Gazette Project

Interview with

Bill Shelton,
Little Rock, Arkansas,
23 February 2000

Interviewer: Ernest Dumas

Ernest Dumas: Today, I'm interviewing Bill Shelton — that's William T. Shelton — for many years, the City Editor of the *Arkansas Gazette*. Bill, the first thing I need to get you to do is, for the record, say pretty much the same thing that's on this form here, that you agree that this transcript can be used for whatever purposes, research, or whatever, at the University of Arkansas.

Bill Shelton: I agree that this transcript can be used for research or any other purpose at the University of Arkansas.

ED: Okay. I'm going to start off with you like I do with everybody. Go back and tell us about you, where you were born and when, and take us up through the years.

BS: I was born March 2, 1920, in Jonesboro, Arkansas, in the northeast corner of the state. And, born in 1920, I was raised in the Depression. When I got out of high school in 1938, there was no hope for me to go to college. When the war started, my friend Bill Penix was going to school in Fayetteville. He got me a job in the athletic department there.

ED: What, at ASU?

BS: No, at University of Arkansas. And, so, I went over to the Draft Board and told

them — this was in August, 1941 — and told them I was going to go up to the University. And they looked at my draft number, and said, "You can go up there if you want to, Billy" — that's what I was known as in those days — "but you'll never finish the first semester. Your number is too low." So, I thought about that a few days, and I decided to go ahead and volunteer. So, I went down and volunteered and wound up in the Air Force, Air Corps - Army Air Corps.

ED: This would have been before Pearl Harbor.

BS: This was in October. October 15th, 1941. When Pearl Harbor came, I was assigned to the radio school at Scott Field, Illinois. Scott Field had been a radio school in World War I, and they were still using the barracks from World War I. And that's where we were in these. Boy, they were old, crumby buildings. They built a new batch on the other side of Scott Field and on Sunday, December 7, 1941, we moved. The whole bunch of us just moved, and, so, we didn't hear about Pearl Harbor until about dark. We got into the building, and somebody turned on a portable radio and there it was. That was all there was on the radio. And we hadn't heard a thing about it because we were out of touch, no radio, because we were moving. So, I spent four years. I got out in July 1945.

ED: Let's go back and talk about those war years.

BS: Okay.

ED: You got to be a pilot. When did that happen?

BS: Yes. Okay. I went to radio school first. Then I went to radar school. Radar was a strange new secret equipment they got during the war. I think we got it from

England. We were using English radar receivers; we didn't have any. I was a radar operator, and the table of operation in the squadron showed that radar operators ranked as tech sergeants. I was a buck private, and all of us — there were eleven of us --- went to the first sergeant to complain, and he just paid no attention to us. He kept putting us on K-P or duty like that when we were not flying, and we just didn't think that was right. So, all eleven of us met and said, "Well, let's just go sign up for officer training." We were stationed at the Jacksonville, Florida, municipal airport. The next day, I got on the bus and went downtown to the recruiting office and the recruiting officer said, "You don't want to go to Officer Training School. You want to go to Cadet Flying School." I hadn't even thought of that. I said, "Okay." So, I left. None of the other guys did. They were laying over there in their sacks still asleep when I got on the bus and went downtown. So, I don't know what happened to them. I went up to Nashville, Tennessee. This was where they assigned you where you were going to go. They had thousands of soldiers up there. And I was assigned to Navigator School. This was in the fall of 1943, and all us were supposed to be navigators. Thousands of us were just staying there. After a while, they came along with an order one day and reassigned every damn one of us to pilot training. Turned out that they already had all the navigators they wanted, so we all got reassigned. That's how I got to be a pilot.

ED: This was in 1944?

BS: Yes.

ED: This is way on into the war, now.

BS: Yes. It was so far into the war they didn't need any more navigators. That was how we all got reassigned to pilot training. I said the fall of '44; it was the fall of '43. Because I was in the Class of '44 B. '44 B, that's right. That means it was February of 1944 that my class graduated from pilot's training. I was trained in multi-engines so that when I got out of pilot training and went to someplace to fly a real plane, it was a B-24, a four-engine bomber. I spent two months learning to fly the B-24.

ED: Where was that?

BS: That was also at Nashville, but a different field. There was more than one field there. Then I was sent to Charleston, South Carolina, the municipal airport, which the Air Force was using as a base. The other nine men in my crew were assigned to me. All ten of us met there for the first time.

ED: So there were ten people on a crew.

BS: Ten-man crew on a B-24. That's a pilot, a co-pilot, a bombardier, a navigator, nose gunner, tail gunner, two waist gunners — one on each side of the plane — and the ball turret gunner, who was in the bottom of the plane. And the tenth guy was in the turret right behind the pilot, right up above, stuck out through the roof. Ten of them. The first time I ever flew with those ten guys, there was no trainer pilot or anybody. I was flying the plane; I was it. We took off from Charleston and flew around for a while. They had these little training runways, and so I honed in on one of them and landed so well, you couldn't tell when the wheels

touched. Boy, it felt like heaven that I could do that the first time with these guys!

ED: It made them feel good about you, too.

BS: Boy, I'm sure it must have. I don't think I ever did that again, land that smoothly, but, boy, that was something! So, we spent a couple of months there in Jacksonville getting acquainted, and on the way to Europe, we flew to Mitchell Field, Long Island, Grenier Field, New Hampshire. I guess it was July by this time because the weather, which had been god-awful muggy down at Charleston, South Carolina, was wonderful at Grenier Field, New Hampshire. That New England atmosphere was wonderful weather. Then we flew to a base on Newfoundland. What the hell's the name? I can't remember the name of that one. From there we took off for Europe. We were flying these planes over there. Our route was to Newfoundland across to the Azores to North Africa — two stops in North Africa and then cross over to Italy, Bari, Italy, which was the headquarters of the 15th Air Force. We were all flying brand-new planes, and they took them and sent them somewhere. We never saw those planes again. The 15th Air Force had five or six wings, each wing made up of four squadrons. Well, I was assigned to the Seven Twenty-Sixth Squadron, 451st Bomb Group, 49th Wing. That was based at a little town called Casteluccio, no more than a couple hundred in population.

ED: Do you know how to spell that?

BS: C-A-S-T-E-L-U-C-C-I-O. We were about eight miles south of Foggia, which is a

main town in the flat part of Italy next to the spur that runs out into the Adriatic Ocean. You remember a map of Italy, that spur that sticks out there? Well, Foggia was about even with that, and we were about eight miles south of Foggia. That's where we fought the war. There's where we got it. I guess I ought to mention one thing. When we approached the landing field at the Azores Islands — there was just one there — there were fifteen or twenty planes. We were not flying formation; we were just all flying to the same place at the same time. We got to the Azores mid-afternoon. The Azores has a mountain on one end, and every afternoon the clouds form over the mountain. They just form right up above that mountain and went on up. One guy in our group — I didn't know his name, but you didn't have to go through that cloud to land, you just went around it — went through it, hit the mountain and killed them all.

ED: Why did he do that?!

BS: Of course, nobody ever knows. That's the end of him. So, we got to Casteluccio and we had to fly twenty-five missions before we could go home. I started flying, I think, the tail end of August somewhere in 1944, and by September or October, they raised it to thirty-five missions. The war was so nearly over that the missions weren't as dangerous as they used to be.

ED: What were the missions?

BS: These were bombing missions, and . . .

ED: . . . in Germany?

BS: Yes. I don't know if you want a list of bombing missions. I've got a list.

ED: If you could kind of generally describe them . . .

