Gazette Project

Interview with

Ray White,
Little Rock, Arkansas,
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Interviewer: Jerol Garrison

Jerol Garrison: The aim of this interview is to shed light on what kind of a newspaper the *Gazette* was. We want to talk about the quality of the *Gazette* and the people who produced it. Why don't we start off by just asking you to describe when you worked for the *Gazette* and what type of work you did.

Ray White: Okay, I think I probably should start by saying that I came to the *Gazette* right out of college. I was green as grass and there was really no way that I was mature enough to comprehend or understand what kind of newspaper I had gotten myself hooked up with. I was hired by A. R. Nelson, at the princely sum of about fifty-five dollars a week, to be on the "crap desk," which was the place where you filed obits, wrote little, tiny short items, and so on. Just by a stroke of genius and luck, I was sitting right next to Bill Shelton , whom I consider to be just a wonderful role model, in terms of caring about the content of the newspaper and caring about the right, the important, things in producing journalism.

I graduated in 1968 at Hendrix College. I had a degree in English and had worked for the school paper, mostly as a cartoonist. I also had written

some things and was editor of the literary magazine up there, so I thought I was hot stuff — and I was not — and I came down to Little Rock because a friend of mine, Tim Hackler, had always intended to become a journalist and had gotten himself hired on as a reporter at the competing *Arkansas Democrat*. We took an apartment at the Crestwood Manor, which was a kind of, uh, cheesy apartment complex off Kavanaugh on the way toward the Heights. So that's where we were and we talked about news all the time, we talked about our jobs all the time, we talked about the people that worked there all the time and we really had a great time.

JG: He was with the *Democrat.*

RW: He was with the *Democrat* and I was with the *Gazette*. We wouldn't share secrets with each other but we did have a good time — lively discussions about the news. Of course, the copy desk at the paper at that time was just marvelous. It was really a great copy desk. Bob Douglas was the news editor and the copy desk chief. His assistant was Bill Rutherford, whom we made merciless fun of, as kids would, because he wore white socks and he didn't seem as sophisticated as some of the other people around the desk and he wasn't as young, and so on, so . . .

JG: Bob Douglas wore the white socks?

RW: No. Bob Douglas may have worn white socks, but he also had a certain *gravitas* that kept us, uh, kept us off his case. But around that rim were Paul Nielsen, Paul Johnson, and Richard Portis, brother of Charles (Buddy) Portis, the novelist, and they were always playing tricks on each other and really having a great time. Yet

there was a really high quality of editing, and thinking about editing, that was going on. And certainly the news play was just impeccable. The *Gazette* always had a real genius for how to play a news story and I think Bob Douglas was largely responsible for that. This was an incredible year to start in journalism, because it was 1968 and there were all kinds of things happening. Just a whole lot of stuff was going on. There were assassinations. There was a national race. There was Lyndon Johnson. There was the Vietnam War. Not only did we talk about journalism, we also talked about how the national media had kind of blown the Vietnam story. Actually only a few newspapers were kind of figuring it out at that time and starting to report what a disaster the Vietnam War was for America. And Bobby Kennedy was killed, and you just name it. So, that was the environment. Then the people, the cast of characters, both there and at the *Democrat*, were very interesting. Divisions were more along generational lines than they were along *Gazette-Democrat*. The competition, and what was going on, was generational. There was George Douthit, you know, and Karr Shannon, and the other old fogies at the *Democrat*, but there were also some young kids like Hackler and Bill Eddins over at the *Democrat* who were giving it a little bit of life and spunk.

JG: Bill Eddins?

RW: Yes. He's at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* now.

In the *Gazette* newsroom, though, were really wonderful, solid reporters like Ernie Valachovic, who was a solid reporter, and just a real upstanding person, and so

on. There was Jerol Garrison. Talk about confidence! You just had confidence all around. Now, I was 21 years old. I didn't understand this, I didn't realize that it was just serendipity that I had fallen in amid all of these wonderful writers. I mean, Bill Lewis, who, say what you like about him, always had some kind of approach to his writing, always structured his stories, always had a theme, and was just brilliant at the twenty-five to thirty inch range. You had Ernie Dumas, I mean, who was writing better than that? Of course, there was a competition going on there. There was a competition to get your story on page one. And byline competition was going on, too. Bylines weren't like today, just slap a byline on anything, you had to earn your byline. Certainly, as a young reporter you felt that more than somebody who was on a beat.

JG: We were talking about the people in the newsroom. You were on the crap desk, or were you on the copy desk?

RW: Well that's kind of an interesting story. I was on the crap desk really only about two weeks. It's a really great story. There came a day they had so much news going on that they ran out of reporters. So Shelton noticed me and he said, "Okay, kid, you're going to go out and cover this story." It was kind of a funny story. Some kids had gotten together to set up a lemonade stand to raise money to buy a giraffe for the city zoo. So, he gave me a notebook and a pen, and I said, "Well, what am I supposed to do?" He said, "Just go out there and get everything you can think of and bring it back here and write it all up. Don't worry if you think you're putting in too much. We'll take out what shouldn't be in there, so you just

go ahead and put anything you want in the story. Go out there and find out as much as you can about this and come back." There was a deadline, the deadline was six-thirty or seven o'clock, somewhere in there, and this was about, probably noon, or one o'clock. So, I had to go out there and talk to these people. I talked to the parents of the kids, I talked to the kids. I came back, made calls to the zoo, and so on, and I wrote a story. On the basis of that story I got promoted to reporter. They made me a reporter on the spot. And that was a wonderful way to get into journalism, because I really felt that I had done something to get to where I was. I think I got a five dollar raise, or something like that, but to me it was kind of a big deal. I still did fill in and write obits and help George Boosey, who was also on the crap desk, and got to write stories occasionally, but my main job from then on was being a reporter. That story — actually, my daughter was attending a party up in the Heights and she saw on the wall a copy of that clipping that had been framed, and that story was hanging up in a house out there in the Heights . . .

