guy, but boy, he sure moved a lot of copy! [Laughter] He was surrounded by teletype machines, and they were always clattering, churning out the wire copy.

JB: Well, you know, that's interesting because Bob Douglas was working that wire desk when I was down there.

PN: Yes. Now, when I was there, Bob Douglas was in charge of the news/copy desk, and the two people who I remember most often worked as his backup or relief were Bill Rutherford and George Carter. Carter was the first slot man I ever worked under in Pine Bluff. On the rim, there was Ray Kornegay, who was kind of an old-fashioned liberal and really had fond memories of being a leftist. He was forever lecturing us about the old days. He talked about the days when people laid down their lives to be members of unions. To get a union in a shop, you were fighting for your life, quite often. His loyalties and political sympathies were structured by those experiences, but union issues weren't quite so intense by then. This was 1968. Three other very memorable people on the desk rim were Paul Johnson, Richard Portis and Chris Kazan. Paul Johnson was a very entertaining guy, but quite a striking wit. Richard Portis was Buddy [Charles] Portis's younger brother, and brilliant, just brilliant. I think Richard left the business to become a doctor. As I recall, the family wanted him to do that. The

word was that they hoped that this young genius would not have dirty fingernails like Buddy and the rest of us, but would become a professional. Every journalist who knew Richard just mourned the thought of him leaving the business. Next to Richard, usually, was Chris Kazan. He was the son of Elia Kazan, the movie director. I don't know how long he had been there, or what happened to him. He was a little distant, or at least he and I didn't exchange much talk. I talked a lot more with Richard and Paul Johnson because they sat closer and because I knew Richard from when he'd worked for the *Pine Bluff Commercial.* It amazes me to think of it now, but Richard Portis had been the bureau chief in Hamburg, in southeast Arkansas, living in a trailer. The mind just spins now at the thought of that much wit and that much insouciance living in a trailer in Hamburg and reporting on the Pink Tomato Festival --- and loving it, and making the reader love it. Richard was good. And I tell you, at the *Commercial*, we thought the Pink Tomato Festival was important, too. It was a part of real life, the way our readers lived. Also on the rim at the *Gazette*, there was Michael Barrier, and as I recall, he did have a law degree. I also recall that he spent a lot of time reading comic books. He was a young guy in his twenties, like the rest of us, except for Kornegay. Serious, young guy, and he was reading Donald Duck. Now, I always loved comics, but I didn't take them very seriously back then, but Barrier sure did. He'd keep his own counsel, so to speak, when he got ribbed about it. I take comics much more seriously now. They've been evolving steadily toward intellectual and cultural respect as a graphic medium, you know. I believe that Barrier played a crucial role in that change. Back then, no one knew who Carl Barks was, but he was the guy who was drawing all the Donald Duck comics, without any credit. But a guy named Michael Barrier was writing to him in the 1960s, drawing him out about his work, and writing scholarship about Barks. It

has to be our Michael Barrier. When Carl Barks died about a year ago, the *Times* did a huge obit on him. Barks was important, and Barrier made people take him seriously. One of my favorite memories of working at the *Gazette* concerns Barrier. I'm fond of this because the incident sort of rolls a lot of facts of our life up into one ball. We used to work an awful lot of wire copy, and, in particular, we worked an awful lot of undummied wire shorts. The *Gazette* had an awful lot of the one- or one-and-a-half-inch, six-column strips above an ad. And they would be filled with nothing but one- to one-and-a-half-inch wire shorts, and they would eat up shorts like nothing you ever saw. Poor Pat Carruthers was just pushed to the wall to generate enough of these obscure, one-graph things. I mean, he would have to cannibalize some wire stories. They were major features sometimes, and Pat would turn them into shorts to fill up all that space. So, that's part of this story. Now, it's also the case that Portis had a devilish sense of humor. He didn't think well of the writing style of some of the reporters. I mean, we all had our favorites, but we were in general agreement about the writing style of this one particular reporter, Les Seago, which was not the most graceful or welcome. Richard also had his likes and dislikes on the rim. It was his conviction that Barrier always took a long lunch to avoid having to work Les Seago's copy. Copy just sat in the "in" basket and we usually just took the top piece. Richard thought that when Barrier saw some of Seago's copy land in the basket, he took off for lunch and stayed away too long. So, one night, Richard spent his lunch time at a typewriter writing up a fake story in the style of Les Seago. Richard made it fevered and silly, and he put in an awful lot of admiration for the mayor of North Little Rock, Casey Laman, since Seago covered North Little Rock. [Laughter] So Richard put this right on top of the "in" basket just as Barrier was coming back from lunch. So, Barrier took it, never suspected a thing.