BS: The war was nearly over, and we were bombing oil refineries and railroad yards. That's the two things that the 15th Air Force was bombing. Every mission was either an oil refinery or a railroad yard. We went to Vienna several times because they had both railroad yards and oil refineries. Other towns were in Czechoslovakia, in the southern part of Germany, and one time we went to an oil refinery in Odertal, German Silesia. That was on Sunday, December 17, 1944. That was the mission on which I had a mid-air collision. I'll come back to that in a minute. With a new crew, they put the pilot in as a co-pilot with a veteran flyer for your first mission, or first two missions, maybe. On the first mission I flew, I was sitting co-pilot with a man who'd been there a long time. We were bombing a railroad bridge in Northern Italy, so it was a relatively short mission, but the Germans were defending that bridge; they didn't want that bridge knocked out, so they had a lot of anti-aircraft fire around there. In the B-24, the windshield in front of the pilot and co-pilot was like that [gesturing], and then there's a space right here, a rather small space, that looks directly ahead. A piece of anti-aircraft fire hit that little window right here between the two of us, and, of course, we were going 160 miles an hour by the indicator, but our ground speed was probably 300 or something like that. That air coming through was like a steel rod it was coming through there so fast. It didn't touch either of us. The pilot was sitting there, and I'm sitting here and that air just went right through.

ED: It had knocked a hole in that window?

BS: It knocked out that glass, and, man, that air came through! Well, that scared me, but that was the only danger we had. So, after a couple of missions with those guys, we flew thirty-five times. On Sunday, December 17th, the oil refinery at Odertal, German Silesia, I was flying the lead plane. There was a flight for each squadron. A flight consisted of seven planes: The lead plane, a plane on the left and the right wing, the next element of three right behind and below the lead plane and a seventh plane right behind that guy in the middle and slightly below it. That's seven. The guy in the co-pilot's seat was the flight commander. There were four flights. Flight A was flying straight and level; Flight B, just to the right and slightly above; Flight C, just to the left, slightly below; and Flight D, right behind Flight A and slightly below. Our goal was to fly close formation because the fighter planes were less likely to attack a close formation. I believed that, and I flew close formation; I'm telling you, Ernie, and I never underwent fighter attack. But on Sunday, December 17th, we saw one. We were flying along. Flight B. Flight A's down there. The unit ahead of us was flying the same kind of formation that we were — or was supposed to. The final unit of three planes in that group ahead of us had lagged way behind. They must've been a mile or more behind where they should've been. We looked, and, my God, there's two ME-109's, coming up right down there. The ME-109's, saw those two stragglers out there, three B-24's, and came at them one after the other. In about sixty seconds all three of those bombers were down. Boy, that'll scare you. I'm telling you, that's all it took. The fighters went off somewhere. I'm thinking that they didn't

have enough gasoline. This was mid-December of 1944, and we'd been bombing their oil refineries for months. And they were running low on fuel. The only thing we could think of was that they just found those three stragglers and shot them down and went back home. That was right before the bomber planes reached their initial point. It's established in your briefing before you start the mission. It's something on the ground, a town or a river or something. When you pass over that point, you then turn directly toward the target and fly straight and level the rest of the way until the bombs fall. This was to give the bombardiers time to adjust and adjust and adjust and get it right on the target. Right after, two ME-109's shot down the three bombers, we reached the initial point and turned, and you just hold it steady, right on the line. Something went wrong with my plane. The electrical system went out. All the indicators on our dashboard were just going like this, and we were losing speed slightly. The flight commander was there in the co-pilot's seat. We talked it over. Should we drop out now? We're already on the final run. The final run lasts five or six minutes, so we decided that we'd stay in and, as soon as the bombs were gone, then we'd get out. There's a signal for that. You'd get that in your morning briefing, too. If a plane has to leave a formation, he rocks his wings violently like this [gesturing]. We dropped the bombs, rocked our wings, and you're also given the directions on how to leave the target. You want to change your altitude and your direction and everything as fast as you can. This is to prevent the anti-aircraft fire from following you. If you just turn flat and level, they'll just follow you. Well, on

this day, Sunday, December 17th, the whole formation was supposed to make a sharp, diving turn to the left. The whole group. All of them. So, we rocked the wings and made a steep, diving turn to the right, to leave the formation. Everybody got the signal and kept going except one. The one beyond my left wing followed me. Tried to. Of course, I couldn't see him. I can't see back. So I made a steep, diving turn, went down two or three thousand feet, pulled up, and he just slid right in over me. But it cut his plane in two about where the waist gunners are. It hit my left outboard engine and knocked that engine off. We looked out, and there was no engine there. And the airplane wing was sticking up like that. The B-24 has two vertical stabilizers on the tail. The left vertical stabilizer was right in line with that engine. The guys back there reported that the debris had hit that vertical stabilizer, and it was shaking in the wind. What I first thought was, "Russia," because we were close, only a couple of hundred miles. Well, the flight commander and I talked about it, and we decided to go to Russia, assuming that the plane wasn't going to last. We turned to ninety degrees due east and tried to call on the radio, but all our aerials were gone. We couldn't rouse anybody. No radio. We flew four or five minutes, and I looked at the commander and he looked at me, and I said, "Why are we going this direction? Let's go south," which was back to our base. We turned south. This happened about ten minutes until one in the afternoon. And we flew that plane till it was running out of gasoline. It just kept on flying. We flew until (in December, I guess it's dark around 4:00 or 4:15) it was about to get dark. And we figured we

were just about out of fuel. This day there was an overcast over Europe the whole day and we never saw the ground. Clouds were everywhere below us. We sank down through the clouds. We'd also been told that if you bail out over Yugoslavia — we had calculated from our air speed that we were over Yugoslavia by now — that the Germans still held the towns and the highways and the railroads. If you had to bail out over Yugoslavia, get out in the countryside somewhere. That's what we did. We got out over a mountain somewhere.

ED: All of you bailed out.

BS: We all bailed out — all but three. The nose gunner, the bombardier, and the navigator, all of whom were in that little nose section, saw what was going to happen and bailed out just like that. They didn't take time to say a word or unhook anything. When we first tried to call on the navigator, to help us guide the plane, no answer. One of the crew went down there, and all the wires that connected to their flying uniforms, just trailed out the open nose wheel door. They were gone. Well, we found out later they were captured by the Germans and served out the war as POWs.

ED: They bailed out back there in Germany, right after the collision?

BS: Right there instantly. Yes, they were in Germany.

ED: And you all bailed out over Yugoslavia? There were seven of you, I guess?

BS: There were seven of us. You know, there was not a broken bone, not an injury to a one of us.

ED: You bailed out in the woods?

BS: I didn't realize that it was as much of a mountain as it was. We were just looking for a big open space, and I picked one out and everybody had bailed out except me. I was the last one out because I was holding the plane while everybody'd go out the bomb-bay doors. It was about twelve or fifteen feet back there. I was standing between the pilot's seat and the co-pilot 's seat, holding the plane straight and level while everybody bailed out. Then it was my turn, and I turned loose of it and turned around to go back, and the plane started turning. I got right back up there and straightened the plane up again.

ED: You were holding on with one hand as long as you could?

BS: [Laughs] . . . That's right. But it stayed level this time, so I got back there and bailed out. Well, I landed in about ten inches of snow. I didn't realize that snow was there, but it was probably a good thing because it had a cushion effect. In all your training, you are told to grab these risers and pull a little bit before you hit the ground. Well, as I passed the top of the trees, the thought ran through my head, reach up and grab these things. Before I could do it, zam! I hit the ground like a ton of bricks! It was a good thing the snow was there. It didn't hurt me. First thing I did was to hide the parachute. The second thing I did was cut me off a little souvenir. I'm right here in enemy country; I don't know where the enemy is, as a matter of fact, but I got a souvenir!

ED: What kind of souvenir?

BS: Just a piece of silk from the parachute. During the time that I went back to adjust the plane to keep it flying straight, it passed over a mountain.

[End of Side One, Tape One]

[Beginning of Side Two, Tape One]

BS: . . . They'd all bailed out on the other side of the mountain, and, by the time I got out, I didn't have any idea where they were. It was a big mountain, it turned out. I thought I had the direction. I thought that they'd be right back there, so I started that way, walking that way through the snow, and I walked around the mountain so that I was staying at about the same elevation. I wasn't climbing the mountain, or going down it, I was just going around it. Within five minutes, I was totally lost. I had no idea where I was or what direction I was going or what was I doing here, anyway?! And then there came a single file of guys entering the woods. I was in the woods. I could see them silhouetted against an open space.

ED: You hoped they were your men.