JG: That 1968 story was hanging on the wall, and what year was this?

RW: This was just, like, the other day.

JG: Now, in the year 2000?

RW: Yes. And it had my byline, and she said, "Do you know who that is?" They said, "No, we just remember this guy came out and did this story about our children." She said, "Well, that's my father."

JG: And your daughter's name is?

RW: Callie. Callie White. So, I've always thought that was funny.

JG: Very. And unique.

RW: That was my very first story to be published in the *Gazette*. I guess, if I have another claim to fame, I covered a country-western beauty contest that was kind of a sleazy thing. They sent me out there because there was a girl who was going to do a dance with a boa constrictor as her talent in this country-western competition. The claim to fame is that the picture that I took of her with her snake raised a huge debate over whether we could run a picture of a belly button in the paper. Finally the forces of reason won out. They told me, at the time, anyway, that it was the first time a woman's belly button had been published in the paper.

JG: Probably the first time a snake had run in the paper.

RW: Probably the first time — it was a rare occasion for a snake to get in the paper because there was a ban on photographs of snakes in the paper. But it was kind of necessary to go along with this to illustrate this story.

JG: Did you take the picture and write the story both?

RW: Yes. I did that a lot, actually. I don't know why, but they would give me a camera and I would go out–I shot only one picture that I think was any good.

JG: What is that?

RW: I was assigned to cover the annual counting of the birds. The Audubon Society had an annual bird count. I was supposed to go out to Burns Park and link up with the people who were having the bird count and write a story about it. So, I went out to Burns Park and drove all around but I never found anybody. At five-thirty I came back to the office and I said, "Shelton, I can't find these people."

There were no cell phones or anything like that back in those days. They said, "We've got to have that story, the old man says we've got to have that story, so, dammit, you've got to get it."

JG: The "old man" meaning . . .

RW: J. N. Heiskell. Yes. He cared about the bird count and the weather, and certain other things. Anyway, I called the guy who was running the bird count and he said, "Oh, we're all home, we all went home." I said, can I come over there, and maybe somebody can go outside and look for a bird and I'll take a picture." He said, "Sure." So, I run, I mean , I'm driving like . . .

JG: This was in February, wasn't it?

RW: December, actually. It was cold. No leaves on the trees, which actually turned out to be for the good. Well, anyway, on two wheels, I'm going out there to this place to get this story on the bird count. So that gave me enough facts to write about a ten-inch story. Then they also went outside. The sun was going down, I mean, there was not enough light to shoot a picture. So, I thought, the only way I'm going to get a picture is to silhouette these people against the sky. I lay down on the ground and shot up with them looking with binoculars into the sky–of course, there were no birds in sight anywhere, but I just happened to luck out. I bracketed, which means taking several different exposures, and in one of them the clouds were in a wonderful design in the sky. It turned out to be a great picture. I forget if it ran on page one–I think it was on the Metro page. But they played it big, and I got really good play for the story. The story also came out all right.

JG: By the "Metro page" you meant the front page of the Metro, the "B" section.

RW: The split page, yes.

JG: That sounds great, like great fun.

RW: It was a lot of fun to work there.

JG: You were a reporter at the *Gazette* for about a year?

RW: A little less than a year. Then I was lured away by the competition. Gene Foreman had come up to the *Democrat.* And Foreman, of course, one of the best known journalists from Arkansas, wound up at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. He eventually hired me to work at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and I spent twenty years there, from '73 to '93.

JG: He hired you to work for the *Democrat*.

RW: He hired me to work for the *Democrat*. And Bill Shelton pulled me aside, he said, "You do not want to do this, you not want to go over there. That's a terrible newspaper and you're just ruining your career, you could have a good career here." I had already told Foreman I was taking the job. And I was a kid. I was kind of stupid. I said, "Well, I've already taken this job, and I think that Foreman"–and, in a way, that did turn out to be the . . .

JG: Did you know Gene Foreman?

RW: I did not know Gene Foreman. The way that Foreman found out about me was through Hackler, my roommate. And Hackler kept telling me that, well, they were just trying to hire anybody who could write an English sentence over there. And he hired me as an editor. Which in hindsight was a terrible mistake.

JG: What kind of editor?

RW: I was the editor of the Sunday Magazine, which was then called *Enjoy*. We all laughed about the name. Terrible. It had horrible fiction in it. It had, you know, horrible local fiction. It had . . . oh, it was just a disaster. So, I kind of came over there to pep it up and liven it up. I had no idea what I was doing, I was a kid. I learned a lot. I learned a great deal, and Foreman helped me a great deal, and so on. But I would not want to go back to revisit those issues of the newspaper. And the things I wrote at the *Democrat* were not as good as the stuff I wrote at the *Gazette,* because I was not being edited as well, or coached and handled as well. I was at the *Democrat* for about nine months, then I got mustered out to the Reserves, then I came back and worked for another year or so at the *Democrat*.

