Gazette Project

Interview with

Aubrey Shepherd
Fayetteville, Arkansas,
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Interviewer: Roy Reed

Roy Reed: Aubrey, what's your full name and how do you spell it?

Aubrey Shepherd: It's Aubrey James Shepherd. It's A-U-B-R-E-Y J-A-M-E-S S-H-E-P-H-E-R-D.

RR: All right. Now I assume we have your permission to turn this over to the university archives, this tape recording?

AS: You do, indeed.

RR: Okay. Start at the beginning, Aubrey, and give me your basic biography. Where were you born, when, and to whom?

AS: I was born in Ruston, Louisiana, on October 31, 1940, to Sidney James Shepherd.

RR: Sidney?

AS: Sidney James Shepherd and Jimmie Rose Palmer Shepherd. Jimmie Rose Palmer, P-A-L-M-E-R, Shepherd.

RR: J-I-M-M-I-E?

AS: That's right, two words, Rose.

RR: Okay.

AS: In Ruston, Louisiana, as I said. My father was a coffee salesman at that time for Standard Coffee Company. He traveled around, and if your coffee got stale, well,

he didn't let your coffee get stale because he came once a week and took the old coffee back. My mother was a housewife. And so that being–Ruston would have been my growing up years, but my mother got polio in 1941 and was totally paralyzed for many months, so we moved to Shreveport. I grew up in Shreveport and attended Allendale Elementary School and Lakeshore Junior High School, and I graduated from Fair Park High School in 1958.

RR: Okay, and then what?

AS: I went off to the United States Coast Guard and attended boot camp in San Francisco Bay on something called Government Island, near Oakland. And did a little time on one of those ships out in the Pacific and a little patrol of the San Francisco Bay on a forty-footer. I came back to Louisiana early the next year and started reserve meetings and attended Louisiana Tech, where I got a bachelor's degree and a master's degree by 1964.

RR: That's where my wife went to school.

AS: Did she really?

RR: Louisiana Tech.

AS: I didn't know that.

RR: Yes. You got out in 1964? Quite a bit after her.

AS: I was there from early 1959 through 1964. After that I taught English for one year at Delta State College in Mississippi, two years following that at Northeastern State College, now University, in Oklahoma, in Tahlequah, and then two years as an assistant professor of English at Northeast Louisiana State

University at Monroe. And then spent the next five years in the graduate program, which I'd started in the summer of 1966 at the University of Arkansas– the Ph.D. program in English, which I did not complete. I went on to a career as an outdoor writer, working as a private contractor for, first, the *Northwest Arkansas Times*, then Prairie Grove, Lincoln, Tahlequah, Huntsville, Eureka Springs, and then the *Springdale News*, the *Southwest Times Record*, the *Rogers Daily News* – just about everybody in the vicinity. Probably in 1974.

RR: All these at the same time?

AS: All these overlapped quite a bit for years. I had radio programs on KNWA– not only KNWA, but several radio stations here, and a now extinct station, an FM station in Fayetteville, initially, for a long time. Summers I got to do some television work with the young station that's now Channel 29/40, I guess, still. I started that with Channel 40 before Fayetteville had a television station. So all this was related to the outdoor sports in those years. Probably in 1974, I would guess, I first wrote as a stringer for the *Gazette*. That is, I would send them copies of the same outdoor columns I might be using in the northwest Arkansas papers. By that time Joe Mosby had become the outdoor editor, and he seemed to use them every time I sent them. But I generally sent him things that were of statewide interest as opposed to localized things in northwest Arkansas.

RR: Let me back up and ask you a question. How did you happen to get interested in the outdoors anyway?

AS: Well, I had a professor at Louisiana Tech, a Dr. Charles C. Chadbourn, Jr.

RR: How do you spell that?

AS: Chadbourn?

RR: Yes.

AS: C-H-A-D-B-O-U-R-N.

RR: C-H-A-D-B-O-U-R-N?

AS: I believe that's right. I haven't spelled it lately. His daughter, by the way, is a librarian at the University of Arkansas these days. And I believe one son, Charles the third, Charles Chadbourn, III, teaches at, maybe, the Naval Academy, the last I heard. And another son is in the Little Rock area, Cowper Chadbourn, C-O-W-P-E-R, and Cowper, I'm not sure of his profession now, but he was head of the Arkansas Canoe Club for some time and is a member of that still. Maybe the president this year, I don't know.

RR: Sounds like you kept up with the family.

AS: A little bit, yes. Because this professor, Dr. Chadbourn, was the kind of person that everybody needs when he's a young college student, who looks at your talents despite your weaknesses and says, "You ought to do this. You ought to do that." And he wanted me to have a Ph.D. in English and share in his profession, so that motivated me to make that effort even though I was more interested in hunting and fishing and might have been a better biologist than English professor if somebody in the department of zoology had grabbed me. But I think they required memorization of so many technical things that I barely got through their class, and they never knew that I was really a biologist at heart. So my interests

were pretty diverse, but as a young person I was distracted by the things that young people are and didn't have any idea of what I wanted to be. So Dr. Chadbourn led me to his English classes. But I think the thing that I remember his liking at the very first was that I wrote an essay for him about quail hunting with my father. And he always remembered that, and that was probably my start as an outdoor writer, although I didn't know it at the time. And, of course, I grew up in the era when people had relatively few things to read in most homes. We didn't have a whole lot of books. We had a few books, and we had a few magazines coming in. Among the magazines, of course, my favorites were the outdoor sporting things. My father was a duck hunter and a fisherman and a quail hunter, squirrel hunter. Deer didn't exist in north Louisiana when I was growing up, so he and his father's generation had never hunted deer simply because they had not been restocked. They had been wiped out a hundred years ago or more. So Dr. Chadbourn led me to be an outdoor writer without my really knowing it at that time. So when I was in graduate school at the University of Arkansas and teaching part-time and the competitive bass fishing craze was growing at that time, I had a friend who sponsored me to compete in a bass tournament. And I missed a few days of class and got fussed at for not being there to teach my classes because I was in a bass tournament.

RR: "Gone Fishing?" [Laughter]

AS: "Gone Fishing." But I really got to the point in the graduate program that I completed the French and the German, and a mass of course work, and had a

dissertation planned that I was very slow getting started on. Once you get through formal classes, you've got to do it on your own. You've got to do the research. Somebody wants to hear from you and know that you're working on it, but the advisors can't do it for you. So at that point it can easily take up your other interests, [and] I just drifted over and started writing an outdoor column and finding myself a proofreader at the *Northwest Arkansas Times*, using the things I learned in academia. Or, maybe, the things I learned while teaching because when you teach, you do learn things in detail that you normally don't proofread as a student.

RR: You like English, obviously, the language, I mean.

AS: Certainly, the language is very important to me. At the same time part of my background, as I said, growing up with relatively few books, newspapers were extremely important. We didn't have TV. We didn't have anything but the radio in my generation. We had a television set first when I was fifteen years old, so I grew up with my parents--that was way before school days.--My parents would read me the funny paper before we went to church on Sunday morning. And this was a way to learn to read because you wanted to read the funny paper faster than they would do it for you. They might be busy getting breakfast ready or something, so a kid would learn to read from the funny paper, and in church read the Bible and learn to sing the words from the hymnal, and things like this. You didn't have the distraction of the computer or the television set and so forth. And there wasn't nearly as much recorded music available, so you learned to sing the

songs from hearing them once on the radio as opposed to having lots of recordings of them.

RR: And in church--I suppose in church you learned the hymns and all that. What church did you go to?

AS: Went to Mangum Memorial Methodist Church and First Methodist Church in Shreveport, but I visited other churches. My dad had grown up a Baptist and joined the Methodist church because of my mother's affiliation. So I got to sample several other Protestant denominations and went to Catholic churches sometimes with friends.

RR: Was your religion with the Bible?

AS: I got more from the Bible than most people one year or two there, when my dad sent me to one of his aunts, who was a representative of the Bible Memory Association and [I] got to memorize a great part of the New Testament in order to go to camp. I was terrible because I resisted memorization, and this poor old lady, aunt of my father's and I guess some kind of great aunt of mine, was very patient, but she made me get every word before she'd give me credit for having learned these things. So the language of the King James Version of the Bible controlled usage and speech, and so forth. We knew it was outdated, but it insisted on a stricter more--oh, I don't know, not better necessarily, but a poetic language. To me, at least, it would have more beauty than current usage in advertising or a TV announcer, or even newspaper writing sometimes.

RR: I'm fascinated by this because you and I are of a generation where if you grew up

in the South, it was church.

AS: Right.