BS: I was hoping against hope. I jumped behind the nearest tree. I had a .45 pistol. It looked like ten or fifteen guys. Well, as they came up close, I saw that they were not soldiers. They were civilians. And I stepped out from behind the tree, and they hadn't seen me. I scared them to death. It's a wonder they didn't shoot me in reaction. I was wearing an electric flying suit; it keeps you warm, boy --- they do. Those things really work. These people had never seen one. They all touched it and all my equipment and everything. So, we started walking somewhere. They were old women and little kids. There were no young males left. They started walking, and, I'm telling you, they could walk up those

mountains and down them just like you and I walking on a sidewalk. Within five minutes, I was panting. I just couldn't keep up with those people.

ED: Old women.

BS: Old women! And little kids. Eventually, they got me to the house they were headed for, and the other members of my crew were already there. They had already found them.

ED: At their house?

BS: Yes.

ED: Were they out looking for you?

BS: They must have been because that night at that house they brought to us — we didn't want them — some pieces of the wreckage. They had found several emergency kits in that plane, and one of them had popped open. They had the gauze and medicine that was in it. They had watched the plane come down. I don't know if they thought to count the parachutes, I don't know, but anyway, they had us, and there we were.

ED: Did they feed you?

BS: Yes. They fed us the best stuff they had which was bread with . . . How do you make bread when you don't have flour and sugar? That was it. They thought it was good stuff. They were used to it, I guess. Boy, it was hard going to get that stuff down. This household was a unit of Tito's rebels, and the next morning they led us across the mountains. Boy, these are mountains, I am telling you, the Alps in Yugoslavia. We crossed a river where the bridge had been blown out. Tito's

people had invented a cable so that you could pull across in a box. One person at a time could go across. You'd get in that box, and they'd pull it across. Pull it back, get another guy in it. It was two or three hundred feet down to the water. It was dangerous looking. We all crossed the river, and on the other side was a Dodge pick-up truck that was being leased to Tito's crowd. We rode from there on. One place we stopped was a make-shift hospital full of guys. They were torn up. We kept on going. I think we spent one night at that first house and then another night. The third night we reached Niksic. . . . They were going there because an American Army lieutenant was stationed there. He was overseeing the arrival of war materiel to Tito's crowd. He said, "Well, just settle down. There will be a plane in here in the morning. You can fly back home." The airport was simply an open field. That's all there was to it. The plane delivering the military goods was an Italian Savoia Marchetti, a three-engine bomber of the 1930s. When he landed and rolled up to where we were, boy, it was an enormous plane. When we opened the door and got in, nothing in there! The load they carried, 20mm ammunition in wooden boxes, was stacked in the plane about as long as this table. That was all that big plane was carrying! Whooeee. Of course, our plane could carry 6,000 pounds or something, I don't know what it'd be, but a B-24 could carry a whole lot more than that! There was a three-man crew and, boy, were they dolled up. Every piece of leather was shining. Their boots were shining. Their buttons were shining, and we were scroungy, dirty old guys. They never looked at us. Not once did they turn around and look at us. I

guess the American lieutenant who was there to receive the goods told them who we were, but they didn't ever look at us! So we got in the plane and flew back across the Adriatic to a bomber base; it wasn't ours, but it didn't make any difference. Then they made everybody take a shower to get rid of the bugs and flew us down to 15th Air Force Headquarters at Bari. Of course, by this time in the war, there wasn't anything we could tell them. They knew everything already, but they interviewed us and sent us back. I think we got back in three nights or four nights, and it was the quickest any crew had ever gotten back. And then we finished our missions.

ED: So you flew some more missions after that? They gave you another plane, and you went out again?

BS: Yes. Yes, as long as you were healthy, why, go ahead and fly again.

ED: Were you nervous when you flew the next time? After that experience, was it hard to get back in the plane?

BS: No, I didn't have any problems flying at all. I don't remember worrying about that. It's such a rare kind of accident. I've never heard of that happening.

ED: And everybody in the other plane were probably killed.

BS: Oh, they were gone, yes. Not a parachute came out of that plane; it just went straight down in two halves. So, I went over as a 2nd lieutenant and, about halfway through the missions, I was promoted to 1st lieutenant. When I got to the last three or four missions, I was promoted to captain. When I left on my last two or three missions, I was a captain. I was the only one of my crew who had gotten

all of my missions in. The rest of the crew had to stay and fly some more. We flew to Naples. The army had a base there. We stayed there for a few days. I came back on a banana boat, actually, a banana boat. There were only about twenty of us because it didn't have any room. It took us, boy, it took us a long time, two weeks or three weeks, to get back to New York. On the way, President Roosevelt died. We got to New York Harbor. We unloaded at Fort Dix in New Jersey and, I think, were there one night, and then each was sent to a base in his home state. I was sent to Fort Chaffee. From there, I went home, home to Jonesboro. I was still in the army. I just had thirty days off. Then I was sent to Miami Beach, Florida, where there was another outfit that reassigned you and took care of you. On my first meeting with one of these guys, I walked in his office and he looked at my papers and he said, "Do you want out or do you want to stay in?" And I said, "What?!" I had no idea. I hadn't heard a single rumor! And I said, "If I've got a choice, I'll get out!" Hadn't even thought of it! Didn't have time to think of it either.

ED: Did you think about the possibility of re-upping?

BS: I had never thought of it, but I didn't think of it either.

ED: Yes.

BS: I was down there, I think, for thirty days. Sent me back to Fort Chaffee and got me out. I was home before the end of July. I was still in the army, but I was just serving out the last thirty days. During the war, I'd married the girl that I'd been going with there, Connie Stuck. And her family had a fair amount of money, so

my wife and I went down to Marked Tree and bought the *Marked Tree Tribune*. And I was down there running that paper in time to put out the VE edition. I remember writing that headline: "U.S. First with Atomic Bomb - Drops One on Japan." That's the headline I wrote. It wasn't in type like that; it was type about like that [gesturing].

ED: 72-point type?

BS: About an inch high. Well, the marriage fell apart right away, and her family had the money, so I left and went back home. Then I discovered there was something called the G.I. Bill. What a wonderful thing that was!

ED: Go back. Had you had any journalism training?

BS: Yes, I left that out. Sometimes I leave that out. In the Depression, I was the third boy in my family. Every one of us got a paper route; that was our first job. And when I got to, I think, the seventh grade, I got a paper route. Went down to the *Jonesboro Daily Tribune,* and the instant I stepped in the door and smelled that printer's ink, I thought, "Man, this is for me! And the idea of being the one to find out what's going on and telling the whole town, that'll feel good!" So, by the time I was in the eleventh grade, I was writing up high school news and stuff like that for the *Jonesboro Daily Tribune*.

ED: It had two papers in town then.

BS: There were two papers . . .

ED: . . . the *Jonesboro Sun* and the *Tribune*.

BS: . . . the *Jonesboro Sun* and the *Daily Tribune*. Jonesboro's about 10,000.

ED: Two papers?!

BS: Two afternoons! And each one of them published six days a week, not on Sunday. So, I knew way back there that I was going to be something in the newspaper business. So, when I got out of high school, because I had no money to go to college, I worked for three years full time. I think I made $15 a week, something like that.

ED: At the *Tribune*?

BS: At the *Tribune*.

ED: You were a reporter at the *Tribune*?

BS: I was reporter and sports editor. There was a city editor and there was me. Two men. I covered city hall, the courthouse; I covered everything.

ED: And wrote sports.

BS: And then wrote sports at night.

ED: So, you had that three years of experience as a reporter before you went to the service?

BS: Yes.

ED: You came back out, you worked down at Marked Tree, and then you heard about the G.I. Bill.

BS: I don't think I knew about the G.I. Bill until I got back home. Of course, it had been in the papers, but I had never considered it. I thought, "Well, I'm going to run this Marked Tree paper." When that fell apart, what to do? G.I. Bill, boy. I think you were entitled to 48 months of real time under the G.I. Bill, if you had

enough service time then, and I did.

ED: How many years had you had in the service? Four years?

BS: Four years. I went in in October, '41, and got out in July of '45, so it's not quite four. I used 46 months of the G.I. Bill and got a bachelor's degree and two master's degrees.

ED: At the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville?

BS: Well . . .