JG: What did you do that last year at the *Democrat*? Did you still do this *Enjoy* magazine?

RW: Oh, I was copy editor, but mostly did "featuresy" sorts of things. Editors there were expected to write a lot, too. And you assigned yourself stories, which was a bad idea. Maybe if you're on a beat, okay, but it's good to have a commission. The commission at the *Gazette*, and I think that this is one of the things that I would like to make a point of, the commission at the *Gazette* was just perfect. It was: find out everything you can, write it all down, put it all in the story, and we'll try to publish it. If you put in something inappropriate, we've got editors here who'll backstop you, and we'll take care of you. Check your facts, two and three times. Get all the facts. I had many experiences with Shelton where I would go

out, report the story, write it up, bring it over to Shelton, Shelton would sit down, he'd read for about a minute-and-a-half and he'd say, "Well, what about this?" And he'd ask me a question, and I'd say, "Well, I don't know," and he'd say, "Well, call them up." So I'd call back, but about the sixth time you call somebody back to ask one more question, they're thinking you're an idiot. But you just say, "Well, you know, I just forgot to ask," or, "I should have asked something and didn't do it." That really improved stories a lot. And it gave them the kind of polished touch that you needed to have, and, in fact, the idea was that you weren't "writing" — and I hate to see people with stars in their eyes writing out there — the hard part is the reporting and then the ordering of the facts, and getting everything in the right order. That's, I think, what happens in a good news story. And that's what they were doing at the *Gazette*. I feel very lucky and privileged to have had the experience of working there, briefly, and then to try to bring some of that to the *Inquirer* when I was there.

JG: Now, tell me about the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Gene Foreman moved from the *Democrat* up to the *Inquirer*?

RW: No, actually, he was at the *New York Times*, and they had a strike. He had a bunch of kids, so he couldn't weather the strike so he came to Pine Bluff. Now, that's the way the story has been told to me. I think he also tells the story that he was just ready to move and that he came down to be a managing editor. He was managing editor of the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, and as you know, the *Commercial* was very good, too. George Wells was down there writing State House stories.

He did a great job. And Kathy Wells. Both of them were writing really strong stuff. You had Tucker Steinmetz, I think he was a *Pine Bluff Commercial* guy. He was terrific. Bill Eddins worked there as a kid in high school. Mary Lowe Kennedy. You had some real talent down there at the *Pine Bluff Commercial* that was a kind of feeder for both the *Gazette* and *Democrat*.

JG: Mary Lowe Kennedy?

RW: Mary Lowe Kennedy. She was a banker's daughter. When she was in high school she asked her daddy to buy her a Linotype machine. She was really into it, she had the printer's ink in her blood. She also wound up at the *Inquirer*.

JG: Anyway, Gene Foreman went from the *Pine Bluff Commercial* to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*?

RW: No, he went from the *PBC* to the *Democrat*, then from the *Democrat* to *Newsday*, on Long Island. And he worked at *Newsday* on Long Island quite a while before moving over to the *Inquirer*. Gene Roberts lured him away from *Newsday* to be managing editor. Roberts was executive editor and former news editor at the newly-acquired *Inquirer*. Knight-Ridder had just purchased the *Inquirer* and there was a shakeup. I was hired in the first wave of the "hillbilly mafia," about eight or nine people from Arkansas who eventually ended up working at the *Inquirer*.

JG: Were you hired to be a reporter?

RW: I was hired as a copy editor. I spent most of my career as an editor. That was probably a mistake, but we won't go into that.

JG: Did you eventually get to go over into design work at the *Inquirer*?

RW: Yes. I started as copy editor, then I went on to the news desk as what they called assistant news editor. The reason you would take that promotion was to make a certain level of pay that accrued to being a D.A., or Desk Assistant, they called it, and that involved laying out pages as well as copy editing. So, I was the caption writer for six months. The caption writers were having trouble writing concise captions, so for six months that was my job, to just write all the captions in the newspaper. We had a universal desk. At that time I think there were nine or ten copy editors at the *Inquirer*. Now, there may be fifty. It was a growing phase. The competitor in Philadelphia, the *Evening Bulletin*, went out of business while we were there, while our paper gained in size and became much more respectable. It was a pretty bad newspaper before Knight-Ridder bought it. Under Foreman and Roberts it became, sort of, <u>the</u> place to work in the country. You were just tripping over the Nieman Fellows and Pulitzer winners, and it was a pretty interesting thing.

I worked on two Pulitzer Prize-winning projects. One was about the Farview Prison for the criminally insane. I was the chief copy editor for this series by Wendell Rawls and Acel Moore.

JG: You were the copy desk editor for this series?

RW: Right.

JG: It was about the Farview . . .

RW: The Farview Prison for the Criminally Insane, and they had been warehousing people who were not insane but whose families had connections and could get

them locked up. One guy wound up in a room for 30 years because he was complaining about being locked up, and when he came out of it, he was nuts. They documented all that and wrote quite a compelling series that won the Pulitzer Prize, I forget the year.

JG: The other story?

