Gazette Project

Interview with:
John Reed
Little Rock, Arkansas
27 August 2004

Interviewer: Jerol Garrison

Jerol Garrison: I'm interviewing John Reed, R-E-E-D, a former *Arkansas Gazette* reporter who now works for the Arkansas State Senate, and we are sitting in the Arkansas Senate conference room in the State Capitol for the purpose of this interview. John, this interview is part of an oral history project being sponsored by the University of Arkansas Libraries [Fayetteville, and the purpose is to find out what kind of newspaper the *Gazette* was and what made it that way. We want to find out what your memory is of the *Gazette*, what things were like at the *Gazette*, and who were some of the key people you remember while you worked there, things like that. When the interview is finished, you'll get a chance to review it and make changes, additions or subtractions. The [Arkansas Center for Oral and Visual History of the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville] will transcribe the interview, and after you've reviewed it, it will go [to Special Collections at the University of Arkansas Libraries] to be placed in the archives for use by future historians who want to know something about the *Gazette*. Are you willing to proceed with the interview?

John Reed: Yes.

JG: I have a little form here for you to sign, and if you could fill it out. Your name would go first, and then I'll write my name in there, and the date will be August 27th.

JR: And sign it?

JG: Yes. Thank you very much. This form just simply will let it be known that you have agreed to his interview and have agreed for this interview to be added to the archives of the University of Arkansas. John, could you tell me a little bit about when you worked for the *Arkansas Gazette* and what your duties were?

JR: I began in February of 1985 as a reporter, a general assignment reporter [GA]. I had been working at the *Pine Bluff Commercial* as a reporter. I worked in Pine Bluff for a year and a half, and like almost everybody in that newsroom, we applied to the *Gazette* and took the job as soon as we could. At one point, a couple of us were looking around the newsroom, and there were at least a half a dozen former *Pine Bluff Commercial* reporters within sight, and there were several others who were out on assignment. Started in February of 1985 and worked as a GA for about a year.

JG: That's general assignment?

JR: Yes. And then I got the Capitol beat, and I left the *Gazette* in July or August of 1990, so I worked there a little over five years — five and a half years, maybe. When I walked in the very first day, Max Brantley was my boss, my editor. He was city editor. The very first day, I walked in, he opened up a big drawer and

handed me a, what they called a style pile. The *Gazette* did not have a style book, just had this huge stack of memos and clippings, and I went through it to see what the *Gazette* style was. It was my first introduction to what a tradition the *Gazette* had. Some of these memos had been written by Mr. [J.N.] Heiskell and Bill Shelton, a lot of them, but a lot of those big, famous names I never worked with. But they were very prominently collected in that style pile, and I think my second day Max sent me out on a story, and he was my editor for most of my years there. At the very end of I think of my fifth year, they put me directly under John Brummett, who had become political editor. So, I'm guessing—please don't hold me to the dates—I did my first four years I under Max. The last year or eight months, under Brummett. I sat next to—they gave me a desk there on that second floor newsroom, and I sat next to Brummett. He was kind of an imposing presence because he was always getting phone calls, and he was hardly ever there. Whenever I picked up his phone, his sources would just hang up. They didn't even want me to recognize their voice, I guess. As a general assignment reporter, I worked Sunday through Thursday. I had Friday and Saturday off. On Sundays, Brenda Tirey was the editor and Wayne Jordan was the police reporter, and I was the reporter. And it was pretty slow on Sundays, but I got to meet a lot of different people. The NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] would have regular Sunday meetings, so I got to meet a lot of the leaders of the black community. I did fun things like covering Confederate funerals for widows. I can't remember who they are now. Daughters of the

Confederacy over at the cemetery, those kind of things. Very, very wild and very fun. Like one day some people were trying to blast out a hillside on JFK in North Little Rock. These ol' boys put too much dynamite in the side of the mountain and just sent huge boulders flying all up and down JFK, and I got to interview people who had boulders the size of this chair come flying through their windows. One Sunday night, Brenda and Wayne and I were hanging around, and the photographer was Kelly Quinn. We got a phone call from some people saying, "I'm going to jump off the TCBY tower," and we didn't believe them, but we went over there. And these guys were driving through town and they saw the TCBY Tower at that time was just being built and it had a crane sticking way out over the top, and these guys parachuted off the top of that, and we got a funny little story and photographs on the front page. [Kelly Quinn] did a great job. She got a great picture of these guys coming down out of the sky in the middle of the night. When I went to the Capitol beat, it wasn't nearly as much fun. The newspaper war was going on at that time, and the capitol beat was one of the *Gazette*'s pride and joys. It was very intense, very intense and long, hard days. I worked there with Bob Wells, Scott Van Laningham, Brummett, James Meriwether, and Mark Oswald, and we worked long, hard days, especially during legislative sessions. Oh, and Maria Henson before she went off to get a Pulitzer Prize somewhere and Brummett, but Brummett was kind of a lone ranger. He got to do his own thing. Max rode us pretty hard it seemed at the time, but, you know, it made us all better reporters because he drove himself pretty hard, too.