He edited the whole thing and wrote the headline. As soon as it went to the composing room, Richard went dashing back there to intercept it to keep it from getting into the paper. He had a lot of fun with Barrier for not having seen through the ruse. "Looky here, looky here, anybody would know this is a made-up name. It's "Omo (Fevers) Bartlett, a visiting police chief from Enid, Oklahoma." Richard had a wonderful ear for ludicrous, emphatic names and nicknames. "A police chief from Enid, Oklahoma, visiting his friend, William H. (Casey) Laman, mayor of North Little Rock." This was such a delicious episode and the name was thought to be so preposterous, that we just couldn't let go of it. Sometimes we would edit that fake name into copy! [Laughter] Not in major stories, which were looked at carefully, but into one of those miles and miles of wire shorts, which went through the desk pretty fast. I'm not telling who did it, but I'm sure that it got into print once, that Omo (Fevers) Bartlett was one of a band of people who died in a snow storm in the Alps. "Omo (Fevers) Bartlett was last seen disappearing into a raging storm on the Matterhorn." [Laughter] It was not our proudest hour, but it was the kind of thing we amused ourselves with sometimes. But mostly I remember a *Gazette* that was very, very sober. It didn't take itself anywhere nearly so seriously as *The New York Times* did, and does, but it was very serious about what it did. I was eager to work for the *Gazette*. It was difficult being at the *Commercial* and always competing against the *Gazette* because the *Gazette*, by virtue of being, in 1968, the dominant newspaper in the entire state, drew all the attention to it, and news makers --- public officials and such --- turned to the *Gazette* first. The *Commercial* was able to carve out a niche for itself in the southeastern quarter of the state and was able to do some very interesting things --- the campaign to save the Buffalo River, for example --- but it was always quite frustrating to try to compete against the *Gazette*. But it

was also quite alluring, the idea of being in Little Rock. I remember the first time I ever saw Little Rock, going up from Pine Bluff, which was a town of 50,000, at the time the second-largest in the state. I was from the East Coast and I missed larger cities. The first time I saw Little Rock, we were driving down one of the main drags and passing street after street after street that was lighted and busy, and it was obvious that things were happening. I grabbed Jim by the arm --- he was driving the car --- I said, "Jim! Jim! A fellow can get lost up here!" It looked like a big town, and in that region it <u>was</u> a big town. The *Gazette* was just an excellent paper. It was a conservative paper in the way it looked. It looked in 1968 the way it had looked in 1958. It attempted to be a newspaper of record in its area, and it was the best paper for states and states around. You couldn't find a better paper than what the *Gazette* was. You'd have to go to one of the two oceans, I guess, to get a paper that was comparable to the *Gazette*. It was quite a thrill to go there. I was just delighted to go. The *Gazette* was a little bit stiff, sometimes. Here's an incident, a silly thing, but we were fascinated by it, and it suggests something of what was just beyond the pale at the *Gazette*, but also the odd mix of people there. This episode got talked about, and laughed about, a lot. There was a photographer, named Jo. L. Keener. I had known him in Pine Bluff. The tale goes, he got on the elevator with Hugh Patterson. Just as the elevator started going up, he turned to Mr. Patterson and said, "So, how they hangin'?" [Laughter] Mr. Patterson did not reply. There was silence. Nothing but silence while the elevator ascended, all too slowly. Some people couldn't believe Jo. L. said that, but I could.