RW: The other, well, actually, there were two others. I worked on the Three Mile Island story, which won a public service award, which was awarded to the *Inquirer*, generally. I was on the news desk at that time. I just laid out pages and I didn't consider myself to really have much to do with that one.

But I was also chief editor on a law and justice series by Bill Marimow, who is now executive editor at the *Baltimore Sun*. I don't know if your're familiar with *Precision Journalism,* a book written by Phillip Myer and a reporter from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. The idea was that you would go out and collect data, and instead of just flying by the seat of your pants and writing up a story, — well, computers had come into being and they used punch cards to collect data and did this quick and dirty research to find out what the trends were, like, we knew there was a problem with arrests in Philadelphia. They looked at all the arrests and they tried to pick out cases that fit in to the profile that was developed through statistics. They could show statistically that these arrests were being made that shouldn't be, and they're using too much force here, things like that. Then, they would look into the data and they would find a representative sample, and go out and really report hard. I mean, just write every nuanced detail of a person's life

who had been investigated. And that way the story then became a compelling narrative. But it had all this underlying research. You weren't just telling a very compelling narrative story, you were also telling something that made a point about a societal problem that needed to be corrected. So, that won an award not just because it was an interesting read, but because it pioneered a kind of journalism that was then coming into use, which I thought was a great idea.

JG: The subject, again, was

RW: Law and justice in Philadelphia. I was the chief copy editor on that series. I wrote headlines, handled copy, and actually got some of the leads changed on some big stories.

As a copy editor there are two things that you can do that'll really make your day, one is to get a story killed, because it has so many problems and unanswered questions that no editor and no reporter can answer them. That was part of the joy of being a copy editor. Sometimes we even would put a little mark on the side of our typewriter that we had gotten a story killed.

JG: A notch.

RW: Right. And the proofreaders, who were in the composing room, for them to get a story killed, that was their greatest joy, because that showed that the copy desk had fallen apart, and so on, and that they were the last line of defense. Then the other thing that you could do was to get the lead of an important story that, you know, somebody had thought about for a month, to get that lead changed, because it didn't jibe with the rest of the story. I got Barlett and Steele, whom you may

have heard about, the guys who wrote *America, What Went Wrong?*, to change the lead on their story about Howard Hughes. I guess they were the main purveyors of precision journalism, because they used a lot of statistics and records, and they got more and more sophisticated as they went along in their ability to use the tools of research and investigation to develop stories. They would spend about a year on each project.

JG: Just so I understand, were they working at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*?

RW: Yes. They were the chief investigative team at the *Inquirer*. They, too, have won a Pulitzer.

JG: You were a copy editor when you were hired by the *Democrat-Gazette* as design director?

RW: I was the weekend editor, then I was the deputy features editor. That was probably my best job at the *Inquirer.* I rose to that level and now my career has been in decline ever since, I've been moving backwards ever since then [laughs].

JG: No, I wouldn't say that.

RW: I went to the news desk and then got interested in — well, all the good design work was going to happen in the art department. I mean, you could lay out pages, that was what I used to do, taking a pencil, drawing a page, then send it to the composing room. Somebody would make it up in either lead or paper, depending. I remember the old hot metal shops, I fondly remember the old hot metal shops. I've worked as a make-up editor at the *Inquirer* and the *Democrat*. They were wonderful, wild, crazy, wacky places to work, but loud, and dominated by guys in

undershirts pushing two hundred pound pages around with sweat dripping off them. And it was a contentious place, because there were deadlines to make and that was where the rubber really hit the road, that was where you turned the page, and everybody else could pretend they were making a deadline, but the real deadlines were made in the composing room. But I got off on a tangent there. So, I was deputy features editor, then I went up and worked on the news desk and laid out the Sunday B section. There was another guy there called "Crazy" Ron Patel. He's not with us any more, he died. His nickname was CR, for Crazy Ron. He laid out the A section and I laid out Metro section, the B section. My nickname was Cosmic Ray, and, actually, more people in Philadelphia called me Cosmo than called me Ray. I was also CR, so the two CRs laid out the Sunday paper. We did a lot of feature sections in addition to that. But the really interesting design work was in the art department, so I went to Foreman and said, "I think I need to be in the art department." He said, "But you're not a graphics artist." I said, "Well, I'll learn to be a graphics artist." They didn't have an answer for that so they put me in the art department. They said, "If you don't learn to be a graphics artist in six months, you're coming back out to work on the news desk." I said okay, and, anyway, I passed that test. I was in the art department for about three years, mainly as a page designer, trying to do feature pages, and trying to push the envelop a little bit in terms of using computers. I was one of the first people ever to use computers at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* to lay out pages through pagination. In fact I was picked as the person to do the first

few pages in pagination. Actually, they picked somebody else but they got so frustrated they gave up, or, it didn't work out.

JG: But you were on the cutting edge.

RW: Occasionally. And we were using a system designed for our newspaper, an ATEX system that was a lot different than PageMaker and QuarkXPress.

JG: So, when you came to the *Democrat-Gazette* . . .

RW: Okay, when I came back in '93, I had my choice of being Sunday editor or the design director. I decided that I wanted to be the design director, because I was politically incorrect for my new newspaper. I thought I would be having a lot of fights with people, so I opted to be the design director, and that's worked out pretty well in terms of, you know, not getting fired [laughs].