RR: Because you read the Bible. You were taught about the Bible, and it was always the King James version. And there's nothing quite like that kind of exposure to language. And I'll bet you that all of the newspaper people of our generation had similar upbringing and got a feel for the language. Of course, a lot of other places, too, but among other places the Bible was there to kind of tell us, all right, this is the way it ought to be written. [Laughs] And I can still remember phrases from the Bible, from the New Testament especially, but go ahead. You were going to tell how you got involved with the *Gazette* and you started working for Joe Mosby.

AS: Well, yes, that would probably have been 1974, when I was writing columns for the other guys up here, up in northwest Arkansas, but let me jump back quickly. Before that I was an inserter at the *Shreveport Times*, at age thirteen. And that was sort of like--there was hazing. What's known still as the mail room--although people can't figure out why it's the mail room anymore--where they prepared the papers to go out to the carriers and mail them, actually mail them out to the few readers who got them by mail. And we inserted the comics into the society section and so forth on Saturday morning. And then Saturday night late, we inserted that big part of the paper into the main news and breaking sports section on Saturday night. So I'd work until four in the morning, which, of course, cost me going to church a lot of times, which my mother and dad didn't

think much of, but it gave me $7.50 a shift. And when you did both those shifts, that was fifteen dollars a week. In the fifties that was a lot of money for a kid to make in one day in the week, so I saved that money and bought an outboard motor [laughter] for my high school graduation instead of an automobile, which was a little different. You might predict outdoor writer from that.

RR: Yes.

AS: But, anyhow, the fact was that I was there with the newspaper and hearing that big, old press start up, sounding like a cross between an airliner warming up at the airport and a train pulling out of the station. The excitement of the press was something that I grew up with. Between reading the newspapers as the main source of information growing up and being around the paper, at that point I was pretty well hooked into the newspaper business. And I didn't set out to be a journalist by any means simply because a journalism professor didn't grab me and say, "You ought to do this." I know I resisted the push of a speech teacher to be in drama because I didn't like to memorize the lines. I was in some plays and I did some little theater in three or four states, but I never really saw myself as likely to be good at that. But the newspaper was in my blood. And when I was teaching, particularly after moving to Tahlequah and coming to the University of Arkansas in the summer, Fayetteville, starting in 1965 or 1966, I would read the *Gazette* and compare it with the *Tulsa World*, particularly at that time, the two papers that dominated the market in Fayetteville. At that time you had boxes from several towns in Missouri and Oklahoma, so you might get ten different

newspapers in Fayetteville from the Holiday Inn or some other place. You had your choice of boxes on a Sunday morning. You could run and buy all of them if you could afford it and read them. But I would use these as part of the teaching process at Arkansas, particularly in something called junior English. For some of the students who hadn't made the highest grades in freshman English, maybe, or didn't want to take an exam, they'd take the junior English class, which was, basically, a third grammar, usage and writing course. And I taught that a lot during the five years I was teaching at Arkansas. So I would show them the differences in the way things were done with those newspapers. I guess I've always been accused of teaching journalism when I was in English class and trying to be an English teacher when I'm editing the newspaper. Anyhow, it was particularly important during the Vietnam War because the *Tulsa World* and many other southern newspapers totally took the government line on their approach to the war, as they had in the battle over segregation in the years before that, and it was still going on at that time to some degree. The *Gazette* was unique in that it published a wider variety of information sometimes that you might not know about if you looked at another paper. Even TV stations--when I was in Louisiana during the Vietnam conflict, there was no--they simply suppressed part of the national news sometimes because it didn't suit them or didn't suit what they thought was their viewership. So opinion was controlled not by expressing the opinion, but by suppressing the information on which we based our opinions. That was a frustrating thing. The *Gazette* was broader based and

maybe slanted in its own way. I remember I had a giant collection of *Gazette*s from the 1960s for a long time, through the 1970s, that I finally was forced to part with in one of my moves. But I had collected a lot of stories, and a lot of pages, whole sections in which you could see the difference between the headlines in the *Gazette* and the *Tulsa World*. One of them, it was--to be a little unspecific here, but to try to be specific on a made-up thing, let's say the *Tulsa World* might say, "Americans attacked at someplace in Vietnam and lose so many people, but win the victory," or something of that nature. And the *Gazette* might say something that indicated the Americans might have been a little bit out of line by doing something that cost the other side. There was a slant in the headlines [and] you'd have to look closely at the story to see which one you agreed with. Maybe the information on which the headline was based was all there, the *Tulsa* [*World*] headline and the *Gazette*'s headline, but simply the emphasis would control the viewpoint of the reader, who [would] read the headline first, read the story, and from the start the headline would make him see it the way that headline told him to see it. That was the thing that I noticed strongly. And some of these things I showed in detail to classes, trying to say [that] part of learning to read and write well is to be skeptical of some of the things you see. "Now, these are supposed to be objective sources of information. Let's look at this." And, "Why did they put this in there?" And, "Why did they put that?" And sometimes the difference was radically obvious to people once you pointed it out to them. So I felt that was an important use of the newspaper in those days because of the contrast. Today I

don't know which papers would show it as clearly as those did at that time.

RR: Did you think of the *Gazette* in those days as a liberal newspaper?

AS: Well, yes, certainly from the opinion pages. There were a lot more columnists, and the editorials would certainly disagree with the *Tulsa World*. At the time the *Democrat* wasn't a factor in northwest Arkansas. I hadn't lived in central Arkansas, so I seldom saw the *Arkansas Democrat*. They weren't as widely distributed up here, but the contrast was probably great there also if I'd been seeing it in the early 1970s. I thought of it as liberal, but I thought of it as fair simply because I didn't feel that they slanted some of those headlines as badly [laughs] as the *Tulsa World*.

RR: Was the wrong political . . .?

AS: I grew up in church, in a segregated society, in a world where opinion was supposed to be the same as your parents' in the society, so part of going off to the service and college and watching television and reading a wider variety of magazines and books was to get a different view. And part of that view was academic, in the sense that it was the view that you should be open minded and try to relate to the opinion even though at first glance it's not your own. You begin to accept the fact that other people have other opinions, and you want to know why. You don't want to just say, "He's a radical leftist" or "radical right-winger," you want to say, "Well, let's see what his opinion's about? Why does he think this?" And acknowledge the fact that if you had the same background as that person, the same information, whatever limits or breadth you might have,

then you might have the same opinion. And . . . the whole academic background gave you this willingness to gather information. And I thought the *Gazette* did a better job of featuring a broader base of opinion in, maybe, its editorial pages, its letters to the editor, and publishing those critical letters [laughs] during times when the general public in Arkansas maybe did not, overall, agree with the *Gazette*.

RR: Yes.

AS: And that was the thing that it said it built a reputation for before that time.

RR: It occurs to me that you brought something to the *Gazette* that not many other people have and that is, as a candidate for a Ph.D., you must have been in an incredibly small minority on the staff of the *Gazette* to have that much advanced education.

AS: Well, that may be true, but I don't know that. I think there must have been others with the equivalent amount of education and certainly with a broader education in other areas. I really don't know, but I guess the difference that causes might be--just causes you to be perceived as arrogant about certain things. [Laughter] It's not necessarily a benefit. You might want to keep that secret if you're a young person in any profession, to say, "I've had more schooling than you."

RR: Well, let's talk about the *Gazette* some. When did you go on the staff full-time?

AS: Okay, that was probably late 1988, October of 1988, I believe.

RR: Meanwhile, you had been working up here at these . . .?

AS: I was at the *Democrat* from 1983 to 1988.

RR: Okay.

AS: And I went over to the *Gazette* in late 1988.

RR: You were writing outdoors at the *Democrat*?

AS: Writing outdoor things and editing the sports section. I came over and worked on the desk. I'd been the outdoor editor at the *Democrat* for five-and-a-half years, approximately, and came over as associate outdoor editor to work with Joe Mosby, also in the slot of the assistant sports editor at the *Gazette*. By then they had a deputy sports editor who was a little higher up than that, so that was the slot I took. I took over copy-editing duties there and participated in that process. That was an interesting mixture because I would often go out as early in the morning as I could get up and try to gather material for a column or a feature story of some kind for the outdoor page and maybe drive a hundred miles away, spend part of the day, and then get back and work on the desk at night. [Then] maybe write a column, turn in some film to be developed, try to get an outdoor page of sorts out. They went through times of having an outdoor page every day of the week and then cutting it back. During the newspaper war of the 1980s and into the early 1990s, there was constant change in what was perceived by management as the right thing to do, so what was popular one day, they wanted to try something else the next day; and, even if it was working, they might change it. So, when you look at it, maybe the reason the *Gazette* didn't overcome more of the challenge from the *Democrat* was simply that they didn't change some things they needed to change, and they changed too many things that shouldn't have

been changed.

RR: This was after Gannett bought the paper when you went to work there?

AS: After Gannett bought it, yes. I never worked there--I was a stringer during the old regime, but I never worked there.

RR: Who hired you at the *Gazette*?