And I worked on the Capitol beat until 1990. My second son was born in 1990, and that's when I applied for and got the job that I have now, and I've been doing that ever since as information director for the Arkansas State Senate. It gave me a lot more time to be with my family, which made a big difference.

JG: Was that the reason you left the *Gazette*, so you could have more time to spend with your family, or were there several reasons?

JR: That was one. It doubled my salary — that was another. I think I never made $20,000 a year. I had finally gotten one more $20-a-week raise right at the very end that maybe bumped me right up to $20,000 a year, but, you know, after taxes, that's nothing. My pay was just miserably low is another reason. So the incredibly long hours at 90 miles an hour, the incredible stress and the low pay, when this job became available, I didn't have to think too long and hard about it. People ask me if I miss newspapers, and I suppose I do, but I didn't miss that part, and I was not willing to go to another town. I liked Little Rock.

JG: So the newspaper war is what made it so hard, you had so much competition, you had to work so hard?

JR: Yes, it was fun, but it was very hard and the sense of tension. You'd wake up in the morning and read the newspaper, and, of course, I'd read the *Democrat*, and you would just cringe if you saw something that they had that you didn't have. Now, if you scooped them on something that was great, and I seemed to remember we scooped them more than they scooped us. But John Robert Starr and Meredith Oakley would write about us by name in their columns, and that

was not any fun. But, yes, that made it very hard, just beating them on a daily basis, and if it was a good story you had to beat them not just the first time, but you had to stay ahead of them for about three or four days if you broke a good story. You couldn't rest on your laurels. Max wouldn't let you, which was good. So if you scooped them once, he kind of expected you to scoop them for two or three days in a row if it was a story that had legs.

JG: You said that John Robert Starr and Meredith Oakley wrote about you by name, you mean they kind of put you down or . . .

JR: Meredith wrote about me by name and Starr wrote about my dad by name, and then Starr was always writing about the *Gazette*, and it is people you knew. And I guess it hit home the day I picked up Meredith's column and saw my own name in Meredith's column as having done a poor job, and she said I was—I can't remember exactly what she said, but it really made me mad and upset me because I had scooped their reporter on a little political story, and it was their way of fighting back, and I can't imagine what some of the big names at the *Gazette* felt like routinely being excoriated by John Robert Starr and by Meredith Oakley. Because, you know, the *Gazette* at that time was at the height of the war, and we took pride in not responding in kind. We went out and covered the news. The Democrat columnists interpreted the news and columnized on events of the day and seemed to spend a lot of time writing about us.

JG: Let me see if we are getting a good recording here.

JR: Okay.

[Tape Stopped]

JG: Okay, we'll continue here. Do you have any more comments to make about the newspaper war?

JR: Sure, like I say it was a lot of fun. It was frightening at times to pick up the paper and see how much copy they expended on stories. I think they had more of a news hole, at least they devoted more space to stories they really liked, but that made us a little sharper, because it made us pick and chose what was newsworthy. I can give one example, some time during my career there, the records of the Razorback Foundation, which is a private fundraising arm of the athletic kingdom up at Fayetteville, were opened. It was decided that all of their records would become open to the public and Scott Van Laningham and myself drove up to Fayetteville the day before they were to become public, got a hotel room, and these lawyers and big shots with the Razorback Foundation were going to open them up to the press at 9:00 the next morning in the offices of the McIlroy Bank. And so Scott and I went across the street at 9:00 and tried to look at these records, well there were four or five Democrat reporters. We recognized most of them, and there was just me and Scott for the *Gazette*. And there was a room full of records. There were probably fifty boxes, and each box was just full of receipts and memos, and everything, you know. Scott and I picked a box, and at least four Democrat reporters. Each [of us] picked a box and started going through it. The records were not in any order. There was some stuff about Eddie Sutton, the basketball coach. There was some stuff about whoever the football coach was at