JB: Well, are you talking about the staff being a little stiff now, or the staff members you thought were a little stiff?

PN: I --- I --- [laughter].

JB: It didn't sound like it by the tale you told about Richard Portis.

PN: [Laughter] That was just not the right word. I think that, in general, it was larger and more sober and less intimate than other papers. Some of us palled around off the job --- went drinking together --- but not everyone.

JB: I've wanted to ask you about that. What about the pals within the newsroom? Was there a lot of socializing among the staff members?

PN: There was, and it pretty much broke down by age and by length of time there. There were two people on the state desk that I spent a lot of time with, Ginger Shires and Larry Gordon. I worked with Gordon later, too, when he eventually came to the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and went from there on to *Newsday*. And there were two young fellows on the city desk, George Boosey and Ray White, we saw a lot of. My favorite place to drink in those days was a bar called the Angry Bull. The place that was much favored by politicians and Capitol bureau reporters was the Gar Hole. It was in a hotel, had a gar in a fish tank behind the bar. I almost never went there, but Richard Portis did sometimes, it seems.

JB: Now, were you married at that time when you were at the *Gazette*?

PN: I had been married, but by the time I got to the *Gazette*, we were divorced.

JB: So, you were a single man again?

PN: Yes.

JB: So, you were doing your hanging out with the guys at the *Gazette*?

PN: Yes.

JB: Okay. Who were some of these guys, now? The others that you socialized with outside the *Gazette*?

PN: There was also a fellow by the name of Dick Allen, now Richard Allen. He's at the *Paris Herald Trib*[*une*]. He calls himself Richard now, but in those days --- I don't know --- I think Dick was a stringer for us in Fayetteville, but when I went

over to the *Democrat*, we hired him full time as a staff member. I remember Dick most from my days at the *Democrat*.

JB: Now, when you went to the *Democrat*, there was quite a change in the atmosphere of the newsroom there, wasn't there? Foreman began to straighten the *Democrat* out at that point, but tell me about the differences that you noticed.

PN: The *Democrat* was not a well organized paper, or had not been a well organized paper. Through all the years when it was competing with the *Gazette* and was under the ownership of the old man, why, the composing room more or less put the whole paper together. The ad department did not dummy ads, which means that the ad department did not specify what page any ad went on, or what ads were near others. It also meant that the newsroom didn't have a dummy, a diagram of where the ads were on each page and, hence, the newsroom could not specify what stories went on what page, or near-related stories. So, both the ad department and the news department just sent their copy up to the composing room, and the composing room put the paper together by tradition. The composing room knew where the old advertisers' ads customarily went, and they fit the new ones in wherever they had room, sometimes. When Foreman arrived as the new managing editor, he caused a revolution. One of the first things he did was to get together with the new production manager and say, "We've got to start dummying ads." The other fellow said, "That'd be a good idea, you know. We printed eight ads Sunday that were supposed to wait until Monday, and we missed about six more that had paid for Sunday." So, that was fourteen ads that they didn't get any money from. In general, I'd have to say that even after we started using dummies, the composing room was still pretty wild and wooly, and they still had the feeling that they ran things. What using dummies meant was that we were taking a good measure of control out of the hands of the composing room