AS: Paul Borden was the sports editor, and he actually, through Joe Mosby's friendship, had brought me in over there.

RR: You never worked for Orville Henry?

AS: I didn't work for Orville, but, of course, I had the privilege of reading Orville's stories and occasionally talking to Orville on the phone and seeing Orville in Fayetteville sometimes. But Orville, by the time I went over, was actually working out of the university area and living on Vandeventer Street in Fayetteville and often could be found at a restaurant on Dickson Street and was covering the Razorbacks at his usual high level. So, when I was in Little Rock, I just knew him on a limited basis.

RR: Yes.

AS: I didn't get to work under him in the office.

RR: So you worked for Paul Borden?

AS: Paul Borden. And Paul, of course, had been brought in by Gannett and was a good man and suffered as much as the old-timers in many ways when the *Gazette* shut down. It was probably his idea of a great spot to be in, a wonderful spot to be in. And he, too, moved to Fayetteville in the final days and left the office.

And they brought in some other people under Gannett, trying to do whatever it was they wanted to do, which we weren't certain of at that time.

RR: You were in a pretty good position to observe the paper, generally, not just the sports part of it, I guess. What was your impression of the different changes that Gannett was trying to make to try and keep the paper going?

AS: Well, honestly, I was like many other people seeing changes of things that shouldn't have been made. That is . . .

RR: Like what?

AS: The sense of desperation sometimes, maybe, that some of the managers came in with. If they weren't making enough progress--as I recall, if you looked at all the figures and so forth from the final year of the two papers, the *Gazette* was still outselling the *Democrat* in circulation and advertising and quality in many ways, but they simply weren't making the profit they expected to, and they didn't dominate the market. This is my impression of what happened. And they had a target that must have been set when they bought it, that if it didn't dominate the market totally by a certain time, then they'd get rid of it. It was just an experiment to them from the standpoint of a corporation. And maybe the changes at higher levels and what their thinking was controlled these things. So the shifting of people to various roles in the paper may or may not have been good in many cases. I was happy to go over there, thrilled to go over there because I always had great respect for that paper, but at the same time what the *Gazette* had done for so long successfully was emotionally grueling. But the *Gazette* was not

aggressive in, say, going out and following politicians from one spot to the other to find out all their weak spots. They weren't as aggressive as the *Democrat* simply because the *Democrat* felt it had to do these things. When you had someone like John Robert Starr at the *Democrat*, pushing reporters to investigate everything they could, this was something that maybe the *Gazette* had a reputation as revealing the truth and doing investigative reporting, but not being quite as aggressive or feeling the need to do it during those years. The *Gazette* was pretty satisfied with itself. The Gannett people, maybe, were seen as arrogant in their wanting to make changes and yet not having a clear overall sense of direction. In other words, sometimes they would try to compete with the *Democrat* in an area where the *Democrat* wasn't necessarily doing a better job, and maybe they neglected some other areas. Ten years ago I would have talked to you in a great deal more detail about specifics, but right now I'm sort of giving you broad impressions.

RR: Let's take one example that just springs to mind. When I was at the *Gazette* in the 1950s and 1960s, the *Gazette* was known as the newspaper of record for Arkansas.

AS: Yes.

RR: Meaning, among other things, that it covered important governmental meetings, even down to committee meetings of the legislature. Was the *Gazette* still doing that sort of thing under Gannett?

AS: Well, [laughs] honestly I can't compare right now. Back in the days when I

looked at both papers thoroughly, I could say, but I think what they were doing was maybe trying to compress those things in their various redesign. During the three and a half years, I guess, from the time I went over there until it closed down, it seems we had two major redesigns of the paper. And not only did they cause one of the young lady art directors who had to create all these things in the computer for the different look to finally quit and leave, but they caused the reporters and editors doing the various sections of the paper to totally rethink their thinking in many areas. For instance, they might want a maximum of a ten-inch story on a big lead. It might not matter in this new redesign that this wouldn't fit. They wouldn't say, "Okay, for this story, because of its importance, we will jump it and we will use all of it." They might say, "No, you've got to get it to ten inches." So a reporter who had spent three hours in a controversial meeting, maybe if you talk to him, they cut three-fourths of his story. And this would have happened--I remember in the sports section fellows going out and spending time at a ball game that turned out to be very exciting. And they would have good quotes from--they might be told to get coaches from both teams, quote them, quote two of the players. Now, you're talking about quoting six people. Just some kind of quotation about the game and getting all the statistics . . .

RR: Is this formula required or something?

AS: And then they would want this in ten inches.

RR: Yes.

AS: And you're telling them to write a thirty-inch story and compress it into ten

inches for publication, including the statistics.

RR: Yes.

AS: So the same thing was going on in news at times, that people simply could not put in all the pertinent details. If they had done a good job and gotten some background from some of the--say you're talking about a public meeting. You've got council members. If you talk to all those council members and get their view on why they voted and it's a critical vote, the public would like to know. They would like to know what the thinking was. They would like to know, "Is this guy influenced by some property owner and he allowed this to happen?" Or "Is he trying to be virtuous in some way, or is he just stupid?" You'd like to hear the rationale for some of the decisions made in your government, and there might not be room for it.

RR: Now, these Gannett folks must have had some rational reason for doing things in a different way from the old *Gazette* way. What do you think their rationale was?

AS: Well, the competition of television caused newspapers, I think more than anything, to try to figure out a new role for themselves. And because people liked what was on television, they envisioned that they would like the same thing in a newspaper. So *USA Today* and the changes in design were in many cases built upon the need to compete with the look and sound of television. You wanted something exciting, they felt, that would compete with television. Now, the truth is that the majority of readers, even in the year 2000, who read a great part of the newspaper, are people like us, who may have been brought up in church with the

Bible, with a newspaper and no TV. . . . While a lot of other people buy the newspaper, I suspect that the older people who grew up when newspapers were the main source of information in their homes are the ones who read the newspaper in detail. I think the Gannett people thought that they could catch the young readers and get them to buy the paper if the front page had graphic elements, catchy headlines, [which] may not necessarily reflect the facts in the story, but are cute, [with] exciting color pictures–various things that are attention grabbing, but not necessarily altogether valuable information. So, by making the story short, they thought, "Well, these people will read this whole story." Well, of course, my argument against that viewpoint quite often is [that] anybody can quit reading the darn story anytime they want, so let's give them the whole story. If we have the space, the manpower, and the ability to get the whole story, let's give him the whole story and let him quit reading when he gets bored with it. Let's write a lead in the early part of the story that will give him a hint [of] what he's going to get if he keeps reading, but let's don't expect him to get the gist of a three-hour meeting in three inches. It's simply not going to happen. The fact is that you see more white space, more visual effects that are certainly nice to look at. And I love a well designed page. I like a well-organized paper. I like to find everything about a certain town in one place or everything about politics in a certain area of the paper. I like to see things that you can find and follow easily. I like some kind of digest sometimes. A digest of the news on the front page is nice. But if there's so much of that, you kick off any major story, or putting more

than one or two major stories on the front, then maybe it's a weakness. But that is a generational thing. I think if you grew up using the newspaper as a major source of information, then you expect it to give you all the information. You don't want to have to go--as people are told now, "Go to the internet for more news." You see it on television. You see it in the paper, "More about so-and-so on the Internet." Well, I don't know if I'd turn off the final game of the World Series to go get on my computer and see what they've got to say on there. I think I'll keep my TV set on, and I'll read the stats in tomorrow's paper if they're in there, but the Internet's the new competition [?].

RR: Why didn't it work for Gannett in Little Rock?

AS: I think it didn't work because they gave up too fast. I mean, as an outsider, I thought the old order simply didn't have the heart to stay up with a nasty little war with the competition in Little Rock. And I found it the most exciting time of my life, maybe, in many ways, being involved in it when it was a war. When I was at the *Democrat*, I took great pride in having the things I was concerned with in the paper before the *Gazette* did. If I spent my weekend days driving to two or three or four outdoor events and getting current news on them and the people I was competing with at the *Gazette* didn't do it, I knew that it was within their capability. I think the *Gazette* and the Gannett people at that time who dominated the *Gazette* simply weren't seeing, maybe, the quality human effort that the competition was putting into it. There was a time when, maybe, I viewed it as the *Gazette* had the liberal editorial slant as opposed to a more conservative thing

coming in the *Democrat*'s editorial page, which was pretty much geared to what the publisher wanted over there. There were some young liberal people at the *Democrat*, who were struggling to do a good job as journalists, people who would have been glad to have been at the *Gazette*, but they had their start over there, maybe, and they were extremely energetic. And the *Gazette* had the best people, the most experienced people, but the leadership was not using them as well as they could in many cases. They weren't getting the best out of them.

RR: You worked for Starr, I guess?