the time. It was just a hodgepodge of stuff. And about that time, of course, everybody is scrambling through, taking notes as rapidly as they could record whatever seemed interesting and newsworthy, and during the first coffee break, Scott and I had a little discussion. It's like, they're going through a whole lot more boxes than we are because there's just more of them, and they're taking notes like crazy, and we made a decision we weren't going to beat them on just covering this stuff. We had been through quite a few of these boxes, and it's like there is no rhyme or reason to it. It's just going to be pure luck if you see a story. So we just wrote about the work of the Razorback Foundation and how it interacted with the athletic department, chose a few receipts to show what the records revealed and it was not as exhaustive a piece as the *Democrat* had, but I think it was better reading because we recognized that there were going to be no smoking guns in there, but there was a lot of very interesting stuff. Eddie Sutton would charge the Razorback Foundation for everything. There were receipts in there for Coke and gas that Eddie Sutton collected from the Razorback Foundation on the way back from a recruiting trip, you know, $12 worth of stuff, and I never would have known that had happened. There were receipts for steak dinners for the entire football team, and I cannot remember how much that cost at Coy's, the big steak house up there, but it was a huge amount of money. It's just like a little awards ceremony, but just seeing the numbers of steaks eaten gave you an idea of just how many steaks a football team can eat. It was pretty impressive. But it seemed that the *Democrat* had more space and they would

have these big, big long stories, and our editors did a good job, I think, of making us—just old fashioned journalism—making us pick what was important, answering the questions, getting the important stuff in the top of the story and just cutting out the verbiage, and not relying on background paragraphs too much. I had to cover Arkoma a lot. Every time there was a small development in Arkoma, it was very easy to lose a lot of space with background, and you have to—they wouldn't just let you plug in the old same background paragraph. You had to hone it and refine it every single time.

JG: What is Arkoma?

JR: Arkoma was an issue in one of the governor's races between Sheffield Nelson and Bill Clinton. Arkoma is a gas producing region in Arkansas and Oklahoma. It's also the name of an exploration company owned by Jerry Jones, who was a friend of Sheffield Nelson. Jones owned Arkoma, but he was also on the board of Ark-La at the time, the natural gas company here, and it smelled like a sweetheart deal where Arkla paid a huge amount of money for some gas from Arkoma, basically Sheffield bought a bunch of gas from Jerry Jones. It became an issue in the governor's race. It was a very complicated story. It was fun. I wonder how many people read the stuff we wrote.

JG: I forget how you spell Arkoma.

JR: A-R-K-O-M-A. And I got blessed with that story because I covered the PSC [Public Service Commission]. I think it's because I was low man on the totem pole at the capitol, and the PSC was the beat that the low man got because it was

dull stuff a lot of times, like rate increases. You'd go there the last thing every day, 4:30, to see all the filings, and you never knew when it would be a [big story]. One day, a huge development happened in Arkoma at 4:30 on a Friday, and so you're there all night trying to get a hold of people to comment, but that was the nature of the game. So it always seemed to happen that the huge developments occurred on the Friday afternoons when you had social plans for that night, and I would have to call my wife and say I can't come home because of this. That just always seemed to happen, or if you want to get out of town to go on a three day weekend, you don't get off at 7:00 as usual, you get off at midnight. I believe our — I can't even remember our deadlines. Our first deadline was 7:00, but then there was a city deadline that was almost midnight.

JG: It depended upon how important the story was.

JR: Right, it was going on 1:00 a.m., and I remember Bill Rutherford was always very good to me. Whenever I—very rare instances—when I had a story that was going up front, he never put too much pressure on me. He let me sit back at my computer and sweat waiting on a phone call to make that story. I appreciated that because he could have put some pressure on me, but he didn't.

JG: He would usually accept the story in takes?

JR: Yes, yes, right. Yeah. I think he might have driven some people mad on his end of the building, but he was, he was good to me. He knew that I was waiting on a phone call, and you can't make a phone call come.

JG: What do you remember about the atmosphere of the *Gazette* newsroom, the noise,

smells, dress?

JR: It was pretty quiet when I worked there because it was the first time I'd ever really worked on a computer—well, at newspapers at Pine Bluff and in the *Gazette* newsroom. It was much different. As a child, it was very noisy. I remember going and visiting, because my dad was a reporter there, and that would have been in the sixties. It was very loud. Those teletype machines in the corners were just a constant racket, and then everybody was typing away, and that was a constant racket. The atmosphere, the main thing I remember it was just red: red carpets, red walls. It was pretty calm.

JG: Did you have some good equipment to use?