and the composing room shop foreman and putting it in the hands of the people who were responsible for the paper --- the journalists and the ad people. The lack of control really was deplorable. I mean, the proof room was the group that classified the classified ads. The classified ad department didn't know the classification system! [Laughter] So, every day production would stop while the proof room --- the part of the composing room that was supposed to be getting the typographical errors out of the news type --- production of our type would stop while the proof room classified the cockamamie ads. It was crazy! [Laughter] But there was also no copy desk under the old *Democrat*. The system was that as soon as assigning editors wanted to send copy to the composing room, why, they just sent it. There was no central organization, no universal copy desk. Foreman changed that. He pulled about six office desks together in a general U shape. When I got there about three months after he did, I sat down and looked in the top drawer at my left, and there was an old [Ku Klux] Klan leaflet. Obviously, the old *Democrat* had people who would have Klan hate literature around, but when they cleaned this desk out they had overlooked this. This was one of those moments that reminded me of just where we were at that point. The South was very different by then --- it was 1968 --- it had changed a good deal since 1954. It was not the South of 1957, either. It was the South of 1968, but there were a lot of changes yet to be made. I entertained the pleasant thought in those days that a lot of people who thought they had a refuge from change in the old *Democrat* would have to change their notion of the paper. We would give racism no sanctuary at the *Democrat*. We changed that paper an awful lot. We made a huge amount of change in that paper. I think we went overboard on some things. I think we made a sort of folk hero out of a black activist named Sweet Willie Wine. He was part rabble-rouser, and he was leading a protest march from

Memphis to Little Rock. This was 1969, I think, and it may have been related to the work protest that brought Martin Luther King to Memphis in 1968. Anyway, we printed huge, long dispatches about Sweet Willie Wine and the march by a reporter named Maurice Moore. As I say, maybe we went overboard, but maybe not. The story was important and it was a sign of the changing times. It was new, and fresh, and it was ours, and we were going to go with it. I'm sure the dedicated readers of the old *Democrat* used to pick the paper up in those says and mutter to themselves, "Just what the heck is going on?" At least, I hoped they did. I was very pleased with it. We worked awfully hard to make something out of that paper. But the standard throughout my time in Arkansas was always the *Gazette*. Always and eternally the *Gazette*. What it had achieved in 1957 and 1958 in the Central High School integration crisis was then, and is now, a benchmark and a standard in this profession for what public service is and shall be and should be. Two events have shaped and defined my professional convictions: the *Gazette*'s performance and Edward R. Murrow's show on Joe McCarthy. They set the model and the standard for the deliberate and appropriate response to the people who seek to bully the news business and interfere with the proper gathering and reporting of information. I am very proud to say I was at the *Gazette*. I wasn't there in the years when the *Gazette* put itself on the very line, but a lot of the same people were still there. People like Bill Shelton, the city editor, Bob Douglas and Bill Rutherford and Ernie Dumas, and probably Pat Carruthers. As I look back at those days, it seems to me that they carried themselves with a full knowledge of who they were and what they could do. I can remember Bob Douglas telling me about staff members coming to work in 1957 after crosses had been burned on their lawn and sugar poured in their gas tank. So the people in the neighborhoods knew who they were and knew where they

lived and where their families were. The circulation went down, down, down in those years around 1957. It ended up being about half of what it had been. By the time I got there, the tale often told was of how important Orville Henry and the farm columnist --- what was his name? Was his name Dumas, too?

JB: It was DuVall, I believe.

PN: Leland DuVall.

JB: Leland DuVall, yes.

PN: Yes, he was. It was often said that those two, Orville Henry and Leland DuVall, were the ones who got the *Gazette* through those years when the circulation went down. Readers couldn't do without Orville Henry covering the Hogs and Leland DuVall telling them what kind of crop rotation to have. Or that was the lore, anyway. I was from back East --- all this was quite something. [Laughter]
I remember --- I am very fond of recalling that wonderful frenzy of checking the early copies of the paper. We were a U-shaped desk, with seats for maybe six or seven around the outside, and we sat with our backs to a row of windows, that fronted on --- what was it there, Third Street or whatever?

JB: Third Street, I'm sure.

PN: Yes. Anyway, there was a space between the backs of our chairs and those windows, and it would end up just hip deep in tear sheets. The shop foreman would bring an armload of early copies up to the copy desk and we'd start devouring them. Just tearing into them. I think Portis was the one who started the process of just ripping the paper apart. You'd tear your page out, scan it down really fast, and then get rid of it. Get it off the desk. Get it away. It was done. Rip out the next page. Finish it. Throw it behind you. Rip out the next page. If you found something, tell Douglas or Carter, and somebody would go running back to the composing room or the presses. And on and on, like sharks around

bleeding meat. By the end of this process, all that space right behind the desk would be filled with tear sheets from the paper. Like a pile of leaves in the fall. Ah, it was frantic.