JG: So, you immediately went to work laying out pages by computer, or was the *Democrat-Gazette* doing that?

RW: Actually, one of the reasons I <u>came</u> here, or, one of the reasons it was easy for me to come here, was that, well, (John Robert) Starr was gone [laughs]–and I had always wanted to come back to Arkansas–but, beyond that, I thought that Clay Carson and Barry Arthur had put together for about a half a million dollars a pagination system and a method of computer typesetting that was superior to the one at Philadelphia where they had spent $3 million with the Sytex Corporation. They had a huge committee, which I was on, well, actually I was not on the selection committee for Sytex, but the deal in corporations is to be on committees, and I was on a bunch of committees in Philadelphia. The main one was one I

helped start myself, which was called the Blue Sky Committee. A guy named David Sullivan and I co-chaired the Blue Sky Committee, and our commission was to think up projects new to the newspaper, things that nobody was doing at that time at our paper. We looked at other papers. Computer systems reporting got a real big push from our committee. Neil Borowski got his start in that committee, you've probably heard of him. We also had a hand in getting the science section started at the *Inquirer*. That got a push from our committee. And there were other issues that we got involved in. But I think they, you know, put all of us bad apples on this committee so that we could bitch and whine among ourselves.

JG: As design director at the *Democrat-Gazette*, what are your duties?

RW: I manage and work with a staff of about twenty designers who lay out the paper. We've put the copy desk and design desk together now, and it's a little unclear as to how that works, but, anyway, I'm responsible for the look and feel of the paper. I also do some pages myself, and I do some special projects. My main job is to make sure we hire and train designers, find people, stay abreast of technology, things like that. I'd really like to talk about the *Gazette* in 1968. What I'm doing now is okay, but 1968, and the people at the *Gazette*, well, a lot of my heroes are from there.

JG: Well, you've already spoken about the white socks. Bob Douglas and Bill Rutherford both wore white socks.

RW: Well, the person who got teased about it was Bill Rutherford, and the reason he

got teased about it was that he defended himself by saying that he was allergic to the dyes that were in socks. A lot of us thought that was b.s. so we would tease him about that. And, I don't know, Rutherford was serious, and I think everybody else was, kind of, ironical about things. And I love the late Bill Rutherford, don't get me wrong, and I have a great deal of respect for him. But in that newsroom with a bunch of whippersnappers who were very irreverent, and he was reverent, he was religious and not afraid to show it. There were a bunch of people in there who were very irreligious, and, like I said, there was this generational thing that was going on about how you behave. The people at the copy desk were basically hippies. I mean, their attitude, and their ethos, and their thinking about America, or our political affairs, was really over on the left. And the paper was over on the left. And that was fun, that was good. That was one of its attractions to me. The thinking among the working press, as long as I've been in it has been progressive. We don't say "liberal" any more, we say "progressive." The editorial policies of almost all papers I've worked for have been vastly more conservative than mine, including the *Gazette's*. But it was right on the war and it was right on integration and it was right on civil rights. It was right on a lot of the important, cutting edge issues of the day. You had to respect that. You had J. O. Powell. You had Mike Trimble in there, good grief, you had people who were really writing, and writing well. I was just trying to survive, or stay even. I was cocky, really cocky, as a kid. I thought I could just get in there and do with the best of them.

JG: Where was your desk in the newsroom? Was it right in the middle of the

newsroom, or did you have a desk?

RW: Yes, I had a desk. It was right behind Shelton. They didn't want to get me too far away from some kind of control. It faced Ernie Valachovic, and Ernie and I would talk. He was gruff but he was really a good mentor. In fact there were a lot of good mentors at the paper. People who would say, "Look, kid, you're not doing it right. Do this." Paul Johnson was like that. He'd come over with a story and say, "Why did you say this?" And I'd say, "Well, uh, I don't know," and we would have conversations about it. And that was a great learning process, not only for language — there were things I couldn't get about the language, like the "who - whom" thing. I never got that. I had to learn that after I got to Philadelphia. "Sequence of tenses" was a mystery to me until I got to Philadelphia, and had to be a copy editor. There were a number of things that I just flat out didn't know because, you know, I didn't go to Harvard.

JG: But you went to Hendrix.

RW: I went to Hendrix, which was a good school, and so on, but there are certain linguistic nuances — maybe they escape every college student, but I don't think they do, I think that the kids who go to prep school, and go to the eastern "ivys," come out of that with that background, having read all the classics. I never heard of Fowler until Gene Foreman threw it at me one day.

JG: What was that word, again?

RW: Fowler, that big book on usage. And Ed Newman. I hate Ed Newman. They want to put language in a box. So does Fowler. But they do have something to

say. If you're trying to be literate, that is part of the deal. You've got to understand those rules before you break them. But we were just going out there and breaking them. We didn't know anything and we just went ahead.

JG: Did the political views of the *Gazette* staff affect the news coverage?