JR: Yes, yes, it was better. Computers, they were smarter than I was, and I realize now that it was basically just word processing. In my job now I have to manipulate digital photography and different kind of documents, graphs, and so much more than simple word processing, and I miss that about the 1980s when a computer basically was a glorified word processor. Other people did the art. I didn't have to mess with it. I don't ever remember computers going down. It's a constant fact now. I've been fighting the computer all day and the computer people all day where I'm at now. It's just a common occurrence now. The [computer] people keep the computers up and running. I'm sure there were computer glitches then, and I'm sure there were computer people that stayed busy at the *Gazette*, but I never had a single problem. I would come in. I was always on very intense deadline pressure, and it was never an issue. The hardest part was

getting used to laptops, and, oh, gosh, they started coming in when I was there. Mainly I would come out here to the capitol, spend all day at the Capitol, and we had a computer downstairs in the little newspaper room, and you could, I guess it was email, you could at least send a budget to Max to say this is what is coming. Or you go back and forth two or three times a day, but mainly once all the state offices closed at 4:30 or 5:00 and once the legislature broke up at 4:30 or 5:00, we went back down to the newsroom downtown and just typed at our computers. At some point, they gave me a laptop, and I hated that because you had to attach it to these phone couplings. One time I covered the Gillett Coon supper and I needed [a phone coupling], and Marion Berry was very, very helpful. He let me go into his bedroom, I think, where he had a telephone and fool with my laptop and curse at it while I was trying to get it hooked up to a telephone. It took me half an hour to get my story transmitted.

JG: You'd already written it before . . . ?

JR: I'd already written it, it was just the actual nuts and bolts of transmitting it across the phone lines from Gillett, Arkansas, back to Little Rock.

JG: Marion Berry has an office in Gillett?

JR: His house is there. His home was—I suppose it still is—right across the street from the gym, or near the gym where they have the Coon supper. He was very, very helpful. Another time [laughs] it might have been a later edition, gosh that Coon supper is in January or February, it's in the dead of winter, and at that time there was actually a pay phone in Gillett, out in the middle of a corn field, bean

fields, and I did this business with my laptop connected to the telephone and this functioning pay phone in the middle of this field, and it was only five degrees and the wind was whipping around, and it wasn't even a pay phone that went down to the ground. The glass wall only went about down to about knee high, and so on top of having, not having the technical know-how expertise to hook up my laptop, my fingers would hardly move either.

JG: But you did get it . . .

JR: I got it transmitted, yes. I don't know how good the story was. Of course now, all the reporters you see have cell phones, they have laptops, just super-duper things, and they're used to using them, and I have a laptop at my new job, and it's a lot better. But except for a few occasions of having to mess with a laptop, the technology part of the *Gazette* was pretty easy. Basically it was to sit at my desk in the newsroom of the second floor of the *Gazette* building and type on a word processor. With the deadline pressures we had, with the newspaper war and the constant battle with *Democrat* reporters, if we had had to mess with computers it would have driven me crazy because guys like Paul Barton were just bulldogs. He was a *Democrat* reporter. He was just a dog, a bulldog. He was a good reporter, and he came to the PSC for them, and he used to just put the fear of God into me because he really worked hard and understood the topic.

JG: And he works for the [*Arkansas*] *Democrat-Gazette* now, reporting from the White House in Washington.

JR: Yes.

JG: I remember Paul. He covered Arkansas Power and Light Company when I was media relations man for AP&L, and I remember once trying to explain to Paul how the end of a rate decrease was not a rate increase, but...

JR: [Laughs]

JG: I'm afraid I lost the point, but Paul did explain it. John, I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about your background. Your father was a newspaper man. He was a reporter for the *Arkansas Gazette* and then he went on to become a reporter for *The New York Times*, and he wrote a book about Orval Faubus and so I wonder where you were during your father's career?

JR: Well, I was born in Ypsalanti, Michigan, because he was in the Air Force at the time, although our family was from Arkansas, but he was in the Air Force. I think he said he never flew a plane, never even got on a plane. He ran the base newspaper, and so that's why I was born there. We lived in Little Rock. And when he got a job at *The New York Times*, we lived in Atlanta, Washington, D.C., and then New Orleans, and then by that time I had graduated from high school. And while I was in college my mom and dad continued to live in New Orleans. They went to London from there. I got into the newspaper business late. After college, I went to Madrid, and I taught English as a foreign language in Madrid, and I believe I was twenty six or twenty seven when I moved to Pine Bluff from Madrid. I didn't have any job skills except teaching English.

JG: What was your college degree?

JR: Literature.

JG: Where did you go?