ED: You got your bachelor's degree there.

BS: I went to the university and got a bachelor's degree in English. While I was there, Mort Stern or Tom Davis, one or the other said, "You ought to go to Columbia and study journalism." I'd never heard of it. They talked me into that. I applied and got accepted. In the meantime, I had finished my bachelor's degree there at Arkansas, but I was still halfway through a master's degree. So I stayed to get that master's degree in history. That was at the University at Fayetteville up through 1948, I guess. And I went to Columbia in New York for one year. It starts in September and ends in May, and you get a master's in journalism. I really enjoyed that. It was a hell of an experience because, in essence, the students (in that time there were about 70; now, I think it's two or three hundred per year). We were just treated like reporters, just sent out in New York City to cover something, a city hall meeting or something like that. Oh, that was really a nice experience. Well, I had had it in my mind that the place I would work was the *Arkansas Gazette*. I was in Columbia, getting ready to finish up in 1950. It

was December of 1949, and the newsroom of the *Gazette* struck. Have you heard about this?

ED: Yes.

BS: I was crossing my fingers, hoping that it would be over before I got out of Columbia, but it wasn't. It was still going, so I came back to Little Rock, and Bob Wimberley got me a job over at the Arkansas State Chamber of Commerce, doing some writing for them while I waited. I didn't want to go in there and break a strike or be considered a strike breaker. The strike, meantime, was going through all the NLRB hearings. In the end, the *Gazette* won every issue that was carried to the NLRB. This put me up to October of 1950, and I decided then it was safe to go over there.

ED: You hadn't offered to go there or anything?

BS: I just walked into Harry Ashmore's office, told him who I was and what I wanted. And he hired me, but he didn't pay me much. I think I'd been making $60 a week, I believe, at the State Chamber of Commerce. He calculated a little bit there, and I think he gave me $62 a week. Of course, I was so eager to get there, to get going on that paper, that . . .

ED: That was in 1950?

BS: October, 1950.

ED: They paid me $80 when I went to work there in 1960, ten years later. May, 1960.

BS: It didn't get up very fast then, did it?

ED: No!

[Laughter]

ED: So, what were you, a reporter?

BS: No, no. I was copy editor. That's what they needed and that's what I was good at. Turns out, I was good at it. Or they said I was, and I thought I was, so I was good at it.

ED: Who was the executive editor? . . . Who was the managing editor?

BS: [sigh] I can't remember.

ED: I don't know what that guy's name was either.

BS: Well, I don't think it was A.R. Nelson right then. I think Nelson had the job of slot man. I think he was the one in the slot. I think there was a big fat guy wound up writing a business column, John . . .

ED: John Fletcher?

BS: Fletcher.

ED: So, you go to work with the copy desk.

BS: Yes.

ED: This was fall of 1950.

BS: Yes.

ED: At what point did you become the city editor? Do you remember how that happened? Anything memorable happen while you were a copy editor?

BS: I don't remember anything. I became city editor January 1, 1952, which means I'd only been on the paper about fifteen months.

ED: Who was the city editor there?

BS: The previous city editor was Sam Harris. A.R. Nelson must have been the managing editor then because he was the one who picked me to be city editor. They were dissatisfied with Sam as city editor.

ED: Do you know why?

BS: No, I don't know.

ED: Did he leave or did he go over to cover the Capitol?

BS: No. He stayed on the paper as Capitol reporter for about a year, maybe.

ED: And then he went to work for Witt Stephens.

BS: And then he went to Witt. And Nelson was the one to pick me to be city editor after I'd been there just such a short time. In spite of all the experience I had, I didn't have any experience handling a newsroom crew. None. I'd never done this, and I didn't know them, either. They weren't guys that I'd hired; they were somebody else's. Sam's.

ED: Were you apprehensive about that?

BS: Boy, I'm telling you! That was scary, but I was afraid to turn it down. I might not ever get another chance. So I took it. Boy, I'm telling you, Ernie, it took me five years to get control of that job. I just couldn't do it. I just had no training for that, and, man, I worked day and night. And it took five years before I could walk in and feel like I knew how to do this.

ED: How did you feel inadequate?

BS: Well, one thing was handling the reporters, who were all strangers to me. I didn't know them. In rebuilding the staff, they had hired whoever they could hire.

Nearly all of them, half of them were drunks. I mean, alcoholics. Bill [?] is one I can remember. You know, you're not only trying to handle the reporter who's a stranger to you, but he's a drunk.

ED: Were these people hired during the war?

BS: No, these were the people hired to replace the strikers.

ED: Oh, the strikers. I get it, okay.

[Phone Rings]

ED: Want to catch that?

[tape turned off]

ED: Okay, so you had all the drunks who had been hired during the strike.

BS: Yes.

ED: Had Sam Harris been the city editor during the strike? Do you know?

BS: I don't know. But, of course, I'd never had a job like this. There I was, a dozen, fifteen reporters out there, waiting for me to tell them what to do, give them assignments. Man, I didn't know how to go about that! What is an assignment?! It was . . . boy, it just took me a long time to where I felt like I was in charge.

ED: Did you have to fire any of these characters, or did they just gradually leave?

BS: They didn't last long. I didn't have to fire any of them. They couldn't hold a job, you know? They just weren't used to being on time and things like that.

ED: So, it took till '57 or so before you had control of the job?

BS: I can tell you almost to the day. There was a conference held at the Sam Peck Hotel in the spring of 1957. I don't remember the name of it, but it was to plan

the future of downtown Little Rock. Out of it came a forecast of where big skyscrapers would be. And they almost hit it. Ten years later, if you looked back at the map, it was very close to what happened. Well, part of this was in the morning, and I didn't go to work till, I guess, noon. And I remember walking over there and, boy, I felt great. I felt like I was in charge of what I was doing for the first time since I was on that desk. Spring of 1957.

ED: Well, just in the nick of time because . . .

BS: Because here comes Little Rock Central High!

ED: Four or five months later, you have the crisis at Central High School. Let's talk a little bit about that, what you can remember about that crisis. Did you have any notion about this historic event taking place, historic for the paper, historic for the country, when all of that started?

BS: I don't believe so. Let me back up just a little bit. I had remarried, and my new wife got sick and died in the summer of 1957. I'd been off about a month for that, and I came back to work on Labor Day weekend deliberately because there was a holiday and a Sunday. I was just going to use this to catch up with the little things that. Well, that Monday night, Faubus called out the troops. So I came back to work and worked forty-two straight days. I mean, worked. It was fourteen, sixteen, eighteen hours a day. Not just me. I think everybody on the paper was working like that. That's the main thing I remember, the work, work, work.

ED: But this time though you had a staff that you felt pretty confident in.

BS: Oh, yes. This was my staff. Yes.

ED: You had Ernie Valachovic and almost up and down the line you had . . .

BS: Oh, yes, they were good people. Boy, and they worked. I didn't have to tell them to work; they just worked. They did a hell of a job, I thought.

ED: I came along in 1960, but I guess the key reporters who covered it --- of course, everybody covered it?

BS: Everybody. That's right.

ED: Everybody on the staff played some role in covering this thing at some point, but you had Ray Moseley.

BS: Was Moseley there?

ED: Ray Moseley.

BS: Boy, now, there is a great reporter!

ED: Talk about Ray Moseley.

[End of Side 2, Tape 1]

[Beginning of Side 1, Tape 2]

ED: Okay. Tell a little bit about Ray Moseley. How did you hire him and what was he like as a reporter?

BS: How did he come to us? I don't remember. I'm just blank on that. But he was quiet. He didn't talk much. When he did talk, his voice was low. And he knew things. He knew everything you need to know if you're going to be a reporter in Little Rock. Now, where he got all that, I don't know.

ED: He was not from Little Rock, was he?

BS: I don't think he was.

ED: He was a general assignment reporter, I guess, at the time.

BS: Yes, I think he was.

ED: ErnieValachovic. Well, Matilda Tuohey was at the capital and then Val. When it all started, I think Matilda was out there, and then you sent Ernie Valachovic out there shortly afterward.

BS: Yes. Yes.

ED: So you had Moseley out there covering the crisis from day to day and then Jerry Dhonau was at Central High.

