Gazette Project

Interview with

Dianne Woodruff,
Little Rock, Arkansas,
20 November 2000

Interviewer: Jerol Garrison

Jerol Garrison: This interview is part of an oral history project about the *Arkansas Gazette*. We want to find out what kind of a newspaper the *Gazette* was and what made it that way. Dianne, I have a form here which says that you have agreed to the interview and are willing for it to be added to the archives of the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville where it may be examined by persons interested in the history of the *Arkansas Gazette*. So I will submit this to you, and you can write your name in there and the date. Let the record show that Dianne has signed the form and has agreed to the interview. Dianne, when did you work at the *Gazette*, and what were your duties?

Dianne Woodruff: I began there in April, 1972, and I was there until March, 1980. During that time I was, I came to the *Gazette* and worked on the county beat, county courthouse beat, initially with George Bentley. I was the first of several partners on that beat with George who was there all those many years. And I believe, probably, in 1976 was when I began covering the federal beat only and on my own

on that. And I was there until I left the *Gazette*.

JG: Did you have any especially interesting assignments during that period? Any news coverage that you especially remember during that eight-year period?

DW: Well, let's see, some of it. And I was thinking about this earlier, Jerol, some of these go back to when I was at the *Democrat* before I came to the *Gazette* because I was there two-and-a-half years. And, of course, I covered the federal beat when you were covering the federal beat. I was trying to distinguish between some of the stories. Because one I have always thought was interesting among the things that we covered were the school desegregation cases. And that was when I began at the *Democrat* in 1969. And I don't believe I covered any of those after I was at the *Gazette*. But some of those prison hearings on cruel and unusual punishment and the constitutionality of that I believe I did cover. That was part of what I covered, some of that, after being at the *Gazette*. Yes, I did.

JG: After being at the *Democrat*?

DW: Yes. And I know one of the things I covered over there in federal court was the case having to do with the police chief, Police Chief Weeks and Sonny Simpson and the issue of whether or not his constitutional rights had been violated in his dismissal, and all the issues that surrounded that. That was pretty interesting because of some issues of the criminal element and connections and those kinds of things that made that pretty well read copy that we had.

JG: Why don't we go back to the beginning, you're a native of where?

DW: Born in Camden, Arkansas. Moved to Jonesboro when I was small and grew up

there. I went to Arkansas State and then came to Little Rock. I worked a year at the *Jonesboro Sun* after I graduated from college. And then came to Little Rock in 1969 and worked for two-and-a-half years at the *Arkansas Democrat*. When I was there, I covered either the federal beat or the county beat, and a couple of times I was actually covering both of them. One thing I forgot to mention, I did cover city hall, Little Rock City Hall, when I was at the *Gazette* for three or four months. Jay Huddleston had been the city hall reporter for quite a number of years and he left the *Gazette*, and they assigned me there for an interim period until somebody permanent, I can't think of who that was now, but at that time Jack Meriwether was the city manager.

JG: So you worked at the *Gazette* from 1972 until 1980, and then where did you go?

DW: From the *Gazette* I went to work for the state, the Arkansas Department of Education, a communication coordinator there, and was there for a little more than four years. After that I went to Arkansas Power and Light Company. I was following you around town, Jerol. [Laughs] I was there for about six years. Then I worked as the communications director for the Little Rock School District for about three years. Then I went to Cranford/Johnson/Robinson/Woods and was there as an account executive in the public relations department for four years. In February of 1997, I came to work here at Thoma Thoma Creative.

JG: Is that Thoma Thoma? There's no "and"?

DW: Yes.

JG: This interview is being conducted in your office at Thoma Thoma in the

Rebsamen Corporate Square business center here in Little Rock. What do you remember about the *Gazette*? What kind of a newspaper was the *Gazette*?