JR: I went to Yale and got a literature degree. There was a line, I think it was a line in a movie where Sophia Loren was the rich, young daughter of a rich Italian man who lost all his money, and she says, "I'll go get a job." And he says, "I've given you an education in the finest schools of Europe, you have no job skills." I burst out laughing at that! That hit home with me. I got a very good education with no job skills. My dad, when I came back to the United States from almost five years in Madrid, was teaching journalism at Fayetteville. I sat in on a few classes of his. I sat in on some classes with Bob Douglas and enjoyed those. And I probably shouldn't say this if there is anybody at the university listening, but I don't think I paid; I think I just sat in. And then my dad helped me get a job at Pine Bluff. He had this child exploitation racket going where he would send journalism students off to jobs in Pine Bluff and Little Rock mostly, but other newspapers too. It was for students like Stephen Steed and Michael Haddigan, who went to the *Gazette*, guys that never got their degree, but dad didn't care. He seemed to be the only college professor that I ever knew that didn't care if you got your degree. He would send you out to be exploited by an editor. He helped me get the job at Pine Bluff where Frank Lightfoot, one of my editors there, said, "Yeah, this is the *Pine Bluff Commercial* and graduate school." They knew what they were doing in Pine Bluff. They were just getting young guys, teaching them the business, and then they would go off mostly to Little Rock but also to St. Louis and other places. I was in Pine Bluff for a year and a half before coming to

Little Rock, and I can't remember how long I'd been working for the *Gazette* when Gannett bought the paper. I came to Little Rock in February of 1985. I don't know when Gannett bought the paper.

JG: I think 1986…

JR: Yeah. That was one of the big deals that happened during the time that I was there because Gannett bought the newspaper, and that changed the newspaper and the atmosphere considerably in many ways. They had their own ideas about how to run a newspaper and I guess somebody at the Gannett Corporation realized that we were in the middle of a newspaper war, but they sure didn't act like it. I suppose the people they sent to Little Rock figured it out after a month or two in town, but I don't think anybody in Gannett Headquarters ever figured it out. They sent a steady stream of idiots to Little Rock to run the *Gazette* into the ground.

JG: The managers and editors, is that who they were?

JR: There might have been some decent business managers, but the editors they sent were—well idiots is about the most charitable thing I can say about them. They didn't seem to understand the local market. They probably could do a good job running a newspaper somewhere else, but they sure didn't do a good job at the *Gazette*, as history has proven. They shot the *Gazette* in the foot.

JG: Was the *Gazette*'s ownership of the paper part of the factor in you leaving?

JR: Well, yeah they pretty much made life miserable for me. John Hanchette and Walker Lundy were the two guys that I remember I had the most run-ins and

disagreements with, and I had no respect for either one of them, so when the opportunity for another job came along—they had soured me on journalism in general, even on the *Gazette*. As much pride as I had being a *Gazette* reporter by that time, I just wanted to get out away from those guys.

JG: What were their titles?

JR: Lundy was editor maybe, and you know how newspaper is, the shorter your title is, the more of a big shot you are. I think he might have been just the editor, I don't know. And Hanchette was, I can't remember what their titles were, but there were two of them, and they ran the budget meetings, and when everybody else came out of the budget meetings, the tension—you could cut it with a knife.

JG: On the budget meetings, you mean news budget?

JR: Right, right. They would do it in the morning and in the afternoon, I think. And they'd come out and say we want this story and that story. One thing I will hand it to Gannett, is they modernized the look of the *Gazette*, and that was a huge deal, all these conservative, old traditional, hide-bound people, "Oh, look what you're doing to the *Gazette*." But I think a lot of that made it more readable, at least the legislative coverage. This idea that we're the paper of record was fine, until you have to read every bit of it. My job now, I have to read every bit of that, not just the Little Rock papers but several others, and it can just hurt your eyes. And I believe it was my last legislative session as a reporter, which would have been 1989, Gannett would have been in full swing at that point, and they put all of our legislative coverage into a tab, a pullout tab, and it was very readable, and