RW: In the newsroom, probably the staff there was liberal, but it definitely wanted to cover things objectively. And, of course, there were people in the political system at that time who were racist whom we were all wildly opposed to. But you were commissioned to write about those people with just the facts, and not try to point in one direction or the other. That was a strength of the *Gazette*, that it didn't play favorites, even to people that it found repellant. Your great joy was to write a story that was in favor of something that you, personally, were against, that worked in the interest of something you were opposed to. That was a proof of objectivity. I think that the paper did that constantly. There were many, many stories in there where an editorial person might come in and comment later, and change course. But the news story, you couldn't look at the news story and say, "Oh, that person was thinking this way," or, "That person was thinking that way." And that was the test, I think, of whether you're being objective or not. And then there are larger tests where what you cover — well, we've learned a lot since 1968 about how the newspapers direct the conversation but they don't necessarily influence opinion. But they can get people to think about certain topics. We have to develop an awareness of that, and to be more careful about selecting <u>what</u> we cover, and not just let people who are making a loud noise be the things that we

cover.

JG: Let me ask about your memories of J. N. Heiskell.

RW: Heiskell was a real presence in the room, whether he was there or not. Shelton was definitely aware of things Heiskell was interested in, particularly the weather, and the crap desk guy got to write the weather, every day. And it was a kind of a good exercise because you knew that Heiskell was going to read it. So you were careful with it.

One day we got a call, I was answering the phone, so I picked up the phone and a voice says, "There's a car wreck at Third and Main." This was almost incoherent. But, immediately, "click." I put the phone down and I said, "Shelton, I just got the weirdest phone call I ever got in my life." And he leaped out of his chair and said, "That was the old man! What did he say?" I said, "Well, he said that there's an accident at Third and Main. I believe that's what he said." He said, "Get Obsitnik, send him to Third and Main." Larry Obsitnik, of course, was the chief photographer, and he [Shelton] wanted to have a photograph of this fender-bender. I said, "Mr. Shelton, this is a little fender-bender. We don't even run those things in the paper." He said, "I don't care. We're going to cover this." He goes down, tells Obsitnik, he got a picture. We got the police report and everything. I believe Heiskell called back the next day and asked if we had covered that thing. We said, "Yes, sir, we did. It wasn't worth putting in the paper." He said, "Bye," and that was it. But what it said to me was that Heiskell wanted us to be aware of everything that was going on. And to report those things

that were worth mentioning. If he saw something happen that he thought was newsworthy, he would call the city desk. And he would not announce who he was. He would just blurt out what it was and hang up. This happened several times while we were there. I got so I could identify Heiskell's calls.

JG: Just from his voice?

RW: Oh yes. Well, just from the whole thing, I mean, it was just obvious.

JG: He never said, "This is Mr. Heiskell . . ."

RW: Never. No. He did not announce himself in any way. He just blurted it out and hung up. Then I would leap out of my chair and say, "That was Heiskell! Quick." And whatever we had to do we would do. I don't think any of these things ever resulted in an actual article being published in the paper. But we were covering them. We were noticing them, we were aware of them, and we could have put all the facts in, if we had wanted to. He was dapper. I would see him in the elevator sometimes, and he had a rumpled kind of dapperness about him.

JG: He was probably in his eighties by then.

RW: At least. Nineties, and driving, and everybody was terrified that he was driving, but he was driving. This was about the time his wife had a car wreck that, sort of, persuaded her not to drive any more. So, that was kind of an issue.

But Shelton had the utmost admiration for Heiskell. And, I heard any number of times, while I was working at the *Gazette*, the story of Heiskell being offered — somebody walked into his office and had a cashier's check for a million dollars, and said,"Here's a check for a million dollars, if you'll just hand over the

Gazette." And Heiskell, just taking that very lightly, said, "Well, I don't think I need this."

JG: What was the check for?

RW: To try to buy the *Gazette* so that they could change its direction. The *Gazette* was out of sync with the state of Arkansas. It was a liberal paper in a very conservative state. It was anti-Faubus, rabidly anti-Faubus. And rightly so. And they've been proven out. The positions the *Gazette* took are the ones that have worked out. And almost nobody would go back and support what was going on back then. That happened in '57, I came in '68, eleven years after the fact. Gene Foreman was there just after the '57 crisis and he gets a good dose of it, and he passes that on, and the people at the paper got a really good dose of what covering a huge, national story was like and made these people aware of their role in a way that was different from any place I've worked. They were very proud, I mean, the paper was proud. You had a lot of pride in being a *Gazette* reporter. When I would say that I was a *Gazette* reporter, out in the community, people would perk up, and "Oh," "Ah-ha," you know, it was a really great job for a 21-year-old.

JG: You were probably 22 when you left?

RW: Right. The advanced age of twenty-two. A wizened, old expert. But the people who were there were very impressive.

JG: What is your memory of Bill Shelton?

RW: I have a lot of memories of Bill Shelton. I think mainly of his pain. He was in pain a lot of the time. I think he experienced some physical pain, but I was aware

sitting next to him that things pained Bill Shelton. He did not like facts that were wrong. He was pained by people who were obnoxious. He did not suffer fools gladly. He would sit there, and PR people would come in, and he would accept their little offerings, or their little sheets of paper, with a cracked smile and say thank you, or, not thank you, but he would accept it anyway. Sometimes somebody would be seen through the door that he would not want to talk to, or see, or in any way, shape, or form, meet. It was usually some glad-hand, some person who was real peppy and perky. He hated all those people, and he would run to the back shop and have a smoke or just hang out there in the back shop for a while, get a Coke — he'd say, "I'm going to get a Coke," when he'd see one of these turkeys coming. Occasionally people would call up, and they would be irate, they would be very irate. Shelton would listen to them, and he would say, "Thank you very much." You could tell that he was not happy about getting those kinds of calls. He would just grit his teeth through them, and they pained him. He would defend his paper, if it needed it. If not, he'd say, "Thank you very much," and assign a correction, or whatever. If a man was living by "duty" as his watchword, that was Shelton. Shelton did his duty. Actually, I should tell you about the first time I met Shelton. That was after A. R. Nelson hired me and brought me out to Bill Shelton and presented me as his clerical guy. Shelton looked at me and said, "Everyone who works at this paper has to know the paper's style. It's contained in these envelopes, and I'm going to give them to you and you're going to take them and read them. Take as long as you want."