JB: Well now, one thing about --- were there ever any big fights in the newsroom or big disagreements while you were there?

PN: I don't remember anything particularly colorful, except the time Douglas threw me out of the newsroom because I'd been drinking too much. This happened after I had left the *Gazette* to join the *Democrat.* The *Democrat* was an afternoon paper and the *Gazette* was a morning paper, so I was done with my work and the poor *Gazette* folks were working. I was bothering them. I don't remember what I did or said, but I'm sure I deserved to get thrown out. That's the closest thing I can remember to a colorful incident.

JB: Well, that's good enough --- Bob Douglas cleaning out the newsroom. You went to the *Democrat*, then, and you stayed there a little over two years, I believe you said.

PN: Yes, something like about two years.

JB: And Foreman, I guess, in the meantime, moved on to *Newsday*, or had he not?

PN: He did go to *Newsday*, but some time after I went there. I left in about May of 1970 and got a job at *Newsday*. Foreman called ahead and talked to an old friend he had known in Pine Bluff and may have known at the *Gazette* --- this is Pat Owens, a remarkable fellow. Did you know Pat?

JB: No, but I've heard about Pat. I believe the words were that "Pat blew in from Omaha," or something like that, and he looked like he blew in from Omaha! They told stories --- what kind of guy was Pat?

PN: Pat, by the time I knew him, was chief editorial writer of *Newsday*, and was quite colorful. I mean, he had a wife and a wonderful house in Roslyn, Long Island, in

Nassau County. Very settled circumstances, only Pat Owens was as unsettled and unsettling as they came. It seemed unexpected. Patrick J. was a wonderful man, memorable, colorful and brilliant. And he was an excellent writer. He was a passionate and committed writer. I thought he was the best columnist in America. Anyway, Foreman had called ahead to Pat and said, "You ought to do what you can for Nielsen," and he got me a tryout at *Newsday* and I got the job. So Pat really had spoken for me, I think. So I was there by about May of 1970. I think the invasion of Cambodia happened about then.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

PN: Foreman arrived at *Newsday* in mid-1972 and was there for about a year and a half, and left to go be managing editor for Gene Roberts at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. I am a little bit hazy on time here, but it seems to me that he would have --- I had been there about two years when he came to *Newsday*. He was on the news desk. I think his title was executive news editor. But *Newsday* was not his kind of paper, and also he didn't have enough free range, so when he got a chance --- I am speaking for him here. I shouldn't be. I'm sure you can get him to tell you this. But he did go on to be the managing editor at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. He and Roberts made an extraordinarily good newspaper there. Foreman is quite a genius at building a newspaper. Of all the people I've worked for, I'd say that Gene Foreman is the most dependable and the most sensible man I ever worked for. He was the managing editor at the first paper I worked for, so most of my early lessons in how you edit came from Foreman. And it's perfectly true that most of the time when I make a mistake, it's because I've forgotten something that Foreman taught me. The guy is the most dependable man I've ever known in the newspaper business. If he said he'd do something, he'd do it. If he said

something would be this way, that's the way it would be --- eventually maybe, but it would be. He didn't bullshit anybody, and he didn't play games --- the most sincere man I've ever known. It left him at a certain disadvantage, from time to time, in certain situations, but it also meant that when he retired in Philadelphia, there was real mourning there. The people were really sad to see him go. They were also delighted to have known him. I was back in New York by then and working at the *Times* and went down --- made a couple trips down. So I was seeing things a little bit from the outside, but people really regretted the fact that he was leaving.

JB: Foreman was that way from the word go because Foreman was . . .

PN: Always that way.

JB: . . . always that way because I went back to Foreman --- Foreman was my mentor and colleague. He was a year ahead of me at Arkansas State --- helped me a lot there, and he was a true genius in this business. Listen, so now . . .