people around this building loved it. Every day they would just go straight to that pullout tab, and it was eight pages, with pictures, and the stories were broken up, and I don't remember all the expressions, pullout boxes, quote boxes, little charts, art, photographs, and you couldn't get away with turning in a thirty-six-inch story about what the senate did, for example. You had to break it into a story about changing the workers' comp laws, the big vote on an abortion bill, the big vote on a banking insurance industry fight, and that's what people wanted to see. The bankers and insurance people want to see a story about their fight, and the workers' comp people want to see a story about their fight. Nobody wants to wade through a big ol' long story about what the senate did for all those issues, and I think that was one improvement that Gannett had, but then they had so many goofy-ass stories. Their feature stories were driven top down instead of bottom up, but I didn't have to write too many feature stories as a Capitol bureau correspondent, so I can't really discuss that. I just know that we got away from writing leads that, who, what, why, where and when, although we didn't necessarily write those kind of leads, those pyramid leads. Sometimes if the story demanded it you did, but even here out in the capitol if there was a political story that had a slam-bang, weird touch to it, they let us put that in the lead. But then the Gannett people just insisted on these leads, these stories, this whole emphasis on just human interest features. They said that we had to compete against TV, and we had to compete to get readers, so we had to make our stories interesting. What that meant was you had to read about six paragraphs into the story by the

time some of their young feature writers had flowered up and backed into the lead. You had to read about six paragraphs into the story to figure out what it's all about. Well, I know that everybody that I knew didn't have time to read all that, you know, lawyers and accountants. Business men don't have time to read six paragraphs into the story to find out what it's all about. And so, all those feature type stories I think were a waste of time, nobody read them because . . .

JG: There are just so many hours in the day.

JR: Right, right.

JG: John, I wonder if you could tell me your title here at the senate and how old you are and what your duties are.

JR: I am information director for the Arkansas State Senate. I'm forty-nine. My duties are—I'm a ghost writer, basically. I write speeches, news releases, and copy of all types. I take photographs occasionally. That's the bane of my existence, but mainly I write, and I research, and I write radio scripts as well that the senators read to their local stations. And what I write is used mainly by weekly papers out in the state that don't have the resources to send a reporter to the Capitol and the weeklies also, I don't know if they subscribe to AP [Associated Press] or not, but it seems that the stuff that I write gets picked up by the weeklies more than any of the dailies. The daily papers pick up AP, and then you've got quite a few dailies who are owned by Stephens Media that have their own bureau here, and then quite a few daily's that are associated with the *Democrat-Gazette*—I guess that's still WEHCO Media, which obviously has a

big bureau here, too. But I still write, I still keep up with state government and legislative issues. I'm almost like a little personal news bureau for the senators, so it's kind of an extension of what I did at the *Gazette*, but in so many ways it is different.

JG: Do you prepare graphs and charts?

JR: No, I do not, but I know the people who can do those. I'm not very good with computers and graphs and charts, but like I say I know people who can.

JG: When you write speeches, would those be speeches for the senators?

JR: Yes, I do them for Republicans and Democrats both. In fact, you'd be surprised at the state level—a lot of people are surprised when I tell them that I work for both Republicans and Democrats. There are no votes in this building that I can remember that have come down on strictly partisan issues. The Democrats have always had a large majority, and there's just nothing that comes down on partisan grounds, where, you know, all the Democrats vote this way and all the Republicans vote this way. The breakdown is city versus country, big schools versus small schools. They don't, they forget who the Democrat and Republican are most of the time. The only time it makes a difference is when they're choosing committees, and that happens like once every two years, and then they kind of forget about it.

JG: What about the school consolidation and school taxation issues. Have you spent a lot of time on that?

JR: Yes, because the public school fund represents half of state general revenue. In

other words, half of your sales taxes goes to schools, half of your income taxes goes for maintenance and operation of schools. And for that reason, it's just the area in which the state legislature still has the most relevance. I think if you did a pie chart of what state general revenue is, half of it goes to public school K-12, sixteen or seventeen percent to higher education, six percent to prisons, twenty three or something, my math is breaking down, but like twenty three percent to Health and Human Services, and the reason Health and Human Services is relatively low, relatively small, on the state level is because we get a huge match from federal money. Like Medicaid is one fourth state money, three fourths federal money. If the state government had to pay the entire bill for Health and Human services, it would be way more than we could afford, but that is your federal income taxes, and I'm getting far afield from the *Gazette* here. I learned a lot about civics being here at this job.

JG: So, let's see, if you moved here in—how many years have you been on this job?

JR: I've been at this job for fourteen years now, and this is the only job I've had since the *Gazette*. I miss the *Gazette*. I miss having a newspaper war. It would have been nice having this job with two newspapers in town. I think having a newspaper war is good for the citizens of Arkansas because the two papers kept the government really honest.

JG: It was heavy coverage . . .

JR: Yes, yes.

JG: There was heavy coverage on both the major stories and the minor

stories—neither paper wanted to get beat on anything.