DW: Well, it was *the* newspaper. And I know that when I came to Little Rock and was working at the *Democrat,* that was when the *Democrat* was the afternoon paper and the *Gazette* was the morning paper. And I don't know what the subscription comparison was between the two papers, but it was always so frustrating when you were over there and you went and covered and wrote your story. If it had been in the *Gazette*, it was real, and it didn't make any difference if it was in the *Democrat* or not. [Laughs] It wasn't considered real news unless it was also in the *Gazette*. So it was thorough. We had the opportunity to really get into a story and cover it in depth. Of course, covering the courts like you and I did, we were covering some of those long, extended trials especially some of those federal court trials. This is one I think when I was at the *Democrat* that you and I both covered. Remember the F-111, the airplane parts case? And they were doing all those welds that wouldn't hold and all of that? That went on forever. And a case that I did, and this was one of the last trials I covered before Michael was born in 1978, and it had gone on for a long time. It was the Harlan Lane Bank case where – I guess it was the Couch family, wasn't it? They were trying to get their part of the investment settled, and they had sued Harlan Lane and back and forth.

JG: It was the Union National Bank?

DW: It was Union National Bank, yes. Now, that trial went on forever and ever. But we had the luxury, I guess it was, of being able to focus on something and really

cover it thoroughly. The *Gazette* covered news, and it was there to cover what was happening. People weren't creating news, [Laughs] creating stories and making news to cover. We were on top of what was going on and not creating opinion news stories, opinionated news stories. There was a big difference, I think.

JG: What kind of a routine did you follow at the *Gazette*? Did you go to work in the middle of the morning and finish up after dark or in the evening?

DW: Yes, depending on what was scheduled on the beat. You went to work when the news of the day, when it was happening, and when they closed the courthouse, the federal building or whatever, and shut down for the day, you went back to the office and just started churning out copy. Usually, the earliest to be in was about 9 a.m. Most of the trials and things didn't usually start until about ten o'clock. They varied, but we'd be over there all day. We had pressrooms there in the county courthouse, or over in the federal post office building there was a pressroom, and if you weren't working and covering something, you were in there during the day rather than over in the newspaper office until after five or five-thirty in the afternoon and working then into the evening.

JG: Did the *Gazette* introduce computers at some time when you were there?

DW: Yes. They sure did, and that was a traumatic experience for all of us, I think. The problem was you came in in the afternoon and you had a deadline to meet. You didn't have time to learn to use the computer there while you were trying to get your typing done. What became very simple and routine pretty quickly was new,

and foreign, and frustrating. And I think, too, I think we were sharing a terminal. I think we had to switch off there in the beginning. I don't think everybody had a terminal to start with. One of the most frustrating things that happened to me was – and this would have been in, well, whatever year it was, there was an amendment and it changed the make up for the Pulaski County Quorum Court, which had had, gosh, hundreds of members and really was not much of a governing body the way it was constituted. So they changed that and they were left with, I think, thirteen members, whatever it was, and there were five or six people running for each of those positions. And I had written my story, had done interviews for weeks. And this was the pre-election, the primary election story. And I had about one-hundred-and-four inches of copy in my story in that computer. And I didn't, I don't know, I didn't have it backed up and lost it. And had to rewrite that whole thing. [Laughs] That was terrible.

JG: Oh, my Lord. Had you saved your notes?

DW: Yes, I had my notes. I had to do it again. I had everything there to do it from, but it was terrible. I don't think there's anything worse than having to rewrite, reconstruct something you've written and everything; to have it all back like you had it to begin with.

JG: It's exhaustion all over again.

DW: I know. I know.

JG: What people at the *Gazette* stand out in your mind? Do you remember some of the characters who worked there?

DW: Oh, absolutely. Of course, Bill Shelton was the city editor. And Jerry Jones was the assistant city editor. Bob Douglas was the managing editor. Ernie Dumas was out on the State Capitol and Doug Smith, too. There was a time in there then when, let's see- when did those guys switch around? We had at one time Tucker Steinmetz and Carrick- no, I guess it was Carrick, the investigative team – was that when they did that? Yes.

JG: Carrick Patterson?

DW: Yes. Of course, Jimmy Jones was the state editor part of that time. Of course, we had Jerol Garrison. [Laughs]

JG: Time kind of disappears.