AS: Starr was a very mixed bag for people. He was domineering and rude to some people and maybe frustrating for people to work with, but he was aggressive and he had a mission, and his mission was to outdo the *Gazette*. And the people who got caught up in that with him made it a competitive thing and made the *Gazette* try and do more than it had done. It wasn't necessarily right, but Starr, many times, had reporters out digging up information before the *Gazette* considered it important.

RR: Yes.

AS: And that was Bob Starr. Sometimes we--in discussing what journalism's about, Starr's view of--he had a mission. And if you're an editor, in many places, you must have some idea of a mission, but in many places it's going to be radically different from that. You want to cover your community or your area of coverage fairly. Starr wanted to control the state of Arkansas. He would have liked to control the world if he could. And I very much sympathize with a person who

wants to control things as long as I agree with what he's trying to do with them. That's why [laughs] we have a democracy instead of a dictatorship. We're suspicious of people who want to control. And journalists are taught in all of the good schools to try to be objective, try not to control things, and yet a journalist with a mission is pretty valuable as long as his mission is one that the majority in a democracy would agree is good for the society. And sometimes Starr appeared to be bad for the society. If you were certain politicians, Bill Clinton on a given day, or Tommy Robinson or on and on and on, he didn't seem to be good for society from your point of view. So that was something that was inspiring. Many a night I wondered how he could, how John Robert Starr could, leave the building and walk to his parking lot without an armed guard. Because I knew how many people he had offended that day, how many important people had called him to chew him out, how many people he had--well, sometimes, I guess from some of the reporters' views during the days I was there--and I did participate in some investigative things with some of the news reporters even though I was assigned to sports theoretically--Starr would write a column attacking somebody based on information his reporters had gathered before they got to do the news story. And that can be frustrating because he alerted the object of this, or subject, [laughs] victim, of this investigative reporting to the fact that people were gathering information, whether through interviewing them or interviewing others and so forth. And once he tipped them off by knowing something that he couldn't have easily known, then they would know that he was after them. And they might

clam up to the reporters or shut down the sources in various ways.

RR: It must have been frustrating to the reporters.

AS: There were occasions I know of from the 1980s when it was frustrating because he got ahead of the game. He couldn't stand to keep it quiet. He liked to go out and write about something in his opinion column. He wasn't in the editorial section. He was never in the editorial section that I can recall. [I cannot recall] his writing an unsigned editorial during that time because I was very close to the man who wrote the editorials.

RR: Where was his column?

AS: His column was op-ed, across the page from the editorial page, facing.

RR: Yes.

AS: So it was clear it was opinion, but many, many people saw his column as the opinion page.

RR: Oh.

AS: And neglected the real opinion page. The publisher approved every editorial. He didn't approve Bob Starr's column and probably wouldn't have most of the time, but it was part of the excitement of the newspaper war. You could have a lot of diverse opinion in Little Rock at that time. [With] every columnist and every editorial writer at the *Gazette* and everybody doing the same roles at the *Democrat* and columnists in other sections of the papers, opinion came from everywhere. And opinion's always based on a diverse range of experience and knowledge. And this is what makes it fun to have it. It's what makes letters-to-

the-editor interesting, although they're not always as well edited to get rid of undocumented opinion.

RR: Yes.

AS: But Starr was the guy who pushed all that, and he pushed the *Gazette*. And maybe we could blame him for the *Gazette*'s demise, in that the people at the *Gazette* from Gannett who had taken over and were trying to compete with him simply didn't know what he was doing. If they set up a columnist to write in opposition to Starr, Starr could win because he was more experienced at it. They didn't have a person with a mission in that role. They would put somebody who was a good columnist in some other city into Little Rock to write editorials, to add to the editorial staff, but as long as you had the old, the basic--what was it, nine-person editorial writing staff at the *Gazette*? There was no way that they didn't write a better range of well-educated opinion. The *Democrat* during that time had David Hawkins, one man, writing all of the editorials and getting them approved by the publisher. And this was a situation where he was working all day not only to get the opinion to suit him, but to get the thing to make sense after it was done because he would send over two or three drafts to the publisher and he would make scratches on it. And quite often in the afternoon I would be trying to look at the final version and clean it up a little for David in my spare time because he would say, "Well, look at this. The publisher's marked this up again. I've done this five times." David was from a conservative background. He was from Shreveport, as I was. He'd written--I think his first--he went to LSU. His

first job in journalism may have been at one of the Dallas papers, writing conservative editorials there. That was what he was doing in Little Rock, writing conservative editorials and making sure the publisher, . . .

RR: The publisher being Walter Hussman?

AS: Walter Hussman, had the viewpoint that he wanted in that editorial, [that] the editorial page itself, or at least the editorial itself, did not go against Hussman's opinion.

RR: Yes.

AS: The columnists were all free. There was as much freedom for the columnists as you could imagine.

RR: Something you said a minute ago reminded me that one of the criticisms that I've heard repeatedly about Gannett was the lack of institutional memory that they brought to the state of Arkansas. They brought in people in all the top, or most of the top, management positions from faraway places. You had a view of that from the inside of the paper. I was not. I was here.

AS: Yes. You were up here by then.

RR: Yes. Was that a valid criticism?

AS: Oh, certainly. As an example from the sports department, there was a young man sent in to be the sports editor after Paul Borden had moved from Little Rock to Fayetteville and was covering the Razorbacks. And that occurred after Orville Henry had gone to the *Democrat*. Well, letting Orville Henry get away was a really stupid mistake, obviously, that Gannett made. There were several people in

the sports department who irritated him, but I think upper management had to take the blame. But I remember this young man deciding to get rid of, clean out--There was a rumor that--I think it was true--that he had had a brain tumor previously, but I assume it was a built-in attitude that some of this old stuff was not very valuable.

RR: Old stuff? You mean material [?]?

AS: Photo files primarily.

RR: Right.

AS: I could think--well, somebody at Gannett had told him, "In a year or so we're going to shut down the paper and sell it, so we don't want anybody else to get your old material, so let's get rid of it." But he was having people clean out the photo files that went back one hundred years or so, and they were just throwing these photos in the trash. And sports had Razorback and all other college sports and high school sports and national sporting things. They had a photo file that was pretty massive and just wonderful to anybody who had a little knowledge of the past. Some of it was older than Orville Henry's tenure, which was from the 1940s.

RR: And this was just thrown away?

AS: Just throwing it away, yes. I recovered some of it. Joe Mosby and I took home some old photos and things.

RR: Did anybody else?

AS: I haven't done a good job of taking care of this stuff because I've moved two or

three times and had it in storage.

RR: I wonder if anybody else rescued any?

AS: I'm sure a few people rescued a few things they wanted.

RR: Yes.

AS: But this guy was just getting rid of it. File cabinets full of photos. And he had no idea that these things should be over at somebody's museum, somebody's library, or file if they weren't going to exist, if the *Gazette* wasn't going to exist. And he probably came in two years before it closed down, I'm not sure, but maybe a year-and-a-half. So during his tenure, which was short, [?]--These people weren't there very long.--He did a lot of damage. But the same man, an example of his expertise was that one night I was there doing desk duty, and Joe Mosby wrote a column about an outdoorsman, a significant citizen of his area, near where he lived in Conway, a man he had known for many years, and the guy was an outdoorsman and significant in other ways to Joe. He was a prominent person and--I don't remember--not a major figure, but Joe wrote a column about the man's death, not about his death, but what he'd been, what he'd meant to people, and so forth. Interesting column. This young man from Gannett said, "Well, you can't run Joe's column. You can't put Joe's column in the paper." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "He doesn't have the cause of death." Well, I started trying to explain to him. I said, "Well, you know our obits don't necessarily have cause of death. Many papers refuse

to run cause of death. They don't think it's a significant part of it, maybe in a news story if you died in an accident or something, but cause of death is not necessarily part of an obituary either." Well, apparently, this young man had been somewhere, and they said, "Always put cause of death in an obit." And he saw this column, which was a personal opinion column that would have a photo of the author, the outdoor editor. He thought it should have cause of death in it, and he was not going to allow it to run. Well, finally, he got tired and went home, and I ran the column. [Laughter]

RR: That's just incredible.

AS: That's incredible. I called Joe Mosby, and he wasn't at home, and his wife didn't know the cause of death. And I think late I finally got a hold of Joe. He'd been out on a trip somewhere, and he didn't know for sure the cause of death or didn't have anybody to quote with him. We weren't going to say he died of something unless we had a medical authority or a close family member to say, "This is what killed him." I mean, you're just not going to do a [laughs] cause of death.

RR: Yes.

AS: Well, the guy wanted to suppress a good column.

RR: Because of that. Okay. We were talking about the *Gazette*, but I wanted to get a little more on what you were doing. I knew you were copy editing, and you were writing an outdoor column. What sort of things, day by day, were you involved in?