JR: Right, right. And you had big newsrooms, and I must say this about the *Democrat- Gazette*, I mean, they seem to have big news holes. When I go to Memphis and New Orleans, I read the paper in about twenty minutes and realize I must have missed a section here, but where is all their local news? And so I will say that about the *Democrat-Gazette* that they maintain their news holes. Oh, but yeah, they covered everything back then. I guess when I go to Memphis and New Orleans and Dallas and those places, what I have a hard time finding is the kind of coverage I'm used to, the small government, quorum courts and school boards and water commissions, water and sewer commissions. That's the kind of thing that people in Little Rock get a lot of good coverage of, and it may be dry, but it's very important, and you'll miss it when it's gone, it's a different league, but you miss it when you don't have it, and those are important stories.

JG: Well, like the water commission, you never miss the water until the well goes dry.

JR: Exactly. [Laughs.]

JG: But sometimes people don't think about the important work those commissions do until the pipes leak and their water goes away. Well, John, is there anything else you'd like to add?

JR: Well, I'm trying to think of some of the people I've worked with, because I don't keep in contact with nearly as many as I should. Scott Morris — I worked with him at the Capitol for a while. I still see him occasionally. Max Heuer is her name now. She was a *Democrat* reporter but then came over to the *Gazette*. She

was Max Parker. She's now Heuer. She works at Blue Cross. Scott Morris works for the Heifer [International] Project. Stephen Steed was a state desk reporter and he's my counterpart with the Arkansas House of Representatives. I still keep in touch with Peggy Harris, who works for the AP bureau in Little Rock. We worked together on a couple of projects, of which I'm kind of proud. She discussed them in her *Gazette* oral history interview. I also keep in contract with Lamar James. He was on the state desk while I was on the city desk. Gwen Crownover is now Gwen Moritz. She's editor of *Arkansas Business*. Actually, I see her husband, Rob Moritz, a lot more than I see her, because he's a Capitol beat reporter for the Arkansas News Bureau. Peggy and Gwen were reporters at the Pine Bluff Commercial when I was a reporter there. Like a lot of other reporters, we pulled out of Pine Bluff at the first opportunity.

JG: Is that S-T-E-P-H-E-N?

JR: Yes. Everybody calls him Stephen. He's not a Steve. He was always Stephen.

JG: Max Heuer, H-E-U-E-R?

JR: Yes.

JG: Is that Max Parker by any chance?

JR: Yes, Max Parker, yes. You see her name nowadays as a spokesman for Blue Cross/Blue Shield. Scott Morris works for the Heifer Project. He writes for them. I don't think he's a spokesman type. I think he writes for their magazine. Michael Haddigan also works for the Heifer Project. Jan Cottingham, I haven't seen her in a long time. She works with Scott and Michael. I've seen Mark

Oswald occasionally. He covers the Capitol and the legislature in New Mexico, in Sante Fe. He's got *Gazette* traditions in his family. He married Mayme Ruth Williams' daughter, Ruth. I saw Bob Wells recently. He lives in North Carolina at Duke, I know you can't live at Duke, wherever Duke is, he works at Duke Medical Center.

JG: Bob Wells?

JR: Yes. He was on the Capitol bureau with me. I don't know where James Meriweather went to. I heard he went to Maryland, I think.

JG: Can you spell Meriweather for me?

JR: I can try. M-E-R-I-W-E-A-T-H-E-R.

JG: Did he work for the *Gazette* or for the *Democrat*?

JR: He worked for the *Gazette*. He was on the Capitol bureau with me. There were those years when we'd leave work mad every day for some reason or another. I see Scott Van Laningham quite a bit, because he operates that new airport in northwest Arkansas. If it wasn't for him, they wouldn't have an airport and they sure couldn't keep it running. He's the Executive Director and CEO of the Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport [XNA].

JG: Can you spell Van Laningham?

JR: I used to be able to. V, capital V-A-N, capital L-A-N-I-N-G-H-A-M. Scott was very levelheaded, and he kind of helped us cope. James was pretty levelheaded too, but he sure got mad a lot, and Bob got mad a lot. Bob is a very talented reporter, a very smart guy. Maria Henson went on to win a Pulitzer Prize, I guess

at the Lexington Paper. She'd get mad a lot. We would just seem like we'd get upset almost every day. I'm sure our stress levels were through the roof. Max got stressed all the time. Of course he was having to take all the heat from the big Gannett guys. Brummett was pretty always pretty cool, but he had built his own little following and he got a big contract, so he could afford to be cool.

JG: As far as the competing . . .