BS: Yes.

ED: Jerry Dhonau.

BS: I just can't - hell, this was fifty years ago.

ED: Yes, right.

BS: I can't remember all this!

ED: But Jerry Dhonau was the guy you sent out to Central High. He was feeding the stories of whatever happened at the school. Moseley was writing the big development.

BS: The main story.

ED: The main story everyday.

BS: He was fast, that's another thing. He could sit down and write it.

ED: I have used some of his stories in my journalism classes. I've gone back to look at some of his critical stories, written on deadline, and he was capable of writing

some beautiful prose. Jerry Dhonau was your leg man out at Central High School. I guess he was a general assignment reporter as well.

BS: Yes.

ED: Do you remember much about Dhonau? I gather he was an accurate reporter with an eye for detail?

BS: Yes, he was accurate. I mean, yes, he was not a Ray Moseley, but, you know, just a slot down.

ED: Yes. Just a good, everyday news gatherer? What about Harry Ashmore? What was the relationship of the staff with Ashmore? He was executive editor, I guess the last executive editor we had.

BS: Oh, yes.

ED: He'd come out and talk about news coverage everyday. He was writing editorials, of course, but also concerned about coverage.

BS: Yes. He hardly ever came out and read Central High copy, but he would sometimes. So much of it was going on in federal court. Some of those stories he liked to take a look at, but, normally, we'd just tell him what's going on today. Somebody would tell him what we had.

ED: And he'd go back and sharpen the editorial?

BS: People don't believe this, but this happened. He was out there in the newsroom, and at this time my desk was the last one going down the hall toward Ashmore's and Heiskell's office. And Ashmore was off over there, talking to Nelson or whoever, and as he left and walked toward his office, passing right in front of my

desk, he was talking to himself and he said, "Now, I've got to go back in and make some great thoughts." That son of a bitch . . .

ED: And he did it.

BS: That's what he did, too!

ED: What role did the *Gazette* editorial position in that crisis, these courageous editorials that the *Gazette* wrote, affect you as city editor? Was this an inspiration to you and the staff?

BS: Oh, yes. It affected me like that, and, you know, not everybody on our staff was an integrationist. Bill Lewis, boy, now, there's a reporter. Bill Lewis was born and brought up in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. I think he started out that way, but I think this experience changed him. But I was happy to be working on this paper. And I looked across the street at the *Democrat*. Of course, they were just huddled up and trying not to do anything. They tried not to be noticed, somehow. Their editorials were not editorials. They were just canned goods.

ED: Hmm. On-the-one-hand, this, on-the-other-hand, that kind of editorial . . .

BS: Yes.

ED: How did the *Gazette*'s coverage compare that with the *Democrat*'s?

BS: I think I can tell you that. For the first ten days, they matched us story for story. And then, what happened? I don't know what happened. They quit covering it like we were covering it. They just didn't do it. For one thing, George Douthit was out at the Capitol, and he was in Faubus's pocket, and Faubus would play to the *Democrat*. Faubus would play to the *Democrat* because they were friendly to

him. George Douthit got everything out of Faubus's office first. They'd beat us over and over again because he had an "in" there. But, at the same time, after that first eight or ten days, they just relied on George Douthit. He was their man covering this. And they just let us take all the rest of it. And, man, we beat them, beat the hell out of them, from there on. I don't have any idea what happened, or who made a decision over there.

ED: Gene Herrington was the managing editor over there, wasn't he? I remember you made a statement at that Central High conference a couple of years ago, the same remarks. I remember Herrington was stuttering and trying to respond.

BS: He was over there, wasn't he? I guess he was managing editor.

ED: Well, I don't know. He had some position of authority. He tried to defend the *Democrat*, but he didn't, to my recollection, do a very good job of it.

BS: I don't think you can defend what they failed to do.

ED: Probably the *Gazette*'s editorial position encouraged, infected the whole staff. I know it did years after. That's why we came to work for the *Arkansas Gazette*.

BS: Yes.

ED: Because we were working for a special kind of paper.

BS: I believe it did. It infected me, I mean, it sure helped. It spurred me on.

ED: Then in 1958, the *Gazette* won two Pulitzer Prizes. Ashmore won one for editorials and then the *Gazette* won for community service for its general coverage. Do you remember the day that the Pulitzer's were announced? Were you in the newsroom?

BS: No, I was not. So that means, I think I was off Sundays and Mondays, and I was at home and I heard it on the radio, and I got in the car and drove down to the paper. [Laughs] Nelson saw me coming in. I think I'd already had a drink at home or two . . .

BS: Nelson dragged me across the street to the bar for a drink. I wasn't in the newsroom for more than a few minutes.

ED: Did it all feel like it was worth while after that . . .?

BS: Oh, boy! . . . I mean the feeling was just too good. Yes.

ED: We talked a little bit about Moseley. Talk about some other people who worked there during those years. You mentioned Bill Lewis, who was, I guess, the quintessential general assignment reporter because he would cover everything.

BS: Oh, man. He could cover everything and do it in a minute. He was the fastest guy I ever saw! You know, he was supposed to have gotten that working for UPI. I don't know if that's true, but he had worked for them.

ED: He never seemed to be under any pressure.

BS: No!

ED: He did it every day and turned out a ton of copy.

BS: That's right. Boy, he was a valuable man to have for that very reason. He could get so much done in such a short time.

ED: Who else? Jerol Garrison. Remember when Jerol Garrison went to work there about that time?

BS: Was he there during the crisis?

ED: Well, I think he must've come --- I think he came there a little after the crisis. I'm not certain of that. We'll - Roy Reed's already interviewed Jerol, by the way. Of course, Jerol was the opposite of Bill and he was very slow.

BS: Yes. He was tedious, in fact.

ED: So meticulous, but my impression is that Jerol Garrison might be the only reporter for any paper ever who never made a mistake.

BS: He never made one! He wouldn't let it go. He'd be back there and write it, take it out and go back, tear that one out and rewrite it and put it back . . . again. He did that over and over again!

ED: So that the stories, when he turned them in, would weigh about two pounds. . . .

BS: All those patches he put in there!

ED: Yes, you could hear it hit the basket when he finally turned it in.

BS: Yes!

ED: I guess that's why he eventually left the newspaper business. He found it so stressful.

BS: I think so.

ED: So hard to turn a story loose. He felt always under so much pressure to get it exactly right.

BS: Not long before he left the paper, this happened. He was back there in the back row with his wooden chair. I don't remember the story, but I needed it. And I hollered at him and, after a while, I got up and walked back there and said something to him about it, and . . .

ED: Was that you? I thought it was Douglas. I was sitting beside him then.

BS: Oh, well, no.

ED: I was sitting at the next desk on the back row.

BS: No, it was me. And about the time I got back to my desk, he stood up so violently his wooden chair was back against the wall - Crash! Bang! All that noise, you know. So, I think it was very soon after that that he quit.

ED: Then he knocked his typewriter over.

BS: Oh, I don't remember that.

ED: Three of us were back there — I can't remember who else — and we were the only ones who were up there that late, probably eleven o'clock at night.

BS: Yes, it was late.

ED: He turned red faced and he grabbed the door to Charlie Davis's office.

BS: Yes.

ED: The Sunday Magazine office was right there, and he raced in there and slammed that door behind him and stayed in there. I remember there was a deathly quiet — it was a scary thing. And then everyone broke into applause. And he finally came out four or five minutes later after he composed himself and apologized to everybody. But you're right, I think that was when he realized that it was just too stressful.

BS: Somehow I connect that event with his decision to leave a short time later.

ED: I think he just felt so much pressure because Douglas was always coming back and reminding him that he was working for a daily newspaper, not a weekly

paper.

BS: Uh-oh!

ED: I guess it was the last straw. I would follow Jerol sometimes at the Capitol and we'd work on a story together and he would question people so meticulously. He'd ask them the same question until he was absolutely certain he had it right. He had to be 100% certain that "I understand this thing" to the nth degree. People would just get frustrated being interviewed by him, but he always got it exactly right.

BS: [Laughs] Yes.

ED: Remember Roy Reed, who, I guess, was a political reporter?