AS: Well, being connected to the sports department for an outdoor writer is partly

good and partly bad, simply because the outdoor writer may see his business as a little different from the entertainment aspects of an athletic event. Particularly because the outdoor writer--well, let's start with a poor analogy. If somebody came along and started to take Razorback Stadium down to create a housing development, every sports writer in Arkansas would say it was a bad idea, but the outdoor writer is in the position of having people take down forests, build dams, flood out bottom land, change natural streams, and dump various polluting elements into streams and rivers and lakes and the ground water, and put smoke in the air that's not healthy--an endless variety of things that the outdoor writer would see as interfering with his subject matter. Just as the football writer can't exist in his profession, can't function without a football stadium someplace, the outdoor writer can't operate without a healthy environment. If the wild things are affected by what people are doing, then the outdoor writer has to be an environmentalist. So I saw my role not just to entertain people with stories about fishing and hunting and bicycling and bird watching and all the delightful things people do outdoors in Arkansas and the world, but to see that there was good information about the effects of human activity on these participatory sports. The outdoor recreational sports involve all the natural resources, so a person who's involved in those things has to become aware. Say, if he sells real estate and goes back next year to hunt and fish in the area where he sold a big parcel of real estate, he may find there's no longer any way to enjoy that. So he may say, "I can't be a real estate agent because I might have to sell a piece of property that

would become a housing development, and it wouldn't be beautiful anymore, and it wouldn't be healthy anymore." Or whatever. So he finds himself suppressed in his freedom to [laughs] grow economically maybe simply because he's an outdoor enthusiast. So I always felt that it was important that as an outdoor writer I try to share the information about such subjects with people and share my opinion. And tell them what that opinion was based on. And for me, I guess, growing up in north Louisiana, fishing and hunting, I saw the leakage from the oil wells drilled in lakes such as Caddo Lake. Absolutely poisoned beautiful cypress forests around the periphery of the lake in some areas. The salt and the oil and so forth that came out of the ground simply turned beautiful swamp areas into wasteland. And these were the areas most valued by hunters and fishermen and most important to the wild creatures and ultimately then to the water supply for the human beings. I learned this when I was a teenager. It wasn't something that I came to as a radical green person. It was what I grew up seeing happen. [?]

RR: You probably wrote some pretty controversial columns.

AS: Well, I guess I was pretty controversial for some readers.

RR: Give me an example or two of a controversial subject that you got into in your column.

AS: I suppose I always, from the earliest days as an outdoor writer, criticized the U.S. Forest Service for its management practices. I felt that by clear-cutting they wiped out large areas of timber that was valuable to wildlife and to the cleansing of the water and the air, and the prevention of erosion and so forth. [It was] the

same thing with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. I wrote columns criticizing them for wanting to build--and even communities, and people in different parts of the state wanting them to build--certain projects. For instance, damming streams to build lakes- create something useful economically, and something delightful to a lot of people. And I enjoy lakes and reservoirs and fished many hours in bass tournaments and so forth on major reservoirs all over the southwestern part of the United States and even to some degree in the upper Midwest, and the East, the Southeast. But the fact is that those reservoirs come at a great price to the environment. The best farmland goes under water. The best fishing, in the natural sense, is in the running streams. And the species in those streams don't all do so well in a big reservoir. Basically, a reservoir is a lot of water with a relatively small amount of life in it. The life of various kinds tends to use the shallow areas. The cases where they've stocked striped bass in the major reservoirs in Arkansas and surrounding states, the reason was there was a lot of wasted area. There was a lot of water where there were no predators eating the shad. There was something wrong in there. So they put the big stripers in. Those stripers grow to weigh fifty pounds or more. And you have some more tourists coming in to catch stripers and you have some relatively harmless economic activity. People fishing and staying in the motels and eating at the restaurants and so forth, using a little gasoline on the lake and making a little pollution, but not as bad as some of the other things they could be doing in the area. So you're glad to have them. But the initial project, flooding it, this is the destructive thing.

RR: Yes, takes the best farmland, the bottomland.

AS: It destroys the homes and churches and displaces descendants of the people who first settled there. It wipes it out, so you're more dependent on food being shipped in from California or somewhere else.

RR: Were you in on the Buffalo River controversy?

AS: I was relatively new to Arkansas at that time. I got here at the end of it.

RR: I guess it was already pretty well settled.

AS: Yes.

RR: Orville Faubus settled that before he left office in the 1960s then.

AS: As an outdoor writer, I came along after that was pretty well done.

RR: Yes. But those kinds of things were . . .

AS: I was a supporter of that, but I was not a big active participant. I knew the people who were a little bit supportive of it, but I came to Arkansas when that was already under away.

RR: Yes. In your working day, how many columns a week did you typically write at the *Gazette*?

AS: Oh, probably three columns, and then I did a massive fishing report. I guess I'm obsessive-compulsive about a lot of things, and one of them was trying to have the best fishing report wherever I was. I started that in northwest Arkansas, and I carried that to the *Democrat* and the *Gazette*.

RR: Did you get a lot of phone calls?

AS: Hundreds of phone calls, [laughs] representing the whole state. I would try to do

those as late as possible and yet make them timely. You didn't want to write a fishing report that was gathered on Monday, so you tried to do it all on Thursday and still meet the deadline. So you'd call all these people and not only take what they told you--what people caught on the weekend--but insist they tell you something that occurred today. What did somebody bring in today? How did he do? I added to the fishing report in my years in Little Rock something that didn't happen much, which was a hunting report, too. I was making the outdoor report and tried to have the hunting and so forth and then brief items on anything anybody had going on. Because to me, my lead for a feature story and often a column was not what I had gone out and observed because I couldn't be everywhere. I had to be in the office a lot. So my leads for other things came from news releases. I never ignored news releases from people. I would start with a massive calendar of events and sometimes--after doing this in the days of computers, you're able to have this thing set up for a year ahead. And by the computer magic you can cut and paste the parts you need for a particular day's paper out of that computer file and not interfere with your massive file. So for my calendar of events, I would envision stories that could be done–not just a listing in the calendar–and try to use those things. So I would spend a lot of time keeping the calendar up to date. Somebody called in or sent in information about an event. Whatever it was, as diverse as the outdoor recreational sports could be, I would try to get them all in. I remember times when the same people fished in bass tournaments and raced pigeons. People had diverse interests. You wouldn't

think of a fisherman and a pigeon racer, necessarily being the same person, but that was the kind of diversity. People might run in a 10k race and also go duck hunting, so you knew them in various contexts.

RR: You must have had hundreds of sources around this state.

AS: Thousands, yes. [Laughs]

RR: Thousands? [Laughs]

AS: Because in every town there was somebody who had a club for shooting or bicycling, or whatever it was, and they wanted to be in the paper and you wanted to get them there.

RR: Sure. Was there any way to measure the importance of this kind of reporting handed down to the newspaper? In the readership or revenue or advertising or subscriptions? Any way that you know of that it was ever measured? Polling readership?

AS: Oh, yes, probably so, but I think mostly just if you were there getting the phone calls or getting the mail.

RR: Yes.

AS: There were days when for outdoor recreational things I would have as much mail as the rest of the sports department because it represented so many different things. And these were things people participate in as opposed to--they didn't just watch.

RR: Right. You and Joe, right?

AS: At the *Gazette*. Yes.

RR: I mean you all were the only two?

AS: We were the only two, yes.

RR: So you two guys . . .

AS: We also had some people doing recreational things, which at various times were more or less associated.

RR: Okay.

AS: For instance, at the *Democrat* toward the last year I was there, I was doing a two-page spread on one day a week with outdoor fishing and hunting and environment, and [on] a different day, a two-page spread on recreational things which were not--we say hunters and fishermen are "consuming outdoorsmen," whereas other recreational activities don't consume anything.

RR: Right.

AS: And so everyday of the week we had something like that. When I got over there and joined Joe at the *Gazette* in doing outdoor things, we were the main two. Occasionally, I think as the popularity of the outdoor sports grew or at least the newspapers acknowledged it and competed over it more, then they began to do things about outdoor sporting activities in other sections.

RR: Yes.

AS: By now there may be more things that I tried to cover then in other sections of the newspapers than there are in the sports section.

RR: Okay.

AS: Because writers and editors would see, "Well, look how much attention that got."

It also, of course, helps if there's somebody in that section of the newspaper, say, in the living section, who likes to bicycle, then they'd include that in there.

RR: Yes.

AS: And the same could be true of bird watching. You would put that over there. So when we were doing that, that was just starting to happen.

RR: I don't see how you had time to sleep or anything else.

AS: Well, that was the fun of it though. You'd get up early in the morning before you'd had enough sleep, so you could drive somewhere and get some pictures and participate just a little bit. Some days, for a column, all you had time for in that situation was to go out and sample the activity. Unlike earlier years when I might have spent my whole day hunting or fishing, I would go sample. I'd go to some lake and put my little pirogue [duck boat] in and paddle it around out there and fish for a while and have a personal fishing report: "You
can catch them this way," at that lake, on that day.