JG: Envelopes or folders?

RW: Folders, a bunch of file folders that were in his desk. I found out later that most people took them and were gone about two hours then came back and gave them to him. I stayed gone for two weeks. I read everything that was in those folders with fascination.

JG: You don't mean you disappeared for . . .

RW: I disappeared for two weeks. I sat at a desk behind the crap desk for two weeks. He managed everything by himself while I read those folders. And he never said one word of complaint. He never said, "Hurry up," he never said, "You've got to answer the phone." He wanted me to know what was in those folders. By the time I was through, I could have told you who the jurors were in the libel case that went against the *Gazette*, because their names were in there. And there were lots of style memos. It was not like you have now at a paper, they compile a style book, and there's a style committee, and all that, no, this was pure Shelton and various other editors who had worked there who had set these procedures and policies. They were excellent policies and procedures. It was like a textbook on how to put out a newspaper.

JG: They were memos?

RW: They were memos, one memo after another, and lists, and phone numbers of all the sources. It was everything you could imagine that a city editor would have in his desk drawer. There was a schedule of when to run certain items, I mean, we published a little item on the Terry Mansion, and I could probably rattle it off for

you right now, because every week we typed it in fresh, and we set it fresh, "The Terry Mansion is open from 9 to 5, Monday through Thursday," I forget exactly how it went, but it was a perfect little sentence. By writing that thing over and over again, I learned something about writing. I don't know, just the rhythm of it, and the succinctness. It was so concise, it was just perfect. Somebody had edited this paragraph down until it was just as low as you could get it. It was the lowest common denominator of this paragraph. Those were in there. Anyway, two weeks later, I came back and I said, "I've read everything that's in this folder," and he said, "Well, go to work. Have a seat."

JG: How long were you on the crap desk?

RW: Just about another two weeks. Then, as I say, I got that story and got off the crap desk, mostly.

JG: But you had a great knowledge, from reading those folders, of how to write for the *Gazette*.

RW: Yes, I did. I don't know how I could have done the job otherwise. I kind of knew what they were shooting for. And I knew what was upsetting — a mistake. A mistake was very bad. You didn't want to make a mistake. There were a lot of memos in there about corrections that we had run. There were all kinds of corrections, mostly factual error, some of omission. We ran corrections at the *Gazette.* It hurt us to run them, but we ran them because duty compelled us to get it right. Our whole idea was to get it right.

JG: A correction would be a paragraph, or a short little article?

RW Right. But it wasn't a blot on your record to have a correction. It was part of a badge of honor to write the correction, get it right, and have it published, so the record was correct. And the library was filing all this stuff, so the correction would go in with the original article, and the record would be kept clear.

JG: What if a headline needed correction?

RW: It was always one line, and it said, "Correction." And I think that's the right way. There were other newspapers that said, "We apologize," or something like that, well, one of the memos in that folder said that you never apologize. It's our duty to get this right and it's obvious why we're doing it. We don't have to beat around the bush, or suck up to anybody, we're just going to get it right. And that was the right way to be. I still think that kind of mentality, which is–I don't know if it's an Arkansan quality, or an Arkie quality, but it may be, and I don't know if the *Gazette* perpetuated it, or created it, but I think it helped perpetuate that. And there were papers all over the state, at that time, there were papers all over the state that were really quite good. I mean, the *Northwest Arkansas Times*, under the Fulbrights, was pretty good. I worked for them for a little while. Floyd Carl was up there, he was real quality. They had Allen Gilbert, he was the editorial writer, and, gosh, he wrote wonderful editorials. He was a great writer and a funny guy. He was Fulbright's nephew. And, of course, Hal Douglas, he was the president of the school board for many years while my dad was superintendent up there, was just without peer. Everybody thought he should have been the senator. There were a lot of really great newspaper people in the state. Roberta Fulbright,

who edited that paper for many years, was just a class act.

JG: That's where you grew up, in Fayetteville?

RW: I grew up in Fayetteville. I went to high school there, and junior high. I was the editor of my grade school newspaper, the Washington Elementary School newspaper, when I was in sixth grade. I was the editor of the Woodland Junior High School newspaper. In high school, I was the editor of what they called the *Junior Times*. It was actually published in the *Northwest Arkansas Times*. It was a page, once a week, in the *Northwest Arkansas Times*. That was really actually good experience. I worked with Ted Wylie, who had this cartoon character voice, was just one of the most excitable people I've ever met in my entire life, and was just a funny, funny sweet man. He wrote a column about me. When I was in high school, or actually I was a freshman in college. The headline said, "Ray White is a Busy Boy." And I've been teased about that ever since.