BS: Oh, yes!

ED: How do you remember Roy? He was covering North Little Rock in 1957.

BS: He was at North Little Rock when this started. I'm not sure if we kept him over there.

ED: He went to the Capitol some years later. He was a good writer.

BS: Oh, Roy and Moseley, you know, they were great. I put Jerol in there, too. They were the best writers of the bunch, I believe. And there was nothing wrong with Bill Lewis. It was just that he did it so fast you couldn't really believe it was going to be that good. [Laughs]

ED: And you had George Bentley, covering the court house for so many years.

BS: Oh, yes!

ED: Now, George was not a great writer. His copy was sometimes a little rough, but

he covered the court house, like the dew. And Ernie Valachovic.

BS: And Valachovic.

ED: . . . who was a kind of a character . . .

BS: Yes. He didn't know anything about writing, but he got the information.

ED: Yes. Someone had to practically re-write everything he did.

BS: It took a lot of re-writing.

ED: I covered the Capitol with him for a while. You sent me out to the Capitol with him about 1965 or so, and Ernie would be writing these stories. All day long, I'd be sitting there writing, and he'd say, "How do you spell so and so?" And I'd tell him, and he'd say, "That's what I thought. It didn't look right." But he was a hell of a reporter because he faced the problem of Orval Faubus favoring the *Democrat*.

BS: He did. He did.

ED: Because that attitude filtered out to all of state government. Everybody out there favored the *Democrat*.

BS: That's right! That's right.

ED: They had instructions that if you had a story, you released it in the afternoon, on the *Democrat*'s time.

BS: That's exactly right.

ED: So, Val had to go out and compete, and, I thought, beat the hell out of George Douthit at the Capitol.

BS: George just didn't do anything after that first week. First week.

ED: He waited on Faubus to tell him every day. He had an interview with Faubus about ten o'clock every morning. He got the story of the day and that was it.

BS: That was it. Yes.

ED: His job was done. Faubus would hand him his story, and his job was done. Val just went out across the Capitol and made contacts, learned the names of the secretaries and assistants, and got all the other stories around the Capitol except those that came from Faubus. Well, let's see . . . Patrick J. Owens. Do you remember Patrick Owens?

BS: Oh, yes! Gosh, he wasn't there, or was he?

ED: No, he wasn't there in 1957.

BS: It was after that.

ED: I think he came as a result of that. The '57 crisis, the *Gazette*'s Pulitzer Prizes, I think, were a kind of a signal. Everybody wanted to work for the *Gazette*. We got a lot of applications. Owens was from Montana, I think.

BS: [Laughs]. Actually? That's where he lives now, but I . . .

ED: Yes, I think he was from Hungry Horse, Montana, somewhere along there, a big old bear of a fellow.

BS: Yes. Yes.

ED: He was a good writer, too.

BS: Yes, he was. He sure was. I can't remember what would we do with a reporter like that? I can't remember where he was placed. He wasn't on a beat, I don't think.

ED: No, you never would put Owen on a beat because he'd just piss everybody off.

BS: Yes.

ED: He was a general assignment reporter, I guess.

BS: Yes, that must be it. Yes.

ED: You had some others. Charles Portis, was he a reporter? He wrote the "Our Town" column. He and Charles Allbright, were they ever reporters? They must have been for a short time.

BS: Allbright was, way back, way back, but I don't believe Portis ever was.

ED: He was a reporter at the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* and came over here. I guess he never he did anything other than to write that column.

BS: I don't think so.

ED: And Bill Whitworth.

BS: Oh, God, he was one of our best people.

ED: I went to work there the summer of 1960, and Whitworth was already there. I think he graduated in December of 1959, from the University of Oklahoma, and came there in about January of 1960. And he went on to become editor of *The Atlantic* until not long ago. A quiet little fellow.

BS: He sure was. Man, he could write. He was another one who could turn in some great copy.

ED: But then, of course, he turned into a great editor.

BS: That's right.

ED: He left the *Gazette* and went to the *New York Herald Tribune*. He went to the

New Yorker, where he became an editor, and then to *The Atlantic*. Well, we could go on down the line. How long were you city editor? You started in '52 and when did you retire?

BS: 1985.

ED: '85. So, you were city editor for . . .

BS: Thirty-three years.

ED: How did you do that? I mean, that seems like a back-breaking job, reading all the turgid copy that we wrote for 35 years.

BS: Well, of course, one thing I learned fast was that I had to be fast. I was going through the crisis, which demanded speed, too. I had to get that copy out so people could make up the page. I'm naturally fast, thank God for that. Down at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, where I worked for the last seven years, I could read almost that whole paper while the rest of them were fooling around.

ED: Did you ever get tired of it and think, "I need to do something else. I need to move on and do something else besides city editor of the *Gazette*"? Something else at this paper or somewhere else.

BS: Yes. It did get old the last few years there, and that's the reason I retired. I wanted to get off that desk and those goddamned phone calls. The phone rings and rings and rings. And all this copy coming in. That's tiresome. Jerry Jones was some help, but not too much. I'd have to do it after him sometimes.

ED: He never had much confidence in himself?

BS: I don't think he did, you know. And that might be my fault. I'm not sure.

ED: So that's why you finally quit. You were just weary.

BS: Well, yes. I didn't want to quit work. I was perfectly healthy. I wanted to get off that phone, get off that desk and get over and read copy. Just be a copy editor. That's what I started out as. And when I mentioned that to Carrick Patterson, boy, it tickled him to death. He says, "Why don't you just retire, and we'll give you a little job over on the copy desk." To Carrick, all he could see was getting rid of that salary. I was making $55,000 a year, something like that. All Carrick could see was getting rid of that salary. He really didn't care what happened to me.

ED: That was obvious to you in that conversation?

BS: Boy, it was obvious. So, I did. I left the desk and lost my salary and took a three-day-a-week job back then.

ED: How much did you get for three days a week on the copy desk?

BS: Oh, I don't remember.

ED: Did you go make the standard copy editor pay, or was it some pro rata share?

BS: I just don't remember what that was.

ED: How old were you then?

BS: I was sixty-five. That was the reason I came to the conclusion to just get off this for a while and rest.

ED: Max Brantley, by that time, was assistant city editor.

BS: Max and Jerry.

ED: So you had two assistant city editors. You had Max and Jerry, right?

BS: Yes.

ED: I want to go back to a couple of things in ‘57. Obviously, the *Gazette* was very unpopular with much of the community, much of the state. There were reprisals against the *Gazette*, its advertisers and, sometimes, *Gazette* reporters. Did you ever catch a lot of hell from people, abusive calls and so forth at the city desk during that time?

BS: The president of the Mother League at Central High walked up and slapped my face.

ED: Margaret, what was her name?

BS: Margaret . . .

ED: Jackson.

BS: Jackson. Jackson.

ED: Margaret Jackson. Tell me about that incident. I’ve heard that. I wasn’t there. It’s one of the legends.

BS: By this time, I was at work by eight o’clock in the morning. So much work you had to be there early. This was 8:30 or something like that. I don’t know if anybody else was even in the newsroom. She walked up, this woman — I’d never seen her. “Are you Bill Shelton?” “Yes, yes, I am.” Whap! She slapped me across the face! And I said, “Get out of here. We’ve got work to do.” And she slapped me again! I said, “Get out of here! We’ve got work to do,” and she turned and left.

ED: Well, did she tell you why she slapped you?

BS: No.

ED: Was there some incident involving somebody's daughter whose picture was on the page of the paper, and she was upset because her daughter was pictured screaming at Central High?

BS: I don't know.

ED: I remember a story about a mother being upset because the *Gazette* ran her daughter's picture.

BS: No, I don't remember that.

ED: That's all she asked. "Are you Bill Shelton?"

BS: . . . That's it. Of course, there were bound to have been some phone calls, I just don't remember. I probably just moved that out of my mind some way, but I don't remember it.

ED: Were you there in late '59 or early 1960, shortly before I went to work there, when Ray Moseley and Swint had their fight?

BS: Tom Swint.

ED: Tom Swint, copy editor, hit Ray Moseley. Were you there that night?