RR: Yes.

AS: And make that part of a column and write about the beauty of the place a little bit and how to get there, and that sort of thing. But it had to be fast because you wanted to get back and see that all that other was done.

RR: I can see the fun of it, but it sounds very wearing.

AS: Yes, that's true. That's true. It was.

RR: And you were doing copy editing, too, weren't you, at the same time?

AS: Yes. I'd be waiting for my film to develop to see what pictures I'd get and

writing the column and starting to get pressure to start reading copy and writing headlines for pages.

RR: So you'd be there until how late at night working copy?

AS: Well, generally, at least through the first edition's printing because at the *Gazette* in the final years, at least--I don't know what went on way before when they had even more editions--but the edition that went to northwest Arkansas and the other corners of the state would be done pretty early in the evening. Probably started the press at ten-thirty or something. So you'd be trying to get those pages out by eight-thirty or something, nine. You should have all the copy in by eight-thirty or nine.

RR: Did you go home after that or stay until the first edition?

AS: No, no, no. So you'd get that done, and you wouldn't have time to proofread all the pages thoroughly, and some of the stories hadn't been edited thoroughly enough to suit you. And so as soon as they'd start the press and give you a batch of papers to look at, you'd have a chance to proof it for a lot of them. And then they had a certain moment they had to start back up and get it going, so they could ship it out. So you wouldn't have time to correct very much on that first edition, but you could use that first edition to see what you needed to do for the later edition, which was the city edition. And at various times it might have been just the city, but a certain suburban area got the real city edition with all the final corrections and so forth. I remember when I first went to the *Democrat*, there were five or six editions on Saturday night for Sunday. It was that specialized.

We'd keep changing things. And the *Gazette* used to do that, too, but by 1990 I think it got down to two editions maybe.

RR: When would you finally go home?

AS: Quite often after the city edition came out, and I took one of those home.

RR: Around midnight?

AS: Yes. But there were times when, for some reason, I didn't have to be there in the evening. I'd be at home, and I would go by and pick up a copy of the first edition, so I could go back home at my leisure and look it over in time to point out anything on the telephone to people who were in the office. [Laughter]

RR: I ask, did you have a family?

AS: Yes, I had pets and a significant other during that time, too, so, yes.

RR: Must not have had a whole lot of time to spend.

AS: Well, that was life, I guess. That's what I say. From the time when I was a kid, inserting on Saturday night and being there when the press ran, I liked to be there when the press runs. I like to see the final version. I like to see what the readers are going to see before it goes out. I'm not happy--if you offered me a job working in the morning and having significant control of what goes in the paper, I'll tell you, "Fine, but I'm still going to have to be there at midnight to be sure that's what gets there." So I guess I'm more interested in the final product and hated to leave there.

RR: Yes.

AS: So I've missed many wonderful opportunities to be on the water or in the woods

at dawn simply because I just felt compelled to be there at work when the paper was actually printed.

RR: Yes.

AS: And that's a frustrating thing, but it was part of it, and to do a quality job for the paper, you had to give up some of the pleasures of doing that. The fun of being an outdoor writer to some people in the business is making nice long trips, writing the story afterward, and being out on another nice trip on the day the article's published, whether it's a newspaper, magazine, or whatever. But I wanted to see the whole thing through immediately. [Laughter] I like to finish.

RR: Let me back up to something that we touched on just very briefly a while ago, and that was Orville Henry's leaving the *Gazette* to go to the *Democrat*. What caused that? Or do you know? You might not have been in a position.

AS: I don't know. He didn't stay very long after I came over from the *Democrat*. When I came over from the *Democrat*, it was a situation where I went to the publisher along with another person who was leaving and told him, Walter Hussman, I was leaving to go to the *Gazette*. The other guy was leaving to go to the *Washington Times*. Well, Walter Hussman said, "Well, he's going to the *Times*, but you're going across the street." [Laughs] Walter was angry at me for taking the job at the *Gazette*. And I knew that I was going to be lucky to get back in the building--his office was in the next door building--just to get my personal items out of there that day, so I went immediately from his office. I tried to explain to Walter Hussman how the *Gazette* was giving me a lot more money and

better benefits, and I needed these things, and they were things he couldn't provide. I enjoyed working for him during the newspaper war, nothing personal, but I was getting an opportunity like many other people. Walter Hussman wouldn't work for less when he was there. So I went to the general manager, Paul Smith, at the *Democrat* and told him that I'd been to see Walter and that one of the things I'd said [was] "I don't want to get into a war with Bob Starr over this because he often attacks people and I don't want to get into a match of writing columns about one another." And there were a couple of other things. I had a relationship with a young woman who was head of another department at the *Democrat* at the time, and so I didn't want her to be harassed by Starr. So I made that deal with the publisher and then with the general manager. And it was clear that he was not to take this as a personal war.

RR: Yes.

AS: So when I went to see him, Starr was like, [gruffly] "Well, you don't have to go over there and be a copy editor to get a raise." And it was like, "Well, obviously, I do. [Laughs] I've been here for five or six years and I don't make much money." Way far less than what you would think is industry standard nationally to work in Little Rock.

RR: Yes.

AS: But, anyhow, so when I went over then to the *Gazette*, there was this situation where some of the people in sports maybe didn't like the way it had been done. Stories were that in the past--and it was still going on to some degree–Orville

would write an early story after the football game, a quick first-edition story, which would be normal length for most reporters. And then he'd keep writing and keep sending it in, and it would be added in. So by the final edition, you'd have a very lengthy, thorough game story from Orville Henry that nobody in the country probably could match for quality and size. And so they began to cut back on Orville's space and his emphasis on write, write, write, write, type.

RR: The Gannett people were?

AS: The Gannett people. It was taken to an extreme by then because he wrote it long and still wrote it tight and right, quite often. It was interesting to the readers. They were used to that, so the city readers got a long, detailed story. It was like being there at the beginning. And Orville was frustrated dealing with the people there in various ways. And among them maybe a couple of the young people in sports treated him rudely, and he wasn't getting the backing he should. And I don't remember the details. I think Orville today will tell you some of those, but he went over for, apparently, a good contract at the *Democrat* and now is writing for Donrey media for the various papers in the state.

RR: Let's fast forward to the end of the paper. What do you remember about that, the last days of the *Arkansas Gazette*?

AS: Well, we knew it was probably the end, and there'd been a major push to try to get the employees' group to buy the paper. And everyone was unhappy and fearful about it and uncertain what would happen. I don't think many people had another job. And people like me knew we weren't going to work for the

Democrat if they bought it because, simply, once you walk out of there, they're very unhappy with you, so you weren't going back. So between the people who saw it as an emotional tie to the past, the newspaper they'd grown up with, which I was almost in that situation since it was many years I'd been reading the *Gazette*, and those who felt it was the most money they were going to make anyplace. And some people felt both of those things. Then it was like the end of a career, a relative dying and losing your job and all those things at once. It was going to be traumatic, so people were fearful and uncertain. There was no detail of what was going to happen shared with many people, so by the time it got down to the very end, we were pretty sure tomorrow's going to be the day, but nobody had said it for sure. So people were told, "Take some time off if you want it," or "Take a little trip and turn in the expenses if you want to, but your story may not get published." You know, this kind of fear. "We've got some money left over. You can go do that story, but we're not sure." There were hints, but there was not anything certain. So people got--I guess those of us who didn't go in early mornings were called to come in for a meeting at midday on the--I guess that was a Friday. We published Thursday for Friday. And the amazing thing to me is I'd never seen anybody take a drink in the newsroom, but when they announced it was closing, whiskey bottles came out of various places. [Laughter] Right on the table, out on the desk, where the dignity of the old, gray lady was assaulted a little bit by the fact that it looked like a cocktail lounge in some areas there. People were pretty shocked and stunned, yet everybody knew it was going to happen.

They just didn't know when or what or how it was going to happen. So I know I kept going back. Some of us didn't want to give it up. Some people left and didn't come back that day. I came back and cleaned out my desk for a couple of weeks I think.

RR: They let you do that then?

AS: Yes. The *Democrat* people were taking over, but yet they didn't know what to do with it. They didn't know what to control. As I was saying earlier, a lot of our photo files had been destroyed and a lot of things were there and we didn't know what was left. People didn't know what they could take home that, maybe, was company property. Do you get the pencil sharpener, you know?

RR: What about your files?

AS: Well, I think I got most of my own personal files, most of my photo negatives, and most of my files of old things.

RR: Some of the reporters were not allowed to take their files. That's what some of them told me.