DW: Yes. I learned to cover the federal beat by – I'd go around and look in the courtroom door, and if you were in there on the trial, then I could figure out that's where I should be. [Laughs] Of course, George Bentley, who was there at the county courthouse for all those many years. Gosh, Leroy Donald was state editor. Matilda Touhey was on the state desk. Buff Blass was in the women's section, and Tish Talbot was general assignment, I think, there at one point. And I used to always think that those names, they just couldn't be real names. That just seemed made up to me. [Laughs]

JG: What was it like working for Bill Shelton? How did he give you your assignments?

DW: Let me think. Of course, when you were covering a beat, in a way, you were keeping up with your own assignments to some extent. Because you knew what

trials were scheduled or maybe some of the boards or some of the commissions, when their schedules were and meetings. So you tracked that yourself and kept up with it. But we would talk to him, if not before noon, very early in the afternoon to let him know what we had and what we thought we might have. Of course, at that time there might have been something in the *Democrat*, and he might say, "Go see about this." Because it would have come out for that afternoon. And that was always a terrible feeling, [Laughs] to have something there and have Shelton want you to explain or you felt like you had to have a good reason,why you didn't know about it if you didn't. But then, of course, we would confer and decide if – that was the good thing certainly about when George and I were both there on the county beat – there was so much going on there. They had added a couple of divisions of circuit court. – Between us, we could kind of divide and conquer. You were able to be several places and keep up with some of that. Sometimes you kind of had to juggle various stories of the day. On the federal beat, you might have been in court all day long and make that last late afternoon check in the clerk's office. You looked for a John Walker filing. He always filed whatever he had late in the afternoon and invariably that was what you were going to need. It was always a story.

JG: It was a federal district court filing?

DW: Yes, in federal court. Of course, he represented a lot of the plaintiff issues in some of the school discrimination cases, and that was always going to be news. If something happened and you didn't happen to stop in there and check, then the

Democrat would pick it up. That wasn't fun. I didn't like that. [Laughs]

JG: And sometimes you might have a huge hearing story to write, plus some major filing that John Walker dropped in the hopper at a quarter to five.

DW: Yes. And then we would need to get back, and you would have to read the filing and try to figure out what it was about. And then get somebody on the phone for reaction or interpretation or something. So it was exciting. But, like I said earlier, those day stories like that, you did it and it was over when you left. You had it wrapped up. It didn't drag on. But sometimes if you were working on a feature, you would have stuff to work on over a period of time.

JG: Were some issues kept out of the paper, or did everything go in the paper?

DW: Well, I can't think of anything I personally dealt with that was ever held out. I think there were several times when there were things with some prominent people in town and something had happened. You always thought that they would probably really like to exercise some effort to keep that out of the paper, but I think everything was always fairly balanced in that sense. I don't remember anything.

JG: No. It seemed like everything went into the paper.

DW: Yes. And, news-wise, I don't guess I ever had the sense that I was reporting a viewpoint. We reported the news whatever it was.

JG: And if there was a viewpoint, it was what somebody said, wasn't it?

DW: Yes. But it wasn't an interpretation that was presented. I am sure that somebody who read the story would – you know, you're always making some judgment in

selecting the news you put in there, but it certainly was never conscious. It was never a viewpoint or a way that anybody was expected to be governed. You were expected to get the story, whatever all the story was.

JG: Well, now, how did you juggle with your home life with reporting? I mean if your husband John was covering North Little Rock and you were covering the county courthouse or the federal court, so how did you? Did you have much home life? Did you and John leave work together sometimes, or did you go home and then John would come in later? How did that work? What's it like to be a husband and wife reporting team?

DW: [Laughs] Well, it worked out really well. I guess John was there late more times than I was, for the reason that a lot of his council meetings and board meetings met at night. Certainly, every other Monday night was the city council meeting. He was never home on a Monday night. And then, a lot of others, he would have a late afternoon meeting. And, really, it would push him later into the evening routinely than I seemed to have, but because both of us were covering beats, our morning schedules were pretty flexible. So that was good. But that's why I left the *Gazette*. Because after Michael was born, one of us needed kind of a regular schedule we could work around daycare.

JG: And Michael was born in 1978?