JR: Yes. Well, Brummett kind of had his own deal going. He was a columnist and reporter, and what made his column really good was that he broke news and was calm, so his column was more than just his opinion. You had to read his column if you wanted to keep up with the news because he would produce all of these scoops in his column. But being a column, he could always lambaste you, too, if he didn't like the way you were spending public money or something.

JG: Besides writing his column, was he the bureau chief, the Capitol bureau chief?

JR: Not at the time that I was there. Well, actually he may have been, but he wasn't a bureau chief kind of a guy.

JG: Did you have a bureau chief, a Capitol bureau chief?

JR: I can't remember. I think we might have had. I think it might have been James. Excuse me a minute.

[Tape Stopped]

JG: I'm asking John here whether the fact that his father [Roy Reed] was a journalist, and whether that caused any interesting situations for him.

JR: Well, not so much interesting as annoying for the first several years of the

Gazette. It was always, "Oh, yes, I know your dad." "Yes, I know your dad, I know your dad." You might have even said the same thing when the first time I called you for a story. I remember Jonathan Portis very early on shaking hands with me as I was walking to the *Gazette*, and he said, "Hey, I know what it's like to have a family member who's more famous than you are." Because his brother is [Charles] Buddy Portis, author of *True Grit*, so I always liked Jonathan for saying that. And after I'd been there for a couple of years, everybody forgot about it, but you know you have to work to make your own name. Coming to work here I was my own person, because the people at the senate knew me as a reporter. They didn't know my dad. So that was nice having my own reputation. When he came out with the [Orval] Faubus book [reference to *Faubus: The Life and Times of an American Prodigal*], it started up again because a lot of people said, "Is that your dad?" And I'd say, "Yes," and they'd say, "Can you help me get that book for free?" [Laughs.] I'd say, "No, you've got to buy it." But I guess the fact that he was not just a journalist, but that he worked for the *Gazette* in the 1950s and 1960s, you know—in 1957 and those years—it kind of makes you more proud of the *Gazette*. It made it that much more tragic when the Gannett came in and trashed it, too. You know, because it's — the *Gazette* was a family thing, kind of. I mean, it was a hardworking newspaper, but, you know, I wasn't the only person, I think, who had family at the *Gazette*. You know the Pattersons [Hugh, Carrick] — it was their family paper. Jonathan Portis' brother, Buddy, I think worked at the *Gazette*. And I think Richard Portis may

have been a copy editor at one time and went on to become a doctor.

JG: Yeah.

JR: But Gannett came in and made it a corporation.

JG: Well, did you ever have an opportunity to show your dad around the *Gazette* while you were working there?

JR: No, when he came down, he was very good about staying out of it. I don't ever remember being in the newsroom at the same time as my dad when I was a reporter there. Number one, I think he realized I didn't have time to chit chat, and also he was very good not to come in and do that — you know, talk about the good old days and all that.

JG: What about here at the senate—have you had a chance to show your dad and mom around?

JR: Oh, yes. I think my dad has come here a few times and just dropped in and talked to people, and it's fun to introduce him to people, but he hasn't been to Little Rock in a while.

JG: Especially when it's your dad, whereas, I guess, years ago he would have introduced <u>you</u> or something like that.

JR: Yeah, and I'm getting to the age now — I have a son, my oldest son Bernard is a junior at Central High, and he is on the school newspaper this year, and he's in journalism, too. So, my dad and I are both proud of that. Maybe he'll grow up to be a writer of some kind.

JG: How do you spell Bernard?

JR: B-E-R-N-A-R-D. My youngest son Vincent is a ninth grader at Central, and he has expressed interest in being a writer, mainly a sportswriter. Vincent loves sports of any kind, and so I think if he's going to be a journalist, it may be from the angle of sports writing. He has knack for writing as well. I guess it's in the blood. But Bernard will, you know—he's working on his first newspaper this year, and he turned in his first piece today or yesterday for the newspaper. He had to write an article about what other students did over the summer. He had to interview someone who went to governor's school.

JG: Oh, okay. He was writing about what other people did over the summer.

JR: Right. Oh, yes, he couldn't write about himself, so he had to interview other people. I guess he learned that names make news.

JG: Right, that you have to work for a story like that.

JR: Yeah.

JG: He can't just sit down and write something.

JR: Oh, yes.

JG: Well, that's good that all of your family is continuing on in the field of journalism. The field needs good people.

JR: It does.

JG: Well, thank you very much, John, for taking time for this interview.

JR: Thank you, Jerol.

[End of Interview]