AS: I think that's true, but part of it--some of them abandoned, didn't come back. But for a certain period, I can't remember what it was specifically then, you could go back. So I remember being in there some days at my desk, slowly cleaning out and packing, throwing away a few things and saying, "No, I want this." And Meredith Oakley, who was associate editor at the *Democrat*, I remember her being there at least one day sitting around my desk. And Frank Fellone, who was the associate editor or whatever he is now--I don't know--but they were both in

the administration and writers over at the *Democrat*. Meredith worked on the op-ed page with Starr. And I remember their sitting around my desk, and they wanted souvenirs. I remember they wanted a couple of things that had "*Gazette*" on them.

RR: Yes.

AS: "You have a job. I've got this piece of junk." But it was something. *Gazette* stationery or some cup or something, you know?

RR: Yes.

AS: Because people at the *Democrat*, maybe more than anywhere else in the state, envied the *Gazette*. That was the thing about people who didn't go to the *Gazette*. [They] missed something. At least you could go be part of the *Gazette*. I loved the *Gazette*. It had a mystique. And as I said, I didn't become a newspaper writer until I'd taught English in college for ten years and done all these other things. So to finally have a full-time job at the *Gazette*, I was nearly fifty years old. I was forty-something years old, so to me this was a big thing and a wonderful thing. And I would like for it to exist now. And [as] for those people who were over at the *Democrat* and very successful in their own way, they had not been a part of the *Gazette*. And now they are, but it's not quite the same. They've got the name and they've got the equipment and so forth, and they do a great job, but the fact is the *Gazette*'s mystique is something that's not there. It's not with it anymore, I'm sure, because you have relatively few of the people or the policies.

RR: What did you start doing about another job? That must have been a pretty

traumatic thing.

AS: Well, they did give us some kind of an economic settlement, some months of pay or whatever. And it was at a nice rate of pay. So as soon as [I was] eligible--I think I missed a week. I could have gotten unemployment benefits because a friend was from out of town here hunting. We were hunting ducks, so I didn't go apply the day I should have, so I missed a week of that. But I started applying for college teaching jobs because I didn't see myself as ever having another opportunity to be an outdoor writer full-time in Arkansas. I did not envision that I could do that. I did start writing some that year for the Arkansas--well, I can't say. Anyway, it's a small tabloid publication in Little Rock for elderly, mature, senior citizens.

RR: *Active Age*?

AS: *Active Age*. Maybe that was it. Or what was the other one? There's another name. Anyway, I wrote for several publications, a couple of outdoor magazines, and I can't even recall the names offhand right now.

RR: Yes.

AS: But they were popular at that time. And . . . I had a column in the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, and I applied for college teaching jobs. And this was in the winter and the spring, when they aren't going to be likely to be available until fall. Mostly, I applied for those hoping to get something approaching what I made at the *Gazette* because other newspapers weren't going to pay that much. In fact, I make today in northwest Arkansas at a newspaper what I made at the *Democrat*

when I went to the *Gazette*. The *Gazette* was, even before Gannett, it was a better paying, more realistic place for people to work. I'm not saying they get paid a lot of money. Certainly, only the top Gannett executives were getting [laughs] the big bucks there, but it was good money for Arkansas journalists.

RR: Right. You didn't consider going to another state, another large paper?

AS: No. I didn't even think--well, I might have considered it a little bit. I guess I did talk to somebody at Gannett papers at Shreveport and Monroe, but they didn't have openings for outdoor writers, and their copy editing didn't pay as well as what I thought I should have to live on, so I never really applied. I never really went to any place to apply.

RR: Right. You were thinking teaching again, which you started again [?].

AS: I started teaching again.

RR: Yes.

AS: So that year I did–Let's see, when summer came, I went to work at the *Log Cabin Democrat* in Conway and started teaching. Let's see, I worked thirteen months at the *Log Cabin Democrat* in Conway as assistant city editor, which was copy editing primarily, and taught English at UCA part-time and at UALR part-time. And those overlapped somewhat, when I was teaching and writing part-time for these other publications. So that was an extremely busy year, but compared to my schedule and what I had been doing, it wasn't that bad. It was just even more diverse in that I might leave--*Log Cabin* was an afternoon paper, so you'd get off at three in the afternoon or two, three, four, or whatever, depending on what you

had to do. On salary, didn't keep up with the hours, but two days a week I know I was teaching at UCA in Conway, and the other two days [I'd] go down and teach at UALR. So I managed to get classes over at the branch at the technical center in North Little Rock, so I didn't have to drive all the way into Little Rock. So it was pretty close to Conway, and I lived at Lake Conway in Mayflower for most of that time after I moved up from Little Rock to get a little closer to that job. And I wrote for several smaller publications around and enjoyed that a great deal and actually made decent money by doing all those things at one time, but it kept you busy. I had two Labrador retrievers living with me, and they would be in crates in the back of my truck when I went to Little Rock And we'd go to the Arkansas River or backwaters or to Lake Conway or someplace and go swimming every night. They'd get their swim and retrieving and so forth. And so I didn't go anywhere without them, except I didn't take them very often to work in Conway, but they just stayed on the lounge chairs. They each had a recliner in my living room in Mayflower. [Laughter]

RR: Great. Some people take their kids to work and you take your retrievers?

AS: Right. So these were hectic days, but I loved other people. I think I was pretty much like life was destroyed. And then my father died the year I was working in Conway a little over a year after the *Gazette* closed down. And that made me feel even older. As you know, when you lose your parents, you're on that cutting edge of the end of life. Even though you're not that old, you suddenly say, "My gosh, my career's gone. My father's dead. What are we looking forward to

now?" So the thing about the closing of a major corporation of any kind, it happens everywhere, all the time, any big business where people are dependent on, it makes them feel lost, hopeless. So I think that was the terrible thing about that and people starting new careers, particularly journalists who are maybe as much as sports figures or politicians caught up in it. Their name goes on a story. The columnist has a picture with his story. He gets a lot of public attention. Some of it's bad and some of it's good, but it's attention. You've got interaction with the public, and you're called on to perform at a high level because of that attention. People know what you've thought today and what you've said and what you think when you interpret a story, and it's always interpreting no matter how much you try to do it as news. You're still interpreting it in some ways. Whatever you write about. So the end of life for a lot of people--and some of them are worse than I am--of not having really reached any pinnacle to match that or even tried to since then. People simply were left. "This is it. I've done what I wanted to do. This was my career." And they go to a state agency and work as a public relations person, or they go to a politician and represent him in public relations. They go to federal agencies.

RR: *Gazette* people have done all these things.

AS: All. Hundreds of things, no telling what all they're doing. You see their names here and there and various places, but they're not going to match what the position as a writer at the *Gazette* meant in times past and what they grew up thinking it would be to be there. If you found all of the people over the years and

asked them, "What were your goals?" "Well, I started out to do this, but I ended up writing at the *Gazette*." A lot of them ended up there because they started out to go there. They wanted to be a journalist. It was important to them. Whoever made them think that, like I was talking about the professor who made me think I should be an English professor. He was right in some ways but wrong in some ways because I didn't have the same level of focus that he did. But the young person that gives his life to a career, if you take it away, if you destroy that career, it's very hard for him to find another step up. "What do you want to be now?" "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Well, a lot of journalists don't know what they want to be when they grow up, and if you take that job away from them, they don't know where to go.

RR: That's where you all were, hundreds of them.

AS: Hundreds of people, sure, and it happens everyday in America, and it's happening right around us now and we don't know it. But for them, in particular, it's an ego thing, that they want to be important, not to control necessarily, but to be out there getting that information and getting it out to people.

RR: Yes.

AS: Not necessarily like Bob Starr, who wanted to make everybody do it his way.

RR: I see you as lucky in a way, Aubrey, that you did end up up here at a good newspaper, doing newspaper work again. When did you get up here? What year?

AS: Well, let's see, I was at the *Log Cabin* thirteen months, so I got up here–Let's see, the *Gazette* closed in the fall, then it was a year and a half later that I came up to

work at the *Morning News*.

RR: 1993, it would have been.

AS: Is that right?

RR: Okay.

AS: That's probably right.

RR: Yes.

AS: Okay, but I had a friend who was up here in graduate school, who went to work at the *Morning News* and worked there for a few weeks and got a job offer from out of state, and I told her, "Well, tell your landlord I want your apartment, and tell the editor I want your job." And I immediately, as quickly as I could get it all arranged, moved from Conway to Fayetteville to work at the *Morning News*. The major reason I lived here for years, the biggest reason was my daughter was up here, and it was what I considered home. I love Little Rock in many ways, but all the time I was in Little Rock, I was wishing I could be assigned to Fayetteville and do what I did. So, yes, it was a great thing to come up here, and I found work teaching English at the community college in Rogers/Bentonville area at the Northwest Arkansas Community College. I did that for a few semesters after I came up here, but that conflicted terribly with the night shift also. By the time I'd get up and drive way up in Benton County and teach a class or two, I had to be back at work.