PN: Another interesting fact. Foreman is the only person I know who has the same six papers in common with me. *Pine Bluff Commercial, Arkansas Gazette, Arkansas Democrat, Newsday, Philadelphia Inquirer, New York Times*. I'm proud to say, too, that every paper I worked for has won a Pulitzer. It wasn't always while I was there, and it wasn't --- it would be a stretch to say that I contributed significantly to the Pulitzer Prizes, but I am very proud of the fact that all of the newspapers I worked for were excellent examples of the craft. And I'm very proud of the fact that I worked at the same six that Foreman worked for. And, in particular, when it comes to the *Gazette*, I'm especially proud that I was at the *Gazette*. It set the standard. It exhausted its opportunity. You get a chance to be great within a range of possibilities --- we live and work within the constraints of time and place --- and I've always believed that the *Gazette* was as good as it was

possible to be in that time and place --- that, in fact, the time and place made it great, in a way. It's just too damned bad it doesn't exist anymore.

JB: It's a crime. The amazing thing about some of the guys who set the standards --- I was a young man then. I was twenty-two years old, and I thought these guys setting the standards were eons older than I was. Now, looking back on it, they were three or four years older than me. Five at the most. They were all guys who were in their twenties.

PN: Right.

JB: Every one of them, to the last man, except for Bill Shelton, and he's the older guy at the top, but I'm talking about the guys in the daily coverage. Well, let me ask you this one --- a couple of other small things here now. You went on, then, from *Newsday* to Philadelphia, is that correct? And you stayed there while Foreman was the managing editor, and then he was promoted, I believe, a step up. Is that correct?

PN: I don't know what his new title was. He was managing editor all the time I was there. Here are my years. From 1964 to 1968, I was at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. For six months in the middle of 1968, I was at the *Gazette*. From late 1968 through early or mid-1970, I was at the *Democrat*. From mid-1970 to mid-1975, I was at *Newsday* on Long Island. From 1975 to 1989, I was at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. I then took, what, six years --- I then left to go get a Ph.D. in English, and I returned to the newspaper business in 1996, when I came to the *Times*, and I've been here ever since. This is my home. New York is my home now. I always missed New York City after I left it to go to Philadelphia. I am very pleased to be here.

JB: One last thing . . .

PN: But when I was --- those fifteen or fourteen years that I was at the *Inquirer*,

Foreman was the managing editor through all those years. And those were excellent years at the *Inquirer*. We won just as many Pulitzers as *The New York Times* did.

JB: I remember those years.

PN: [Laughter] It was an excellent --- it still is a fine paper.

JB: One thing I want to ask you. Where did you get your degree from, your Ph.D.?

PN: Ph.D. in English. I got it at LSU.

JB: And you were able to take six years off and spend, or were you working down there?

PN: I decided about 1985 or 1986 that I had a chance to do it. My parents had died. I have two siblings. The three of us had a small inheritance, so I had a little bit of money in the bank and I'd always wanted a doctorate. I'm from an academic family, so I'd sort of been raised to regard a Ph.D. as a kind of *summa*, a crown for the intellect, the life of the mind. I was feeling a little bit worn down by the dailyness of journalism. A lot of things conspired to make me think in terms of going and getting a degree. I didn't want a journalism degree. Journalism is what I do for a job. I wanted something specifically literary. I never set out to build an academic career, though I would have pursued it if it seemed feasible. But I was fifty-five when I got the doctorate, and nobody in his right mind was going to hire me. So it happened that I came back to journalism. It was worth it, too, even though I went from having savings to having debt. Instead of a career, I built a chance to revive myself, and the experience has changed me and the life of my mind in many, many ways. I'm very pleased to be at the *Times*, and I'm just utterly delighted to be back in New York. Although I didn't plan it this way, it is good that it happened.

JB: Good. Okay. Well, thank you very much. You've been at the two biggest and two

greatest papers, the *Gazette* and the *Times*. At least I think so, anyway. I've been at both papers. Thank you very much.

PN: All right.

[End of Interview]