DW: Yes. And I went back to work in the spring of 1979, so I was there a year. And what I did during that year was I worked in the office. I'd forgotten about that. I was there, and I had an office general assignment position. And that was the best

way that they could figure out to give me an assignment that would try to work around the hours. But one of the things I was writing were the city obits, and [Laughs] they would come straggling in late. And so a lot of afternoons you'd be wrapping up a bunch of obits, and I'd be watching the clock, doing that, and then trying to figure out how to get across town and pick Michael up.

JG: What time did you have to pick Michael up? I presume he went to a daycare?

DW: Yes.

JG: You took him there in the morning before you came to work?

DW: Yes.

JG: And then picked him up after work or in the evening?

DW: Yes, after work. I think I had to be there by six, but it just wasn't . . .

JG: Did you ever get there late and they had closed the door and Michael was on the inside and you couldn't get in?

DW: [Laughs] No. I don't think I ever. Cut it close a lot of times, but they never set him out on the doorstep.

JG: But if you were in the middle of writing an obit, you just had to let the city desk know?

DW: Well, I'll tell you what John and I had to do. Sometimes he'd go get Michael, bring him back, meet me down there, and then we'd switch off, and I'd bring him on home. He might have to leave.

JG: So, then, you'd be finishing up an article and John would get Michael, and then by the time he came back, you'd finished the article and you and Michael went

home?

DW: Yes.

JG: The *Gazette* didn't have a playpen there in the newsroom for Michael?

DW: [Laughs] No.

JG: I have seen offices like that.

DW: I know it. I know.

JG: There's more of that in recent years.

DW: I don't think we ever even thought of it as an option. [Laughs] I'm not sure if Shelton would have, how he would have taken that.

JG: Well, when you were at the *Gazette,* did you always write your stories any length that you needed or what was the space situation?

DW: Well, in the beginning it felt like we had unlimited space. I'm sure we'd write the stories, and then they'd be edited and sometimes they had to be cut. But I think as the years rolled on and before I left, the space regulation had begun somewhat and we had to write a lot tighter – less of the details that were there maybe, I'm pretty sure that we did. But I don't think it was anything like they encountered after that *USA Today* notion of coverage came into being.

JG: What do you remember about the furniture in the newsroom? Did you have nice, plush desks or were they old, beat-up desks, or tables, or what was it, anyway?

DW: Well, when I first started there, we were in the newsroom on the south side of the second floor, down most of that side of it. And we had metal desks and very functional looking chairs. And we had a phone. You had a phone partner there

where we had one phone between us with the two desks that sat side by side.

JG: So you shared your phone with another reporter?

DW: Yes. Of course, we had our typewriters. I don't know what they were, Underwood or what brand.

JG: I think they mostly were Underwood.

DW: Yes.

JG: But how many years had you been there before the *Gazette* got rid of the typewriters and put in computers? Wasn't that something like 1973 or 1974?

DW: Probably. It was sometime right around there. I think that was probably about it. Of course, we got the computers when we were still in that space and they were remodeling and later the newsroom moved around to the east side of that floor. And when we moved around there, then we had those real fancy-looking orange desks, and I think the chairs were blue with gray carpet. It was very lively looking. I think I remember – I can't remember his name – he wrote the "Arkansas Traveler." My mind is blank.

JG: Charlie Allbright?

DW: No, not Charlie.

JG: Ernie Deane?

DW: No. [Laughs]

JG: Richard Allin? Buddy Portis?

DW: No. He didn't write it very long.

JG: Mike Trimble?

DW: Mike Trimble. I think Mike's comment was we all looked like a bunch of insurance salesmen in there or something [Laughs], the way the new newsroom looked.

JG: It was different, wasn't it, having something really modern in there instead of old-style tables and chairs and desks?

DW: Yes. And some of the different reporters, their desks soon disappeared under piles of clutter, paper, old lawsuits, and filings, and all the things that they gathered up.

JG: Stuff you wanted to keep around to refer to later, but there wasn't anyplace or you didn't have time to file it.

DW: Yes.