RR: Describe your job a little bit at the paper.

AS: Nowadays?

RR: Yes.

AS: Well, I don't get to write very much. I think I wrote, in 1999, I think I wrote two editorials and two columns during the whole year maybe. [Laughs] And not doing any of that this year probably.

RR: Not doing any outdoor writing?

AS: No outdoor writing, strictly a news copy editor. That has involved building pages in different systems. During this time we've gone from paste-up when I first got up here to pagination with MacIntosh computers. That lasted for some years, and more recently we're now having the pagination done at the offices of Donrey media in Fort Smith, and we are now back to primarily editing copy, putting suggested headlines, and then checking proofs of the pages they create in Fort Smith, which we can do on our computers here before they go to press. So a day involves mostly reading the copy, trying to see that the reporters got the facts right--as well as a person in the office can do--recognizing discrepancies and trying to create the impression that every reporter is a good writer. And we hope the reporters who are victims of our work appreciate that. Sometimes they don't.

RR: You grab a few lessons along the way.

AS: You do. And you have to do it without appearing to because not everybody's willing to learn once they get out of school. Reporters are a proud lot and pretty much want to do it their way, and editors are, too, so there's a small conflict, but they depend on one another. You can't edit without something to edit, and you can't get it in the paper without somebody editing it and putting it on a page so,

we're all a part of a team, and it works pretty well. But, again, we're victims of changing technology, which from the time I was a kid to now the technology in newspapers has changed a lot. The press isn't very different. [Laughs] In fact, many newspapers are using pretty old presses, but they've all got computers, which didn't exist, and the technology right up to the press is different. So that now you're doing things that were only imagined when you were a kid, but I enjoy all those things because it is actually easy to learn to use the equipment. I can't imagine somebody who understands how to build a computer. I might go watch some people build a press and understand the steps, but a computer is a magic creature whose guts I can't envision. But it's pretty easy for older people, middle-aged people, to adapt to changing technology if they're willing. So that's not been a problem. Because of what we talked about earlier, I don't value the design of the paper as much as the content. I think it's important and in today's competitive world, who am I to say that it's not more important, but I don't think it is. I think that for the majority of the people who actually read the darn thing for more than just a specialized area, it's the content, and the look is--well, they know that paper looks that way. Our paper right now from the latest redesign probably has a percentage of white space that is unheard of. Every story in recent weeks, it seems that after the people in Fort Smith work on it, they leave out half of every story, maybe, on average. I'm not sure what the average is, but it's from one-third to two-thirds left out of every story simply because the design reduces the amount of copy you can get on a page.

RR: So you're not jumping from page one anymore?

AS: We do jump, but even then it just cuts it down. Instead of having a pica space between elements on a page, we've got two or more or two-and-a-half, it looks like. Well, that leaves a lot of lines, a lot of words.

RR: Yes.

AS: Plus, we've gone to smaller paper, so the format just doesn't allow for much. So while we've got new writers, more writers, more people, working at producing a good paper, we can't get all the information in, and I think that's a tragedy. I think Thursday night or Friday, maybe, we got a page back from Fort Smith, and I said, "No, just give me that page and let me . . .," after I saw the proof. So I just took one story that could hold off and got in nearly all of the story because they had put some insignificant thing under this story that a reporter had worked hard to get and would be well read in that community. Since we're doing four editions, trying to specialize in these communities, then you sure as heck don't want to leave out part of a story in the town where it's most important, where it happened, or where it's significant to the readers. You might leave it out in one of the other towns, either the whole story or part of the story, but you don't want to cut it in the hometown because that's what the name of the game is. But the people in Fort Smith [who are] doing it may not be cognizant of the significance of this. I've read this, talked to a reporter while I was doing it and so forth, and we've already edited this thing.. We don't want to throw it out.

RR: Are you still staying until the last press run, or do you just stay until midnight or

so?

AS: We just have the opportunity to look at the first one that comes out. They are printing Rogers first, I think maybe this week, so when they run the edition of the paper with the Rogers front page, we get to look at it, and they don't even stop for the others.

RR: Right.

AS: They change those plates out on the fly.

RR: What time do you get to go home?

AS: So I'm going home, instead of 2 a.m., I'm going home around midnight some nights now, between twelve and two.

RR: How many years of your life have you spent working until midnight or later in the newspaper business?

AS: Well, certainly from the time I went to the *Democrat* in 1983, I've done that consistently until now. In the past it was different mostly.

RR: There's one more thing that sets newspaper folks apart from everybody else, [laughs] the hours they keep. I had to wind down afterward.

AS: Well, I guess that's the funny thing to explain to people, that when you work that late, you don't go to bed instantly because you do wind down. When I go home, I let my Labrador retrievers out to play in the yard and exercise and feed them. Well, first, I have to close up my chickens, be sure to count the chickens in the chicken house, be sure they're all safely in there and then close that up because they've been ranging free in the afternoon. Then I let my dogs out.

RR: You can confide in me for history. Now, how many dogs do you have?

AS: I've got five Labrador retrievers.

RR: Oh, my.

AS: Yes.

RR: Four of them legal.

AS: Four of them. Well, the city says you can only have four. Well, I thought, the oldest one, I thought, was going to die two years ago . . .

RR: [Laughs] Okay.

AS: . . . when his wife produced the puppies. So I kept three puppies, and the old man has survived.

RR: Yes. Old men will do that.

AS: Yes.

RR: So you've got five dogs, some rabbits . . .

AS: Four rabbits.

RR: . . . chickens, some cats.

AS: Fourteen chickens and a turkey, something like that.

RR: If anybody's looking at this a hundred years from now, doing research on newspapers and get to wondering how big a farm this man lived on, [laughs] you might explain where you live.

AS: Well, I live in south Fayetteville in an old farmhouse that historically had a barnyard. When I bought it in recent years, I said, "Leave those chickens and leave those rabbits for me and I'll bring my own dogs." And the cats just showed

up, so we just enjoy playing at farming there.

RR: But it's in the middle of town!

AS: It's in town, yes, it's well within the city limits, but it's in a part of town that has a little open space left around the back, and if I ever get so that I can buy the property next door out back, I'll keep it that way. I'm afraid somebody will figure out a way to develop it.

RR: Someday I'd like to interest your paper or one of your competitors in a phenomenon in Fayetteville, and that is the large number of livestock in the city limits. I saw cattle and horses--All over town you see pastures with livestock grazing--and I've never seen that in any other city that I've ever lived in.

AS: Well, some of those places, though, if you talk to the people in the older houses around, they'll say there are an awful lot of subdivisions out here in the country. [Laughter]

RR: Okay.

AS: So that's a change that must occur everywhere, but it's pretty shocking around Fayetteville.

RR: Aubrey, this has been fun. Is there anything that you can think of that ought to be said before winding up, about the *Gazette* or any other aspect of your career?

AS: Well, I hope that the newspapers that exist will thrive and they won't let the competition destroy any of them really because the competition is interesting. It becomes wasteful like the *Democrat* and the *Gazette*. If somebody has to win to

take over the market, that's a tragedy because the more diversity you have of sources of information, the better, particularly with newspapers whose traditional role has been pretty important. There are so many more sources of information now. I think, when we get so that there's no competition and all the papers are owned by the same people, that they won't have to allow columnists with diverse opinions. They won't have to be objective in the news coverage, and that's a tragedy for the people, because you've got to have somebody looking over the shoulder of politicians and business people and sports figures--every character in our society needs a little scrutiny to keep him straight, including journalists. And, when it comes down to it, the journalists keep one another straight and when they're all on the same team, it might not happen. And, if they don't keep one another straight, who's going to keep all those other guys straight? So I hope that newspapers as we know them will continue to exist powerfully enough to last long enough to see that they are replaced by an equally devoted type of medium that might not quite exist yet. We don't know what's happening with the Internet. We don't know how important it's going to be. The newspapers now have Web sites and give away the paper free at two in the morning on their Web site, in many cases, but so far that hasn't made much money, so we don't know what that's going to amount to. It is good that it's free, but somehow there's got to be an independent press, if you will, which in today's world--it's not the right term because not everybody uses a press--but somehow there's got to be somebody overseeing the details of life from the objective point of view, somebody who

will--I say overseeing. I should say looking over, watching over, and looking out for the public's good and maybe not telling them what to think, but giving them the information with which the voter can decide how to vote. You've got to have all the information you can possibly get. As long as we have a democratic society, its quality will be governed by the quality of information the voter has, the quality of information that the voter uses to come up with an opinion. Without that we're in real trouble as a world, as a nation, as a state, as a city, as a community. The paper right now still has that role, and I hope that something similar develops from it if it doesn't exist a century from now.

RR: Yes.

[End of Interview]