BS: I don't think so. I think Ray Moseley had moved up to the city desk because he was the night city editor.

ED: Late city editors got the desk.

BS: Yes. I can see in my mind how that looked, but I don't think I was there actually. Moseley was sitting there at the city desk and Swint got up over here at the copy desk and walked right over there, walked by and just knocked the shit out of him. The chair went back, he fell on the floor, and . . .

ED: . . . knocked him under a table, and he was unconscious

BS: Nobody knows what happened, I mean, why? Why did he do that?

ED: There had been Some exchange between the two of them. A remark across the room, or something.

BS: Oh, I didn't know that.

ED: I don't know. I don't know what happened.

BS: Of course, they both left after that. After a short time, they both left.

ED: Okay, go back to the *Gazette* toward those later years. Did you have any sign that the *Gazette* was faltering? You had no notion the *Arkansas Gazette* was ever going to die, did you?

BS: Lord, no!

ED: Particularly after you survived '57 and the circulation came back and the paper was prospering again by the middle of the '60s.

BS: The reason I accepted Carrick's plan was that he said, "Why don't you just go ahead and retire and we'll give you a job over here." That was my retirement plan. If the banks don't ever fail, how can the *Arkansas Gazette* ever fail? It never entered my mind. I thought I had a three-day-a-week job until I died. That's what I thought. Well, the paper changed so much during the last years you could hardly recognize it. It wasn't the *Gazette* anymore.

ED: Before Gannett took over?

BS: Yes. Yes. It seemed like it was about the time that I left the city desk, around '85, '86, right in there somewhere, Hugh Patterson or somebody with Hugh's

permission, redesigned the paper. Do you remember that?

ED: Oh, yes. Brought in a guy from *Time* magazine to do some redesigning?

BS: Yes. Golly. And I am telling you, the *Gazette* went down hill from that. That changed the *Gazette,* and I don't think it ever recovered.

ED: Before that, and I'm not sure of the sequence, but Hugh Patterson arranged for Bob Douglas to go up to Fayetteville to teach journalism against his will, I gathered. And Carrick became the managing editor. I don't know when that would have been. First, they had this guy, Bill McIlwain come in as the editor for a period. He was the editor, wasn't he?

BS: Yes. You know, I can just barely remember that guy. It wasn't very long, was it?

ED: He was an outcast a couple of months after he got there, I gather, Hugh didn't care much for him anymore, and he just occupied an office.

BS: He dated all the unmarried girls.

ED: Yes. Well, all the girls a third of his age or younger. So, you think was the *Gazette* going down even during that period?

BS: In my opinion, yes, it was.

ED: How did it change, just the appearance or was it less serious?

BS: Yes, the appearance of it and the news hole kept getting smaller and smaller. In essence, we're almost converting ourselves into a *Democrat*. The time was when the *Gazette* had the space, and every story in town got in there first; the *Democrat* followed along. Now, by this time, after '85 approximately, we didn't have any space.

ED: Was it because the *Democrat* was reducing our profits by free advertising?

BS: That's right.

ED: Hugh, I gather, was saying, "Well, we're not going to lose money, and so we'll shrink the paper rather than start down that slope. That's how we'll save money, shrink the paper." And we're not replacing reporters. Vacancies are cropping up for long periods of time. We're not filling vacancies. Did you give an assignment to Bill Lewis to write the obituary for the *Democrat*?

BS: I believe I did, and somebody heard about it . . .

[End of Side 1, Tape 2]

[Beginning of Side 2, Tape 2]

ED: You thought it just your duty to have a prepared obit for the *Democrat*, just like we did for anybody. For major figures.

BS: Right. That's all there was to it. Bill Lewis was supposed to write it, but Hugh Patterson heard about it and came to me and said that obituary was not to be written.

ED: Do you know why?

BS: No, I don't know why. I don't know if he said why or not.

ED: About when would this have been? Well, you were still city editor; it was before '85.

BS: Yes.

ED: And the *Democrat*'s circulation was shrinking down to 55,000 or 60,000.

BS: You know, the *Democrat*'s low point was about the last half of the 70s, along in

there. It was probably right in there when I did this. I mean, it just looked like the paper was going to die any month. But, you know, they hired John Robert Starr in 1970 or '71, and he took it as his mission to go out and sink the *Gazette*.

ED: Actually, a little later, probably about 1980 or so. I'm not sure just when that was. At any rate, some time along in there. After Hussman bought the paper . . .

BS: Yes.

ED: . . . maybe about '78.

BS: Yes.

ED: Hussman bought the paper, and then shortly afterward, he hired Starr. But Lewis didn't start to work on that story, did he? Hugh just heard about it in some fashion?

BS: You know, Lewis is so fast, if he had started it, he would have finished, but I don't think he ever started. But I am just guessing on that.

ED: Lewis didn't dally with an assignment, even an "as time allows."

BS: No! [Laughs]

ED: I remember you gave me an assignment once to write Orval Faubus's obituary "as time allows." I was out at the Capitol at the time, and I was a procrastinator, and I put it off. When Jerry Neil died, Hugh asked me to go write editorials. One Friday afternoon, I was cleaning out my desk because on Monday morning I was going to go upstairs. You walked over to my desk about five o'clock Friday afternoon — I'd finished my Capitol stuff — and you had a little slip of paper in your hand. It was a carbon of an "as time allows" assignment: prepare Orval

Faubus's obituary. Faubus at that time was at the Baptist Hospital. He'd had heart surgery a couple of times, and he was back out there. There was a little story in the paper. You said, "I gave you this assignment - whatever it was - a year or two years ago, and you haven't written it yet." I said, "No." And you said, "If Faubus dies, and we don't have that obit, the head's going to say, "Faubus Dies, Dumas Fired."

BS: [Laughs] I don't remember that!

ED: I stayed there. I called up Elaine and said, "I'm not coming home." I stayed there all night long, all day Saturday, good part of Sunday, and I wrote the most god-awful obit. I bet it was 15,000 words. And I finished that damned thing. We rolled it out across the newsroom floor because that time, you know, the printout was a long roll of paper. It covered a good part of that aisle in front of the city desk. I wrote that damned thing before I could go to work up there Monday morning.

BS: [Laughs]

ED: I don't know whether you're aware of this, but that was January 1979, when I went up to write editorials. Of course, Faubus outlived the *Gazette*.

BS: He sure did! [Laughs]

ED: So, in 1991, the day that the *Gazette* closed, Max Brantley called me and said, "Where's your Faubus obit?" And I said, "I don't know where it is. It's just in the system someplace." And he said, "We've got to find that thing. I don't want the *Democrat* to get it."

BS: That's right.

ED: He said, "Well, I'll talk to one of the computer guys," and he told me later that one of the computer guys said he'd find it. It's on a disk someplace; he'd find it and kill it. Throw it away. Then, in 1995 or '96, when Faubus died, the *Democrat* had this mammoth obit. I didn't read it. Doug Smith called me that night and said, "Is that your obit in the *Democrat*?" "No, I haven't read it, but it couldn't be because they killed mine." But I got the paper down and looked at it. I had a copy of my obit because years earlier, when Roy Reed started work on his Faubus book, he asked if I could print out a copy of that obit. I got that thing down, and, sure enough, there's my obit!

BS: Your obit!

ED: That's my obit! It covers about four pages inside the *Democrat*, but the by-line said, "by the *Democrat-Gazette* staff." I called Doug back and said, "No, that was my obit." So, they wrote a little thing in the *Arkansas Times* about it. Griffin Smith, the *Democrat-Gazette* editor, saw me and apologized. He said that when he left there that night, he left instructions there was to be no by-line at all because he figured I wouldn't want mine on there. I told him, "I don't care. I'm just happy to see all that work I put in that weekend get in the paper." He said somebody violated his orders by putting that thing up there. Then, they submitted that obit in a newspaper contest, and it won first place for deadline news writing.

BS: [Laughs]

ED: Six months later, they were running full ads - "Award-Winning Newspaper - First Place in Deadline Newswriting." It had been written a good 17 or 18 years before deadline.

BS: Years before!

ED: . . . seventeen years earlier.