JG: Par for the course. [Laughter]

DW: Growing up in Arkansas and reading the paper, you saw the names on some of those by-lines for a lot of years, and they were assigned to the same beat. You associated that person with the Capitol, or the city hall, or whatever it was. So when you got to meet the person whose name it was you'd seen all those years, it was, you were really awestruck. I was. I was pleased to get to be there. I felt fortunate. I've always thought that it was a special place, to get to be a part of an organization like that. I don't know. I don't know what I would think if I were working at any newspaper right now. In terms of was the newspaper business different then or were we all younger and [Laughs], it just seemed very different and special.

JG: I think it was different because now, over the last twenty years, there's been such a growth of television news.

DW: Yes.

JG: I've noticed a lot of people who actually get all their news or most of their news off of television, and newspapers have to fight for the readers' time, because the reader is over here looking at television and then has less time to read the paper.

DW: Yes.

JG: At least that's evidently the case. Not with me, but I'm retired, so I have time to read. Well, Dianne, is there anything else you'd like to mention about working at the *Gazette*?

DW: One thing you asked early on about any of the people, the stories and things like that. Of course, we had courtroom episodes which were dramatic or entertaining. Some of the judges and lawyers had quite a style and a flair of their own. Judge Kirby was one of those. He was one of the circuit court judges. I remember he always would say something – Judge William J. Kirby – he always said that criminals weren't there for justice, they wanted mercy. [Laughs] One time, I guess the most unusual event, maybe, was one day there was one of the defendants, a young man – I think he had been charged with burglary. I think his name was Freddie Jones. And he tried to escape and the courtroom bailiff shot him, shot him in the abdomen and he was lying there in the hallway in the courthouse. He had tried to make his escape. He had just kind of walked and talked his way up the center aisle in the courtroom and into the area inside the rail

in front of the judge's bench, and he kept right on walking. And the bailiff drew his gun and kept telling him to stop. And he'd just keep an arm's length away from this bailiff. The bailiff was Captain Fredericks. I can't think of what his first name was, but Captain Fredericks. And he went around that and we were sitting, the reporters, we got to sit inside the rail over at one of the side tables. In several of the courtrooms there was room to do that. And we were sitting there. And all of us, several of us sitting at that table stood up and sort of backed up against the wall because that kid was between us and the bailiff with a gun. But he went on out of that courtroom and around the corner, and then we heard the gun. And went out there, and there he was lying on the floor.

JG: Right there in the courthouse?

DW: Yes.

JG: At the Pulaski County Courthouse?

DW: Yes. And this particular bailiff had been involved earlier in another episode. This was back when the county jail was down on the river, the old county jail down there. It was right across from the courthouse, on the bank of the river. The bailiff would walk some of the prisoners back down there from the court hearings. And this was plea and arraignment. And they'd walk them back down there. And somehow one of these guys had a knife and stabbed him. I think the fault was that the bailiff was a little . . .

JG: A little apprehensive because of the earlier episode.

DW: Yes. He was apprehensive about getting up close to the guy, and he didn't want

him to run and so forth. Anyway, that was pretty scary. I remember calling Shelton to tell him about it to get a photographer over there. And I was just, you know, shaking on the phone. [Laughs]

JG: Do you think this Freddie Jones lived?

DW: I think he did. I believe he did. I think he had to have some extensive surgery, but I know he didn't die there. And as far as I know he lived.

JG: Now, George Bentley, you were telling me earlier when the tape recorder wasn't running, that he picked up a lot of information in the coffee shop at the courthouse?

DW: Oh, yes. George could get more news in the coffee shop than most anybody else could get working all through the building for the day. Because he had a good network of contacts and people who would come down and tell him such-and-so that had happened, maybe a little background about some case or some information about something going on in one of the county offices, or county judge or so forth.

JG: He was sort of "Mr. Courthouse," wasn't he?

DW: He was. He was "The Dean." [Laughs]

JG: As I recall, his father was a deputy sheriff over in the Fort Smith area.

DW: I think that's right, yes.

JG: Working in a courthouse just came naturally to George, it seemed like.

DW: Yes.

JG: Well, thank you very much, Dianne. We appreciate your taking time to do this.

DW: All right.

[End of Interview]