JG: You were the editor of your high school newspaper?

RW: Editor of my high school newspaper. I didn't edit my college newspaper, Tim Hackler was the editor of that paper. And I was the editor of the literary magazine. By that time I had decided that I was above this newspaper stuff, and I was going to be a writer. And I wish that I had continued that way, but I didn't, so, I screwed up. I've got two more stories I want to put on here, then we'll close this out. They're both things that Shelton sent me out to do. One is he sent me out to do a neighborhood story. Actually, these were "as time allows" projects, and that meant that when you were not doing something else then you could work

on these as time allows projects. He sent me to write a story about a neighborhood that was changing. It was on Main Street south of downtown. There were some buildings that were being torn down, there was some changing going on down there, and there were some apartments that were run down and decrepit. I was supposed to talk to old-timers in the neighborhood and get the story about how wonderful that was, and so on. Well, I was 21 years old, and I could not imagine anybody as ever having done anything in that neighborhood that would interest anyone. Certainly I was not interested. I did not care what any of those people had to say. I went up to the area, and I talked to a whole bunch of people, time after time after time, and I came back and I wrote that story maybe eight times, and every time it got rejected. Shelton would say, "No, this is not it," and he would hand it back to me and say, "Do it again." And that was a great thing, because occasionally you would get a rejection at the paper. We don't reject anything, as far as I can tell, any more. Being rejected as a reporter teaches you what's important and what's not.

JG: It hones you.

RW: It hones you, yes. You get these stories that really don't work. I was incapable of writing that story. There was no way that I was ever going to complete that story. I got another assignment in Philadelphia on the old Stetson plant, and I still was not mature enough, or old enough, to appreciate it. I never could nail that one down. My editor there kept bouncing that story back to me. Anyway, that one project was just a mess.

The other thing that happened to me, and I'm going to quote on this one, it's actually something I'm rather proud of — well, in '68 there was quite a bit of racial turmoil, and it spread all over the country, it didn't just stay located in Watts, and it didn't just stay located on the East Coast. It spread. When Martin Luther King was killed, there was quite an uproar in the city of Little Rock, and people were scared of some kind of violent outbreak. As part of that story, there was a protest at Philander Smith College, and Shelton sent me to cover that. It was dangerous to go over there as a white reporter, or it was thought to be dangerous. I guess it really wasn't dangerous, but it was thought to be dangerous. It was certainly touchy. The *Gazette* had a reputation of being a friend of cultural diversity, so that was good. You had that, at least, that they knew who you were. But you didn't wear a big sign saying *Gazette*. You were going over into places where it seemed dicey. I remember covering that story, getting those stories in print, and I couldn't write anything down. I mean, pulling out a notebook in those interviews would have stopped the interviews. So, I sat there, and I would listen, and I would say, "Excuse me," and I would go to the bathroom and I would write notes, make a bunch of notes. Then I would come back and listen some more. It was an exercise in memory, as much as anything. But I felt good about those stories and I got good feedback on those stories.

JG: What kind of meeting was this at Philander Smith?

RW: Well, it was students who were upset with the political system who wanted to do something about it. They wanted to have some kind of confrontation. There was

also some nighttime violence and vandalism that took place. And they cordoned off part of the town. There was trouble that way. I felt like it was a duty to cover that.

JG: Was there more than one meeting that you went to at Philander?

RW: Yes, there were. It was a continuing story. There were several.

JG: Several meetings?

RW: It wasn't meetings. It was interviews, where you'd go and talk to somebody about what was really going on, or try to find out what was really going on, as much as they would tell you, you know, some white kid who's pretty stupid. But I felt good about that work.

I did something back then that I probably shouldn't have done. As a reporter you're really not supposed to take a position, or be publically in favor of things. Maybe I shouldn't tell this. I went on a march with Ralph Abernathy. I was still working for the *Gazette* at the time.

JG: What state was that in?

RW: That was in Little Rock, Arkansas. He came to Little Rock and led a protest march around the State Capitol. My wife was a real strong supporter, and wanted to march in that march, and I didn't want her to march alone, so I went with her. I kind of looked over my shoulder. I knew there was going to be coverage and pictures taken and I was a little bit worried about it.

JG: Did you manage to stay out of the pictures?

RW: Yes. I wasn't photographed, as far as I know. I think it was good to make a

mistake, because I have not made it since then. It taught me that, even though I have a conviction, as a reporter, and working in journalism, you have a responsibility to stay outside the story, not get in the story. There have been times in my life when I wished I was not a reporter, because there were things that I cared about deeply, and I wanted to jump in and become part of it. I think the only way really we have to express that is through the Society of Professional Journalists. It takes on some freedom of information and certain other issues that we might care about, and I've supported that stuff. I've been in favor of professional interest and development. Actually, I testified up on the hill one time about a bill, an FOI proposal, to make meetings of two city officials not qualify for FOI protection. I think that would have gutted the bill. Since I was an officer in SPJ, I could go up there and testify and say some things that I cared about. That's one of the rare examples when a journalist — other than someone who gets totally involved in the editorial side — can put his stuff out there.

JG: When did you testify up on the hill, when you were president of SPJ?

RW: When I was president of SPJ, last year.

JG: Last year?

RW: '99.

[End of Interview]