[Laughter]

ED: Anyway, that's another one of your "As Time Allows." Lewis would have written it instantly when you assigned it.

BS: Yes.

ED: You were still around when Gannett took over?

BS: Yes.

ED: And Walker Lundy came in.

BS: Yes.

ED: What happened after that? What was the *Gazette* like under Gannett?

BS: It was not like the *Arkansas Gazette*. They liked to decorate the front page. They liked to make it look like *USA Today*. You can't believe the number of people they hired. Why did they do that? I don't really know. I was over there on the copy desk. I wasn't involved in any of the meetings. I depended on Pat Carithers, and he just told some horror stories coming back from the news meetings. Lundy and the executives at that level were hardly around, or maybe they just weren't there when I was there. They just didn't seem to be there.

ED: Lundy thought the *Gazette* was a lousy paper. I happened to have lunch with

Max Brantley a lot, and Max would tell me that he was going to be fired any day because he said Lundy had given him a list of reporters he wanted fired. George Bentley, John Woodruff, Brenda Tirey. I think there were maybe five or six reporters. He told me that one day that Lundy had demanded they be fired. Max refused to fire them. And this went on for a couple of weeks, and, finally, Lundy told him, "You know, I can fire you. I can get this done. I can fire you and have a city editor who will carry out my directions." Max thought that he wasn't going to be around long because he wouldn't fire those people. Why Lundy didn't fire them himself I don't know.

BS: Why didn't he?

ED: Well, you know, he had the power.

BS: Yes!

ED: When Lundy went to work there, were you there that day when we assembled in the newsroom and Bill Malone announced, "Here's our new editor, Walker Lundy"?

BS: I don't remember that. I guess I wasn't there that day.

ED: They called all over the building; we all went down and Malone said, "Here's the new editor, Walker Lundy." And Lundy makes a little two-minute little talk and said, "Any questions?" And Chuck Heinbockel, who was a business writer, asked the first question, "Can you tell us something about your management style?" And Lundy said, "Yes, I can. Let me sum it up this way: I know how to fire people, and I don't mind doing it." It was a stunning remark!

BS: Boy, you’re right!

ED: Here was an editor whose first impression with the staff is to tell them “I can fire your ass, and I know how to do it.”

BS: That was incredible.

ED: It was just unbelievable.

BS: You know, these guys, they go off and get better jobs. Walker Lundy is up there in . . .

ED: St. Paul.

BS: Minneapolis-St. Paul, editor of a big paper up there. How the hell does he do that?!

ED: Apparently, throughout his whole life he just screws up at every level and then gets a better job. I don’t know. Well, was the *Gazette* a special place to work?

BS: I thought it was. You know, that was the only place I ever thought of when I was growing up, when I realized what I was going to try to do.

ED: What kind of reputation did it have then?

BS: It had the best, in my opinion. It had the reputation of being accurate, and it had the reputation of being independent, especially after Ashmore got there. I guess they were sort of independent before that, but Ashmore made it a lot stronger. I knew there was a newspaper named the *Democrat*, but I never considered it.

ED: When you were there, you felt like you were working at a special place.

BS: Yes, I did.

ED: It was not just a job, but this was a mission that you were on? It always struck me

that there had been an esprit de corps there.

BS: Yes! Boy, we had it, I think.

ED: I never saw it any other place I've ever been or heard about. Okay, were you there the Friday when the *Gazette* closed? I guess you would have been there later in the day.

BS: I was in the hospital.

ED: You were in the hospital then. Is that when you injured your shoulder?

BS: No, this was the heart attack.

ED: You had the heart attack.

BS: Yes.

ED: But you were still working there.

BS: Yes, yes. Of course, before I got out of the hospital, there wasn't any paper left.

ED: So it was after that that you went down to the *Pine Bluff Commercial*.

BS: I went to *Pine Bluff Commercial* in 1992. What did I do from '86 to '92?

ED: Well, you were just working at the *Gazette*, I guess, then, three days a week.

BS: I worked three days a week, but, of course, that ended . . .

ED: In '91.

BS: So, well . . .

ED: October, '91.

BS: After that, I got a job at a bookstore out there in the mall, but it turned out that retail sales is not my cup of tea.

ED: This was after the *Gazette* closed.

BS: Yes. Yes. I didn't stay at the bookstore very long. What else did I do?

ED: The *Gazette* closed in October, '91, and then you went to work at the *Commercial* sometime in 1992.

BS: Yes, so it would've been four or five years there. I must have been working somehow.

ED: It was just a couple of months though, wouldn't you think? You retired as city editor in '85, continued to work there at the *Gazette* three days a week . . .

BS: Oh, that's right.

ED: . . . as a copy editor until '91 . . .

BS: Yes.

ED: . . . except you were in the hospital at that time.

BS: Yes, that's right. That's right. So . . .

ED: So, after that, there was a little short period you were at the bookstore, and then you went down to Pine Bluff. Did you work three days a week there as copy editor?

BS: Yes.

ED: How'd you do that, driving back and forth three days a week and then driving back to Little Rock every night?

BS: I'm telling you. That's the reason I quit, one reason, is I just got tired of that. It's so dark. That road is so dark. There's not a light on it, that highway.

ED: And coming back at night.

BS: At first, I'd leave at midnight. They changed these editors and we got through

earlier. We put the paper out a little bit earlier, and I'd leave at 11:10 or whatever. But the reason I quit finally was on a Thursday we all got notice in our mailbox that starting Friday, the next day, we had to punch a time clock. I looked at myself and said, "You're seventy-nine years old. You never have punched a time clock, have you?" I had not. And I told them I'm not starting. The news editor there, I've forgotten his last name, boy, they didn't want to see me leave. In the first place, they were shorthanded; they were always shorthanded at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. People would just go through there and work a few months, a few weeks, and they're gone. And, so, they were shorthanded on the copy desk. I was fast, and he didn't want me to leave. He did everything. " I'll go punch it for you." "Oh, I don't think that's legal. Thanks very much but. . . ." So, I left. That day was my last day at work.

ED: I think of Hussman. Back when I worked for the elder Hussman back in high school, before I went to work for the *Gazette*, you had to punch a time clock, and you couldn't get your work done, so you had to go up and punch yourself out, put your card up, go back to your seat and work another three or four hours. That's the way we did that.

BS: [Laughs] And the management knew that?

ED: Oh, yes.

BS: Well, yes, you're right out in the open.

ED: That's what they wanted you to do, of course. You couldn't have Mr. Hussman seeing all that overtime.

BS: Oh, yes.

ED: To get your work done, you had to just keep on working. Well, all right, is there any other story, anything else you'd like to relate?

BS: I've been thinking ever since you called me, . . . I can't remember a . . . my mind is blank.

ED: Well, it's hard to resurrect those things, so we'll quit.

[End of Tape 2]

[End of Interview]

[**Editor's note**: Carrick Patterson insists that he did nothing to force Shelton to retire and that, to the contrary, he went along with Shelton's repeatedly expressed desire to leave the daily pressures of running the city desk and turn to part-time work on the copy desk. Two of Shelton's closest colleagues, Max Brantley and Ernest Dumas, tend to agree with Carrick. Dumas says, "My understanding at the time was that Shelton wanted to retire, thought the retirement would be sufficient but he wanted to continue copy reading." Brantley says, "I sat by Shelton every day for his last seven years at the *Gazette*, and my recollection is that he looked forward to retirement. He never gave an indication to me that he was leaving unwillingly. He explained to me that, between SS [Social Security] eligibility, the company pension and the ability to do some part-time work up to the limit then allowed by SS, he expected to be in a not terribly different financial situation than he had as full-time city editor. It is possible, of course, in his stolid fashion, that he chose to keep different feelings to himself." Carrick Patterson says, "How Bill's memory distorted this I have no idea. I was surprised he wanted a copy editing job after

retirement, but I was glad to see he got it. Whenever I'd encounter him in future years he always was cordial and friendly." He offers the following as an illustration of Shelton's growing and long-expressed interest in retiring: "When we put in the Digital TMS Computer system in 1983 or so, Shelton chose '1985istheyear' as his password."]

[Shelton died May 8, 2005, at age 85.]